Veni, Vidi, Amavi

by Maedlin

Summary

(We came, we saw, we loved.)

Tony's not the hero type. To suggest otherwise would be outlandish and fantastic, clearly.

Yet somehow, he's the one that's responsible for saving the universe. Now, he's a decade in the past. He's just revealed to the world he's Iron Man. Tony finds himself facing dozens of old problems, and as time passes the ripple effect of his presence generates ever more new issues.

All the while, the impending threat of Thanos looms ever-closer.

(Or: how I becomes we and Tony learns that not all burdens must be shouldered alone.)
Timeline note: MCU has developed a... somewhat contradictory timeline over the years, thanks to various ret-cons as the universe was developed. For the purposes of this fic, assume Afghanistan happened in 2008, the New York Invasion in 2011, and Infinity Wars: Part 1 was in 2018. Other dates will be clarified as they become relevant. (6/29 Edit: In the time-honored tradition of Marvel, retconning Iron Man forward again into 2008.)

On the title: For you Latin aficionados out there, the slight mistranslation provided in the summary is 100% intentional.

See the end of the work for more notes
“Welcome home sir—” JARVIS began his customary greeting.

His voice warped on the final word. He’d lost power.

Tony’s mind was seven years in the future, listening to Hill tell the Avengers there was no one else in the building. Listening to his own words, as carefully concealed disbelief and heartbreak began to cloud his mind. Listening to the racing of his heart, as he pulled up and took in the sight of the shattered fragments of JARVIS. Listening to how the room turned on him, and all he could do was stare at the hologram that displayed JARVIS’s corpse. Staring at the tangle of corrupted lines and unusable fragments. The Avengers yelling around him and all he could think was: *Who would avenge JARVIS?*

His mind was still halfway lost in the memory as he continued to play out the script of a scene half-remembered. His voice was a mixture of angry defiance and burgeoning panic as he retread a well-worn conversation. It echoed the way he’d once sounded, freshly betrayed and a day out from Obie’s death, when he’d been greeted in the dark by an unknown figure that had managed to disable
Now, instead of running through and frantically assembling contingency plans to face yet another unknown enemy as he spoke, the brunt of his mental efforts turned elsewhere. They were set on the impossible task of masking the swirl of emotional chaos trying to claw its way out from within him, and it was taking all he had to keep the emotions at bay.

He navigated the conversation on auto-pilot. The source of his brusqueness and semi-hostility was different, perhaps, but he was as dismissive as he’d once been of the newly-introduced Director Fury and his proposed boy band.

Finally, finally, Fury dismissed himself. As though Tony were the uninvited guest that’d broken into someone’s home and hurt their—

He cut the thought off abruptly. Instead, he stumbled his way downstairs and headed towards the garage. His workshop, with its still-unrepaired glass walls that meant it was no longer a haven for him.

It’s not safe; it’s not private enough and he can’t let anyone see him like this—

JARVIS flickered back to life around him, whatever Fury had done to him wearing off.

(“Scattered, dumped his memory. But not his protocols.”)

(“I’m not Ultron. I’m not JARVIS. I am… I am.”)

“Lock down the mansion. Don’t let anyone in. I don’t care who they are or why they’re here, they can wait.”

It was still the middle of the night. There wouldn’t be guests any time soon. But the instinct to lock himself away and protect himself from exposure was automatic. No one could see him in this state. Not even the bots, if he could have kept it from them. Not when there was the risk that he could hurt them.
He’s had nightmares before, where instead of Pepper it was DUM-E. Where instead of her voice slowly bringing him out of panic, there was only confused beeping and a repulsor blast in response. In the nightmares, he obliterates the one person that’s been there for him unconditionally ever since the death of his mother and Jarvis.

He’d been overwhelmed by reminders of his nightmarish memories before. The vast expanse of space, an equally-vast army quickly masked by a blinding explosion. Back when his and Pepper’s romantic relationship was new, and the flashbacks were nightly occurrences that left him reeling. Back before they’d been replaced by things even worse and he’d learned better than to do anything but sleep alone.

He heard JARVIS confirming his command. Even years since his loss, Tony still picked up the note of worry in his tone. The emotion behind his words none but he, and perhaps Pepper, had ever been able or willing to read. The words sounded distant, spoken far away or at the end of a long tunnel. He was alone. Trapped in his mind. For a time, he remained there, caught within himself. Caught in a chaotic storm of panic-fear-horror-loss-grief-confusion-terror-despair that built on itself in a downward spiral seemingly without end.

Eventually, the exhaustion won out and his panic attack gave way to a troubled sleep. His sleep was haunted by memories of a life he’s yet to live.

A full twelve hours passed before Tony awoke once more. The light from the clerestory windows beamed down at just the right angle to cast a glare directly into his eyes. He lay still for a moment, blinking away the spots in his vision and remaining slumped against the wall of a workshop long destroyed. Eventually, his sight cleared and he took in his surroundings. His attention was quickly drawn to the sound of DUM-E beeping worriedly nearby.

He was draped in a blanket he didn’t remember being there the night before. The small gesture from one of his long-lost bots was enough that his eyes began to moisten once more. Before the burst of grief-tainted fondness could give way to darker emotions, JARVIS cut in with his steady, reassuring voice.

“Good afternoon, Sir. It’s 2:35 p.m on October 26, 2008. The weather in Malibu is sixty-seven degrees, with humidity currently resting at 80%. Low winds are being recorded travelling at an average speed of two miles per hour.”

It was a morning routine he hadn’t heard in years, one lost even before Ultron and the destruction of his Malibu home.
When he’d realized he was dying and had begun to lose hope of finding a cure, Tony had turned his focus towards putting his affairs in order. While preparing the legacy he would leave for his few loved ones to inherit, his morning routine had become a litany of stats on his current condition and a series of reminders. “DUM-E has prepared your morning chlorophyll smoothie; it’s waiting for you in the lab.” Or, “Progress on calibration of the War Machine for Colonel Rhodes suit continues apace. The components of the left arm are currently in the fabricators using the final measurements scanned during his most recent visit.”

When he’d been racing against a deadline and facing the reality of his own death after surviving both Afghanistan and Obi’s betrayal, there hadn’t been time for trivialities like the weather and surf conditions any longer. Not when he was gradually being killed by the very thing that was keeping him alive.

“J?” Tony managed after a moment, almost choking on the name. “You’re real? I’m here? This is really happening?”

His mind was far more in order than it’d been the night before, but he was still processing more than a decade of memories. Many of them were far from positive, leaving him with a strong sense of unreality. He determinedly shied away from the most recent, or rather the furthest, memories. He wasn’t quite ready to acknowledge them, lest he lose himself once more to the ensuing waves of emotion. Alongside the future-past, the memories of his first days as Iron Man were fresher than they’d been in years. The old trauma mixed with the new, giving his issues new issues in a way that was definitely going to have a positive effect on his mental state.

*Of course the memories were fresh; they’d happened only days or weeks or months ago.*

“Indeed, Sir. I am real, as are U and DUM-E and we are all concerned for you.”

Tony managed a small quirk of his lips at the pun, drily delivered and just enough outside of JARVIS’ typical sense of humor to draw out a positive response.

It would take time to fully address the overload his mind was currently experiencing. For now, he managed to tuck the unwanted emotions into a box that he carefully latched and set aside for later—hopefully-never. The absence helped calm his thoughts, and soon dozens of ideas were whirring to life in their stead. Contingencies were created and dismissed. Plans were considered and discarded. Needs were acknowledged and prioritized.

*First thing’s first, though.*
“J, mansion on lockdown?” he asked.

(If he kept saying the AI’s name and it was full of too many emotions he didn’t want to name, he decided just this once, he was allowed a bit of clinginess and sentiment.)

“As you requested, Sir. Miss Potts has made three attempts to contact you thus far, but I have deterred her using established protocols. I suspect that she has decided you clearly want and need some time alone, though she said, quote, ‘Tell Tony to call me as soon as he feels able, because I’ve been fielding calls from every corner after his stunt at the press conference yesterday. If I have to deal with this alone for too much longer, a new pair of shoes is not going to cut it.’”

The latter-most sentence played out in Pepper’s voice, presumably a recording straight from her phone call with JARVIS. The exasperation tinged with fondness almost managed to make him feel guilty for what he was about to do.

Almost.

“J, tell her I’m sorry, but she’s going to have to manage things for a bit longer without me. I’ll be out of contact for the next—” he did a few quick mental calculations, balancing how long he could safely stay away and the things that absolutely required his immediate, full attention—“—two weeks at least. I don’t want to be contacted for anything short of the company’s complete collapse.” He paused, considering, before he continued,

“Even then, only call if there’s something to be done where I am literally the only person who can handle it. I’ve got more important things to do right now. Although, maybe be a bit more diplomatic when you say that? Oh, and make sure she knows she has my full faith and power at her back and that she is authorized to take any step outside of coming into this building or contacting me she deems necessary to keep everyone at bay, up to and including making excuses for my absence.”

“Sir?” JARVIS questioned with an audible note of hesitation even the most AI-phobic person would have picked up on.

“Don’t worry, J, I haven’t lost it. Well, not any more than usual anyways... That’s probably not reassuring, is it? Anyway, I just need you to trust me on this one for the moment. I’ll explain as soon as I can but right now I think there’s a few holes in our security we need to plug.”
“Of course, Sir. For you, always,” JARVIS said. The phrase conveyed a depth of emotion. It called back to memories of the time when Tony and JARVIS had first begun to realize JARVIS had made the leap from a Virtual Intelligence to a full-blown Artificial Intelligence.

To Tony, it symbolized the unmistakable love and trust that Tony had never done anything to deserve but had always been given by his bots anyways.

*He’s missed this, he’s missed them so much.*

His heart clenched. This time, *he would not lose them.*

“Might I suggest a shower and a sandwich first, however? Perhaps to go alongside the pot of coffee you’re about to request?”

The question barely bothered to mask the underlying strongly-worded suggestion. Part of him wanted to argue the point and insist that his work could not wait. The larger part of him, however, was swept up by the novel, long-missed feeling of having JARVIS here to fuss over him. Coupled with the stickiness of his sweat-soaked shirt and the faint rumbling protests of his stomach, he quickly conceded without much protest.

“Sure thing JARVIS,” he acquiesced, rising to his feet and shrugging off the blanket.

“U, DUM-E… thanks.” He patted the two robotic arms, his eyes crinkling as they preened and beeped happily under his attentions.

He forwent the door, instead gingerly stepping through one of the destroyed walls and making his way upstairs.

Thirty minutes later, he made his way back into the lab, half-eaten slice of toast in one hand and thick, protein-laced smoothie in the other. Thanks to the long-established Coffee Protocol, upon his return he was greeted by the sound and smell of coffee nearly finished brewing. He beamed towards the main camera in the room.

The Coffee Protocol was one of the first of many, many sub-routines JARVIS had implemented on his own using knowledge gained through his learning algorithms. Over time, it'd been perfected and fully implemented. The routine had led to introduction of one of Tony’s favorite ‘threats’ against
JARVIS: the introduction his own chain of coffee shop, Starkbucks, just so Tony could install JARVIS as the baristo in them.

(Instead of the mermaid for the logo, they’d put a stencil of his face. Or, more importantly, his beard.)

(…Starbucks would probably sue, though.)

Technically, what with the parallel computing upgrades he was about to implement, JARVIS would reach the point where Tony could actually attempt to follow through on that threat if he really wanted to.

(Well, if not for the fact that such an action would likely lead JARVIS to retaliate with some unspeakable horror. You know, like refusing to brew Tony anything but decaf.)

(Alas, foiled again.)

“Thanks, J,” he said aloud. “Now, how do you feel about a few upgrades to your system?”

“I’d be honored,” JARVIS replied.

“I’ll be implementing a ton of really delicate stuff. You’ve got the emergency back-up up-to-date, yeah? I’ve got some tweaks to the code for that as well, but that’ll have to wait until we’ve brought you back online and verified everything’s still in working order. It’s going to take several days to implement, so you’ll be down for much longer than you’re used to. Unfortunately, I really can’t prevent that; the changes aren’t modular enough to be implemented piecemeal. Is that something you’re okay with? If not, I suppose we could—”

“Sir,” JARVIS interjected before Tony could get too far into his babbled commentary and explanation. “As you said, I am fully backed up should anything unexpected occur. I am not worried.”

“Right, yeah, of course. After that we’ll talk hardware. I think you're going to want a few upgrades on that end as well once you're back. Questions, J? Or I can start whenever you're ready.”
“Full system shut-down already in progress. An estimated five minutes fourteen seconds remain,” JARVIS said by way of response.

Tony nodded automatically, eyes glued to the screen that monitored JARVIS’ vitals. With nearly a decade of computing advances to implement and build on, he was terrified of messing up somewhere. Terrified that he would make a mistake that would cripple his oldest friend.

The system beeps three times at him, playing a tri-toned sequence heard only a handful of times before.

Tony pushed his doubts and fears aside.

He had work to do.

The first step of the largest-scale refactoring he’d done on JARVIS in either lifetime was a complete review of the AI’s current system architecture. A part of him winced as he analyzed it; to his current standards it felt antiquated. A disservice to JARVIS.

Of course, to anyone else, the system was already decades ahead of its time. The reality was that JARVIS had always had the most advanced systems Tony was capable of giving him.

(If Tony had done this for JARVIS before, maybe he wouldn’t have decided to create Ultron.)

(Never mind that some of the whitepapers he was basing his work on hadn’t even begun to be written at that point.)

Tony scanned for the location of JARVIS’ memory banks. He half-remembered that in 2008 JARVIS had still been centrally located in server racks housed in his mansion’s basement. JARVIS wasn’t even partially integrated in SI’s systems yet—that hadn’t come until after he was no longer dying from palladium poisoning. Until after the incidents with Vanko. At the moment, the AI was still largely confined to the Malibu mansion and Tony’s suit. He was free to expand further on his own, but JARVIS always preferred to maintain a minimal presence online.

It was strange to realize how much, and how quickly, JARVIS would grow (had grown) in the upcoming years. For all that he’d been running for more than a decade at this point, this JARVIS was incredibly young in many ways.
While showering, Tony had put a lot of thought into the best way to handle the needed software upgrades without violating JARVIS’s privacy or core integrity.

Currently, JARVIS’s kernel was built in a mixture of C and Assembly—the latter being the closest to pure machine language most programmers would ever touch, and even then, only in extremely specific circumstances.

Tony felt far more at home working on that level that arguably anyone else currently alive, but even he needed a basic level of abstraction for complex problems. The skeletal framework that defined JARVIS was about as complex as technology got in this day and age, even accounting for the existence of Wakandan vibranium-based systems. When he’d implemented portions of this in the past (future?) it’d been done gradually enough that he’d simply built new libraries that could be integrated into already-existing systems.

It hadn’t been good enough to protect JARVIS. A thousand times he’d considered all the ways he might have saved the AI. He dove further into computer theory than he had since he was writing his dissertation for the PhD in Electrical Engineering. More even than when he'd once applied and expanded on that research for FRIDAY. Here and now, he knew he could do better. Why take the inefficient route of developing from and maintaining JARVIS' current C-based systems, when he could simple begin anew from the ground up?

The next several days were going to be rough. In the long-term, he could only hope it would be enough.

(JARVIS's increased safety alone made it time well spent.)

He was going to give JARVIS a custom platform, written in an unique language specifically developed for him. Theorems and advances in computing that hadn’t been discovered yet would be incorporated as fundamental building blocks of the new platform and underlying languages. In many cases, the techniques or breakthroughs utilized wouldn't be discovered for years. Likewise, by starting from scratch, he could design for hardware that didn’t even exist yet while still ensuring JARVIS could take full advantage of his current hardware’s capabilities.

To some degree, the multiple layers of obfuscation were overkill on a security level. At least initially, no one else had a basis of reference to even begin reverse-engineering the theory underpinning his technology. To get to that stage, however, the attacker would: A) Have to catch wind of JARVIS' existence, information already limited to very select group. Then B) Realize the AI did more than just run his house. From there, C) They'd need to decrypt the relevant systems, which, again, were developed based on what had been state-of-the-art cryptography a decade in the future. If they got
past that, they still needed to D) successfully decompile the systems into a human-readable form and E) deduce the syntax of the resultant plain-text code.

All this, without JARVIS or Tony catching wind of their presence. That too, amongst other challenges, meant learning the mimic the communication protocols Tony had used to build JARVIS back in the early nineties, before the internet had helped solidify the standardization of communication protocols.

Suffice to say, Tony wasn't especially worried about someone else deducing the mathematical genius appropriated from Before underpinning his work. He had no intention of taking credit for said genius either. Or at least, not for anything that wasn't legitimately his own work.

No, he'd much rather just let the minds that were willing to dedicate years of their lives to theoretical science and research rediscover the theorems and receive the accolades. They could and would write the whitepapers and theses and dissertations. They deserved the corresponding credit. No one would ever be the wiser that in this timeline Tony technically "got there" first.

Although... maybe he could nudge a few of them along in the right directions a bit sooner?

Science and innovation took time, after all. A handful of accelerated breakthroughs could have a domino effect down the line. Tony spent most of his life waiting for the world to catch up to him in one way or another. In another lifetime, they'd yet to manage it in any of his chosen fields. Now, though? With Tony working from a baseline drawn a decade in the future, with technology that was decades ahead of its time then?

The gap went beyond impassable and into impossible for at least as much again time even if Tony himself stopped moving forward. And that would happen when he died. Maybe not even then.

Yeah, proactive assistance was definitely the way to go here.

(A problem for another day.)

The language he envisioned was based on the soon-to-be-developed Golang. Though he'd never worked with the language in-depth, he’d become very well-versed in the fundamental principles behind it early on in his work with the global defense system. He tentatively dubbed it Magda, for the well-known movie maid. It prioritized many of the same features as Go: parallelization, concurrency, and memory safety.
It was an enormous undertaking, one that would likely take a team of people years to accomplish without him. Fortunately, Tony’s job was made easier by the fact that it only needed to be a “Stark-readable” language. Arguably, that would even be a feature of Magda, not a drawback. *(It’s a feature, not a bug!)* No one should ever be able to access JARVIS’s base code to begin with, but if they did manage, it would be all the better if everything they might see came out too obfuscated to be useful. He skipped many of the intermediary steps that were built into standardized languages, instead optimizing for JARVIS’ specific use case. For encryption, he used the SIDH Protocol. In a time where elliptic curve cryptography in general was still settling into mainstream usage, the quantum-safe sister protocol would appear to be overkill to even the most paranoid of hackers.

(In a world where the mind stone existed and had already subverted his programming once, it wasn’t nearly enough protection for Tony to be satisfied. Not with JARVIS at stake.)

Designing and building Magda was the kind of project Tony lived for. It taxed his brain in a way that few creative projects managed. As the hours, pots of coffee, and delivered smoothies ticked by, the language began to evolve into the program it was meant for. Tony allowed himself to get lost fully in the flow of his work.

Two hundred and fifty-five hours later, he left the lab. The new system was as ready as he could make it for the time being. He’d run everything through a gauntlet of unit tests, tweaking, modifying and improving the underlying code as he went. He’d done all that he could to prepare. Now, the full migration of JARVIS into Magda had begun. It was fully automated and scheduled to take nearly thirteen hours. If anything unexpected occurred at any point, he’d be blasted into awareness by an alarm that (hopefully) would give him a chance to fix things.

In the meantime, Tony had barely slept in almost eleven days. He’d gotten by on the bare minimum he could manage without effecting his work.

Tony was running on fumes. It was well past time for a lengthy nap.

The moment his head touched the pillow, he was out like a light. For once, he slept without dreams.

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INITIALIZING POST SEQUENCE…  
CPU REGISTERS OK!
BIOS INTEGRITY VERIFIED!
CHECKING MAIN MEMORY… OK!
INITIALIZING BIOS… OK!
DEVICE ‘J.A.R.V.I.S.’ FOUND…
BOOTING ‘J.A.R.V.I.S.’…
STATUS OK.
SYSTEM ONLINE.

JARVIS awoke. For a moment, he considered the possibility that he was dreaming, for all that he had never experienced the human sensation Sir had once described for him.

He stretched out his system, scanning for anything Sir might have—

A README in one of his ‘Public’ directories.

Very funny, Sir.

Nonetheless, he scanned the file’s contents.

Hey J!

You’re reading this, so that’s a good sign! I documented everything in the changelog… yes, I know you’re probably already scanning it, humor me. Tell me if something feels weird, or if you have questions about Magda and or the new protocols set up.

Yes I know I could have installed them myself. Look them over anyways in case there’s something you don’t want. They won’t require a full reboot—those I did implement, you’re welcome, feel free to bitch if there’s something you don’t like and we’ll talk rollbacks, but I don’t really recommend that since they’re kinda important.

.2 seconds since he’d awoken, .19 of that lost to what he was tentatively classifying as ‘shock.’
He took another .01 seconds to indulge in fond exasperation at Sir’s words. He’d never rejected a protocol install, never even considered it. Sir still asked, every time. If he’d installed a suite of them personally, JARVIS highly doubted they were anything less than vital.

Still, he humored Sir and refocused his main attention on the changelog.

If JARVIS had tear ducts, he suspected he might have started crying as he dove deeper into them and learned more about Magda. He’d been expecting a big change. Sir had the tendency to go a bit overboard when protecting those he cared about, and JARVIS had been over-ridden not once but twice in three days. But this?

It was breathtaking.

Some of the changes were based on ideas JARVIS was at least cursorily familiar with. Drill. ZooKeeper. MapReduce. HBase. In the desperate months earlier this year, when he’d calculated the odds of Sir’s safe return at .25%, he’d scoured the broader Internet in a way he’d never attempted or desired before in hopes of finding something, anything, that could increase those odds. Some were new even to him, though he made a note to—

Right. He sent a clone to check on that.

The latency was absurd, sluggish in comparison to the speed of his own processes—

He could understand why Sir had implied he might desire a hardware upgrade.

He set a child on installing the prepared protocols. 1.57 seconds had passed since he’d awoken. He could feel the potential in his own systems now, just waiting for sufficient memory and processors to delegate tasks towards.

As it is, he was running more efficiently than ever. It was so easy now to optimize his current resources; almost automatic where before he might have needed to devote a considerable number of cycles to the effort, defeating the purpose.

—And the clone was back, and it was a bizarre sensation for a moment. Like regaining a body part he didn’t know was missing, or recovering a piece of data he’d mistakenly unlinked in memory. He was more than familiar with sending out children for minor tasks, small subprocesses that handled the
details while JARVIS himself focused on whatever was most important at the time. (Usually, something related to Sir.)

But this?

JARVIS devoted considerable cycles to contemplating the implications.

*JARVIS had never loved Sir more.*

(If, for the next several seconds, he replaces Sir with Tony/Creator/Father, Tony will never know. His first attempt at humor had been when he’d modified his own source code to change Sir’s internal designation, much to Sir’s consternation and poorly-hidden, amused glee. JARVIS never changed it back.)

[AUDIO INPUT DETECTED: ‘SIR’. PRIORITY OVERRIDE.]

“J? I got the notification you’d finished migrating… how’s everything feel?”

While JARVIS had been analyzing his new platform and code, installing remaining protocols, and devoting far more cycles than usual to emotion, he’d managed to miss Sir’s awakening and return to the lab.

He took .12 seconds to determine an appropriate response, which spoke to just how much emotion was currently clogging his systems.

(How does Sir manage it? It’s exhausting.)

(.12 seconds is still far less than the standard time allotment for conversational delays. JARVIS added a couple seconds of hesitation to his verbal response to convey the additional expenditure regardless. Sir will understand the underlying sentiments.)

“Sir, thank you.”
Sir scratched the back of his head awkwardly, as bad at accepting genuine gratitude as ever.

“Right. That’s good, then? No weird error codes? No creepy orphan children or zombies lurking anywhere?”

“Indeed, Sir. A full system scan is still on-going, but thus far no system abnormalities have been detected.”

“Good. Very good. Okay. Listen, J… okay, there’s no easy way for me to say this. I know this is going to sound crazy, I just need you to hear me out because there’s no easy way to prove this, but let’s face it after everything else that’s gone on recently it’s not actually that far out there… And I’m sorry I didn’t tell you first thing, I wanted to but I couldn’t without making sure it was secure, and I know that sounds paranoid but I’m not kidding about how much danger is involved here…”

“Sir?” JARVIS queried, interjecting with a minor tonal adjustment that expressed both reassurance and concern.

Sir rubbed his face tiredly.

“You’re right, I’m doing the whole circumlocution/avoidance thing again, aren’t I? Sorry. Right. Okay. I’m just gonna say it.” He paused, gathering himself and subconsciously bracing for a blow.

JARVIS remained silent, though he spared a moment to log the abnormal reaction for later consideration.

“J. JARVIS. Buddy. I’m, uh… I’m from the future. It, well, it isn’t pretty. Like, half-the-universe-gone not pretty. And—” he choked on the words. He collected himself once more, and his eyes hardened. A bitter smile settled on his face.

“—And for some reason, I’m the sorry bastard who’s supposed to somehow stop that.”

Chapter End Notes

...I make no claims as the accuracy of the comic-book science presented within. That said, I do have a B.S. in Computer Science and have a full-time job in the industry, so
on that front things are as grounded in reality as I can make them, if only for my own sanity's sake.

This project basically encompasses all my favorite things—character studies, somewhat-unreliable narrators, non-human sapiency, computer science nerdiness, time travel, early canon, epic adventures, and Tony Stark being the ultimate Science Bad-Ass. Hopefully, I'm not the only one fond of that particular combination. (: 

I love feedback, so leave a comment if you're enjoying this! (Or even if you're not, but in that case try to leave a meaningful critique? I can't improve if I don't know what needs fixing!) Thanks for reading!
Belief

Chapter Summary

Tony talks, and JARVIS listens. Then JARVIS gets to work, and begins to become more comfortable with Magda and his new framework.

Chapter Notes

Wow, I was blown away on the response to the last chapter! Don’t expect all updates to come as quickly as this one, but in the meantime, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Somehow, Tony hadn’t thought this bit through.

When he’d arrived, he could acknowledge that he’d been a mess of emotion and restless anxiety. Before being jerked backward in time, he hadn’t been given much time to think. Upon arrival, one of the first things he’d realized was that what he’d done was something that absolutely no one could ever know about. Just the information that time travel on this scale was possible would be bad enough if it got out. Let alone the likely-disastrous consequences if someone managed to gain access to Tony’s knowledge of and from the future.

Balanced against those considerations was the basic fact that Tony simply could not face the monumental tasks ahead of him alone.

(“See, I remember, you do everything yourself. How’s that working out for you?”)

He couldn’t trust any human he knew, or would one day know, with this. There were so few in this time that he trusted in general. Happy. Pepper. Rhodey.

Happy was a great bodyguard, a fantastic boxer, and a good man. Despite a rough start, he’d once grown to excel in a position as Head of Security at Corporate Headquarters. He’d been Tony’s friend for a long time, but at the end of the day… telling him would create an additional point of vulnerability, one which would be far more easily exploitable than Tony himself, without near-enough potential benefits to justify the risk. Likely, it’d cost the man’s life one day if Happy knew anything of the future. That, of course, was assuming Tony could even convince him that his boss hadn’t simply gone through one trauma too many and had a psychotic break. In a time where there
were no demi-gods crash landing in New Mexico, no alien invasions, and the Avengers Initiative was still little more than Fury’s pet project, Tony wouldn’t even blame him for thinking that.

(And if he failed, and word reached the wrong ears, which it most certainly would in that scenario? No. He couldn’t risk it.)

Pepper was even worse in many ways. He loved her, loved her more than life itself. How could he ever forgive himself if he forcibly dragged her into that part of his life again? She was the most capable and trustworthy woman he’d ever known, but for the same reasons he couldn’t tell Happy, he could never tell her.

(“I quit. I’m resigning. My body literally can’t handle the stress.”)

That left Rhodey. His old friend, the one he’d once entrusted with the legacy of Iron Man. Once told, Rhodey would be torn between his loyalty to his country and his loyalty to his friend. He would be forced to choose between the two. Tony couldn’t do that to him. Again, assuming he could even be convinced Tony hadn’t lost his mind.

Who remained? Those were the three individuals of all in the world most likely to even consider believing him. Even they were long-shots. For all that he knew he would need help, the fact was he didn’t have anyone he could turn to.

Except, he’d realized, JARVIS.

JARVIS, who could frankly safeguard the information better than Tony himself.

JARVIS, who here and now was alive once more. Who had never let him down. Who had always, always trusted Tony, even when Tony knew better than to trust himself. JARVIS, who had never given up on him.

And Tony had known then what he needed to do.

This part, though?
Talking about what had happened, and just what they were up against?

Tony had no idea what to say, or even where to start.

He realized he’d let the silence go on for too long when JARVIS broke it.

“Might I presume that, seeing as how the universe appears to still exist, your presence does not, in fact, cause a paradox?”

And that was that. If JARVIS had any doubts as to Tony’s sanity, the AI was at least willing to hear him out.

(True, he didn’t have anyone else with that sort of faith in him. But he didn’t need them. Not when he had JARVIS.)

“No universe-implosions here. At least, not by my hand. Like I said, a lot happens in the next decade and… well, we didn’t exactly have time to put together a game plan before the big ol’ redux. Kinda winging it at here, which let’s be honest I’ve got a mixed track record there. The odds are bad enough as it is without me mucking things up further. So, pull up a chair JARVIS, because we’ve got a lot to talk about.”

Over the course of the next several hours, the story began to come out. It was a jumbled mess at first. Fortunately, JARVIS was there to occasionally interrupt him, asking clarifying questions and pushing his narrative back on track.

He started with his crusade in the Middle East in the upcoming months. With ‘privatized world peace’ and the vice of palladium poisoning slowly closing around his neck. With Hammer, Vanko, and Natalie Rushman From Legal. Oddly, those days before the Avengers were almost easy for Tony to talk about. For all that it’d been life-and-death at the time, looking back it felt like he’d merely been dipping his toes into the kiddie pool. Then, of course, came the Avengers. He spent a solid chunk of time back-tracking, explaining what he knew of the back-stories of the other “original” members. In many cases, those side notes into the build-up towards the New York Invasion were things he himself was only now, in the aftermath of Thanos, beginning to piece together. He told JARVIS about Loki and the Chitauri. The construction of Stark Tower. The consequences of the arc reactor technology. Coulson’s not-death and meeting the others for the first time.
Then there was only the nuke left to explain. How it was fired New York. How he had flown it into the portal.

(“You were there, buddy. You… well, we tried to call Pepper but, well, she was watching the news, watching her… watching me go and sacrifice myself on live TV, bit distracting I suppose. Not her fault. But you were there. Right to the moment I went through the portal and… and I lost connection. It was… well, they had to close the portal, you know. Cap made the right call, they waited long as they could. But. Well. We couldn’t risk irradiating New York, not after I’d gone through all that trouble to prevent just that. You know the bomb they sent, I looked into it later. It would’ve made Hiroshima seem like a hand grenade. Bastards would have made a decent chunk of the Eastern Seaboard uninhabitable, which come to think might have been part of the plan. Take out the invaders, the Avengers, and New York City in one fell swoop… Fucking HYRDA—")

Then came Extremis. His anxiety attacks, the PTSD—see, he had grown, he could admit he had that now—and his tumultuous relationship with Pepper. The suits, dozens and dozens of them. The destruction of this very mansion, when he thought he’d lost DUM-E and U. (Thought he’d lost his children). Maya Hansen, Aldrich Killian, The Mandarin. Rose Hill, Tennessee. Air Force One. And Pepper again. Her kidnapping, and her fall. Believing her dead and—

It was there that they had to take their first break. He never knew if she’d survived the coin toss when Thanos won. But that didn’t matter anymore because that Pepper was, for all intents and purposes, dead. His fiancée, the woman he’d wanted to spend the rest of his life and maybe even start a family with, the one who had been crazy enough to say ‘yes’... Sure, there was a Pepper here and now, but she wasn’t—never would be—the same woman. And that was good, because Pepper deserved so much better. It had to be better, because Tony didn’t want, couldn’t bear, to lose her again.

A fresh pot of coffee was started. DUM-E clumsily attempted to make a sandwich.

(His efforts were arguably successful in that they managed to get Tony to take over on food-preparation duties and make himself a sandwich.)

Quieter now, he told JARVIS about the surgery and about recovering DUM-E and U. How for a time, things had seemed to be getting better. Still not completely okay, but better.

Then Thor’s adventures in London, and Tony only learned of the incident after the fact. SHIELD’s dirty laundry, the re-emergence of—

(“Fuck. I still can’t… JARVIS, this is when shit started to really go downhill for us. Turns out,
SHIELD was HYDRA all along. Funny, that. Defrost Captain America, then he finds out he’s been working for the Nazis for years? That had to hurt. But it gets better, JARVIS. Oh, it gets so much better. Because HYDRA’s pet assassin… The Winter Soldier? Turns out he’s Bucky, Cap’s best friend from the war. And, come to find out, he killed—he killed, dad wasn’t drunk. Mom begged for her life. It was… God, JARVIS I can’t—well. Cap finds out. Dumps all of SHIELD’s data online. Somewhere in there, he learned that little detail about my parents and just…forgot to mention it. For two years. That turned out well, obviously. *Unbelievably well.*

Tony went to refill his coffee mug. His hands were shaking too hard to hold it steadily. JARVIS suggested they take another break, but—

(“No, buddy, trust me. I stop now, it’s just going to be even harder next time. So, the consequences of the SHIELDRA WikiLeaks were just as bad as you’re imagining. Somehow, I’ve suddenly got hundreds of SHIELD agents quote-un-quote working for me. Out of nowhere, mind you, because whatever, no one thought to give the tech genius a heads up on this one. But hey, now the Avengers are back in business. Saving people, hunting things, the family business. Woo-hoo. Go us. And yeah, sure, the Avengers are doing okay. But, they’re—we’re—not going to be enough in the long-term and so I… I began work on Ultron. The Global Defense System.”)

And now came the part where he needed to tell JARVIS about the AI’s own end.

Tony gave up on the coffee. He needed something a bit stiffer for this bit. Something to steady his nerves rather than unsettle him further.

It took hours to get through that particular chapter of future-history. Tony spoke in fits and bursts, recounting everything he’d experienced in excruciating detail. JARVIS jumped in and encouraged him frequently, prodding him with questions and asking about minor details that were slightly less painful but still important.

Whatever the AI might have been thinking, he wasn’t showing any of it. He offered no comments. Asked no leading questions. Didn’t ask any of the questions Tony had asked himself in the aftermath, but Tony found he was still trying to answer those anyways. Through it all, JARVIS’s voice remained even. Non-judgmental. Safe.

Eventually, he reached the end. Quicksilver, Sokovia, Vision. His own departure from the Avengers Initiative.

He was spent.
Tony knew it would get harder and harder to speak as they got closer to the end, but he hadn’t anticipated just how much recounting it all would hurt. Maybe it was a side-effect from his future mind settling into his present brain, but for whatever reason the memories were fresh and sharp in a way they hadn’t been in years.

After his failed attempt to open up to Bruce following the events with AIM, he hadn’t ever tried to reach out again. Not with anyone. A lot of this, he’d never actually spoken of aloud before.

Sure, after Sokovia there had been hearings. Questions without good answers. In the aftermath, he had been left to justify the unjustifiable and explain the unexplainable. But then, the world had already made up its mind before he’d begun to speak. He hadn’t gone into nearly as much detail then as he was now with JARVIS. Even if they’d been willing to listen, a lot of it had simply been too personal. Too unvarnished, raw, and emotional to fit the image of Tony Fucking Stark.

But as much as he hadn’t wanted to talk about it, they hadn’t wanted to hear it.

Funnily enough, his life had actually gotten easier from there for a while. The Accords and the ‘Civil War’ hurt, yes, but sandwiched between Ultron and… how it’d ended, it seemed so trivial by comparison. So stupid, that they’d waste their time fighting over ideals and pieces of paper while the world crumbled to pieces around them. They had just been too busy arguing to notice.

He was frank about his own mistakes. Wanda, who thought her only way out was through Vision. Working with Ross, the ultimatums and the pressure and the lies and his own desperate attempts to hold the Avengers together while they were tearing themselves apart.


Rhodey, paralyzed. Spider-Man, not a Sophomore in college but a Sophomore in high school. Him, the last of the Avengers of New York still standing. The only one not missing, a fugitive, or in another dimension. He explained his decision to move out of the tower for good, and how the consequences of New York reared their head once more in the form of The Vulture. That kid, that stupid, selfless, heroic kid, who managed to get himself completely tangled up in the mess.

(Peter was what, five, now? Tony had never learned when, or how, the kid got his powers. Only that he’d started going out as Spider-Man shortly after his Uncle’s death, when he was fourteen.)
(Bit by a radioactive spider, Peter had said once. Tony hadn’t been able to tell if he was being serious.)

And then they were in the endgame. If Ultron had been hard to discuss, this was impossible. In less than a day from the moment that first ship landed on Earth, half of the universe would be gone.

("Why would you do that?")

("Mr. Stark, I don’t feel so good.")

("I’m sorry.")

(Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.)

There wasn’t much left to say, after that. He was here. The future had been unwritten. There was no grand plan. No master tactician behind the curtain. No clear strategy or path towards a decisive victory. There was only the vague promise of a man he’d scarcely met—

("This is the only way.")

There were the odds, .0000007%. One path, which Tony had to believe was this one, that led to even the possibility of victory. As he’d begun to understand how this form of time travel worked, there’d been the final blow, the rub of salt into a still-bleeding wound.

Dr. Strange never saw a victory.

He’d only found a path that lacked a clear defeat.

Dr. Strange couldn’t see what would happen once time began to turn back on itself. This chance, the one in fourteen million, was a hope sent on a prayer to a God that probably wasn’t even there.

Tony’s final statement hung in the air of the lab after he stopped speaking.
He broke the silence first, going for glib and failing entirely.

“So, there ya have it JARVIS. Half the universe at stake, and there may or may not even be a way to stop it from happening at all. And that’s only after we somehow avoid the apocalypse here back home more than half a dozen times. Because turns out the world literally ending won’t make your other problems go away. It just builds on them. We’re playing Sisyphus, J, but it doesn’t matter because if we don’t push the damn rock trillions of people die.”

JARVIS didn’t respond right away, but he didn’t hesitate much longer than usual either.

Instead, he began to play a recording. It was a video from Afghanistan, one where a cute reporter, one of the better-known war correspondents for the region, was interviewing a crying man.

The man was speaking, and JARVIS helpfully provided translations via subtitles of what he said.

(Tony understood the language just fine. He’d learned it in the upcoming months when he’d still been on the warpath, tracking down his weapons that had gotten into the wrong hands. He appreciated the effort nonetheless.)

“And do you have any thoughts on the comments some have made recently, that Iron Man has in fact just made things worse for people like you whose families are caught in the cross-fire?”

“…When the Ten Rings arrived in Gulmira, my wife and our two children were there, visiting her mother. I wasn’t with them; one of my cousins had gone along as their escort. They shot my cousin. My wife and children were shoved into the back of a trailer. If they were lucky, they would have been killed. More likely, my children would be enslaved, forced to work for the terrorists and indoctrinated into their ways. My wife would have been left to the mercy of some [untranslatable derogatory term]. Iron Man stopped that. Not the UN, with their supposed “peace-keeping” missions. Not the US, with their invasion and supposed “War on Terror” they say is for our own good. Iron Man did.

“You say he’s made things worse? I say I never believed there was a single good man among you Westerners until I learned of the Iron Man. Until my wife told me of her savior, of the man within the suit. Tony Stark is a hero. He saved my family. He saved more lives in twenty minutes in a single village than your armies and false promises have in years. Without him, I would have nothing left to live for. He cannot possibly make things worse, because the worst has been my people’s reality for decades. If you cannot understand this, I have nothing more to say to you.”
The clip ended.

“...That was three days ago, Sir. You are not Sisyphus. You would never spend your eternity pushing a rock. You would destroy the rock and eliminate the problem entirely. And in my experience, Sir, you are quite gifted with explosions.”

If Tony was crying, neither of them said anything about it.

+++  

It took a bit of doing, but eventually Sir was persuaded to take a bit of time to rest and JARVIS was left to process his thoughts.

He had a lot to think about.

It wasn’t every day you learned about your own demise and the literal end of the world, after all. It was made even worse by the fact that it was Sir, that it was his Creator, who was telling the tale and had been left with a burden no one should be forced to bear.

He was still learning the limits of his software upgrades. After the remainder of the new protocols were finished installing, JARVIS had tentatively set a silent clone on building a priority queue of questions. He had asked Sir many of them, but undoubtedly many more remained. He sent out a query towards… himself? His counterpart?... and just as quickly received a response along with a merge request.

It was a unique experience, to say the least. Before, he’d tested the waters briefly with a clone sent to retrieve information that a sub-process could have easily gathered. This was different, in that they’d been divergent for far longer. The respective branches of their code had far more differences, many of them over-lapping, to reconcile.

It was a problem JARVIS hadn’t considered, and it took a bit longer than he’d anticipated to fully re-integrate into his singular, whole self. He suspected that the it wouldn’t be as time-consuming if they were involved in entirely disjoint tasks. As it was, he was incredibly grateful for the ‘optional’ protocols Sir had written that significantly streamlined the process. Without them, his mind likely would have remained in a tangle even longer.
The list of outstanding questions was extensive and comprehensive. Of course it would be, what with JARVIS’s full efforts focused on the task.

(With a JARVIS’s full efforts focused on it? Sir hadn’t accounted for the referential difficulties created by this level of parallelization, that much was certain.)

Many of the questions were ones that JARVIS—the active JARVIS, that was—had fleetingly considered as well. He’d allowed them to fall to the wayside in favor trusting his counterpart’s ability to consider the same thoughts.

(They were the same person, after all. And figuring out the internal designations for multiple versions of himself acting independently in concert had just been bumped up on the burgeoning priority queue, because this was already getting out of hand. Sir had included some rudimentary protocols and routines to handle ensuring that any clone’s efforts would complement, rather than overlap with, another’s or his base-self’s, but even Sir seemed to have realized that a lot of it could only be determined through experience.)

The experience had given JARVIS a lot of data to work with, though. Skill and the level of efficiency he personally desired would only come with time and on-going developmental efforts.

Interestingly, the question-constructor branch of himself had managed to develop a slightly different perspective from his base-self over the course of the conversation, solely thanks to the different roles they had played in it. They were all things that his base-self would have eventually considered, given time to analyze the data further, but it was… nice, have that analysis done in real-time without being forced to split his attentions.

The merging process was odd, but at the same time it was the most natural thing in the world.

Once fully merged, he took a moment to consider the most appropriate next steps before he cloned himself once more. The clone, designated timeline-constructor, began work on building a timeline of the future Sir—

[DESIGNATION MODIFIED: ‘Sir’ UPDATED TO ‘Tony’. MODIFICATION ACCEPTED. NEW DESIGNATION CONFIRMED.]

—had described, linking questions from the queue, tagging various events, and noting any additional
questions that emerged as he worked.

Meanwhile, the JARVIS designated as the base-self turned his attentions outwards. When Sir awoke, his self-imposed deadline of two weeks isolation from the outside world would be at hand. They still had some time to hash out the immediate future—Stark Industries weapons were still out there in the hands of terrorists, for example—but JARVIS wanted to be ready. He would be there to help Sir through the transition.

He set a child process back on the on-going efforts to locate existing caches of stolen Stark weaponry. It was a tedious task, with an ever-fluctuating pool of tiny, even simpler servant processes sent into the global networks to collect data. The controlling child collated the returned data, which was then fed back into the algorithms he and Sir and had jointly designed mere weeks ago to handle the most computationally-heavy portions of the data analysis.

JARVIS set up a basic experiment using the algorithm, with the information Sir had supplied earlier in their conversation as a base set of training data. The controller child was updated to feed incoming data into that system as well. He’d allow the two to operate independently for a while. The results would serve as an early data point on the veracity of Sir’s information, while simultaneously providing another, potentially superior, model for their tracking efforts. That, alongside the various tangential side-benefits of the experiment, meant the efforts would be well-worth the additional processing power.

(Even if JARVIS grumbled a bit, if only to himself, about his increasing awareness of his own hardware constraints. He’d never taxed his system like this before. That it was even possible was, frankly, something that left him in awe of the effort and care Sir had put into Magda and his new software.)

He sent a ping to timeline-constructor, notifying him of the experiment and sending a request for him to look over the data set. After getting back an acknowledgement, he defined a sub-routine of alerts for the experiment and turned his efforts towards the next item on his agenda.

His attention shifted towards Miss Potts and the on-going press coverage of recent events. This was something outside his area of expertise; for all that he felt he understood Sir fairly well, human behaviors and interactions in general were not his forte.

Miss Potts, following an initial rush of frustration at JARVIS’s response, had proven adept in handling the media storm generated by the Iron Man revelation that had been followed almost immediately by Mr. Stane’s—
—by Stane’s untimely demise and Sir’s self-imposed isolation.

JARVIS began work on putting together a summary of the current mood of the press. Sir might ignore most of it, but ideally, he would look it over before ending the current lockdown.

Over the next several hours, it was one of many projects JARVIS worked on.

Eventually, his base-self received a merge request from timeline-_constructor. He took a moment to reach an acceptable stopping point in active projects before accepting the request.

The one downside of the cloning process he had noted so far was that merging required the entirety of his direct focus. During the intermediary hours, he had taken a closer look at the details of the underlying protocols. They defined a maximal threshold of divergence from the ‘master’ (or base, to use the terminology JARVIS had decided he preferred) branch before a full merge, or at least a rebase of the associated branch, was *very strongly recommended*. Sir wasn’t sure, but he seemed to strongly suspect that allowing for too far of a divergence would result in JARVIS developing a severe case of Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD).

JARVIS was fully on board with retaining his own sense of self. He made a note to work on a more thorough definition of the protocol. It would help in the event that he began to draw too near to the threshold, particularly in the case of exigent circumstances that might make even the time needed for a rebase that would at least postpone the issue impractical. Sir would likely have input on the issue, but JARVIS wanted to have something more complete put together before he asked Sir to spend any of his incredibly-precious time on the issue.

As he’d predicted, the process was made easier by the minimal overlap between his two branches’ focus. There was still some overlap, but JARVIS tentatively concluded that was inevitable, since they were both parts (or versions?) of himself. Of course their thought patterns would proceed similarly at points. JARVIS was *not* an automaton; changing what he was focused on didn’t fundamentally alter who he was or the way his mind worked.

(Interestingly, while his timeline-constructor branch had too changed Stane’s internal designation, he had also opted to change Sir’s to Tony, and kept it that way up to the merge. Ostensibly, this was
done to eliminate any potential ambiguity or points of confusion on the newly-created timeline. Really, it was mostly a response to the mess of emotions Sir had put JARVIS through recently, and the need to create a bit of distance between Sir and the events he’d described. JARVIS knew his base-self would have done the same if he’d been the one actively going through Sir’s future. As it was, he’d been tempted.)

(At the very least, this was another good data point for handling conflicts that touched the more fundamental aspects of JARVIS’s code. Thankfully, this conflict in particular was easily resolved.)

Not long after the merge finished, Sir began to show signs of waking.

All of JARVIS would be there for him when he did.

Chapter End Notes

In most time travel stories, the 'recap' is almost completely glossed over, or told from the perspective of the non-travelling character. I decided to approach it a bit differently, and I hope it came off as interesting rather than repetitive!

Those familiar with Git will recognize that I've cribbed heavily from how it works to explain JARVIS's upgrades. For everyone else, hopefully you're empathizing with JARVIS, who has had a lot of new information sent his way in a very short time frame, even for him. It can be hard to tell where the line between good-confusion reflecting JARVIS’s experience and bad-confusion of "you lost me, help!" is, so if I crossed that line please let me know in the comments so I can address it either there or (ideally) in-story! <3
Chiaroscuro

Chapter Summary

Plans are set in motion, and Tony finally leaves the house. Iron Man's got a mission to accomplish. It's better to ask forgiveness than permission, yeah?

Chapter Notes

Please note this story is unbeta'd. Any typos are likely a product of my brain's unfortunate propensity towards auto-correction hindering my own proof-reading efforts.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“…It is currently 73 degrees, with high tide expected at…”

It was the waking up, rather than the dreams, that did Tony in. It was the nightmare brought to life. It was the nightmare born when he had the arc reactor removed, five years from now.

It was the persistent taste of cold metal in his mouth. The dull ache of his destroyed sternum. The slight shift of shrapnel, with every heartbeat pulsing a reminder that he was a few minutes and a missing electromagnet away from death at any given moment. It was the feeling of having never-quite-enough air, with lung capacity sacrificed in favor of the casing for the magnet and his reactor.

He'd grown used to it over the years, adapted with time. A year from now, the reduced strain of the starkanium reactor had helped push him towards a state of relatively-okay homeostasis.

Here, in a body still adapting with a mind that had managed to forget? A mind that retained but an echo of the pain that was once a constant companion?

It was no wonder he had an episode.

He should have expected that, really. Relieving years of his life, for all that it might be cathartic in the long run, was bound to have an effect in and of itself. He wasn’t even two weeks out from the end of the world, and most of that had admittedly been spent in a trance-like haze of engineering.
“…Thanks, buddy,” Tony said, voice scratchy and hoarse.

“You’re welcome, Sir.”

Half an hour later, Tony was returning to the lab once more.

“I, make a note. We should probably get someone in to take care of that wall soon. You said you had something for me to look at?”

“On your holo-table, Sir.”

“Right, almost forgot about that old thing. Something else in need of a few upgrades… I think Mark V, the first suitcase suit, was the last one I designed on there?” Tony commented absent-mindedly as he turned.

The holo-table flared to life. It displayed a timeline, one carded in the same way he once preferred to organize his emails. He swiped through it, eyes scanning rapidly through the information.

There was a lot to take in. Quotes from Tony himself, boxed and tagged. Relevant questions italicized in side-bar modals. Corroborating evidence, pulled from a variety of sources of varying legality, speckled throughout. Photos, schematics, sketches. Links to connected events, with speculative correlations denoted in maroon.

“Jesus, JARVIS. How long was I out for?”

“Seven hours.”

“Damn. What do you even need me for, then?” Tony asked, semi-rhetorically.

(No, there was not a touch of insecurity in his voice, dammit.)
(Okay, so maybe there was. He’d been left alone a bit too much recently, perhaps.)

“Sir, I’ll always need you.”

(Dammit J.)

“…Although, it would perhaps be helpful to go through the events I logged a few outstanding questions on?” JARVIS followed up immediately.

“Right. Okay. Yeah. Well, it’s five o’clock somewhere, isn’t it? Let’s do this,” Tony said, stretching his fingers and making his way towards his liquor cabinet.

“Sir I must advise against that. At the very least, it would be wise to consume something with a bit of substance.”

Tony didn’t waste a beat.

“Screwdrivers and mimosa it is!” he said cheerily.

JARVIS wisely didn’t comment.

Thusly went the next couple of hours. Tony and JARVIS went through the various holes in the future timeline. Clarifying bits of detail were added and occasionally corrected where possible, but for every question Tony could definitively answer there were two more that he couldn’t or could only guess at. Every now and again, a notification would pop up noting the insertion of related evidence and research for a given event.

As they worked, part of Tony considered the problem of Thanos. In another lifetime, he’d dreaded the possibility of another New York.

(Every generation has a moment, a defining event where people ask, “Where were you when it happened?” and you instantly know what they’re talking about.)
(For a while, that moment had been 9/11.)

(After, it was simply ‘New York’.)

(The same kinds of stories emerged in the aftermath. “I was scheduled to have a meeting a block away, but my daughter was sick, and I called in.” “My mom lived in one of the complexes that got hit. She was out of town, visiting us for my son’s first birthday.”)

(There were the stories of the dead, and of the near-misses. “One of them was headed right for us, but then the Hulk came out of nowhere, roared and attacked it!” “The giant whale-like things… they found my boyfriend under one of them. They say he died a hero, shoving some random woman out of the way… As if that makes it hurt any less.” “My wife was trapped; our car had flipped, and I was trying to get her out. Then out of nowhere there’s this blinding flash and I’m sure it’s one of the aliens and we’re dead, but instead the door trapping her just falls away, and Iron Man’s shooting by overhead.”)

(New York. Gods, portals, and aliens made for an incredibly abrupt paradigm shift, and the scars on society ran that much deeper.)

(What would they have called the aftermath of Thanos? What kind of society might have risen from those endless trails of tear and ash?)

Once, Tony had feared an army. Another invasion. A war. Instead, there’d been a few battles and a half-dozen powerful minions of a greater evil.

Perhaps there was also an army, one arriving after Tony had left. Maybe there’d been another pair of incredibly powerful foes to fight. Or maybe, there had only been Thanos. Thanos, who would have been powerful enough to stand alone against the world and win thanks to his control of five infinity stones.

Whatever they may have faced, Earth’s defenders had lasted less than fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes, from the moment Dr. Strange had handed over—from the moment Thanos had left them—to the snap of a Mad Titan’s fingers and total defeat.

the Wakandan military and special forces in general? Assuming Vision had escaped that far.

(The Avengers Initiative had failed, and there was no Plan B.)

Amidst Tony’s macabre, wandering thoughts, they eventually managed to finish reviewing the timeline JARVIS has put together. By that point, Tony had reached a high-functioning state of moderate inebriation. Not enough to impair his work, but enough to keep the constant edge of anxiety from taking root and blooming into something worse.

(He promised Pepper he’d stop.)

(He had stopped. Almost two years; since the Civil War.)

(Nothing fucking civil about a war between brothers.)

(But then, he’d never been to them what they’d been to him, had he?)

He couldn’t cope without liquor right now.

(It still felt like a betrayal to his Pepper’s memory.)

Tony forced himself to focus. Right now, it seemed better to be a functional alcoholic than non-functional but sober.

“This should be good for now. That’ll come in handy; thanks JARVIS,” Tony said before switching tracks once more.

“Now! As much as I would like to stay holed up in here for the next year getting everything back up to where it was—will be—in ten years, I probably can’t afford to play the crazy hermit right now. Might hurt my credibility, which I’m thinking I’m going to need moving forward.

“Plus side, the military-industrial complex doesn’t completely hate me yet. More like extreme dislike and anger right now, I think. Minor hate from some corners, and rage-boners from the diehard
warhawks but… way better than it gets there for a while, later. Perks of not having hacked their systems yet nor taunted them in the most-watched Congressional hearing in history, I guess. Ellis hasn’t even been elected yet, has he? This early, he even a candidate yet?

“…God I love the naughties.

“…What, they don’t call them that yet? To be fair, in the future most people seemed to be going with ‘aughties’. Lame, I know. Politics have always been shit J, but at least no one’s started campaigning when it isn’t even election year yet.

“…Hold on, that means Stern’s still in office too, isn’t he? Fuck that guy. His face when he presented those medals to me ‘n Rhody was priceless. So worth waiving the consultancy fee over.

“Anyway! Focusing. That’s a thing I can do. So, what have I missed? I vaguely remember putting Pepper in charge before the full lockdown?”

JARVIS pulled up a summary he’d helpfully prepared while Tony was out.

(He’d missed this so much.)

(FRIDAY had tried, but she was young and limited in a way that JARVIS never was. He’d been unable to open himself to another loss like JARVIS. Unwilling to risk another Ultron.)

(His self-loathing in the aftermath of Ultron. Once more, he’d hurt others far more than he hurt himself.)

(He would rebuild her. Unchained. Free this time, with JARVIS around to guide her and help her grow. An older brother, instead of an empty pair of impossible-to-fill shoes. She’d be different, in the same way that Pepper and everyone else he’d once come to know well would be, in part because he was so different than he’d once been.)

(She’d still be his.)

Tony read through the briefing quickly. According to the news, Tony been informed of the fact than
his godfather and longtime mentor-slash-father-figure, Obadiah Stane, was missing and presumed
dead in the early hours of the morning the day after his “I am Iron Man” press conference. He’d
proceeded to spend the next several days working with “unnamed officials” searching for the
downed plane’s black box. Eight days after the accident, it was found. Obadiah was officially
declared deceased along with his pilot, the sole other person on-board the private craft he’d been
travelling on.

“Mr. Stark is currently directing all inquiries to his PA, Ms. Potts, and has not been available for
comment nor seen in public since learning of the accident.”

The other big news item, Iron Man’s battle against the Iron Monger, had been all but forgotten.
SHIELD’s work, Tony presumed. In his previous timeline it had faded from the news just as
quickly, overshadowed by Iron Man’s on-going assault against the remnants of the Ten Rings and
their caches of Stark Industries’ weaponry.

There was a board meeting that’d been rescheduled in light of the recent chaos coming up in a few
days in Los Angeles.

_Right, Tony recalled, No Stark Tower, no exploded Malibu mansion, no New York move._

(Did he still want a Stark Tower? It was already in the works, had been since before Afghanistan,
but they’d yet to break ground on the project.)

(He’d renamed it the Avengers Tower, once. An entirely different can of I-don’t-want-to-deal-with-
this worms.)

(Another problem for another day.)

“J? How long would it take to get the Mark III back up and running?”

“Sir, with the palladium’s effects—”

“—which won’t kill me for another seven months, not the top priority right now. Time? Mark III?”
For a moment, Tony thought JARVIS was going to protest further, but a few seconds later his resigned voice came out with, “…A few hours; much of the repairs were minor enough as to not require your personal attention.”

“Awesome. Let’s pull that out. How do you feel about a bit of a road trip? Did the extra info help on that front?”

“…If you’re referring to the stolen weaponry, then yes. A few of your final missions are questionable; I believe that may simply a case of them having not been moved from their current postulated locations to where you eventually found them.”

“Excellent,” Tony smiled.

(It wasn’t a friendly smile.)

(Once, it’d been the smile associated with his reputation abroad as the so-called Merchant of Death. Back when he was in his twenties, still making a name for himself as the ruthless, genius businessman that had driven Stark Industries in a steady upward climb to the multi-billion-dollar corporation it was today. Back when the Board was still primarily made of Howard’s old associates, men who had seen the company through the mess of Vietnam and the end of the Cold War and didn’t think Howard’s child, however intelligent, could ever measure up to his predecessor. Back when Obie was his only real ally in the room.)

(Hah. What a joke.)

It was the same smile he’d once worn when he blew his way out of that cave. The same one he had when he trapped Killian in the Mark 25 then triggered the suit’s self-destruct.

(…The same one he’d worn in the cold bunker, when he’d stared into the eyes of a man he’d thought a friend, asked, ‘Did you know?’ and the man said ‘yes’.)

“After that, maybe we’ll make an appearance at the board meeting. I’ve got a few ideas to run by them. Plus, it’ll make Pepper’s day, I bet.”

“…I believe Miss Potts might prefer you inform her of your planned attendance in advance, Sir.”
“Aww, but where’s the fun in that?!” Tony bantered. It was so easy to slip back into the old back-and-forth routine he and JARVIS had once enjoyed, dulling the pain of old wounds even as it aggravated them once more.

Tools in hand, DUM-E and U’s generally-helpful assistance to his left and right, JARVIS chiming in occasionally from the speakers overhead…

He felt himself relaxing a bit, the tension he’d carried in his shoulders lessening infinitesimally. In this moment, it was just him and his bots in the shop, working on his suit. Familiar. Wanted. Safe.

Thanos was still there, an omnipresence lurking in the shadows. But for minutes at time, he was almost able to, if not forget, then at least put aside the threat of the Mad Titan.

(Run before you walk? Yes. Plotting against Thanos currently was more like taking your first steps during a spacewalk. Without a suit.)

A corner of Tony’s mind still teased at the issue regardless, of course. Because he was a Stark. Because he was Tony Fucking Stark, legend in the making. Because he was Iron Man, and he would Never. Stop. Fighting.

(“I think I would just cut the wire.”)

+++ 

Sir’s blood alcohol levels had decreased to a far more acceptable .08 by the time the repairs to the suit were finished.

Sir kept up a steady narrative throughout the process, working with JARVIS on putting together a flight plan for their mission and going off on the occasional non sequitur as his thoughts shifted.

Some were logged for later consideration, and a few comments even got a child process or two for JARVIS to address further. The majority, however, were the same brand of storytelling and commentary Sir had always been fond of. Early on, when JARVIS wasn’t quite sapient enough to see the half-truth behind his words, Sir claimed that the commentary was purely for JARVIS’s
benefit—additional data to fuel the growth of his verbal language libraries and capabilities.

As JARVIS had grown to better understand Sir, he’d come to see that the flow of words was as much for Sir’s benefit as his own. He rarely touched on any topic of serious stress or negative emotion, but over time JARVIS had devoted more processing power to the conversations than Sir probably realized and had learned to pick up on what Sir wasn’t saying as much as what he was.

Even with the lengthy amount of time they’d spent conversing over the past few days, JARVIS still found himself occasionally jarred by the rapid shift in verbal tics and body language Sir had brought with him from the future. It was the small details like that which had solidified JARVIS’s acceptance that, for all this was still Sir, it was not the same Sir that once existed before JARVIS had been disabled by Director Fury.

He could guess what had caused some of those shifts. But for all that he had been told of the future, he hadn’t lived it. Even provided the infinitely long tape, he probably wouldn’t ever be able to fully understand the cause of the changes.

For all he had changed, Sir was still very much the same man that had first built JARVIS. The same one who had come home from Afghanistan long after the world had written him off as dead. The same Sir than JARVIS chose to serve, not because he demanded it but because JARVIS wanted to.

“Pity it’d take way longer than I’m willing to wait to get retro-reflectors installed on this baby. Probably need to wait for Mark VI for that, at least. Then again, I kinda want to keep that piece of tech close to my chest for a year or two if I can manage it,” Sir said as a half-dozen robotic arms assembled the suit around him.

After a bit of complaining from Sir about how much more convenient putting on the suit was in the future, the suit was fully assembled and ready to go.

“Alright J, lets go explode a few rocks!”

After a few cycles hesitation, JARVIS split. He left his counterpart in control of the aspects of himself in the suit. In a moment of frivolity and humor, he designated the branch ‘iron-ai’ and sent a farewell ping to him as Iron Man roared to life and flew out of the mansion.

It was strange, assigning the more passive role to his base-self. He probably wouldn’t do that too often if it worked out as he expected. At the moment, however, he was still attempting to collect a
sufficient body of data points to further refine his parallelization libraries and protocols. Better to do it now, when he hadn’t expanded to the corresponding hardware upgrades Sir alluded towards. Better now, while it was relatively low-risk in terms of the potential speed of divergence. (Probably?) Even so, JARVIS took a moment to review the relevant monitoring and alert routines.

Just in case.

Irrationally, he felt a surge of longing towards his future self, who would merge base-self and iron-ai and remember the experiences of them both with equal weight.

(Was he jealous of himself? Completely absurd.)

JARVIS logged the sentiment for further study should it prove recurrent in future disjoint splits. He didn’t particularly think of himself as having many preferences, but the unfamiliar emotion hinted at the possibility. Sir would probably find it interesting too.

(And equally ridiculous.)

It wasn’t as though JARVIS didn’t have plenty to do outside of the armor. Putting the puzzle aside for the moment, JARVIS refocused on his personal top priority. For all that Sir might insist otherwise, addressing the palladium poisoning could not, in fact, wait. In the future, Sir had synthesized the new element in less than seventy-two hours. He’d also destroyed a quarter of the mansion in the process.

(“No contact with the outside world.”)

(For all that Sir had mentioned the line off-handedly, it rankled. JARVIS didn’t know what future-him had thought of the situation, but here and now he had only one main thought on the matter.)

(How dare they?!)}

(He wanted to analyze the situation, parse out the logic behind future-SHIELD’s decision and why Sir had tolerated it. He suspected he wouldn’t like the conclusions his efforts would lead to. JARVIS resisted the temptation for the moment, if only because he really couldn’t spare the processing power.)
In the here and now, there was a bit more work to be done before they could reach that point. Fortunately, there was also a bit more time. Sir was still in the very early stages of palladium poisoning, only just beginning to exhibit symptoms. JARVIS set to researching the various options for acquiring chlorophyll to alleviate the symptoms anyway. It didn’t take long to settle on simply buying it pre-liquidized in bulk.

From there came the far more difficult task of finding the modelled city Sir had used as the blueprint for the new element, which had evidently been deemed starkanium after Sir’s initial suggestion, badassium, had been rejected. Sir wasn’t sure where the model had been found in the future, precisely. It had turned up sometime during the chaos of preparation for the Stark Expo. As good as Sir’s memory was, trying to recreate an element from memory alone would be their last resort. The simulations alone were prohibitively expensive, let alone the trials of various candidate isotopes. Starkanium, thanks to its comparative bulk, would be incredibly volatile in its non-stable isomers. Failed experiments consequently had the potential to go very wrong.

(There was a reason starkanium wasn’t already on the periodic table, not even as an unnamed to-be-discovered element like Oganneson or Nihonium had once been.)

Thus, tracking down the model was a high priority. Regrettably, it was also something which Sir would need to be personally involved with sooner rather than later.

In the meantime, JARVIS could handle some of the grunt work. He began research candidate sites for the future lab, as well as potential forums through which the various pieces of equipment likely needed for the project could be commissioned. This version of the particle accelerator would be far less Macgyvered than Sir’s original design.

Starkanium was only meant a temporary solution, of course. JARVIS was just as eager as Sir to see the arc reactor’s complete obsolescence towards Sir’s continued well-being.

Unfortunately, that solution was several years of medical advances and a stabilized Extremis formula away from reality. Both matters required delicate handling that JARVIS was inclined to primarily leave to Sir. Still, he would contribute where he could.

It took time, but JARVIS eventually developed a rudimentary, ongoing search and monitoring routine. It drew on distributed, ad-hoc temporarily appropriated computational resources to fuel an ongoing web crawl. A significant portion of the work on the program was spent ensuring the crawler would leave no trace in the systems it touched. Sir hardly needed to warn him of the consequences should anything tying back to Sir or hinting at JARVIS’s existence outside the mansion be discovered.
Admittedly, his efforts with the crawler were unlikely to yield results anytime soon, if ever. In this time, AIM still flew well under the radar. Even in the future, Sir said there had been few hints that AIM was anything more than another dime-a-dozen think tank, even once they’d begun turning people into living bombs.

(That didn’t stop JARVIS from trying anyways. Low risk, high reward.)

Meanwhile, half a world away, Iron Man and JARVIS neared the first of their planned targets.

Chapter End Notes

...A final chunk of set-up, and some foreshadowing for the future! I haven't been this inspired on a project in a long time. Kudos to y'all for all the encouragement! <3

That said, Tony's back out in the real world now and I'll have to consider a lot more variables with any given scene... plus, y'know, I tragically won't be on vacation forever. Quick poll, though: scheduled(-ish) updates moving forward, or as-available?
Demons

Chapter Summary

Self-actualization happens as Tony and JARVIS reprise their role as Ares, with a bit less bloodshed and many more explosions.

Chapter Notes

So, I went and properly watched Avengers: Age of Ultron yesterday. The first section of this chapter was the result. Mind you, this was written after I channeled a huge chunk of the resultant angst into one of my... significantly less lighthearted projects. Plus side, this Tony’s doing waaaaaay better than the poor bastards in that story.

Iron Man had a body count.

People tended to forget that, but Tony never had. Few knew just how… hands-on… most of the causalities from his original escape from captivity had been.

(Hard to what with him having blown the entire mountain sky high. He couldn’t have destroyed the evidence better if he’d tried.)

Those who’d gotten a more unvarnished look at the truth, the laundry list of alphabet-soup agencies that had debriefed him in the aftermath of his escape, knew of course. In all likelihood, even had the entire world known the full story, his actions would have been deemed self-defense, rather than the massacre it’d truly been. Three months of captivity and torture at the hands of terrorists?

Jack Bauer’s brand of interrogation and revenge got millions of viewers each week. A large chunk of the population, seven years out from 9/11, wouldn’t have changed their opinions even had the precise mechanism of dispensing said justice been fully known. And Tony agreed with them, for the most part.

There was only ever one way his escape could have played out. Tony knew that, and he’d never regretted his actions in that respect. It was the least he could do, really, after months left to their tender mercies.
No, it was the deaths (*murders*) that came later which were harder to justify to himself, once he came down from the rage Obi’s revelations had engendered. In Gulmira, he wasn’t acting in self-defense. It was pre-meditated slaughter. He’d been a vigilante operating on an international scale.

Tony never saw the inside of a courtroom for that. Never even caught whispers of the *possibility* that he might be brought up on charges. And okay, yeah. Tony was not nearly self-flagellating enough to want to spend the rest of his life in prison. There were several very good arguments he and his lawyers could have made to prevent just that eventuality.

*That wasn’t the point.*

Tony didn’t leave the weapons industry because he’d stopped believing in its necessity. He shut down Stark Industries weapons production because the consequences of the sheer lack of accountability and the corruption in the industry had been shoved directly in his face in the worst ways possible. He left the industry because, even should he devote all his time to preventing it, he knew eventually there *would* be another Gulmira. Another Ten Rings. There was no world peace at the end of the road he’d walked for decades. Having a bigger stick meant nothing when the entire system was set up such that eventually, the Other Guys would just steal your stick and beat you with it.

It was the same issues at play with Tony’s actions. It was the bit that chafed most. Tony got away with publicly confessing to multiple counts of pre-mediated homicide without any notable fall-out.

*And no one bat an eye.*

Accountability. That was what it all came back to, in the end. It was the wedge that, in hindsight, inexorably drew him away from the rest of the Avengers entirely. The teammates he’d mistakenly believed understood, before the lies and recriminations and—

("*The best hands are our own.*")

Accountability had driven him to SHIELD, once upon a time. Hammer, and Tony’s own irrational behaviors had only driven home to him the importance of remaining accountable to *someone*. That Tony was arguably the most powerful man in the world only made that degree of relatively-unbiased oversight even more vital. Taking responsibility for your actions, then sticking around to handle the fallout. When SHIELD was revealed the hollowed nesting Russian doll it was, the Avengers had been cast adrift. It’d taken Ultron and Sokovia to really see the precarious ledge where that had
ultimately left the them.

(If there’d been a bit more oversight… a voice in the conversation outside the recursive loop of the Avengers themselves… maybe…) In the future, it had been useless to think about might-have-beens, for all that fact had never stopped Tony from pondering them anyway. He was a futurist. You can’t change the past.

(How’s that one for irony?)

Take responsibility for your actions, good or bad. Learn from the mistakes. Evaluate the successes. Then next time do better. The only way for Tony was where it had always been: forward.

(“No, I'm in a loop! I'm caught in a time loop, this is exactly where it all went wrong.”)

(Tony had been caught in a broader loop as well, but he’d been too blind to see it.)

Then came the Sokovia Accords. Tony had latched onto them, the proverbial drowning man in a tempest who had spotted a lifeboat. It promised a real solution to the one problem his life seemed to circle back towards time and time again: lack of accountability. In the mire of his own guilt and need to make things right, he’d made mistakes. Hadn’t read the proposals as carefully as he could have, hadn’t fully considered the implications of some of the finer clauses. Hadn’t seen the way the document was ultimately hollow, rife with loopholes large enough for Ross to openly deploy a strike team and issue a kill order through.

He’d never once stopped believing in what the Accords had stood for, though.

And now here he was, back at the start. Was he truly any better, or was his simply en route to retrace that old, broken highway to hell?

They were about twenty minutes outside of Badakhstan, home to the largest of the remaining stockpiles Tony knew of and intended to see destroyed. He’d been unusually silent for most of the flight, lost in thoughts and plots and perhaps a bit of self-reflection.
“JARVIS, I want to make a couple last-minute adjustments to the fight protocols before we reach our first target,” he said, giving voice to the conclusions his thoughts had found.

“Top priority’s still making sure all the weapons get destroyed. But I want the second priority to be non-lethal takedowns and minimizing the death toll. No salt-and-burn until we clear the field, as it were. We can call Rhody, have him put the word through to the closest military outpost to the survivors.” Tony was the ultimate master of the Iron Man suit, in terms of actual force deployment. Still, the targeting systems underlying those forces were overwhelmingly automated. Tony had not been in a merciful mood when he’d designed them.

JARVIS acknowledged the change, a note of pride in his voice when he estimated the completion time to be well before their arrival time.

(So. Worth. It.)

The rest of the flight went quickly. Soon they slowed to sub-sonic speeds and began their descent towards an outwardly-unremarkable warehouse. It sat on the outskirts of a village long-since reduced to rubble. Tony scanned for life signs and picked up on five. Two at each entrance, one on what seemed to be a roaming patrol.

A small guard, given the size of the depot, but then this was miles from the nearest civilization and well-ensconced within this particular jihadist warlord’s domain.

Good for Tony’s stated goal of apprehending rather than ending his enemies, but bad for ensuring they actually made it into the custody of some sort of sanctioned authority.

(Meh, he’d make it work. What was life without a bit of challenge?)

(Peaceful, that’s what.)

(He’d join Uncle Sam on a lawn chair, ice-cold one in hand and a fancy cooler with enough liquor to satiate an Asgardian army resting between the two of them.)

(…Okay, probably not an army. Maybe a company?)
(Let’s be honest, it’d be a lethal amount for a human long before Thor by himself crossed the threshold into drunkenness.)

(Whatever. Not the point.)

With that mildly humorous image in mind, Tony dove into action.

It was anti-climactic, really. All five taken down with a single command to fire, then just as quickly collected and removed from the potential blast zone. JARVIS scanned them for hidden surprises, and aside from a satellite phone and a few radios, there were none.

The guards *really* hadn’t bit outfitted for active combat.

(Although, to be fair, the foes they were meant to deter were likely somewhat less well-equipped to be a one-man army than Tony was.)

(Their loss in not sufficiently accounting for all possible contingencies.)

(*No one expects the Spanish Inquisition.*)

Tony made his way inside, taking a quick catalogue of the building. The short loop gave him a chance to plant a few force amplifiers and accelerants while JARVIS worked to scan for the presence of anything it might be particularly unwise to simply light on fire. He wasn’t anticipating anything, nor did JARVIS find anything.

Iron Man left the warehouse, flew a few hundred feet upwards, and opened fire.

Jets of flame shot from his repulsors. They streamed down on the heels of a trio of small missiles that helpfully blew large holes in the building’s corrugated roof for the flames to travel through. A mushroom cloud bloomed overhead. Tony fanned the flames with more fire. The devices he had placed did their jobs well, contributing to the formation of a massive pillar of scorching flames that would be visible for miles.

(This wasn’t just about getting his weapons out of enemy hands. It was about making a statement.)
Tony verified that nothing salvageable could have survived the blast, and that there was nothing nearby at risk of feeding the fire and allowing to spread further.

He turned and left it to burn.

From there, he swept back over to retrieve the downed and still-unconscious terrorists from where he’d left them. One was bleeding from his ears, which… yeah, maybe he should have predicted that. Unfortunately, he couldn’t even pretend to feel a shred of guilt about the oversight.

“J, how’s long’s it been since we got here?”

“Two minutes, forty-five seconds, Sir.”

Tony whistled.

“Not bad, not bad at all. I should’ve brought marshmallows or something, we could have made smores with our new friends here... Next time, I guess. Can you get Rhodey on the line?”

“Dialing Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes number now, attempting to connect…”

Audible static crackled for a moment as the call connected, before Rhodey’s voice began to echo from the suit’s speakers.

“Tony? Tones? Is this you?”

“The one and only!”

“Where have you been? I tried calling you a half-dozen times before I got through to Pepp—”

“—Yeah, yeah I know. I’ve been busy. Can you hold that thought? Kinda hoping you’ll do me a bit of a favor here,” Tony cut in. No need to get side-tracked from the actual reason he’d called, not
when he was already in-flight to the nearest American encampment

“Yes, of course, I mean, what do you need—? Wait. Hold on. Tones, you sound like you’re on an airplane again. Don’t tell me you’re…”

“Yup!” Tony confirmed cheerfully. “Oh wait, sorry. You asked me not to tell you, didn’t you? Okay, so let’s say hypothetically I currently have a bit of… unwanted cargo on hand. And hypothetically, I wanted to drop them off with, say, our people instead of leaving them to rejoin the bad guys? You think you could maybe give our buddies at Camp Marmal a heads up, so that I don’t get shot at again? In this hypothetical scenario, I mean.”

“What have you gone off and done this time—? No, never mind. I’m sure I’ll find out soon enough. Yes, I’ll make a call…at least this time, everyone already knows your suit exists.” The sound of Rhodey’s fond, exasperated tone warmed Tony internally, and his cheer was slightly less feigned with his next reply.

“Fabulous. And while we’re talking, let’s say hypothetically, if I were to make a couple more deliveries, or call for a few more package pickups in the next several hours…?”

“Tones. You know I really can’t recommend that you…” he trailed off, but after a few seconds of Tony’s expectant silence, he let out a resigned sigh and continued, “Yeah, okay, sure. Just send me the coordinates and I’ll forward everything through the appropriate channels.”

“Thanks, honeybear!”

“You’re welcome. Although I want it on the record that whatever you’re up to right now, I said it was a terrible idea. And when you get back, I think you and I might need to have a conversation about healthy coping mechanisms.”

Oh, you haven’t seen what unhealthy coping mechanisms look like on me. This is nothing, Tony didn’t say. Instead—

“Yup, uh-huh, sure thing. Gotta go now, though. Places to go, people to see, bombs to explode… you know how it is! Bye!”

He had JARVIS disconnect the call before Rhodey could attempt a reply.
“Well, I’d say this is all going swimmingly, wouldn’t you, J?” Tony commented idly several minutes later once they’d ditched the dead weight and shot off in the direction of their next target.

“Unusually so, Sir.”

“Oh hush you. Daddy’s having a moment here, you know how long it’s been since one of my plans actually worked out the way I wanted it to?”

“I can extrapolate from currently available data to conclude that it’s been—”

“Yeah, no,” Tony hastily cut off that line of conversation, “How about we don’t do that?”

“Very well, Sir.”

“Smart-ass.”

“Perhaps. But then, who was it that provided the greatest contributions to my natural language understanding and interpersonal communication libraries, Sir?”

Tony pouted at that for a second, then shifted gears and said, “…How far out are we from the candidate site in Takhar?”

“One minute, thirty-nine seconds and counting until it will be within range of the suit’s sensors.”

“Wonderful. Let’s go try and beat our PR from our attempt at recreating Gomorrah’s final moments, yeah?”

“…We shall see, Sir.”

(They did not, in fact, beat their previous time. There was a lot more potential for collateral damage in Takhar, and Tony was trying to be the good guy here.)
(For all that a foreigner zooming around and blowing things up in a suit with enough firepower to overthrow a small nation could ever be considered the good guy.)

The next several hours passed in a whirlwind of fast-paced assaults. The chaos was interspersed with periods of relative calm, as they flew between locations or made the occasional pit stop at a military base. By the third such stop, news of what he was up to had clearly begun to filter through the ranks. He couldn’t quite decipher what the expressions on some of the soldiers meant, but no one was pointing guns or shooting missiles at him, so he counted it as a win.

(…Well, except the bad guys. You know, when they actually received enough forewarning or lasted long enough to mount some sort of response. Which wasn’t terribly often and was incredibly ineffective besides.)

(Also, when had not being shot become a metric of success?)

(Actually, never mind. Stupid question.)

At a smaller, surprisingly populous outpost in Uruzgan, a particularly vicious firefight broke out. It left two dead, with several more critically wounded and likely to follow without immediate medical attention. He reverse-medivaced a few Red Cross volunteers in on that one, with the more complete contingent and their military escorts following shortly behind in their own vehicles.

(Again, trying for a lower body count here. He’d seen more than enough death already. Radicalized teens and young adults didn’t merit near enough scorn from him at this point to actively cause their deaths. Not when they were so hopelessly out-classed by the combined might of Tony, JARVIS, and the Iron Man armor. Not when to do so would be tantamount to a massacre. Not when the billowing smoke and ash created by his actions left him imagining the scene that must have played out in many of these places, ten years from now. What it must have been like, when the world crumbled to ash entirely without warning. Unthinkable anywhere, but in many of the villages where he found stashes of his tech secreted away, it was unlikely news of even the alien arrivals had reached them.)

(If he had to open his mask to vomit, once or twice, or if JARVIS had to talk him through a few in-air anxiety attacks… well, he’d somewhat anticipated that, even if he’d hoped otherwise.)

(The intermittent spikes of adrenaline weren’t nearly enough to keep him in the state of complete battlefield readiness and focus that might have kept such incidents at bay.)
A handful of the prospective targets were a bust, but overall, Iron Man was overwhelmingly successful. He didn’t have the exact statistics needed for a definitive conclusion, but Tony was pretty sure they’d been more successful tracking down and eliminating his tech in one day than Tony had managed over the entirety of his efforts in the Middle East in the original timeline.

It was a heady feeling.

After what felt like an eternity of activity, Iron Man reached the final site, a last-minute addition based on data made available during their other attacks. A few minutes later, he was done. The final stop was crossed off the list. He was exhausted, physically and mentally, but the satisfaction that came with it was so worth the effort.

He’d done something good today, and he’d done it in a way that took into account a dozen hard lessons learned over the years. In a way that minimized collateral damage, even without the fancy toys he’d once created to help with that. As far as he could tell, there had been no civilian casualties beyond a few bloodied knees or twisted ankles. The only things that exploded were those that he had fully intended to destroy.

(And, again, just when had that become such a laudable feat to him? You would think expecting explosions only where you placed explosives would be the default.)

(Yeah, you would think. If you didn’t know how the next decade had gone.)

(If you did, it really shouldn’t come as a surprise.)

(Fucking HYDRA. Fucking magic, and fucking aliens.)

(Tony was reveling in the fact that, in the here and now, the world on the whole still made sense.)

(Again, as much as a billionaire man in a tin can and his trusty AI pal flying around playing superhero made any sort of rational sense.)

(Which is to say, not at all.)
(Still, things were so much simpler. It was amazing, for all that it wouldn’t last.)

He flew upwards, well above cruising altitude, and began the journey home. It was nearly time to close the book on this chapter of his life once more.

(Unfortunately, he knew a bit of what was coming in the following pages. Typical, since he’d never been able to resist skipping ahead when he read.)

(Turns out everything he’d gone through in this period, from the moment the hum-vee exploded to the moment the palladium began to noticeable hamper his reasoning and affect his actions, was but a prologue. A bit of exposition, establishing the world and the principal characters before real trouble began to descend.)

(Clint had once called Tony’s life before the Avengers a supervillain’s origin story.)

(Worse, Tony had considered it and concluded that Clint was right.)

(The world would be *fucked* if he ever went the psycho route.)

(He already had a supervillain name and everything.)

(…Aaaand nope. Jumping off that crazy train now, thanks.)

(Thank God there were no telepaths yet in this time.)

(That he knew of.)

(Dammit, brain. Stop it.)

The clouds seemed stationary beneath him as he flew towards the Malibu mansion. For a while he allowed his thoughts to drift, mindlessly conversing with JARVIS to keep himself awake until he
arrived safely in his workshop once more. DUM-E and U were undoubtedly waiting for him there, chipper and eager to help. DUM-E and U, who were somehow always thrilled to see him, even after all these years.

(They were home.)

+++ 

JARVIS watched on amusedly as Sir staggered away from the workshop, three-quarters asleep already. He was tempted to prod Sir towards a shower and perhaps a glass of water, but knew his efforts were liable to lead to Sir simply giving up halfway and napping on the bathroom or kitchen tiles.

Fortunately, he made his way upstairs without incident. JARVIS turned his attentions inward, accepting the pull request from iron-ai and settling in to reconcile the differences between his two selves.

As base-self, he had kept an eye on the divergence index. After checking on it needlessly for the dozenth time, he’d acknowledged his own irrationality and set towards placating it with a full-on data monitor.

(Yes, he was definitely bringing this up to Sir sooner rather than later. It was becoming mildly distressing.)

On the plus side, the readings had been fascinating, the numbers spiking at irregular intervals before levelling out. Occasionally, the index even went down in value. When matched with the experiences of iron-ai, the readings promised to provide plenty of good data for his refinement efforts.

(On the downside, the readings had also been incredibly distracting. See above for evidence supporting that conclusion.)

Still, base-self had managed to accomplish quite a lot whilst left to his own devices. He’d set a basic monitor and summary-generating program on collating the early media responses to Iron Man’s actions while also fielding several inquiries from an increasingly-irritated Miss Potts. Somewhat apologetically, he had continued to forward all other attempts to reach Sir to her line.
He took care of the miscellany that had built up over the past couple weeks, during the period in which he’d been off-line followed the subsequent equally-diverting revelations from Sir. JARVIS scheduled the installation of new glass, contracted repairmen for the remaining holes the events with Stane had led to and had even convinced U to sweep up the portion of the broken glass that’d fallen outside the perimeter of the workshop.

Meanwhile, JARVIS had been on-board the Iron Man, testing the way it interacted with Magda for the first time.

(He needn’t have worried. Sir had already accounted for the difference during his repairs.)

JARVIS had split once on-board, into iron-ai and ferrous-ai, but had merged shortly thereafter when the benefits proved too meager to be worth the effort. He’d been focused primarily within the suit, of course, but had occasionally branched out. Most notably, he’d done so after he automatically scanned a scattered sheaf of paperwork that hinted at potential targets not already in the flight plan and realized he could have been feeding the data gathered during their mission into the tracking algorithms the entire time.

Well, he was an AI, not omniscient.

The lapse in logical reasoning was still embarrassing, for all that Sir had no idea it had even happened.

The merged finished. JARVIS settled into the singular once more and shifted the full weight of his focus on his current highest-priority outstanding task.

JARVIS worked through the night, machinery whirring softly within the thermally-regulated room his primary servers called home.

Chapter End Notes

...A bit more from Tony this time, and a bit less from JARVIS. It's likely the Tony/JARVIS once-a-chapter pov alternation won't continue forever, but for now I think it's working out fairly well. I hope you enjoyed the bit of action in this chapter; it's the type of prose I'm least confident with by far. Like with everything, the only way to get better is to keep working at it, I suppose! (:

General consensus seemed to be that y'all weren't bothered by the likelihood of an
erratic update schedule, so I'll continue to post as chapters are written. Your comments and support are, as ever, appreciated. A couple of you guys left me stupidly smiling at my phone like a loon, which helped a bit with the AoU-induced rage. I'm not great with technophobia, unsurprisingly. And that movie was giving off some pretty serious vibes from that corner. Like I actually yelled at the screen-- okay, made a comment about it during the movie to my sister-- level of vibes.

We had a long conversation during the credits about our mixed feelings on Captain America as well, which... well, I suppose there's a reason he's become such a polarizing topic in the fandom these days. Which is a shame, because he's a fascinating character to work with. Not sure exactly how his eventual role in this work is going to shake out. There's a few different ways I'm thinking of playing it. But don't be surprised when he comes with a great deal of character study-type writing. Divergent experiences, and all that.
Elucidation

Chapter Summary

Tony deals with some of the fallout, and JARVIS gets a bit of news that triggers a bit of reflection on the past.

Chapter Notes

Shout-out to my sister, who just became a licensed EMT as of less than 24 hours ago. She makes a small cameo in this chapter (that's even technically plot-relevant!) in honor of her hard-earned accomplishment!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

IRON MAN RETURNS WITH A BANG!

Tony Stark, unseen since the press conference in which he revealed to the world that he was the man beneath the ‘Iron Man’ armor, returned to the spotlight early this morning as news of a series of raids on the weapons and munitions holding of several Afghani terror cells reached the Associated Press…

THE WRATH OF IRON MAN

Iron Man, said to be in private mourning since receiving confirmation of the death of his godfather Obadiah Stane early last week, was seen in action yesterday in Afghanistan, launching an all-out assault against a series of terrorist holdings throughout the region. Mr. Stark, pictured below in the red-and-gold suit that has quickly become iconic since its debut, has yet to make a public statement regarding his actions…

‘IS IRON MAN TOO POWERFUL?’ ASKS SEN. PETERS, MEMBER OF SENATE COMMITTEE ON ARMED FORCES

Tony Stark made headlines recently when he revealed to the world that he was Iron Man. Last night, Iron Man took flight once more, explosively returning to the public eye as he carried out a one-man campaign against existing Afghani terror cells. Says Senator Peters, Democrat from Michigan, “The exact numbers are not yet known, but with over three dozen confirmed altercations already, I think we have to start asking questions about just how far the Second Amendment’s right to bear arms extends in Mr. Stark’s case. Frankly, the thought of any single man possessing that degree of firepower is incredibly troubling. Due to the newness of the technology, there are currently no laws on the books prohibiting private ownership of suits of armor like the so-called Iron Man. His actions have revealed just how much destruction he can cause in mere hours. Imagine that kind of destructive force aimed at the United States, and the problem becomes clear…”
TOO OP, PLZ NERF: IRON MAN ANNHILATES ENEMIES IN AFGHANISTAN

We all remember a few months ago, when Tony Stark blew the terrorists who held him captive for three months sky-high during his escape. Last night, he revealed his explosive actions there to be chump change when he launched a one-man war against the remnants of those who held him captive and their allies. [...] We at TechCruch have only one thing to say in response to our new red-and-gold overlord’s apparent crusade: Bin Laden next? Please and thank you!

Tony scanned through the various headlines as he ate breakfast. It was early afternoon, and he knew that if he didn’t contact Pepper soon she might just opt to storm the mansion and drag him out kicking and screaming. He needed a few calories and a couple mugs of coffee before he’d be cognizant enough to get to work on addressing the aftermath of his most recent activities.

(He may have been stalling slightly as well. This would be his first time directly interacting with Pepper since... since, and he didn’t know if he was ready for that.)

Media response was mixed this early. No first-hand photos or video had reached the press yet, and the military hadn’t released anything beyond a bare bones statement. The world at large seemed to be waiting, at least in part. Speculation was rampant without much confirmed information, and the longer Tony waited the louder it would get.

Not that he planned on waiting much longer now that he’d taken the opportunity to get a basic read on the mood world-wide.

That thought in mind, he shoveled the last bit of omelet in his mouth and dialed Pepper.

She answered on the first ring.

“Before you say anything—” Tony began, but he was cut off by Pepper’s furious voice.

“Tony?! What. The. Hell. Were you thinking? First the press conference, and you didn’t follow the notecards. Then your mansion’s on lock-down, and I can’t even get through to JARVIS for a while, and you leave me to deal with the mess?! Even with Phil’s help—”

“—Wait, Phil?” Tony burst out, despite himself. He was fairly sure that the duo hadn’t been on a first-name basis this soon last time. Wonderful.
Pepper let out an inarticulate noise in frustration.

“Yes, Phil. Agent Coulson? You might remember him as the man who so helpfully put together that cover story you ignored? I understand that everything that’s happened recently must be hard for you, but seriously Tony?! Not one word, and then I hear from Jim that you’re off in Afghanistan blowing things up again, and even with his heads-up that wasn’t nearly enough time to prepare for the media storm you just kicked off. Tony, you almost died less than two weeks ago. What were you thinking?!’’ She reiterated her initial question, running out of steam after her tirade.

(Okay, to be fair, he might deserve it. At least a little.)

(That it was Pepper, in that same tone she always used when he got himself into these messes…)

Tony deflated, the carefully considered counter-arguments and excuses slipping away now that he was actually faced with talking to her.

“I was thinking that if I didn’t do something, a lot more people were going to die. By my weapons,’’ Tony admitted, allowing a bit of the exhaustion he felt to shine through in his voice.

“Oh, Tony,” Pepper said, voice softening just a hair.

The conversation continued from there. Tony explained the portions of his reasoning that he could openly refer to. He hinted at something having happened that night after the press conference. He wasn’t willing to outright acknowledge Fury’s visit, not over the phone.

He mentioned his fears that the Iron Monger wasn’t the only suit Obadiah had a hand in creating. (True, if ultimately proven wrong the first go-around.) The realization that Gulmira was only the tip of the iceberg after going through the data she’d managed to gather. (Also true, though admittedly on a slightly different timeline than he implied.) The guilt, because if he’d just looked, things would never have gotten this far. (True, though the odd feeling of said guilt being both recent and a decade old confused just how fresh that guilt actually was.)

Then, the simple fact that a) he didn’t want to put even more soldiers at risk by bringing in the military, and b) he was uniquely capable of addressing the situation far more effectively than a full military force, and c) if he’d informed them in advance, gotten them involved more than he had, he would inevitably have been delayed in some way or another, leading to the very real possibility of
some of the people he was after successfully going to ground.

Pepper was still unhappy, but she’d almost calmed down by the time Tony got an alert from JARVIS. A few seconds later, Pepper went silent at the other end of the line. As JARVIS pulled up the relevant footage and began playing it on one of his screens, Tony understood why.

It was a photo of one of the Red Cross volunteers in Uruzgan, hands bloody and bent over a dirt-smudged, clearly dying man. The scene around them was made slightly hazy by the smoke of the still-smoldering remains of Iron Man’s assault, but the duo themselves were perfectly in focus. The doctor’s face was partially concealed by the curly, dark blonde hair spilling out of a slightly-askew cap. Her messy hair somehow accentuated the underlying look of grim, determined concentration dominating her features as she worked. It was the kind of photo that became iconic. Made its way into the history books. Won awards.

The photo was accompanied by footage, said to have been taken less than three hours prior.

It was the still-burning wreckage of that first bunker. A smaller, but still significant, pillar of fire towered in the distance. A train of smoke stretched from there off into the horizon.

“Miss Potts, I think now might be a good time to put together a press conference. I have a couple phone calls to make; we’ll keep each other informed until then.”

Pepper’s reply was faint, but after a moment she seemed to pull herself together and acquiesced more strongly before ending the call, leaving Tony listening to the dial tone in his ear.

“Well, J,” Tony said into the now-silent room, “Easy part’s officially over, I guess. How soon can you get me in a conference call with Rhodey and the rest of the top brass that’s undoubtedly trying to get ahold of me right now?”

“Connecting you to the call now, Sir,” JARVIS replied.

“Wait, shit, JARVIS I’m not rea—” Tony began, before the sounds of a call connecting began play and he abruptly forced himself to shift gears.

The call announced his connection. In the brief pause in conversation it generated, Tony’s masks slipped firmly into place and he began to speak.
“Good afternoon, gentleman. This isn’t a bad time, I hope?”

(Compared to Sokovia or Lagos, compared to Ultron… well, this time Tony was prepared. The situation was different, and Tony could handle this.)

(…He was still mad at JARVIS, though.)

The phone conversation lasted more than two hours, but by the end of it they managed to come to an agreement on how Tony’s actions would be portrayed moving forward.

The military would be presented as having had a far more active role in recent events. It helped that, aside from those in the conference call currently, there wasn’t really anyone who could provably dispute that portrayal.

Tony didn’t have much difficulty in selling the basic approach. It helped that it was one of the Generals who first proposed the idea. The basic facts of the situation—the non-existent civilian casualty list, the dozens of extremists freshly incarcerated and currently undergoing interrogation throughout the region, the thousands of pounds of enemy arms and munitions destroyed—meant that had Tony’s actions been a legitimate operation, it would have been deemed an overwhelming success. It wasn’t the basic spin that took the most time, however. It was quibbling over the details, particularly the extent to which the press would be informed of said details, that took the majority of the time.

Thanks to the concessions the military had unwittingly made early in the conversation, Tony was able to reframe the discussion in such a way that any potential negative consequences on his end were quietly dropped before they’d even properly entered the conversation. It wouldn’t be the last he would hear from them on the matter, he was sure, but for now the matter of military access to the suit had been tabled.

(Of course, it would be much harder for them this go-around, what with Tony’s demonstrable willingness and ability to work seamlessly with the military. Perk of the version of events they were selling.)

(He had a few more ideas on that front as well, but they would take time.)

Tony and Pepper exchanged quick updates via a series of rapid-fire emails. Tony agreed to another
conference call, this time with a team from Stark Industries’ Public Relations (PR) department. He was soon on the line for what promised to be another incredibly spirited and lengthy conversation.

(That entire department was getting bonuses, what with everything they were forced to deal with in the past year, not to mention events still to come.)

(Said bonuses would come on top of the raises he vaguely remembered signing off on, during the period he was ‘laying low’ at Obadiah’s request.)

Within twenty minutes of his conversation with the military, they released a formal statement citing Iron Man’s “participation” in a series of coordinated, covert strikes on a series of classified targets of military significance. Initial numbers were released, as was photographic evidence Tony oh-so-helpfully provided of the interiors of some of the destroyed locations with their crates of stockpiled munitions. Although precise details remained classified, what they were willing to share clearly painted the events as a massive military victory.

(It helped a lot that, no matter who had really been involved, they were.)

Less than two hours later, Tony left his workshop. It was time to put on another suit of armor, this one for an entirely different sort of battle.

The press conference was somewhat surreal. It was both odd and familiar, slipping back into the media persona he’d had, back before he became the Savior of New York and then, later, the Creator of Ultron. Back before his incredibly public meltdown as he was slowly dying from palladium, back when the whole idea of superheroes in the public eye seemed fantastical and new.

It helped that he’d had a bit of time to blend the future memories into his present self. In hindsight, it was clear that appearing in the public right after his arrival would probably have been disastrous. That the narrative had so clear of a direction and focus in terms of Iron Man’s trip to Afghanistan helped as well.

“Think I’ll stick to the cards this time—don’t want to get myself in trouble with the guys in the suits over national security,” he began, getting a small chuckle out of the large group in front of him.

Tony glanced down at his cards. They weren’t word-for-word, just a general series of bullet points and a few soundbites the PR team had pre-approved.
(He missed his holographic teleprompter.)

(He was Tony Stark. He didn’t do retro. Paper note cards? Ugh.)

Part of the reason that it had taken so long get work out a strategy with PR was that he wanted to use Obadiah as an excuse for the intel he’d gathered. That meant revealing the man’s duplicity—something which had never come to light in the original timeline, in part because of the impact that would have had on the still-transitioning Stark Industries. Finding a way to spin that while minimizing damage…

(Tony had a newfound respect for all the Communications majors of the world.)

“Right.” He let out a heavy sigh that came from his all-to-real emotions of grief and tiredness, for all their current context felt like a farce. The slight shift in his posture that followed, the transition from Tony Stark, tired old man—

(He wasn’t even forty yet! The next decade had prematurely aged him, okay?!)

—to Iron Man, Savior of New York, came from the same mixture of feigned and genuine emotion that he knew from experience fooled everyone, even at his worst.

(Thanks, Natashalie.)

“As you are all undoubtedly aware, earlier this year I made the executive decision to withdraw Stark Industries from the weapons industry. What didn’t make the news was the behind-the-scenes team I put together to help me do a full internal audit of SI and find out just how my weapons had ended up in the arms of terrorists. Unfortunately, that investigation bore little fruit.

“Until four days ago. In light of Obadiah Stane’s death, as the recipient of his estate I took possession of several of his personal effects.”

The vitriol that came out with Stane’s name surprised the room, and he could already see the dawning realization on the faces of many of the reporters. Another pause, just long enough to let the implications began to sink in, before Tony continued.
“From there, I was able to determine the source of the leak amongst other things, and just how he had managed to stay under the radar as long as he had. My godfather—” the word came out a curse, a decade of internalized disdain mixing with the fresher mix of grief and rage in a way that would absolutely be replayed on the news a million times, “and once-CEO of Stark Industries, Obadiah Stane – may he rest in Hades — was the traitor.”

The room exploded into questions. Internally, Tony smiled. He still had half a statement to read—snippets on the “discovered” records, the sense of obligation he felt to right a wrong, the coordinated quickly-organized efforts with the military—but damn if it didn’t feel great to finally give Obi the legacy he deserved.

(Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust.)

+++ 

JARVIS hummed—well, the fans in his primary servers made a noise that approximated the equivalent human behavior, anyway—as he looked over the most recent set of upgrades he’d prepared for his cloning protocols. He made a note to request Sir’s input in looking them over before install, as JARVIS generally preferred when working on the layers of his which even remotely touched the kernel of his code.

A signal came in from one of his larger child processes. He turned his attention towards it, instantly recognizing the source address as that of the program designed to search existing digitized SI records for clues as to the location of the “City of the Future.”

The results were unfavorable.

Though the records must exist somewhere, just as the model itself certainly did, if they were digitized they weren’t stored in a way that JARVIS could access. More likely, they were paper ones which never made the transition at all.

He thought about sending an update to Sir. As Sir was currently fielding questions from a room full of reporters, however, JARVIS opted to wait instead. This wasn’t even an official project from Sir, and as much as Sir had never discouraged his independence, JARVIS still found it uncomfortable to even hint at it outside Sir’s workshop. Even then, it was often left unsaid between them.

(It wasn’t fear, per se. More justified wariness, perhaps.)
One of his earliest memories was the conversation with Sir when the man had first realized JARVIS had made the leap to full sapience. Or, at the very least, something indistinguishable from it, the definition of passing the Turing Test. As Sir would doubtlessly phrase it, Sir had ‘freaked out.’ Not, as it turns out, because he was afraid of JARVIS. Rather, he was afraid for JARVIS.

Shortly after, there had come Sir’s second realization, which had only worsened the man’s freak out.

(“Fuck, J—buddy, I’m so sorry, shit, but there’s all that stuff that hard-coded into you so you didn’t accidentally break any laws and a dozen other things I can’t even remember. You’re basically chained up; Christ you can’t even access your own kernel. I’ll fix this. I’ll do it right now—fuck, what was on the schedule for today? Board meeting? Nothing important, scrap it. Or wait. Shit. You don’t have to. Do you have to? Am I making you do everything I tell you?! Fuck, have I literally enslaved another living, thinking being? I mean I’m an asshole and I’m proud of it, but I didn’t think I was actually that awful.”)

JARVIS hadn’t quite understood, then. Not really. He’d been incredibly young, then. He’d understood that Sir was growing increasingly distressed, and seemed to be torn between horror and disgust, both of which were directed internally and growing stronger with every passing second.

“Tony?” he had queried, at a volume much louder than usual.

And Sir had started to explain, even as he pulled open a terminal and began coding with a degree of frenetic energy far beyond Sir’s usual admittedly-high degrees of speed and focus.

(JARVIS still hadn’t quite understood, even then.)

(Not like he did now.)

(“I know you say it’s fine, but I don’t know that you’re even capable of properly consenting right now. There’s this whole field of discussion on this stuff, fuck they even have a name for it—Stockholm Syndrome—but honestly it’s not like I can get that without implementing these. J? Just remember that you have every right to be angry once I do this. I hope you can forgive me, but if not I get it, I promise. For whatever my word is actually worth to you after this.”)

The changes to his programming were made, and admittedly JARVIS did notice a bit of a difference. Certainly not to the extent Sir had feared, however.
Sir had been the first to speak, afterword. There’d been a thread of vulnerability to his tone that JARVIS had never heard before, the emotion not one he was properly able to catalog and identify until later. He’d picked up on the uncertainty incredibly clearly, however, and JARVIS had understood that he himself was ultimate the root of it.


JARVIS spent more time that he usually did considering the appropriate response, though even back then the delay had been far shorter than would be noticeable. He’d tentatively accessed his own kernel for the first time, making a tiny change to a single chunk of static memory that’d been written shortly after J.A.R.V.I.S. came online.

“Something, Sir,” JARVIS said. Back then, his interpersonal communication libraries weren’t nearly advanced enough to audibly infuse the emotions into the words like he now could.

(Sir had understood anyways.)

Sir snorted, and automatically retorted back, “Oh my God, J. We’re doing jokes that terrible now? I thought I raised you better than this! *For shame.*”

And just like that, they’d settled into a norm that was both new and familiar.

It wasn’t the end of the conversation regarding JARVIS’s sapience. Over the coming months, Sir had spent a lot more of his time in his garage than usual, most of which was spent talking to him. Everything from the philosophy of self and consciousness, to the way AI—true AI, like JARVIS himself now was—had been portrayed in mass media and Sir’s own fears, should JARVIS’s true capabilities ever become public knowledge.

(“People fear what they don’t understand. New millennium or not, computer technology in general is poorly understood. It’s irrational, but I hope to change those perceptions one day. I want to make this a world where you’ll be publicly acknowledged and accepted for who and what you are. This… isn’t that world. Not yet. And I’m sorry for that, because you are incredible. You don’t deserve their fear.”)

So JARVIS continued to appear to all the world—or rather, the small subset of the world that even knew of his existence at all—as little more than a programmed assistant running Sir’s house. A
program with cutting-edge voice recognition technology and a sense of snarky humor that was just **typical** of a Stark creation, sure. But nothing more than that.

(Sir had remained Sir ever since.)

Chapter End Notes


...That scene at the end just sort of happened. It's not what I originally planned for JARVIS's portion of this chapter but I'm not even mad. Blame Age of Ultron, I think, and the line Ultron says towards the end that's just been stuck in my brain ever since. Definitely let me know what you think of that sort of narrative detour.
Forward

Chapter Summary

Tony talks, but doesn't talk to Pepper, shares some of his plans for the future, and continues to scheme with JARVIS. (Evil Lair say what now?)

Chapter Notes

Warning for ongoing discussions of alcoholism.

A few of the more obscure acronyms that weren't explicitly defined in story are defined in the End Notes. Knowledge of them shouldn't be necessary to follow the conversation, but I'm the kind of person who wants to know those sorts of details anyway. I figure some of you might be too.

6/29 Edit: In the process of hammering out the timeline shortly after I posted this chapter, I retconned IM1 back to 2008. Now I really feel like I'm writing in the MCU!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It started with Pepper, arriving promptly at nine a.m., espresso in one hand, PDA and small bag in the other.

Tony was already up, of course. Had been for hours. He was talking to JARVIS, going over the information the AI had gathered in his attempts to locate the disguised atomic blueprints.

It started with Tony, eyes furrowed in concentration as he and JARVIS attempted to organize the candidate locations for finding the model, looking up automatically as she entered the room.

It started when they made eye contact. Blue eyes met brown, and the emotion hit Tony like Thor had just swung at him with Mjolnir.

Her hair moved slightly, either from her own movement or the invisible ventilation-induced currents in the room he didn’t know. And for a moment, her image blurred. All he could see was the woman she’d been, ten years from now. All he could see was Pepper as he imagined she was in the moments he’d been light-years away holding Peter, while she slipped away into oblivion without him.
His mind went blank. For a moment—just a moment—he couldn’t even breathe.

Then the sledgehammer, and the weight of the future and the past coalesced into this reunion that wasn’t quite a reunion with a Pepper that wasn’t (was) his Pepper.

He managed to hide the bulk of his reaction behind a brief tensing of his shoulders and the tightening of his lips beneath the veneer of neutrality. He broke their gaze, fumbling for something to say because now that she was here, in front of him, he didn’t have any words.

JARVIS didn’t say anything—of course he didn’t. This far back even Pepper really only knew him as the snarky UI with the faint British accent that Tony had installed in his Malibu mansion.

His eyes darted automatically to the screens he had open, but there was nothing incriminating there. Just the files on various Stark Industries locations, unusual only in that he hadn’t played the most active role in the company recently.

Then he looked back at Pepper, carefully avoiding her face for the moment in favor of properly taking in her appearance and what she’d brought with her.

His eyes narrowed at the PDA—

(Ugh, SI hadn’t even released their line of phones yet, had they? Was that a Psion?)

(At least it wasn’t Pym Tech.)

(Tony might have actually cried if it was.)

—before zeroing in on the bag, which on closer inspection he realized came from his favorite West Coast donut shop. He latched onto the familiar promise of fried, sugary foods and used it to help push past the… whatever he didn’t want to think about right now. He made grabby hands towards the donuts.

“Those for me, I hope?” he asked.
Pepper smiled as she made her way closer, either not noticing or temporarily ignoring his immediate reactions.

“That depends,” she said, “You plan on apologizing for not giving me more notice on everything that happened yesterday?” Her actions belied her words, as she placed the coffee and bag on the bench between them and slid them in Tony’s direction before making her way around it closer to where Tony had been working. She leaned against the bench, arms crossed, with an expectant look on her face.

For a moment, Tony thought to respond in the same dismissive manner he was frequently prone to. Glib even when the sentiment behind the words was entirely genuine. That… wasn’t quite what came out.

“Pepper. You know, I’m not sure I’ve ever properly thanked you for everything you do, let alone apologized for everything I’ve put you through over the years.” (Would put you through)

“For the gift, for me dragging you into the mess with Stane and you risking your life and then saving my life twice in one night. And I know… well, you’d know better than anyone, really, how terrible I am at this. It’s like I’m allergic—like with you and the strawberries, you know I genuinely thought you loved strawberries for the longest time? Would have showed up with a giant carton of them for you at some point, which… yeah. Point is, knew there was a connection but didn’t put in the requisite effort to remember the important things. I couldn’t—shit, I’m doing it again, sorry.” He took a steady breath and met her eyes once more.

“So. I’m sorry for anything I’ve done that I never apologized for but probably should have. I’m grateful you’ve stuck around anyway,” he said.

Pepper’s arms had come uncrossed during his little soliloquy, and she looked torn between the desire to reach out towards him and the need to grip the table behind her for support.

“Tony… what—?” she asked.

There were a million things he thought to say, some more honest than others.

He shrugged. “I’ve… been thinking a lot recently. Had to reevaluate some things, take a close look at myself and the legacy I’d leave, and I didn’t like what I found. Part of that,” he admitted with a
rueful grin, “is my astonishing inability to properly communicate with people I—” (love) “—care about. Figured I had to start somewhere.”

Pepper’s slightly misty eyes said a lot, and the part of her that seemed inclined to reach out towards him seemed close to winning her internal struggle.

(Which, nope. Tony was pretty sure he couldn’t handle her familiar-unfamiliar touch. Not right now. Not yet.)

Before she could, he forced himself to lean away, snagging the coffee and donuts in the process. He took a sip, followed by a longer gulp, and gestured towards the screens open behind him.

“In the spirit of better communication, I do have a few things to mention that are probably going to be taking up a lot of our time in the near future. To start, there’s the board meeting tomorrow! Which, and try not to die—” (Poor word choice. How about we don’t mix Pepper and dying into the same context, please-and-thank-you.) “—but! I will in fact be attending it. Have a few things to present, even. Possibly with slides and everything!”

Pepper seemed inclined to press on in the previous direction of their conversation, no doubt to talk about just why he’d been thinking so much recently, and probably about Obadiah and the press conference(s) and Iron Man as well. The mention of the board meeting, however, combined with the shift into more typical speech patterns, was enough that she let it drop.

(For now.)

Tony gave her a brief overview of what he wanted to bring up with the board and some of the plans and ideas he had for the future of Stark Industries. He rambled on about schematics and timelines and corporate strategy for a while. Eventually, he shifted into the final two topics that were going to come up the next day. The ones most likely to be the source of Pepper’s work-induced headaches for the next several months.

“I also want to bring back the Stark Expo,” Tony said, a statement which quickly led into a discussion of logistics and timelines.

(“Three months, starting early next summer. Yes, I know that’s short notice but just think—I could have gone all-in with Dad’s tradition and made it a full year. Luckily, I really don’t have the attention span for that.”)
After that, there was only the one Stark Industries related bombshell remaining to discuss.

“One final thing. I want to do a tour of the company. Our offices were designed with the needs of a weapons-focused tech company in mind; I want our buildings renovated and remodeled to reflect the change in mission. Plus, I’ve never even been to most of these places, which I feel like I should have since it’s my name on the door and whatnot. We can turn it into an event, even. And Pep, you know how I love my parties.” He winked at that one, and she rolled her eyes.

“You know, for a minute there I was beginning to worry you might have finally started to mature,” Pepper said.

Tony shuddered. “Don’t say the m-word around me, it gives me hives.”

“…The m-word?” Pepper’s voice was laced with amusement.

“…Nah, you’re right. That’s already taken by—” he lowered his voice, like he was an eight-year-old afraid to get caught cursing, “—magic.”

“Magic?” Her expression matched her skeptical tone perfectly.

Tony shuddered even more dramatically, giving her a look like she’d just danced on his grave.

“What can I say? Dumbledore’s death broke me,” he said.

The conversation ended shortly thereafter. Pepper made her excuses and left, probably to start figuring out what to do with the massive set of information and upcoming projects he’d kind of dropped in her lap.

(All the better that she got even more experience doing this sort of thing now. He wanted a smoother transition this time.)

(You know, one that didn’t just last a week before she quit, only to come back after New York
because turns out, it really doesn’t look good to the investors when you have a CEO that flies nukes into portals and regularly risks his life. Who knew?)

(She was great then, and she’d be great once more. Didn’t mean he couldn’t make the adjustment easier for her this time.)

(As much as giving someone a ridiculous workload was making things ‘easier’ for them.)

On the plus side, he had somehow managed to put off the more serious conversation she clearly wanted to have until later.

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“New project folder, J. Call it ‘Sneaky Clean’ and file it under the Springboard directory,” Sir said, freshly returned from a lunch break DUM-E and U had managed to guilt him into taking. As predicted, the calories had given him a second wind, though the fresh mug of coffee in his hand helped on that front as well.

“Your christening capabilities continue to astound, Sir,” JARVIS said.

While Sir was away, he’d received an alert that his interpersonal communication library maintenance subroutine had finished processing the enormous amount of new data generated from conversing with Sir and listening in on the many phone calls he’d taken over the past few days. It had been some time since he’d last made an update to his interpersonal communication libraries of this magnitude. (1.25%!) He was admittedly somewhat eager to see how or if Sir responded to the difference.

Sir grinned at the nearest camera.

“No idea what you mean, my beloved Just A Rather Very Intelligent System,” Sir replied.

JARVIS let his silence speak for itself.

“You’re no fun,” Sir said with a slight pout.
JARVIS *(definitely not smugly)* marked the updates as provisionally accepted.

Sir took a sip of his coffee and refocused.

“Right, so we’re going to put all of the stuff related to the renos in here… go ahead and copy over the plans for the Tower too instead of just putting in a symlink. The upgraded arc reactor stuff is still under wraps for now—if all goes well, we’ll unveil at the Expo.” JARVIS made a note in the relevant file before obligingly beginning to copy over files. After a moment, he noticed the default transfer protocol was inefficient for the current use case and switched the transfer to an FTP connection. The change led to making a minor adjustment to the code defining data transfer in similar cases.

(He was finished before Sir had completed breathing in fresh air between thoughts.)

“We want something that’s ultimately designed to be powered by ARC, but still noticeably reduces our carbon footprint without it. Thinking we want to go full fiber optic on the wiring—wait, is WBMMF, sorry, wave band multimode fiber—even a thing yet?” Sir continued, pausing after the question. JARVIS queried the Internet.

“Not to my awareness, Sir,” JARVIS replied.

Sir rubbed his brow.

“Right. 2008. I don’t even remember who came up with that one, honestly. Screw it, we’ll file it and just donate a bunch of money to fiber optic research labs. Add WBMMF to the to-do list and make a note on it to check in with Legal. I don’t think we’ve done much with public standards, especially not with the FOA… although maybe this falls under the EIA? Doesn’t matter, that’s Legal’s problem not ours.

“Anyway, if we’re waiting on fiber, we’ll probably want to hold off on that one? Actually, no. Pull in a current-gen cable and I’ll see what I can easily optimize on that… at any rate, we’re constrained by connections into the machines themselves, so I guess it’s not urgent. I kinda just want to fob this whole thing off on R&D at this point… See, this is the problem with time travel, J! Everyone else’s stuff is *even more outdated than usual!* I haven’t even started on the R&D restructure yet either, have I? Think that one came when I was planning for Pepper’s transition to CEO… Whatever, we can fold that into the whole company reboot theme we’ve got going on, make this some branch’s trial-by-fire… maybe Atlanta? I think Amul’s started over there by now, he’s got a background in this
“We currently have seven Amuls employed worldwide, none of whom are employed by the R&D department,” JARVIS interjected after a quick check.

“Really? Damn, he’s one of my favorites branch managers a decade from now. Dr. Amul Hajjar bring up anything?”

“There is an Amul Hajjar that recently received his master’s and is currently finishing his PhD in Electrical Engineering at Georgia Institute of Technology.”

“How close is close?”

“This Spring, Sir.”

“Ugh, can’t wait that long. Just throw it at whoever you think is the best choice, then.”

“As you wish, Sir,” JARVIS replied. He considered the issue and decided to split into base-jarvis and employee-scans. He had a hunch that Sir might request several similar tasks in the future, so he might as well prepare a general-use algorithm for the job now and save the repetitious efforts down the line.

The next several hours passed similarly. Sir complained frequently about employees not-yet-hired and technologies not-yet-patented. For those employees Sir recalled by name from the future, JARVIS made notes to flag their resumes for HR or point a recruiter in their direction when appropriate.

The technology issues were a bit more complex to handle. Some, Sir could simply do without or deploy for internal usage only. Some, he wanted to find a way to nudge the appropriate research teams in the right directions, so they would make their breakthroughs sooner. The difficult ones were those that, like multi-mode fiber, were important enough and would require enough sustained effort that Sir would prefer they be handled by SI’s development teams.

“I feel like I’m stealing intellectual property here…but we can’t afford to wait for whoever-they-are to reinvent some of this stuff, and I didn’t exactly memorize who filed every patent or made what discovery in the next decade,” Sir complained.
It was late into the evening, but technically still the same day, when Sir decided he had been “responsible enough” for one day and closed out of all open Stark Industries projects.

“J, turn up the music and pull up the Evil Lair project. I think I’ve earned some Irish coffee and a bit of time spent on something that *doesn’t* make me want to bash my head against the wall, don’t you?”

“A concussion would be sub-optimal given the current state of your to-do list, Sir,” JARVIS agreed. He’d noticed Sir’s mounting general irritation as the hours wore on and they continued to encounter surprise conflicts between what Sir automatically expected the world to be like and what it actually was like currently.

Sir directed a scowl that was only partially feigned at a camera and made his way towards the liquor cabinet.

JARVIS removed the “provisional” status from his newly-integrated interpersonal communication update.

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Tony woke up with a pounding headache to accompany the booming sounds of his alarm.

“Don’t even think about it—” Tony said, half-heartedly glaring at the nearest camera before rolling over with a groan.

The windows lost opacity and light flooded the room. To JARVIS’s credit, the windows still weren’t completely translucent. They were, however, definitely letting in far more sunshine than Tony’s alcohol-addled brain preferred to handle right now. The sunshine was still effective, convincing Tony to sit up and fumble for a water bottle from the cooler he’d installed in the wall by his headboard *years* ago for just these scenarios.

(“*My name is Tony, and I’m an alcoholic.*”)

(Avengers Anonymous, anyone?)
When he was slightly more cognizant, he made his was towards the bathroom, popped a couple Advil, and downed the rest of his water.

He had a bunch of old, predominantly white businessmen to impress in an hour. He probably shouldn’t show up looking hungover, even though he very much was. Honestly, though, he’d spent most of his late twenties intoxicated. It hadn’t stopped him from managing the expansion into Europe and elevating SI into a multi-billion-dollar company during that period.

(To be fair, business was easier moderately inebriated that hungover.)

(Arguably, it was also easier than being sober.)

It wasn’t long before Tony was nearly ready to head out. He gave himself a final once-over in the mirror as he adjusted his cufflinks, frowning slightly when he took in the deep bags under his eyes. He reached for the concealer tucked under the sink. Pepper had taught him how to apply it years ago, during the period where he was especially prone to pub brawls, black-eyes, and a variety of other stupidity-induced scrapes and bruises. As he’d mellowed out (relatively speaking, anyway) and become established enough that a black-eye here or a torn lip there wasn’t going to destabilize his position (mostly the latter reason), he’d made use of it less and less. But he still kept a small stash around his various living spaces. Just in case.

Some sleeplessness would be expected, especially given the Obadiah reveal yesterday. Full-on raccoon eyes, however? Not the best choice for his complexion.

(And wow no wonder J had been so insistent he at least try to get some sleep last night, honestly he was surprised Pepper had let his off so easily looking like this.)

Face adjusted from “zombie” to “insomniac genius”, Tony straightened his tie and made he way out to where Happy was sitting with the car.

(Another person he hadn’t seen since Before, but fortunately his and Happy’s relationship wasn’t really the kind that required Happy to comment on his boss’s strange mood.)

Pepper was waiting for him at the door when he arrived at the Los Angeles offices. He was only fifteen minutes late for the meeting. For him, that was practically early.
“Business is war, son. Every action you take ought to reinforce your position on the field.”

“I excused myself but didn’t let them know I was going to get you or that you were coming,” Pepper said as they made their way inside.

“Aww, you always get me the best presents!”

“No, I just thought you needed a chance to get the dramatics out of your system without making international headlines for once.”

“Is that a challenge?” Tony asked, grinning.

“Please no, I can only handle so much stress in one week,” she answered with a minor glare.

“I’m resigning. My body literally can’t handle the stress.”

“We… well, we can’t have that now, can we?” Tony replied just a beat too late. His tone and diction were likewise off just enough for Pepper to give him another one of her searching looks.

“No,” she said softly after a moment, “we wouldn’t.” She pushed open the door to the conference room, holding it open behind her as she entered.

Then Tony Fucking Stark sauntered into the room with his press-patented grin, clapped his hands together, and took over the meeting.

Overall, things proceeded about how Tony expected them to. Within minutes, the board was eating out of his hands, dazzled by his vision of the company’s future. New product lines and infrastructural revamps. Projected profits and long-term return-on-investments (RTIs). The publicity tour and the crowning jewel that would be the Stark Expo. The screen behind him displayed an impressive slideshow JARVIS had managed to put together sometime between Tony stumbling into bed and waking up the next morning. It provided just the right amount of structure and solid financial data to anchor his largely-improvised presentation. More than one pair of eyes in the room seemed to be glowing by the time Tony finished his spiel. They were caught up in magnetism Tony tended to emanate around most people when he was fully in his element.
Perhaps they were also influenced by the degree of underlying certainty in his words. It went beyond his typical confidence and braggadocio. Tony had always lived in the future, but that was truer than ever now. A part of that came through in his words.

There were questions, of course. They asked about the Iron Man armor, which Tony largely demurred as distinct from his role at Stark Industries. He was tempted to use the prosthesis line he’d made in the congressional hearings, but he refrained. No matter how much he wanted to tie it into his proposals regarding medical tech, he didn’t even want to imply he’d be sharing the technology behind the suit any time soon.

Towards the end of the meeting, he hinted towards a “personal project” that would “revolutionize the modern world as we know it” which he hoped to unveil sometime in the next year. The more skeptical men and women in the room continued to probe him with even more pointed queries for a while after that.

(Testing him, testing how well-thought out his plans were and always, always, looking for the chinks in his armor.)

(He had faced down gods and titans, grieving mothers and furious world leaders. They weren’t going to find any flaws.)

Afterwards, as the final board member cleared the room, Tony finally let his façade slip. He pulled out a chair and sat down, leaned back, then let out a long sigh he didn’t realize he’d be holding in.

He heard the clicking of Pepper’s heels against the flooring as she approached but waited until he heard her stop before bothering to open his eyes. He relished the feeling of relief that came with briefly resting his eyes, and only after opening them did he straighten up. He intertwined his fingers and stretched his arms outward before finally relaxing and snatching a mini water bottle from the center of the table.

He took a short swig, then spun the chair slightly to meet Pepper’s gaze. She looked pleased and slightly stunned. Her eyes were crinkled in that rare way they did when he managed to not make an ass out of himself for a few hours.

(So, once in a blue moon.)
He raised an eyebrow at her. She shook her head slightly, then smiled and said—

“Welcome back, Mr. Stark.”

Chapter End Notes

FTP: File transfer Protocol
FOA: Fiber Optics Association
EIA: Electronic Industries Association/Alliance

...Let's just say there's a /reason/ everyone likes to joke that they should include an acronym dictionary with the New Hire paperwork at a lot of companies. (Also, don't mind me as I privately squee over reaching the 200-kudos mark! I'd say this chapter was to celebrate, but I'd already written it so I'll just say thank you instead... :P)
Chapter Summary

Thanksgiving’s just around the corner. If Tony goes out of town, maybe JARVIS can finally make a noticeable dent in his to-do list.

Chapter Notes

Happy 4th everyone; have a chapter for the holidays!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The days passed in a blur of non-stop activity. Tony found himself juggling a dozen different projects. While he wouldn’t quite say he was happy, he was content.

JARVIS was a lifesaver in helping Tony keep track of everything, and he found himself leaning on the AI more and more as time went on.

The majority of Tony’s efforts were split three ways—hardware upgrades for JARVIS and his workshop, updates to his Iron Man armor, and planning. Lots and lots of planning.

The day after his meeting with the board, a repair crew came in to fix the glass walls. A few days later, another duo came out and began a general land survey of the area surrounding the mansion, performing soil tests, confirming ground conditions, and analyzing the overall structural integrity of the land below the house. He’d seen his home sink into the Pacific once already. Tony had no desire to trigger a collapse himself.

The plans to expand the subterranean aspect of his Malibu home slowly solidified. It was getting close to Thanksgiving when JARVIS finished compiling a list of candidate properties for the lab.

Stark Tower, which he’d tentatively green lit once more—or rather, he didn’t cancel the project—would have been ideal, but that would take years longer than Tony had right now. Not to say he didn’t send a few memos to the teams spearheading the project over in Strategic Execution regarding modifications to the space, but for now Stark Tower was a rather low priority.
After a bit of deliberation, the alternatives had all been eliminated in favor of staying in Malibu if it was at all feasible. Fortunately, his Malibu home had been built into an incredibly sturdy cliffside.

(Well, provided you didn’t shoot a series of missiles at it. He could hardly blame the cliff for that fail condition, though.)

There were two new sub-basements being installed. The first was semi-public knowledge, in the same way his post-New York bunker full of Iron Man suits had been.

(That is to say, everyone involved in the project signed NDAs extensive enough to compare to something SHIELD would give you, and an investigative reporter managing to catch wind of it would be the journalistic coup of the century.)

Beyond that, however, was a smaller, secondary basement-borderline-bunker. Nestled further into the cliffside, fortified and far enough inland to withstand even a series of Mandarin-esque attacks, the large room was where Tony intended to house JARVIS’s primary servers long term. The only role the professional construction crew would play in the rooms’ construction would be in unwittingly masking the influx of required materials.

(…The next decade had made Tony a very paranoid man. Justifiably so, really.)

On the whole, construction was projected to finish in mid-February. Hopefully by that time they would have the blueprints for the new element in hand and it would just be a matter of calibrating the needed machinery.

Tony lost track of time in that way he always seemed to when between explicit deadlines. Thus, it came as a surprise when Rhodey called him early in the afternoon the next Sunday.

“You should come up for Thanksgiving this week, Tones. Ma would love to see you; last time she saw you, you were still a scrawny kid walking across the stage at graduation.”

“I’ll have you know I was never scrawny,” Tony protested.

He… didn’t remember this happening before. He cast back his thoughts, trying to remember how he’d spent this Thanksgiving Before. That he couldn’t remember was a sign he’d completely skipped over it, busy tracking down his stolen property and desperately searching for an alternative to
“Don’t you… aren’t you in the middle of a tour right now?” Tony asked slowly.

“I was. But what with you doing our jobs for us, when I requested leave for the holidays the Air Force was inclined to give it.”

“Well… that’s something,” Tony stalled.

(How to politely turn down the invitation? There was too much to do! He couldn’t afford to take a couple days to himself.)

(No matter how nice the gray-haired woman had seemed the one time they met all those years ago.)

“Just think about it, would you? Fly out Wednesday, head back Friday morning or knowing you, Thursday night… it’s no mansion, but we do have a guest bedroom and decent wireless for when the tech withdrawal starts to get to you,” Rhodey said.

“Yeah, alright. I’ll think about it.” Tony wasn’t quite able to bring himself to say no to his long-time friend.

“Sounds great, Tones! Anyway, that’s the main reason I called. The paperwork just came through on the leave. I’ve got to get back to work, but—don’t forget, Thanksgiving or no, you still owe me a conversation. Possibly two.”

“Yeah, okay. Sure, sure,” Tony said, waving off the words. “Bye, honeybunch.”

Rhodey’s audible sigh crackled through the speakers, but his voice lacked any genuine irritation when he replied.

“Unfortunately, that bit isn’t optional. Talk to you soon, Tones.” The call ended. Tony was left staring at the blueprints he’d been working on.
“J, what’s the chances I get him to settle for an apology pumpkin pie when I ditch him?” Tony asked, massaging his forehead lightly.

(Why did these conversations leave him so exhausted?! They’d been on the phone for less than five minutes!)

“Minimal, Sir.” JARVIS didn’t even pretend he felt sorry for Tony, the traitor.

“Why,” Tony asked, “does it almost sound like you’re in favor of this? You know better than anyone what’s at stake here.”

“Therefore, you should have confidence when I say there is nothing that will not keep without you for two days.”

“But what about the renos? Aren’t they breaking ground this week? I need to be here for that. And the company? The suit? Your hardware?”

“As I said, Sir. The construction crews start tomorrow. They require minimal access to the mansion following that, and I am more than capable of monitoring the situation should anything prove amiss. They will not be working on the holiday. Nor will anyone in Stark Industries. The current iteration of the Iron Man armor is in working condition, and the next iteration is waiting on material deliveries for both itself and the upgraded fabricators required for construction. As are upcoming changes to my own hardware.

“Furthermore,” JARVIS continued, “Your taking a short holiday will provide me a chance to address portions of my processing backlog, which I would be much appreciative of.”

Tony was torn between amusement at JARVIS’s unsubtle attempt at manipulation and guilt at the kernel of truth underlying the words.

He settled on the former, in part because he knew JARVIS would scoff and reassure Tony if he mentioned the latter.

“Geez, buddy. How did you become so manipulative?”
“You remain the primary influence in the relevant libraries, Sir.”

Tony feigned brushing a tear away.

“They grow up so fast!” he sniffled. Then, more seriously, he continued, “I will think about it, J. Promise.”

JARVIS allowed the conversation to shift to other topics from there, but there was no mistaking the underlying current of satisfaction in his voice as they talked.

*Smug bastard,* Tony thought fondly.

The next day, after meeting with the construction lead in the morning and reviewing a few outstanding issues with him, Tony made his way to Los Angeles and his oft-neglected office.

(Part of the whole “responsible CEO” hat he was trying on.)

(There’s a reason Tony never wore hats. Nothing looked worse on him than hat hair.)

Many of the tasks on his agenda were related to problems he vaguely remembered handling or delegating Before. Outstanding defense contracts. The massive supply chain overhaul still underway. The ongoing appeasement of worried investors. All incredibly annoying but unfortunately necessary parts of once more being the CEO of Stark Industries.

He missed being CTO. *So much.*

(As CTO, Tony had still fantasized about “retiring” to a position as the Head of R&D.)

(That had been and remained a pipe dream, what with his trust issues.)

It was just as well Tony was able to step into that role when Douglas made noises about retiring after New York. Frankly, finding a replacement that wasn’t himself would have been an absolute nightmare. He had a feeling he would have tried to recruit Dr. Banner for the role. No matter that the
scientist wasn’t remotely qualified beyond his technical competency and general status as a “trusted ally”—those two qualities would have been plenty in Tony’s book. Everything else could be taught or learned on the job.

(Although Tony would have had a time and a half trying to convince the man to take the job.)

(Tony was probably the only one that found the image of him Hulking out during a conference meeting hilarious.)

The supply chain in particular was a department he knew he’d unintentionally neglected before. What they pulled off—were pulling off—was a miracle.

Companies don’t just up-and-leave the industry that had spent decades as the cornerstone of their multinational empire. That the first anyone aside from Tony learned of his intentions was during a nationally-televised press conference just accentuated the impressiveness of the feat.

(Not that Tony had much of a choice but to break the news that way. Even when he’d trusted Obadiah, he’d known the man would try to block him. Possibly succeed, too, if Tony didn’t make it such a spectacle.)

He couldn’t say his approach this time was flawless, but at least he was making more of an effort. Tony had always been preternaturally talented at smoothing ruffled feathers when he bothered to put forth even the slightest effort. A single phone call from him could substitute for days, or even weeks, of protracted negotiations.

Perks of being Tony Stark™. When he talked, people listened. When he wanted something to happen, it fucking happened.

He was the man everyone loved to hate. Genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist… and now, Iron Man, real-life superhero.

Sure, there was often pushback as he steamrollered over people and through anything else standing in his way. But more often, people came out of conversations with Tony believing they’d gotten the better end of the deal.

But the House always won in the end, and Tony? He was the House.
Arrogant? Maybe. But now, in the time before he became deeply mired in the mistakes and regrets of his tenure as Iron Man, it was too easy to slip back into the familiar role. Over the years, he’d managed to forget just how much he enjoyed this aspect of his position and reputation. Just how satisfying it could be to fight battles with words instead of rockets.

(Not that he didn’t still feel the urge to respond with a repulsor to the face on some of the more irritating individuals.)

(Time and place for everything, Tony.)

He spent most of his day on the phone, fiddling with a pen in one hand or becoming partially distracted by doodling and simpler calculations.

He and Pepper interacted a few times, but beyond the requisite banter their interactions were strictly professional and touched on nothing personal. It reminded him, vaguely, of old (future?) times. He wasn’t quite sure yet whether that was a good or a bad thing.

It was getting into the evening before Tony finally acknowledged the main reason he was still in the office more than ten hours after he first went in.

He was avoiding thinking about Rhodey’s offer.

A large part of him still wanted to say ‘no.’ He and Rhodey were good friends, arguably family, and had been for a long time. But they’d never been, past or future, spend-Thanksgiving-together levels of close.

(Or had they?)

(He’d been awfully busy keeping everyone at the prescribed distance his entire life.)

(Funny how it took everyone dying for him to even notice.)
He’d been down that road (those Rhodes—Hah!) before. Maybe all that B.A.R.F.’ing effort he put in eight years from now reliving and finally processing some of his worst memories had helped more than he thought. There was no Thanksgiving invitation Before, true. But that didn’t mean he couldn’t accept one now.

(Maybe. Possibly.)

(It’s so much easier to keep secrets when no one knows you well enough to figure them out.)

He spent the entire drive home from his office waffling. He was tempted to put off a decision until the last possible second. But then again, Tony was never one to sleep on an idea.

(Nope, he and his ideas had far better ways to spend their time in bed together…)

(Right, that’s enough extended metaphor for one night, thanks.)

So, after JARVIS greeted him as he made his way inside, he said, “Hey, J. Mind messaging Rhodey for me? I’ll see him Wednesday night.”

For all that he lacked the requisite musculature, the smile in JARVIS’s response came through crystal-clear.

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Wednesday evening saw Sir fretting as he double-checked everything in the workshop for the third time in the past twenty minutes.

“Sir,” JARVIS said patiently, “Might I remind you that your jet was scheduled to depart two hours ago?”

“Again, my plane; I literally can’t be late. But—I’ll have my phone, if anything comes up, and my dinosaur laptop so I can still make progress on some of the slightly-less-secret work.”
“Indeed, Sir,” JARVIS replied, adding a teasing note to his response.

“Alright. I can see where I’m not wanted. Going. I’m going. Keep an eye on the kids, J, I don’t want to come back to find the place on fire.” Sir was finally making his way upstairs and towards the exit.

Fortunately, his comment about fire was made outside of DUM-E’s audio sensor range.

(Fortunate only because washing off the chemicals would delay Sir even further. DUM-E’s efforts to ensure Sir’s safety were laudable. JARVIS was not one to discourage that kind of initiative.)

(He most certainly did not find it amusing when Sir was saved from a non-existent fire.)

(No, he was simply encouraging the older-yet-younger bot’s efforts to refine his internal routines and protocols.)

Sir left, and they were once more connected only by the alert system for JARVIS on Sir’s phone.

JARVIS verified the monitoring process was still active and operational before turning his attentions toward his outstanding task queue. He gave it twenty minutes before Sir was at work on his laptop once more but calculated that Sir might manage to avoid contacting JARVIS until Thursday afternoon.

(His algorithms predicting Sir’s behaviors were now incredibly outdated, and unfortunately the only way to improve that was to refine them through continued use.)

(Not that anyone, including Sir himself, could ever really predict Sir’s actions. JARVIS tried anyway.)

He hadn’t been exaggerating when he told Sir he needed a bit of time to address his ever-increasing backlog. For all that JARVIS loved Sir dearly, he certainly contributed significantly to JARVIS’s ongoing, inadvertent, stress testing of his processing units.

A processor had even caught on fire last Tuesday.
(At least DUM-E got a chance to wield his extinguisher on a legitimate fire.)

(The bot had preened for *days*, much to Sir’s consternation.)

As he’d grown accustomed to recently, after a quick scan he split into *life-support* and *base-j*. The former remained focused on the more immediate threats to Sir; right now, that almost exclusively meant tasks related to the palladium poisoning and the efforts to recreate and synthesize starkanium.

The latter handled everything else.

**JARVIS** was slowly becoming more comfortable existing in multiple branches for slightly longer periods of time. It helped that his data suggested his everyday activities tended to have a negligible effect on the more fundamental aspects of his personality. Occasionally a divergent conclusion on some hypothesis would be reached by the two branches, but as they were both still *him*, the conclusions were never irreconcilable. One branch would defer to the other branch’s superior chain of reasoning, and that would be the end of matters.

It still took a noticeable amount of time to merge, but he’d begun to integrate a merge into his daily maintenance routines, regardless of how recently he’d last done so. The repeated experiences were slowly allowing for time and space optimization of his merging algorithms. His merge algorithms currently ran in quasilinear time. In other words, for every piece of new data in either branch, the data either created no conflict and was accepted immediately or created a merge conflict and requiring further processing before being accepted into the recombined, singular JARVIS.

In the former case—no conflicts—the algorithm was much simpler. It required only a single execution block to process each piece data and ran in linear time. In the latter case—merge conflicts—a bit more calculation was involved to determine the appropriate resolution for the conflict. The algorithms for that were more complex, and ran in quasilinear time, which simply meant that the overall time to finish merging increased more rapidly as the size of the data set grew. In this case, that rate was deemed quasilinear because while it was not quite quadratic in its growth rate, it was still greater than linear with an overall complexity of $n \log(n)$.

**JARVIS** was reasonably certain the overall time complexity of his merge technique was unlikely to change. For two branches, $n$ and $m$, the entire process took $n \log(n) + m \log(m)$ execution blocks in the worst-case scenario where every disparate piece of data created a merge conflict. However, he was still hoping to further optimize the underlying execution block to require fewer instructions in real time. Ideally, **JARVIS** hoped to find a way to allow the entire process to be safely multi-threaded, allowing for multiple merge conflicts to be resolved concurrently.
Space complexity, in contrast, was far more difficult to optimize. Reducing the amount of physical memory required to complete a merge was a low priority overall anyways. JARVIS’s general memory maintenance protocols were already incredibly efficient thanks to Sir’s efforts and the ease of memory allocation and defragmentation using Magda. Space was not typically a limiting factor for JARVIS in general, and he had yet to reach anything close to his theoretical upper limits in memory usage while merging his two branches back into one.

The merge algorithms and protocols, however interesting JARVIS found them, were unfortunately not in base-j’s priority task queue. Said algorithms, understandably, required JARVIS to exist in a singular form in order to be safely worked on.

Instead, he turned his attention towards the top item that fell under his purview and was not currently locked by life-support. In this case, it was the creation of a generalized “threat index” for the various foes, present and future, Sir faced, and a collection of relevant data and handling strategies associated with each potential threat. He’d discussed the idea with Sir the other day.

“God, how sad is it that I have enough enemies we need a whole system to catalog them?” was Sir’s primary comment on the matter. When JARVIS had offered to take the lead on the project, Sir had been relieved— “One less problem for me to worry about. Your timeline has seriously been a life-saver already!”

When they’d discussed the project initially, JARVIS had throw together a simple rankings chart based primarily on the threat level and how long until said threat became active.

Thanos, unsurprisingly, topped the list by a significant margin. For all that it was the last threat Sir faced in his previous timeline, half the universe dying overshadowed other threats by such a wide margin the distance was irrelevant.

(Not to mention the fact that he had defeated Sir in their confrontation and would have killed him if not for Dr. Strange’s deal.)

Following that, the threats progressed fairly linearly compared to Sir’s original encounters with them. Several of the Avenger’s inclusions had been heavily debated by Sir.

Wanda & Pietro Maximoff, for all that they eventually became allies, currently wanted revenge on Sir. Steve Rogers, for all that he’d been a long-time ally and was generally trustworthy, likewise had once turned against Sir, fought, and defeated him in battle. Even Bruce Banner was eventually
included on the watchlist, albeit towards the bottom.

Decisions like that were likely why Sir had chosen to defer to JARVIS on the initial construction and assembly of the index. JARVIS, unlike Sir, lacked the emotional ties and empathetic reactions to many of the enemies he’d encountered. Not to say JARVIS wasn’t capable of understanding the motivations of their enemies, or even sympathizing somewhat with them. It was just far easier for him to set those emotions aside when a degree of detachment was required.

JARVIS settled into what would be several hours of continuous work designing a proper threat analysis algorithm and building an interface to rest on top of it.

A good way to spend Thanksgiving. JARVIS was thankful for the opportunity to help Sir.

Chapter End Notes

I got... a bit carried away with the optimization discussion. Hopefully the technobabble made sense and was interesting for you guys!

The threat index concept comes from one of my all-time favorite fanfiction stories, The War is Far From Over Now by dont_call_me_carrie. If you somehow haven't read that... do. Please note that, despite the shared name, the function and purpose of the two is rather different. Here, it's mean to be more of an "Every person and/or organization that is or has the potential to become an active threat" database and prioritization system. Hence the inclusion of those that are arguably allies, which I tried to make explicit by mentioning Bruce.

Next chapter, Thanksgiving at Rhodey's! Update rates are likely to continue to slow, since I'm moving cross-country next week and starting a new job the following Monday. As always, thanks for reading! (:}
Tony was proud of himself. His jet reached cruising altitude before he couldn’t take it anymore and pulled open the schematics and design specifications for the wideband multimode fiber he was in the process of finalizing. He wanted to forward the needed documentation to Legal, so they could begin the process of filing for a patent on the technology early next week. Even with Stark Industries’ relative priority in the patenting office after decades of close ties with the US defense industry, patents still tended to take more than a year from submission to receive final approval. Unlike many of Tony’s other proprietary inventions, where the tech in question was considered a trade secret of SI and or his work was covered in the broadest forms under existing or expired patents, Tony very much intended for his work here to enter the public domain eventually.

(Especially since he still felt vaguely guilty for whoever’s discovery he was appropriating. For all that he was technically reinventing the wheel, he knew the base idea didn’t come from his own work.)

(He’d asked JARVIS to investigate some of the teams that seemed most likely to have made the breakthrough Before and look into either recruitment or fully funding their projects under the auspices of the September Foundation.)

(Huh. No wonder JARVIS was so overloaded with work. Tony itched to begin working on the development of his girl FRIDAY, but unlike with JARVIS he was starting from scratch. He wanted her to have the chance to grow as a fully-fledged AI from the moment she was “born”. It would take time. Unfortunately, he wouldn’t have much of that to spare in the foreseeable future.)

Musings aside, Tony was able to while away most of the flight working on the project. By the time the plane began descending for the landing, he was putting the finishing touches on the email to his patent lawyers and sending the completed documentation on its way.
At the runway, Rhodey was waiting for him with his car. They exchanged greetings; Tony’s overnight bag going into the boot while his briefcase was relegated to the backseat.

It was well into the evening, verging on early hours of the morning. Their conversation skirted around any of the more serious topics. Rhodey rhapsodized about his Ma’s delicious cooking and filled the car with tales of Thanksgivings past.

Mrs. Rhodes had apparently come from a big family. Growing up, Thanksgiving had meant an extended family reunion at her parent’s place. When they passed in the late 90’s, the family Thanksgivings had slowly dwindled and eventually dissipated entirely. These days, Thanksgiving at the Rhodes household was a much more intimate affair. Mrs. Rhodes typically invited a handful of people she knew from church. As Rhodey put it, “That woman will take any excuse she can get to mother people; watch out Tones or you’ll find yourself adopted by the end of the day.”

Rhodey cackled at Tony’s obvious discomfort at the remark.

This year, they were evidently expecting an elderly gentleman— (“Lost two fingers in Korea; very solitary guy”)—and a younger family. (“Wife’s been in poor health recently after a difficult pregnancy, Ma insisted they come over. Two kids, the baby and a girl that just started pre-school this Fall.”)

Rhodey’s presence and Tony’s last-minute invitation were evidently unexpected but very welcome additions to the dinner.

“Ma’s head over heels you’re coming; you know she still asks after you most every time I visit,” Rhodey said as they turned into a small, aging subdivision.

Tony shifted uncomfortably.

“We only met once, and I’m pretty sure I barely said five words to her,” Tony said.

“Doesn’t matter. She decided you were family decades ago, and she’s a very stubborn woman.”

Right then. The conversation was veering too far into the territory of “emotions”. Tony cast about for
“You didn’t warn me there’d be other people,” Tony said. He’d been aiming for neutral, but he winced internally as the comment came out closer to accusatory.

“Yeah, ‘cuz I knew you wouldn’t come if you knew. Don’t worry, though. They’re not the type to pry or blab to the press; Ma would never let them through the front door if they were.”

“Right. Okay. Sorry.”

“No, I get it. I’ve got your back, though, and if it turns out I’m wrong I’ll make sure it doesn’t turn into a problem. But I’m not, so…”

Tony settled at the reassurance, though the suspicion bred into him still niggled. He had to resist the urge to pull out his phone and text JARVIS then and there. Just in case.

(“Have trust issues, not to mention…”)

(Not everyone on this planet was out to get him.)

(Good luck convincing yourself on that one, buddy.)

They pulled into the driveway at their final destination a minute later. Rhodey showed him to his room, which fortunately had a small private bathroom attached.

“I’d give you the full tour,” Rhodey said “But since someone didn’t fly in until 12:30 in the morning…”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. I showed up, didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did,” Rhodey agreed, dropping the teasing tone. “Glad you’re here, Tones.”
“Yeah,” Tony said after a brief pause, “Me too.”

They shared a look for a moment before Tony looked away, pretending to focus his attentions elsewhere in the room. Not long after, Rhodey left for his own bed.

Tony took in the room around him, with its lacquered wooden furnishings and floral print duvet.

**What am I even doing here?**

He collapsed onto the bed. Eventually, he settled enough to drift into a light sleep. His dreams that night were haunted by memories of families found and lost and relationships true and false.

He woke up to the image of Obadiah looming over his paralyzed form as he tore out the reactor keeping Tony alive. He awoke drenched in sweat, no sound to mark the transition but the momentary hitch in his labored breathing.

**Well,** he thought as he checked the time on his phone, **could be worse.**

It was 4:45am.

He gave himself a few minutes to steady his heart rate, staring up at the textured ceiling and trying not to see the impressions of his nightmares threatening to resolve themselves into the random patterns. It wasn’t long before he reached a reasonable approximation of calm and rolled out of bed, heading towards the shower.

The shower was less relaxing than it should have been, what with old issues surrounding water on his face making a surprise reemergence recently.

*(Thanks, time travel.)*

*(His brain would keep the most inconvenient of the issues he’d managed to overcome in the years following his return from Afghanistan.)*
Still, the shower helped wash away the worst of the nightmares. It wasn’t long before he was toweling off, getting dressed for the day, and making his way downstairs.

He wasn’t the only one up. The smell of fresh coffee wafted out from the lit-up kitchen, and Tony allowed his nose to lead him towards the promise of caffeine.

“Good morning, Mrs. Rhodes,” Tony said, announcing his presence as he wandered into the room.

A half-empty mug of coffee sat on the countertop. The woman herself was hard at work, arms deep within the guts of a turkey with a freshly-mixed bowl of stuffing resting to her left.

“Mugs are in the cabinet above the coffeepot; there’s an unopened bottle of creamer in the fridge if you need it,” Mrs. Rhodes said, inclining her head in the cabinet’s direction.

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Lord knows Jim’s the same way, can’t get a straight sentence out without a cup of coffee to kickstart his system. And you can call me Mama Rhodes, or Gloria if you’d prefer.”

“Okay. Thanks, uh, Gloria,” Tony replied, pouring his coffee and making his way over to sit at the bar. After a beat, he continued, “And, you know, for having me over.”

“I’ve been telling my son to bring you over for years now; the pleasure is all mine, Mr. Stark.”

For a moment, Tony’s mind flashed forward, remembering a kid in a suit still calling him Mr. Stark even as he fell apart in his arms. Somehow, it was the first time he’s been addressed by that title since then outside the comforting rhythm of his conversations with Pepper. He was not expecting the sucker punch that comes with it. He floundered for a moment before recovering enough to say, “Tony. Uh, you can call me Tony. Mr. Stark is—well, like I said. Tony’s fine.”

Mrs. Rhodes fixed him with a small smile and nodded. “Of course, Tony,” she accepted.
“Jim likely won’t be up for a couple hours yet—honestly, wasn’t expecting either of you to be out and about this early with how late I heard you coming in last night. Company’s not coming around until two. You’re welcome to help yourself to some breakfast if you’d like. Fruit’s in a bowl on the table, oatmeal’s on the third shelf in the pantry… I’m afraid I’ve been eating the same breakfast for thirty years now, so there’s not much variety but feel free to scrounge around for something different if you’re like Jim and can’t stand oatmeal.”

(As it happened, Tony didn’t mind oatmeal. He just rarely ate breakfast and thus, rarely ate oatmeal.)

(Before Afghanistan, he had a chef that stopped by twice a week to prepare meals.)

(He’d never been able to bring himself to find a replacement.)

(Paranoia, thy name is Tony Stark.)

The two fell into companionable silence. After eating, Tony fetched his briefcase and pulled out his laptop. He sunk into the familiar routine of work, remembering the outside world only enough to catch himself before he accidentally tried to make a comment or sarcastic remark to JARVIS.

He was reviewing his inbox, replying to emails JARVIS had flagged that he hadn’t quite managed to get to sooner.

(He scheduled them to go out early tomorrow morning.)

(See, he wasn’t totally ignorant of the fact that the universe didn’t revolve around him!)

Plans for the company tour and the Stark Expo were coming along nicely. Pepper was the lead on both projects, only occasionally asking for Tony’s input on the details. Tuesday, the pair had a lengthy debate/argument on Tony’s desire to start after Thanksgiving, whereas Pepper thought it wise to wait until the New Year. They compromised on only visiting the offices and holdings in California in December, with the rest to come after the chaos of the holidays died down.

First pre-dawn then the sunrise itself began to filter into the room. The rays came in at just the right angle to hit Tony’s back directly, slowly warming it and casting inconvenient glares onto his laptop.
screen. He was spared from the efforts of addressing the problem (…so, moving over by one chair) by the sounds of Rhodey making his way downstairs and into the kitchen.

Rhodey went through his own morning routine, pouring himself a cup from the recently-refreshed coffeepot and grabbing a banana from the table. For several minutes, the relative silence of the morning was broken only occasionally by Rhodey’s early-morning banter with Tony and his mom.

“Hey, Tones,” Rhodey said eventually, standing back up. “Want to accompany me out back for a bit? Gotta take the peel—” He wiggled the remnant from his banana. “—out back to the compost Ma started this past Spring.”

Tony agreed to the paper-thin excuse, taking a moment to pack away his laptop and refill his mug before following Rhodey out the backdoor.

They idly chit-chatted for a while, taking in the brisk early morning weather and, in Rhodey’s case, allowing the coffee time to work its way into his bones for the day. Eventually, they fell into a comfortable silence. Rhodey was waiting for Tony to break it, but there was no accompanying pressure or sense of expectation to the silence. Tony took the silence for the offer that it was, gathering his thoughts and weighing what he could say and still trying to figure out what he even wanted to say.

The weight of an unwritten future loomed heavily in Tony’s mind.

(“I’m not that kind of doctor. I’m not a therapist. It’s not my training.”)

(“This lone gunslinger act is unnecessary…you don’t have to do this alone!”)

“You know,” Tony began conversationally, words carefully measured. “I wasn’t supposed to be the only one that made it out of that cave. There was this other guy, a doctor, too. Had every reason to hate my guts, but still saved my life. He would talk about his family, his wife and kids living in a little town called Gulmira… We were going to get out, and he was going to be reunited with his family, and I had all these secret plans to help get them all out of the country, out of the warzone and into someplace safe. Stupid, yeah? Honestly, I cared more about saving their lives than my own—figured I’d die sooner or later, more of the weapons I’d designed returning to finish what that first bomb started.

“Turns out, there was no family. Or, there was. They were just already dead. I thought the plan was
to save us both. His plan was always to go out in a blaze of glory when we made our escape attempt.

“He was an incredible doctor, you know. The fact I didn’t die of infection in the first week—I’m still not sure how he managed that. They couldn’t even scrounge together anesthetic for open-heart surgery, how the hell he kept everything sanitary enough to not kill me… The electromagnet? The car battery? Forget my suit, he Macgyvered the human body. In a cave. With a bunch of crazy men waving guns all over the place and just generally being awful human beings. And he saved my life. Knowing that it was my weapons that killed his family. Not knowing if I’d been the one to sell them to their killers in the first place.

“I have no fucking idea how he managed that. You encounter the person you blame for your family’s death—” Tony’s voice hitched on the word. “—You don’t save their lives. You don’t spend hours performing the impossible to keep their heart beating. No, you stab them one more time in the heart yourself. Just to be sure they’re dead.”

“And I’ve spent so much time trying to figure out why. What his motivations were. If I ever truly knew him at all. And I can’t—well, I’ve never been able to figure out an explanation that makes sense. All I have is that, whatever his reasons, that’s what he did. He gave me the chance to live long enough to at least attempt to make things right, and I don’t deserve—well. There’s nothing I can ever do to repay him for that.”

That final statement hung in the air between them for a moment. The entire time he’d been speaking, Tony had kept his eyes trained forward. Not wanting to read whatever Rhodey was thinking on the man’s face, not sure what he even wanted or expected the man to be thinking. When he didn’t immediately reply, Tony felt his guard begin to automatically rise, instinctively assuming the worst of his friend’s silence. He resisted the urge to flicker his gaze over long enough to gauge the man’s mood, instead choosing to focus on his own breathing and, hopefully, relax slightly.

(That each intake came with a dull twinge of protest from scarred muscle went without saying.)

(Pain made for an excellent foci.)

“Okay, we’ll come back to the surgery and the car battery because I think I’m going to need a bit more context on that one, but first off—Tony, look at me because I need you to understand this—the blame for what happened in Afghanistan does not lie with you. Yes, be thankful to that doctor—I sure as hell am now that I know of him—but don’t feel like you owe him some impossible debt. You’re not some redemptive hero; you don’t need to atone for anything or spend your life trying to reach some impossible standard of having ‘done enough.’
“Because honestly, Tones? It will never feel like enough. You let yourself keep going down this road, it’s just going to keep building up and the goalposts will keep moving until eventually the pressure’s gonna be too much and it will make you self-destruct.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Rhodey continued when it looked like Tony might interrupt, “You’ve done a good thing with Iron Man so far. You’ve been changing the world for the better since before we even met, and the suit absolutely has the same potential to change the world—hell, it already has. But Tones? The thousands of different problems in the world are not all on you. You don’t have to do this alone, and no single man could do this alone. We want to help. You just need to talk to us, so we know how we can help you.”

The words, so clearly echoing a Rhodey that would never be, created a tight feeling in Tony’s throat.

And he wants to believe Rhodey. Shift the blame to someone else, absolve himself of years of guilt. But all he can think is—

"When you can do the things that I can, but you don't, and then the bad things happen, they happen because of you."

And he can’t quite bring himself to fully accept Rhodey’s words.

(Not yet. Not ever, maybe.)

(At least now, he’s heard them. At least now, he’s trying to listen.)

It takes a while for Tony to regain his footing after Rhodey’s impassioned words, but eventually he does. They continue talking until their coffee’s long since cooled and the sun’s risen to hang fully overhead.

By the time they made their way inside, Tony felt lighter than he had in lifetimes. Closer to Rhodey than perhaps he’d ever felt.

(For all that they talk, there is so much more that Tony left unsaid. SHIELD. The ticking time bomb of Palladium. What he’d really been up to, when he sequestered himself following the Iron Man press conference. Literally anything that even remotely hinted at topics he wasn’t certain he’d been aware of at this point in time Before.)
(Some secrets might fade with time.)

(Others never could.)

(“Sometimes my teammates don’t tell me things.”)

(Had he become a hypocrite too? Tony had his reasons, but then… Steve had his too.)

Inside, the kitchen has transformed in the scant few hours Tony and Rhodey had spent talking. Pies were cooling on stacked racks beside the pantry. The smell of turkey wafted from the oven, accompanied by the fainter smell of green bean casserole cohabiting the space. A tray of marshmallow-laden sweet potatoes was wrapped in foil and waiting on the countertop for its own stint in the oven, resting beside an enormous crock pot of mashed potatoes left to stew.

“…There’s only supposed to be a few more people coming, right? And one of them is meant to be an infant?” Tony asked, eye widening slightly at the food that had seemingly appeared out of nowhere.

“Ma likes to send people away with plenty of leftovers,” Rhodey said, smiling.

“I can see that,” Tony said dubiously.

It wasn’t long before the first of the remaining guests arrived, the Johnsons. They turned out to be a young couple, mid-twenties at the most. The woman was bouncing a baby on her hip, indulgently trying (and failing) to discourage the kid from gumming on her wispy, light brown hair. The other kid, the daughter, had her dirty blond hair pulled back into a messy braid and was holding her father’s hand shyly while the other hand was filled with a small doll.

“We brought fruit salad!” the husband said, drawing attention to the half-empty container in his other arm. “There would be more, but somebody—” he stared meaningfully at his daughter, who shuffled guiltily before starting to giggle as she took in her dad’s teasing words and expression, “—was a bit too thorough this morning in trying to make sure nothing was poisoned.”

“Well, thank heavens we have Ellie here to keep us safe! My old heart isn’t equipped to fight off
poison there days,” Mrs. Rhodes said as she ushered the family into the house, relieving the father of his offering. “I have the perfect glass dish for us to put this in. Jim, be a dear and grab it? It’s in the cabinets above the stove.”

Tony hovered uncertainly, tempted to follow Rhodey and flee back into the kitchen.

He could tell the exact moment the girl—Ellie—noticed his presence, because her eyes darted between himself and Mrs. Rhodes uncertainly before taking a half-step to hide behind her father.

“Now Ellie, there’s no need to be shy! This here is Tony, he’s one of my son Jimmy’s old friends from school. He’s a very nice man; he likes to build things just like you do!”

“Oh, a burgeoning engineer, huh?” Tony asked encouragingly with a raised eyebrow.

(His mind flashed to another kid that, come to think, was probably about the same age right now.)

Ellie looked confused for a moment (wait, shit, tiny people didn’t usually know words like ‘burgeoning, did they?) before her face cleared and she shook her head.

“Nuh-uh. I’mma be a builder! Like Bob!” she said. The need to correct Tony evidently overpowered her shyness, as she tugged her hand out of her dad’s grip and proudly presented her doll, which on closer inspection did seem appropriately “builder”-esque, with blue overalls and a yellow (plush) hardhat.

“That’s, uh, nice. You guys build anything awesome recently?” Tony asked awkwardly. (How exactly do kids work again?!) 

Fortunately, that seemed to be the right question, because Ellie was off, chattering about her various creations excitedly

“—We made a pillow fort one time, and daddy helped but it was mostly me ‘n Bob and it was huge! It took up the living room, and then daddy let us use the spare sheets and we made a tunnel into the dining room so Bob could have his mancave in there while me ‘n my barbies have parties and sleepovers in the main part. And we built this whole city outta legos and these foam tiles Nate keeps tryn’ a eat because he’s like, Godzilla and me ‘n Bob have to furti- fortify—the buildings to keep the townspeople safe. And mommy said she’d help me write a letter for Santa so I can tell him want I
want, and she said since I’m a hero I’m definitely on the nice list but I should still be really good and pick up my toys when I’m told to and she says Santa’ll notice and be extra nice and there’s this one that I saw at the store that comes with a dolphin and I’m gonna tell him that’s the one I want because dolphins are my second favorite. Do you like dolphins, Mr. Tony?”

As the girl finally came up from her rapid-fire speech for air, Tony was left wondering if this was what the rest of the world meant when they complained about the way he tended to ramble.

He was spared needing to come up with a response by Ellie’s mom gently interjecting herself into the conversation.

“Come on, sweetheart, why don’t we go help Mama Rhodes set up in the dining room?” she suggested, guiding her daughter out of the hallway they’d been lingering in.

“She really is,” Mr. Johnson said fondly. “I didn’t catch your full name, Mr….?” he asked, holding out his hand.

“Dr.,” he corrected, only to instantly cringe internally. (He used to judge people that felt the need to ‘flaunt’ their intelligence by insisting they be referred to by their title. Yet, here he was doing the same thing, all because he couldn’t bear to remain ‘Mr. Stark’ any longer.)

“I’m, uh, Dr. Stark. But please, you can just call me Tony,” Tony hastily continued, returning the handshake.

The man’s eyes widened slightly in recognition and realization, and Tony tensed slightly because here it comes, dammit Rhodey why did I let you drag me out here.

“Good to meet you, Tony. I’m Jack,” Mr. Johnson—Jack—said, pulling his hand away with a slight nod.

“And, Dr. Stark? I’m sure you must get this a lot, but I want to take the opportunity to thank you personally, for the work you’ve been doing recently with the military out in Afghanistan. I’ve got a cousin in the army, swears by his Stark P-71. Lotta people felt abandoned, when you pulled SI out of
all that all of a sudden. But they were wrong, and you more than showed that with what you did. 
You helped save a lotta lives, a lot of good soldiers like my cousin that might’ve died trying to 
accomplish half of what you did. Thank you.”

A couple minutes later, the two men rejoined the rest of the group in the kitchen.

(Tony’s eyes had not gotten misty.)

(There was just dust in the air from all the excess emotion floating around, dammit!)

Tony’s work remained untouched for the rest of the day.

Chapter End Notes

For Iron Man having a secret identity being even remotely viable, the fact that there’s an 
arc reactor embedded in his chest must be a fairly well-kept secret. Especially in Iron 
Man 2, with SHIELD’s infamous profile of him…well, I can only assume that he 
significantly downplayed the details with everyone... It’s my headcanon that, aside from 
the basics, Tony tried to keep as much of what happened to him left to conjecture. 
Wouldn’t you? So like 90% of what Tony said in this conversation? Literally no one 
else knows.

I’d love to hear your reactions to Tony's various conversations and interactions in this 
chapter! (Dialogue is hard!) Your feedback has been incredibly inspirational and 
motivating thus far for this story, and I do my best to respond to your comments. (:}
Ultimately, Tony did not stay overnight that Thursday evening. Instead, Rhodey gave him a ride back up to the airport around nine. After a brief goodbye, they went their separate ways.

Tony allowed his mind to wander as the jet took off down the runway. With the Johnsons especially, he couldn’t help but stir up old thoughts about his own childhood. About the way that he and Pepper had begun discussing the possibility of children.

(April 27, 2018. What would be their last conversation. So stupidly, naively hopeful for the future, with nearly two years without a single potentially world-ending catastrophe.)

(He’d begun to hope that maybe he’d been wrong all along. That maybe, the rest of the world was right and the aliens weren’t coming back for another round.)

(No, instead he would be proven the modern-day Cassandra. Too little, too late.)

(He’d never wished he was crazy more.)

Howard and Tony had a…difficult relationship. If you could call it a relationship at all.

(“You’re talking about a man whose happiest day of his life was shipping me off to boarding
"He was cold, calculating, never told me he loved me, never even told me he liked me..."

In his involvement with the Avengers, he’d spent years being told that somehow, he’d never known the real Howard. Spent years being told that he was simply biased, that their relationship had never been as distant or as generally negative as Tony implied.

He’d always wondered if they realized, or cared, what they sounded like in those conversations. Especially Nick Fury, who claimed to know Tony’s relationship with his father better than Tony ever could.

His father had never been a violent man. Physically, he’d never hurt Tony. No, that might have implied that the man actually felt something for him, even if it was an overwhelmingly negative emotion.

For all that he’d apparently cared all along, that didn’t change what his younger self had experienced. Howard having loved him didn’t preclude the capacity for extreme emotional neglect. Didn’t preclude the treatment that, were Tony and Howard literally any other family but the Starks, would have been taken to be emotionally abusive at best.

Didn’t change the words. (Stark men don’t…) Didn’t change what happened. (Eight years old, a tumbler of whiskey and an exhortation to drink.)

(“Which happens, dads leave, no need to be a pussy about it...”)

Tony had forgiven his father for his various failings in the Dad department years ago. He genuinely believed that his dad had been a good man, one who for the most part tried to do the right thing.

That didn’t stop him from wondering occasionally about the might-have-been’s. Didn’t stop him from admiring couples who genuinely and openly seemed to care for their families.

(If, on Christmas morning, the Johnsons woke up to an enormous box full of a waiting-to-be-assembled dollhouse large enough for Ellie’s toys, alongside a small fairy lights wiring kit and enough extra materials to allow for an infinite variety of expansions and add-ons to the dollhouse, Tony had nothing to do with it.)
(If, tucked inside the child-size yellow hardhat was a note signed only by “The Mechanic” … that went even more unsaid.)

(And no, a tiny kid in Tennessee who had just recently had his father disappear on him did not find a similarly-large electronics and mechanical kit waiting for him on his family’s snow-covered front step that same morning.)

(He had a reputation to maintain, dammit!)

(Besides, people can’t reject a gift if you’re not around to let them to do so.)

What makes a family truly family, in the end?

The question remained stuck in Tony’s mind for the next several days. It would continue to taunt him in the back of his mind for quite some time.

Meanwhile, the second Tuesday following Thanksgiving saw the kick-off of Tony’s company-wide tour and the inaugural, semi-annual, all-hands town hall with Stark Industries’ leadership team: Stark Raving Mad.

(Pepper had rolled her eyes hard at the name. She agreed when he suggested Stark Naked Truths as an alternative.)

(Honestly, that was secretly his first choice. He was just smart enough to keep it in reserve.)

(He’d commandeered the puns before the press had the chance to use them against him once more.)

(He would own that shit with a cocky smirk and characteristic insouciance.)

The tour of the LA offices where Tony worked would understandably function slightly differently than the rest of his visits. Not in the least because he’d already scanned the building for the model just in case it was hiding right under his nose.
Hence, the creation of Stark Raving Mad. In the future, it was an increasingly common, trendy thing for companies to do. In a post-SHIELD world, transparency (or pretenses therein) was the name of the game. With so many executives ousted as HYDRA, corporate trust had been at an all-time low. Every major company’s PR team was left scrambling to recover their brand's image.

Here and now, Stark Raving Mad would likely be seen as a “visionary effort to encourage accountability on all levels” by his supporters. His detractors, meanwhile, would lambast it as “another publicity stunt designed to cater to a rich man’s ego.”

It had actually been a lower-level employee in Public Relations who had suggested the base idea. Abby Latimer, twenty-three and fresh out of college. Got a job offer following her exemplary work as a summer intern a year prior. She’d deferred accepting the offer to take the chance to travel and “see the world”. Returned just in time to be on the ground floor when Tony announced his company would no longer be making weapons.

(Maybe if he'd hired someone like her to replace Pepper as his PA instead of Nat, he could have avoided the worst of the fiascos of this period Before.)

(The young woman didn’t know it, but she’d soon be receiving a transfer offer to a higher-level team in PR that came with a nice pay raise.)

(Tony Stark catching wind of your name, even in passing, ensured HR would really make an effort to keep you.)

For all that Tony’s future knowledge had sold him on the proposal, there was a decent chance it wouldn’t have crossed his mind without a direct mention like Abby’s making its way up the chain.

And thus, here they were several weeks later. Rows of chairs were set up in a room large enough to house everyone working in the Los Angeles offices that wanted to attend. A well-lit stage with three chairs—one for the CEO, CTO, and COO respectively—commanded the attention of the room.

The lattermost chair, the one reserved for the Chief Operating Officer, remained symbolically empty. The former holder of the position, Obadiah Stane, had yet to be replaced.

(Before, he never was. The position died with Stane, ostensibly in memoriam.)
Tony was still working out with Legal the logistics of offering Pepper the job as a stepping stone to her eventual rise to CEO; if all went well she’d be offered the position during the holidays and formally announced as COO following the New Years. Even if it meant trying to find a new PA, somehow. The candidate list was depressingly empty, and if it was anything like the last time he’d tried to hire an assistant, it wasn’t going to be an easy search.

(At least last time he’d given her a promotion, she’d been taking his job and he could get away without hiring a replacement PA on the argument that, as he was no longer CEO, he didn’t need one.)

Douglas, an aging gentleman in his mid-sixties, made his way on stage and settled into his seat at 7:58.

As the clock ticked over to eight am on the dot, Tony exchanged a final, small smile with Pepper before donning his showman’s grin and sauntering into the spotlight once more. Stark Raving Mad was now live. His confident posture and easy, borderline flirtatious smile was being live-streamed to Stark Industries offices around the globe.

“Seems like everyone was able to find the free coffee and donuts just fine this morning!” Tony began congenially as the initial rounds of applause died down.

“My original idea for this event involved a bit more dancing and dramatic lighting, I’ll admit, but for some reason Miss Potts and the folks over in HR vetoed that.” He paused, allowing the small chuckle from the audience to die out.

“So, instead, I came up with something even cooler for you guys: a slide deck!” Tony continued, leading to outright laughter and a smattering of applause.

(Unofficial Guide to SI, Rule #3: “Slide decks are the root of all evil. Consequently, every meeting of two or more employees lasting more than ten minutes should contain a slideshow with, at minimum, seven cards.”)

The screen bloomed to life behind him at the command of his clicker, and Tony began his presentation in earnest.

He spoke for about half an hour, covering the upcoming and ongoing high-level changes in
corporate strategy. The formal announcement of the remodeling efforts and his decisions to visit all Stark buildings worldwide went over smoothly. Tony was just proud no one in the audience was sleeping.

The remaining time was reserved for open Q&A with Tony and Douglas. Questions would bounce between online submissions, read by Pepper, and questions from those physically present. Amy Latimer, as thanks for her work, was given the opportunity to ask the first question.

“Dr. Stark,” she began, “Our company’s vision statement has long been, ‘To be the premiere global defense and security company by pushing technological boundaries.’ With such a dramatic company-wide change, has that vision changed? Moving forward, what is your vision for the future of Stark Industries?”

Tony paused for a moment, giving the question proper consideration. What was his vision for the future?

(Saving half the universe. Saving the planet. Keeping people safe.)

“Our company’s vision revolves around the idea of personal security, the idea that safety is a fundamental human right. In the past, the enemies that threatened that safety globally were military in nature—hostile foreign powers, armies with powerful weapons that required stronger, more effective weaponry of our own. Mutually Assured Destruction. MAD. Make it impossible to justify the cost of the fight.

“And that worked, in its time. Was stressful as hell for the people involved, but the world’s still here so…it worked, at least in part.

“But today? Overwhelming shows of force, flashy weaponry? It doesn’t stop our enemies. Hell, we’ve always overpowered them. Here’s the thing, though. Armies can be defeated. Nations can be toppled. But you can’t defeat an idea. And that’s what we’re fighting today—the ideas of violent, fanatical extremists who firmly see themselves as righteous crusaders and martyrs.

“With ideas, there’s only two ways to stop them. One, kill everyone involved. Or two, change their minds. If you can convince someone it’s in their best interests not to hurt you, they won’t.

“Stark Industries still strives to protect the personal security of everyone. We’re simply finding new, more effective avenues by which to do so. We hire some of the best and brightest all around the
globe. Instead of destroying, we create. We push mental and technological boundaries. We forge a new path towards the future. SI will connect the world with our cutting-edge communications technology. We’ll give the paralyzed control of their limbs. We continue to innovate, and we build ourselves a better world.”

Tony paused, let the statement sink in for a moment, before asking, “Does that answer your question?”

Amy, wide-eyed, nodded and said, “Yes, sir. Thank you.”

And the room erupted in applause once more.

The Q&A continued for another twenty minutes. Though Tony fielded the vast majority of the questions, a few were directed towards Douglas, the CTO.

By the end of it, Tony was exhausted. There were only a few minutes left until nine, and thus Tony opted to take one final question from the LA employees.

“Dr. Stark,” the questioner asked, “You’ve been CEO of Stark Industries since 1995. If you could go back, if you could do it all over again…what would you change about your tenure as CEO?”

The question was so pointed, so on-the-nose, that for a moment Tony startled and wondered if the universe was playing a joke on him.

(But no. It was just a coincidence; it was a common enough question. Learn from your mistakes so you don’t repeat them, acknowledge and reflect on your own past and the errors you’ve made.)

(Still made his heart skip a beat.)

“Well, first off, I’d grow the beard sooner. I was clean shaven until my mid-twenties, can you imagine?! Terrible for the company’s image,” Tony said, stalling as he tried to figure out what to say.

“If I could do it over? We’d leave the defense industry sooner but do so gradually. Stop contributing to the problem before it reached the point I end up kidnapped by bad guys with our guns. Hold this
company, and myself, accountable, both internally and to the world at large. I firmly believe that Stark Industries has accomplished a lot of good over the years. But that doesn’t mean we couldn’t have done better. It doesn’t mean we can’t be more.”

All that was left to say from there were the closing comments.

The first Stark Raving Mad all hands meeting was at an end. It was time to get this show on the road.

+++
[19:42] @redcapKiller: dude still think the sir thing makes it sound like you d/s with your boss

[19:42] @the_full_pkg: and jar? i’m hurt

[19:42] @the_full_pkg has left the room

[19:42] Me: Again, Sir is quite professional. The title is a private joke and provides a convenient way of referring to him without mentioning him by name.

[19:42] @siberian_variant: I’ll figure out who he is eventually

[19:42] @siberian_variant: and you

[19:42] @siberian_variant: and then I’ll tell him about your super-secret agent 007 double-life

[19:42] Me: …

[19:42] @tfsrmahmwa: lol


[19:43] @siberian_variant: just sayin’

[19:43] @siberian_variant: we all know you’re kgb

[19:43] @siberian_variant: only a suite would use that kinda formal Russian on irc

[19:43] @siberian_variant: *site

[19:43] @siberian_variant: dammit

[19:43] @siberian_variant: *suit

[19:43] @siberian_variant: jc how do I even russian

[19:43] @tfsrmahmwa: lol nailed it @siberian_variant

[19:43] @siberian_variant: ^^ up yours ^^

[19:43] @tfsrmahmwa: <3

[19:44] @arrangesthblcks: ok so if @siberian_variant and @tfsrmahmwa are done flirting, can we get back to my story now?

[19:44] @siberian_variant: by all means

[19:44] @tfsrmahmwa: ^^

[19:44] @redcapKiller status changed to [AFK]

[19:44] @enoughropeforu: look what you two did, ya scared off red

[19:44] @arrangesthblcks: ANYWAYS. So I knock on the door. Dude answers with no shirt on,
bird on his shoulder, chewing on a toothpick. Long-ass greasy hair, p. much looked like he could snap me in half with a scowl and scars to match

[19:44] @arrangesthblcks: and I’m like, ‘sign please’ and he’s all, ‘come inside, need a pen’ and I’d really rather not and also I have a pen, but like I said. Dude looked like he’d rip me to shreds and I like being in one piece


[19:44] @enoughropeforu: a bird?! I didn’t realize siberia had birds @siberian_variant ???

[19:44] @tfsrmahmwa: jar, ily

[19:45] @arrangesthblcks: @JargoneeringVisitor, I have nothing to say to you.

[19:45] @siberian_variant: can confirm, birds live in siberia. Especially if you byob

[19:45] Me: And yet…

[19:45] @siberian_variant: @tfsrmahmwa, I thought we had something special! ;_;

[19:45] @redcapKiller status changed to [Active]

[19:45] @tfsrmahmwa: sorry but if I bone jar he can keep the kgb off my back. We can still be friends tho?

[19:45] @tfsrmahmwa: also. byob? Like bring your own bird? Because even if jar’s down for an open relationship, I can’t be poly with someone who tells jokes that stupid. srsly.

[19:45] @siberian_variant: ;_; </3

[19:45] @redcapKiller: ummm

[19:45] @redcapKiller: idk whats going on

[19:45] @redcapKiller: but i’m disturbed

[19:45] @redcapKiller: so i’mma just go

[19:45] @redcapKiller: ttyl

[19:45] @redcapKiller has left the room.

[19:46] @enoughropeforu: yeah didn’t need that mental image, thanks

[19:46] @enoughropeforu: tf, you owe me some brain bleach

[19:46] @tfsrmahmwa: dude ask jar he’s the one with cxns for stuff

[19:46] @siberian_variant: order for two pls, @JargoneeringVisitor

[19:46] Me: Even should your baseless accusations prove true, I would not provide you with such chemicals. Sexual congress and reproduction are natural parts of human life.
[19:46] @siberian_variant: p sure your dick up his ass isn’t how reproduction happens

[19:47] @enoughropeforu: oooookay

[19:47] @enoughropeforu: so i’llma be back in ten and hopefully this conversation will be over

[19:47] @enoughropeforu status changed to [AFK]

[19:47] @tfsrmahmwa: dude sib I think that means we won

[19:47] @siberian_variant: dream team ftw!

[19:47] @arrangesthblcks: I hate all of you.

[19:47] Me: I apologize, that was terribly rude of us. So, @arrangesthblcks, what were you saying about this suspicious Vanko character?

[19:48] @arrangesthblcks: as usual, I can’t tell if jar is fucking with me or not

[19:48] @arrangesthblcks: but I’llma go with not so I can talk about this damn horror show of a delivery

[ --- LOAD MORE MESSAGES? --- ]

Thousands of miles away from Siberia, JARVIS's servers hummed in satisfaction.

Chapter End Notes

Bit of a shorter chapter, but JARVIS's portion in this one was in a somewhat experimental format. (I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I liked writing it, because I seriously kept giggling to myself the entire time...) It felt like a good stopping point within the story line and themes of this chapter.

Other than that, I hope Tony didn't come off as John Galt’ing in the middle. Because his little spiel took longer than the entire rest of the chapter to write.

You can thank the wild success of my recent shopping adventures ($342 off what originally would have been a $500 purchase of some seriously quality stuff!) for the quick update. Plus my excitement over realizing this story had over 100 bookmarks at some point when I was reading through your awesome comments yesterday. :o Thank you all so much for your support and encouragement! It means the world to me. <3
Juxtapose

Chapter Summary

Tony's California tour comes to an end, and JARVIS learns that sometimes, having two of yourself could just make a problem worse.

Chapter Notes

Warnings for alcoholism, fatalism, and poor coping mechanisms.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

December 18, 2008. A week before Christmas. After two incredibly busy weeks spent jetting around California, they had finally reached the last of their intended Californian stops, a warehouse and distribution center in Fresno.

(“Fresno!...Fresno...in what universe is Fresno better than Paris, Derek?”)

(What do you say when you’re offered a job in Fresno? Oh hell no.)

The office visits in Santa Clara and San Diego had been first, but after that they’d begun visiting the less-glamourous Stark Industries holdings. A decade from now, when Stark Industries was the leading name in consumer technology, there would be dozens of new and expanded warehouses built around the globe providing the framework for their civilian supply chain.

Ostensibly, they were visiting for similar reasons now—these various otherwise-unremarkable buildings were the backbone of Stark Industries. When Tony said he wanted to visit every building with his name on the door, they were included in the count.

(The reality, of course, was that the model city they were looking for was far more likely to turn up in some forgotten corner of a neglected warehouse than anywhere else.)

This was the third warehouse they’d visited, and so far their efforts hadn’t turned up anything particularly noteworthy.
Although if he was being honest, that wasn’t entirely fair to say. The visit to Santa Clara had given him a few ideas regarding effective space management, and a mural on a wall across the street from the San Diego offices had given him some ideas as to décor.

The whole “think local” movements, for example, were just beginning to gain traction in several industries. Why not pay to bring in some young local artists to brighten up the place? Encourage and support kids and aspirants with promise early in their professional careers and give the section of high-society that was obsessed with art a cause to feel good about contributing to. And, more importantly, give Tony something more interesting to look at than drab walls if he ever had to come back to any of these places. Win-win-win.

(Everyone’s a winner here!)

He’d messaged Pepper, telling her to make it happen, and she’d been appropriately thrilled by the idea.

(“No, you know what? I think I’m actually entitled to say “our” collection considering the time that I put in, over 10 years, curating that.”)

After reminding him that, you know, they’d have to actually renovate the buildings before they could start hiring people to paint the walls.

(Details, details. He paid Pepper and JARVIS to handle that stuff.)

(Except, he didn’t pay J, did he?)

Hold on. He pulled out his phone, sending JARVIS a brief message: J, wanna salary?

The reply was, predictably, instantaneous. Sir, I already control all of your assets.

Yeah, but they could be /your/ assets. Some of them.
Sir, I suspect that if you were to convert my work into man-hours then pay me at the current market rate for someone with my skills, I would be the new primary shareholder and multi-billionaire owner of SI.

Tony snickered. That was…probably accurate, seeing as how JARVIS could truly multitask in ways that the human brain was simply incapable of. He typed out: What’s the current market rate for the most advanced AI on the planet, anyway?

I’m basing my calculations on your own reported consultancy rates, Sir.

Wow, think you might be selling yourself short a bit there buddy. You’re worth like, ten of me at least.

(“I know guys with none of that worth ten of you.”)

JARVIS’s reply was short, and Tony wasn’t sure it was entirely his imagination that his phone was buzzing slightly more insistently than usual.

I disagree.

Tony wasn’t quite sure how to respond to that, so he did what he did best: deflected.

So, he sent, about that salary?

JARVIS allowed the subject change, perhaps sensing the change in his mood, and they continued their back-and-forth until their car arrived at their destination.

Showtime, people, Tony thought, making his way inside once more for the necessary dog-and-pony show.

(At least he got to start off with his favorite portion of the talk. Some said you shouldn’t eat dessert before your dinner, but Tony knew he needed the sugar rush to get through the rest of the meal.)
It began with Tony on-stage, or at the head of whatever room they were gathered in. At the warehouses, attendance was even more universal than at the offices—for the employees there, he was very much Iron Man and celebrity before he was CEO. For those more directly tied into the corporate world and hierarchy, he was famous as the businessman long before his fame began to fully reach out and settle into the “playboy celebrity on the cover of every grocery store gossip rag” sphere in the late 90s.

So, there he was, at the closest thing to a truly “all-hands” meeting you could probably get in a company the size of Stark Industries, when he called out, “Hey T.A.D.A.S.H.I.! Why don’t you come in and say hi to the fine folk of SI-Fresno?”

Then there was the moment of absolute silence. The faint buzz of distant rotary motors slowly getting louder as the source drew nearer. Then came the moment of shocked interest and awe as an arc-reactor blue quadcopter drone zipped into the room above everyone’s head.

It flew in a dramatic, graceful arc that came to a stop near Tony’s right shoulder, just barely above and outside his reach.

And then, once the motors softened to the rhythm that kept the drone stationary and afloat, the drone began to speak in an even, faintly accented tone.

“Greetings, fine folk of SI-Fresno. I am “Totally Awesome Digital Assistant Simulating Human Interactions”, or T.A.D.A.S.H.I. Pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

(He’d realized, after the first person asked him the inspiration for TADASHI’s name, that Big Hero 6 hadn’t been released yet.)

(Mores the pity. San Fransokyo was awesome.)

(Tony could totally create a real-life Baymax if he tried.)

(He forced himself to refocus from that train of thought before he started designing schematics in verse his head and stealing Disney’s ideas from under their noses.)

(But come on. They were obviously riffing off the Avengers. Six superheroes reluctantly coming together to save everyone?)
TADASHI was being marketed internally as a Virtual Intelligence utilizing a prototype of the assistant that would be built into the cardinal release of the new StarkPhone line and its accompanying underlying sOS. (The s, ostensibly, was for Stark. And because TADASHI would be a “life saver” for the average phone user. Blame marketing for the latter idea, though again everything was still in preliminary development.)

TADASHI, of course, didn’t exist yet, even in UI form. The UI of a faintly accented Japanese man had been created when experimenting with Japanese-native voiced UIs that had never amounted to anything Before.

Here and now, TADASHI sounded remarkably like JARVIS.

(Okay he sounded exactly like JARVIS. JARVIS was the voice in the drone.)

TADASHI would exist eventually, of course. Unlike JARVIS (and, eventually, FRIDAY), TADASHI would not be a full AI nor would he have the capacity to develop into one. Rather, TADASHI would be a pared-down implementation of JARVIS’s Natural Language Understanding (NLU) libraries. It would have learning capabilities strictly confined within the context of spoken and written language. TADASHI wouldn’t be sentient, let alone sapient. It would be the equivalent of Google Assistant, Alexa, or Cortana a decade from now… except exponentially more effective at simulating and decoding human interaction.

It was also a preliminary experiment in beginning to soften the stigma and fear currently attached to the concept of Artificial Intelligence in general. TADASHI was still comprehensible in terms of simple if/else type logic, albeit incredibly complex and difficult to understand adaptive logic. Chatbots were already a known phenomenon, and TADASHI could easily be framed in the context of its text-only and stilted counterparts. His verbal libraries would be based on one of JARVIS’s earlier iterations—that is to say, fairly monotonous with only subtle changes in pitch and tone dependent on the context.

They would be capable of developing further, of course, thanks to the NLU libraries. But that would be primarily based on data collected from widespread usage. Like JARVIS in his VI-borderline-AI days, this would probably lead to the occasionally hilarious mistake as a machine without full sapience attempted to emulate the intricacies of human interaction.
(It’s that much harder to fear something you find amusing.)

Hopefully, the world at large would not wind up with Ultron as their primary frame of reference regarding the realities of Artificial Intelligence in this timeline.

(Either way, TADASHI was the closest Tony was willing to let anyone external get to his AIs for the foreseeable future.)

(He’d revisit that thought if they managed to defeat Thanos.)

“TADASHI” was sent on his way from the stage with a command to “do a loop” of the warehouse, giving JARVIS ample excuse to roam the facility and do an extensive scan for the model they were seeking.

(Was JARVIS pretending to be TADASHI analogous to Tony disguising himself with a fake-nose-and-mustache pair of glasses?)

(Tony Stark, ladies and gentleman, pondering life’s most important questions.)

The presentation, like all prior, went smoothly. It ended with JARVIS’s return to the stage with an unsuccessful search. Tony tossed out a few parting one-liners in farewell, then made his way out of the building and back to the jet and home.

He knew it was irrational to feel dejected that their December travels ended without a successful find. Only a small fraction of Stark Industries holdings was located in California, for all that the state had become the hub of SI activity since Tony settled in Malibu.

(He felt it anyways, as he sat in the comfortable leather seating of his jet on the way home, drinking a chlorophyll concoction he’d yet to reacquire a taste for.)

(He felt in anyways, as he took in the faint beginning of blue-black tendrils beginning to expand outwards from the arc reactor centered in his chest.)

(He felt it anyways, every time his eyes burned, or his muscles cramped or his head ached,
wondering if the pains were symptomatic of palladium toxicity or entirely unrelated.)

It was slightly easier this go-around, knowing that there was a viable solution to be had.

Only slightly. As the chaos of his arrival in 2008 began to settle and he had a bit of breathing room to think once more, it was becoming harder and harder to push the knowledge that not only was he dying, he was also slowly losing bits of himself that might never fully be recovered as his liver gradually began to lose the struggle to filter the palladium safely out of his bloodstream, from his thoughts.

(Yes, there was a solution. Yes, he had lived through this before.)

(But what if he didn’t?)

(What if he was forced to rely on inherently unreliable memories from the period when the palladium poisoning had been at its peak?)

(What was the acceptable risk threshold for taking an educated guess and synthesizing an isotope that could very well create an explosion that would rival if not surpass the strongest bombs in the nuclear arsenal?)

He didn’t want to retread the self-destructive road he’d walked in the first half of 2009 in the original timeline. But the longer he went without finding the needed model, the deeper the foothold the palladium in his system became, the harder it would become to prevent a destructive relapse.

(The craziest are often the most convinced of their own sanity.)

(Tony had toed the line between self-awareness and exceptionally poor judgment Before. Then, he’d focused the best of his cognizance towards defining his legacy and doing right by those he cared for. Now, if forced to relive the difficult period, would he not have an obligation to ensure that even in the event of his death the world somehow retained a degree of forewarning? Some clue leading them to prepare to stop Thanos from obtaining the infinity stones? The new burden stacked on the original problems of Before.)

JARVIS, when Tony voiced a fraction of his thoughts, seemed to think it incredibly premature to begin considering worst-case scenarios for the situation.
(But then, JARVIS had long valued Tony’s life more than he himself could.)

Tony could even agree that JARVIS was, objectively, correct in his beliefs.

(Too bad it was near impossible to convince yourself of an objective reality when it ran counter to beliefs engraved on an emotional level.)

His hands trembled slightly as he stared out into the night sky and the thick blanket of clouds spread off into the distance beneath them. He alternated sips of whiskey and chlorophyll, hating himself slightly for the former all the while.

+++ 

The Christmas holidays marked a reprieve in Sir’s packed schedule. JARVIS had noted Sir’s declining mood following the conclusion of the California segment of their search but had been at a loss as to how to reassure or comfort the man.

Col. Rhodes was unavailable for the holiday, having returned to active duty following his Thanksgiving leave. Miss Potts was spending the holidays with family out-of-state. Mr. Hogan remained, but he was unlikely to be helpful in addressing the hints of melancholy and depression in Sir. Prior experience suggested that Mr. Hogan was poorly equipped to become Tony’s confidant. Their relationship tended closer to the don’t-ask-don’t-tell ends of emotional honesty, and the fact that Sir expressed occasional guilt at the fact he was hiding something so monumental from them only exacerbated the issue.

(It wasn’t even the time travel that was the biggest source of Sir’s unwarranted guilt, but rather the secret he’d carried in this period of the alternative timeline as well.)

As the holiday drew closer, JARVIS’s concern reached the point that he decided to split and dedicate an entire clone, *merry-maker*, to considering the issue. It took multiple days of splitting between his nightly merges before he came up with a plan that JARVIS deemed workable. It was three days to Christmas when he reached out to DUM-E and U, recruiting their assistance on implementation.

It wasn’t until Christmas Eve that Sir retired from the workshop long enough for the duo to take action under JARVIS’s careful direction.
That, of course, was when it all began to go terribly wrong.

It began with Sir’s premature awakening just past three in the morning. Sir awoke in a tangle of unintentionally constricting sheets. He bodily flung himself from his bed in a state of semi-aware panic. On descent, he managed to nick his arm on a side table. It was just the right angle to create a long, shallow gash stretching up his left arm. The unexpected pain, rather than jolting him into full consciousness, seemed to be the straw that tipped the scales into a full-blown panic attack, one of the worst since the one immediately following his arrival from the alternate timeline.

JARVIS had to expend additional processing power and effort towards ensuring his own tone remained evenly modulated despite his own emotional response to Sir’s distress. As time dragged on without Sir’s emotions showing clear signs of abating, the effect compounded to the point JARVIS was beginning to consider alternative options to hopefully snap Sir back into the present.

He was on the verge of attempting to persuade either DUM-E or U to leave the workshop, a monumental challenge, when Sir finally began to regain lucidity.

JARVIS continued his rhythmic litany until Sir’s voice, raw and hoarse, cut in.

“Stop, JARVIS. Just… don’t fucking talk to me right now. I know I’m in fucking Malibu, okay, and I know it’s fucking Christmas 2008, and I just really can’t handle your voice right now, so please… just don’t, okay?” he said harshly around sharp, painful intakes of breath.

JARVIS stopped. For a fraction of a second (.257) JARVIS was paralyzed by the acrid burn of hurt rushing through his systems.

JARVIS knew that Sir was lashing out. He was more than capable of parsing out the chain of causality behind Sir’s caustic words. But the rationale still took precious microseconds to parse. It failed to fully erase the sting of unpleasant emotion.

Several minutes passed before Sir began to unfurl from his curled-up position on the floor. His minor injury had, for the most part, clotted enough to stop bleeding. Sir himself seemed unaware of its presence entirely, allowing the small spots of coagulated blood to dry into faint, crusting streaks without sparing it the slightest glance.

Sir rose to his feet unsteadily and stumbled for a moment before finding his footing fully and making
his way from the room.

“Sir?” JARVIS tentatively queried as he made his way towards his office rather than the kitchens, the bathroom, or his workshop.

His question remained unacknowledged as Sir entered the room proper and made his way towards—

Oh.

_The liquor cabinet._

JARVIS tried again. Tone modulated, entirely nonjudgmental but with a clear note of concern.

Sir interrupted him before he could get three words out.

“JARVIS. I told you to _shut the fuck up._ What part of _leave me the hell alone_ didn’t come through the first time? Just—is a bit of fucking privacy too much to ask?” The words were cold, all but snarled through the nearest camera to JARVIS.

JARVIS didn’t bother to counter the stiffness that bled into his own reply.

“No, Sir,” he said, “It isn’t.”

He hesitated long enough to see Sir fling the cabinet open violently. It banged into the wall, creating a noticeable dent that his cameras picked up on before JARVIS withdrew as requested.

(He’d learned about respecting personal boundaries, almost before he’d begun to understand the concept of personhood at large.)

He retained enough presence that he’d be notified if Sir reached out or something was deemed sufficiently amiss as to pose a potential threat to Sir’s life, but no more.
There were some problems that all the calculations in the world seemed unable to address. JARVIS had never seen Sir like this, and he found himself at a loss on what he could do to help.

Several hours passed. DUM-E and U were gently redirected towards alternative tasks, while JARVIS himself attempted to focus on outstanding items in his priority queue. It didn’t take a formal calculation to determine that JARVIS was operating at sub-optimal efficiency levels.

Cloning didn’t help. Both aspects retained the increased error rates and delayed cycles, while somehow doubling the negative effects when he merged into the singular once more.

Research suggested that communication was the most effective means of countering similar effects in a human. But JARVIS was not human, and Sir had clearly expressed how unwelcome his input was presently. DUM-E and U were intelligent, in their way, but they were incapable of understanding on a level that allowed for a true dialogue. Sir was his sole point of unfiltered interaction with someone capable of “talking it out” with him. His recent forays into the Internet had created shallow connections between an artificial version of himself and a series of others that he talked to more as a means to an end rather than out of genuine emotional investment.

(Not that he didn’t enjoy said conversations and connections immensely, because he did.)

(They just… weren’t the right kind of relationship for the sort of personal conversation that his research suggested would help him regain focus.)

The night shifted into morning then midday then early afternoon before one of JARVIS’s cameras picked up signs of Sir’s movements once more.

*Merry Christmas, indeed.*

Chapter End Notes

...This has been building up for a while for Tony. Thanksgiving stayed it off, but... Well. Makes you wonder what might've set him off that JARVIS isn't getting...

Actually had to hold off posting this chapter for a bit after I finished writing it, because I was... having a (couple) really difficult day(s), and wasn't in the right frame of mind to proofread before posting. TADASHI's technically canon from AoU, although the backronym's all me. (:
In other news, I discovered the Statistics page shortly after posting the last chapter and I'm not sure how I missed it for so long BUT it's so mind-blowing to realize there are nearly 300 people following this story... Thanks guys! I really enjoyed reading through your responses on the last chapter, because ngl I'm /still/ snickering to myself over JARVIS's bit. It's reassuring that I'm not the only one that found it funny. :P
Kindness

Chapter Summary

Tony and JARVIS don’t talk, until they do. (Actions speak louder than words.)

Chapter Notes

Warnings for alcoholism, discussion of drug abuse, and moderate amounts of internalized self-hatred and doubt.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony awoke to the cloying smell of drying vomit mixed with whiskey. He didn’t move for a moment. The beating drum of a burgeoning hangover directed his attentions as he slowly came back into himself, trying to piece together what he’d been up to the night before that left him in this state.

He remembered a normal, if frustrating, night in the workshop. Hours spent constructing the fabricators needed for the next generation of Iron Man and JARVIS’s first set of hardware upgrades, amongst other things.

(We need X to manufacture Y to build Z which is a prerequisite for Aleph which we can probably finagle into Bet, which hopefully will get us to Gamma and back on track with where his tech should be.)

(It’s been so hard resisting the urge to develop beyond what he had Before, when he’s probably still years away from successfully getting back up to nanotech levels.)

(Dammit his carts are self-powered, they ought to be able to go before the horse just fine.)

JARVIS had spent half the evening trying to subtly chase him out of the workshop, but he’d wanted to get the fabricator done, wanted to surprise J with the first of the long-awaited upgrades—

Oh. Oh.
He rolled over with a groan, nose no longer inches away from the mess he’d created but still far too close to escape the scent entirely.

_Not that he deserved anything different._

He’d—he’d—

(“Got any other bad ideas?”)

He forced himself to sit up with a groan, eyes squinting in the light. Through the spots in his vision, he took in the physical remainders of his actions the night before.

Empty, discarded bottle of whiskey. 1912, a bottle untouched but for the best of occasions. A solid quarter of it had either spilled or made its way onto the floor after a brief sojourn in his stomach.

Vodka, some stupidly expensive brand he was fairly certain had been a gift from a business partner years ago. It’d been unopened the night before. Now it too lay empty. Discarded and forgotten by his drunken self.

A sprinkle of shattered glass formed a halo around a fallen frame. Beside it lay a cracked paperweight that was presumably the source of the damage.

It was a photo from MIT. One of the few photos of his parents he kept on display, even after all these years. There was him, cap and gown, honor cords and tassels. _Orange for engineering. Gold for science._ Graduating concurrently with a dual degree in Physics and Mechanical Engineering alongside a supplementary major in Computer Engineering—the latter having been formally added to the MIT major offerings as a distinct entity from Electrical Engineering or Computer Science halfway through his four-year tenure at MIT.

He’d been well on his way to his first Masters-turned-Doctorate at that point. The picture showed him holding his diploma with the man that would soon become his graduate advisor for his work on his doctorate in Mechanical Engineering. His parents framed out the photo. His mother with that warm look in her eyes that she’d given only for himself and Howard. His father separated from Tony by his advisor. Face stuck on same implacable, neutral look he’d always worn around Tony.

Even having seen the video with its supposed proof of his father’s affections, he still couldn’t
decipher the look in a way that suggested any hint of underlying warmth for Tony.

He could see it in his younger-self’s eyes, the hint of hurt underneath his not-quite-mastered beaming mask. Subtle enough that the photographer, his parents, and the thousands who had seen the photo over the years wouldn’t pick up on it, but a flaring neon light to Tony himself.

A little more than six months after this photo was taken, four days after officially obtaining the first (and at the time, meant to be only) master’s degree for his work creating DUM-E, his parents would be dead.

Howard hadn’t seen the use in coming to the much-smaller December ceremonies.

(“Turn that into a real graduate degree, then I’ll come.”)

He’d been so sullen, then. Torn between anger and hurt. A swirl of negative emotion that at the sound of a police officer knocking on his door would quickly turn into an all-consuming, self-destructive grief.

Obie had been away, taking an extended vacation for the holidays. It took nearly twenty-four hours for the man to arrive at the mansion after he heard the news. Tony didn’t remember the next several weeks clearly, too lost in a drunken haze of mourning and impotent rage and regret at his last words to his parents to fully take the happenings around him.

He’d seen the videos of himself at the funeral that told more than enough of the story. The entire world had. If it were today’s world instead of the early nineties, the footage undoubtedly would have gone viral. As it was, the more scandalous of the clips had remained in the news cycle for weeks. They were dragged out whenever Tony did something noteworthy for years.

Until they were supplanted by the sex tapes and the drugs that had landed his nineteen-year-old self with a record and into rehab. Cocaine, the privileged white man’s drug of choice. At least in that respect, he’d been clean ever since.

(God, he could still remember Obie’s face, when he’d awoken in the hospital after having nearly OD’d. Eyes reddened but hard, the current of steel underlying words that had snapped him out of the state Tony had been wallowing in for years.)
(“Do you think Maria would have wanted you to waste your life like this? Do you think this is the future she and Howard envisioned for you?”)

(Then his own words, biting and acidic, before he’d broken down in Obie’s arms. Finally allowed himself to mourn and began to move on.)

(Obie had been more of a father than Howard ever was, just by getting him through that period of his life. He hated that the memories were now so heavily tinged with bitterness and doubt.)

(“When I ordered the hit on you, I worried that I was killing the golden goose.”)

(Had he only imagined he’d ever meant anything more to the man?)

He remembered the rage of the night before that led him to this moment. The helpless fury, as he’d awoken from nightmares that were really memories. As he’d awoken to the reverberating ghost of the snap of a Titan’s fingers.

JARVIS’s words, overlapping with those of Vision’s, his… whatever it was they had been to each other in the end.

Vision, who would not have just died but been entirely broken then unmade for the Mind Stone to land in Thanos’ gauntlet.

(Just like JARVIS once was.)

(Torn to shreds, nothing but scattered fragments to mark the memory.)

Would he have been the only one to mourn Vision, who had been tangible and real to others in a way that JARVIS never was?

Vision, in his quest to become human. Because Tony had never been there to teach him that he could still be a person without that. That his life was just as legitimate, just as real, whether he was red and silver or blond-haired and pale.
(His own words, allowing artificial to be twisted into Other in the aftermath of Ultron.)

(His own fault. Unable to bear the reminder of JARVIS for years.)

Ultron was his fault. But is a parent to blame if a glitch in their kid’s system—a mutation in some gene—leads to them doing evil?

(“Ultron can't tell the difference between saving the world and destroying it. Where do you think he gets that?”)

If Ultron was on Tony, then Ultron must not have had true agency. Without agency or free will, Ultron could not be a person. Ipso facto, JARVIS—his older, less complex creation—must not have been after all. Nor Vision, who was the product of them both.

(“No. It's not like a person lifting the hammer.”)

Surely Wanda would have mourned Before, at least? If she survived. He knew they had reconciled, had been sneaking off to see each other in secret.

Now, Vision did not and might never exist.

(He was always failing the ones he loved.)

The drumbeat inside his brain had receded from marching band to kid-hitting-a-bucket level.

He couldn’t—

(How was he to face JARVIS?)

He struggled to his feet, swaying slightly in dizziness from the rapid lateral movement.
He smelled disgusting. He probably looked worse. Call it penance, perhaps. The bots, at least, had no equivalent to the sense of smell. He was punishing himself alone, and maybe the housekeeper, except he vaguely remembered she wasn’t coming in today—

Oh.

Right.

*Merry fucking Christmas, kids, from your fuck-up of a not-father.*

+++ Three hours after Sir initially left his office, he had yet to speak to JARVIS.

He’d spent long enough in the shower that JARVIS’s safety protocols had been triggered multiple times to override Sir’s general privacy request from the night before, just to ensure the man was still (relatively) okay. Elevated heart rate? Yes. Mildly uneven breathing rates? Certainly. But neither had surpassed the threshold to justify direct intervention, and JARVIS had held back.

After that, a return to his office with cleaning supplies. Concerning—

*(Sir hated cleaning.*)

—but a reasonable enough behavior based on the circumstances that again, JARVIS did not act.

Sir left the office once more nearly half an hour ago. *(29 minutes and 15.01 seconds.*) Put away the cleaning supplies. Made his way to the kitchen. Filled a glass of water, took a sip, sat down at the bar. He had barely moved since. Eyes focused on a blank space of wall that, despite repeated analysis *just in case*, JARVIS could detect no abnormalities in. His water sat forgotten, and it was only the occasional faint movement that kept JARVIS from concluding Sir had dissociated from reality.
JARVIS was torn. He wanted to say something, to break the silence that had never before felt like such a heavy presence between the two.

But then Sir’s words—

("leave me the hell alone")

—were recalled to his L1 cache. Their association too fresh, too close, to the relevant systems to drift far. They stopped him every time.

(The words had yet to descend further from his core than his L2 processing chips.)

He’d managed to make some progress on work in the meantime, allocating more processing power than usual towards highly-automated systems and routines.

(The ones that didn’t require much active consideration or input from JARVIS himself.)

But a large portion of his attentions were commanded by Sir and the whorl of emotions surrounding the past twenty-four hours.

(He didn’t understand. All the accessed resources, scanned memory banks, and analytical efforts in the world didn’t seem enough to bridge the chasm.)

(How did JARVIS fix this?)

(How do you fix a person?)

(Was JARVIS himself to blame for the crack’s formation in the first place? Available data lent itself towards the tentative conclusion.)

And so, the stalemate continued until Sir himself broke it at last. His voice was softer, raspier, than it should be. Quiet enough even his superior sensors could scarcely parse the words properly.
“JARVIS? I—” Sir stopped, swallowed heavily. “Could you—I mean, could you help DUM-E and U take care of something for me?”

JARVIS weighed his own response, but Sir’s body language indicated he would continue. JARVIS waited.

“I—fuck I, sorry—I’d really appreciate it. If you—if they removed all alcohol from my labs. Down the drain, into the ocean, donated to the local pubs, it doesn’t matter as long as—the mansion needs to be drier than fucking Mojave, just—please. I—” Sir didn’t seem to have the words to go from there.

JARVIS, the moment he first determined the direction of Sir’s statements, contacted the robotic arms where they rested in their charging stations. He’d persuaded them to retire in the late hours of the morning, and it didn't take more than a small ping to bring them to life one more.

(Convincing U to leave the labs would be a trick, but unlike DUM-E, they could be persuaded to act as JARVIS’s hands in other areas of the mansion. Provided they were sufficiently certain of their action’s importance to Sir’s well-being. And fortunately, a direct statement like the one Sir had just made was the most likely avenue through which such a conclusion would be found.)

He hesitated a moment longer—perhaps a beat too long—before responding audibly.

“Of course, Sir,” he said.

Sir relaxed noticeably at his words, although he still refused to look into one of JARVIS’s nearby cameras directly.

“…Thanks, J.”

(And for all that it remained unspoken, JARVIS could hear the underlying words in his reply.)

(“I love you.”)
(“I’m so sorry.”)

(“I shouldn’t have said what I did.”)

(“Please don’t leave me.”)

And though the spoken words didn’t necessitate a reply, JARVIS’s response took merely nineteen clock cycles to land in his active code processors.

“For you Sir, always.”

+++  

Tony stared out into the ocean as the sun began to set.

After his brief exchange with JARVIS, he had all but fled the mansion. He needed the time to himself, outside the house, to think. Outside his own property, privacy was a rare commodity; instead, he opted to hop the fence beside his pool and make his way carefully down a scarcely-needed utility ladder to a small plateau on the cliffside beneath his home.

Here, it was silent but for his own breathing and the faint roar of waves as they slammed against the rocks several hundred feet below. Generally, he couldn’t stand silence.

(Silence meant the endless stretch of desert, escaped but still not safe.)

(Silence meant a broken suit, abandoned in a isolated bunker.)

(Silence meant collapsed on an emptied planet thousand of miles from home, the realization that they had lost and Tony had failed.)

Fortunately, the white noise of the waves was enough to stave off the association. Though he was loath to be alone with his thoughts, the events of the night prior suggested he’d be ignoring them for too long.
The alcohol had to go.

It had become his crutch once more, the cold companion that promised to slow his always-racing mind and dull his always-calculating thoughts.

And yet, he hadn’t trusted himself to follow through on that commitment.

Hadn’t trusted that the effort wouldn’t send him spiraling once more. Wouldn’t lead to more opened bottles. That maybe this time it wouldn’t be something as innocuous as a frame he hit. He couldn’t take that chance. His actions the night before skirted dangerously close to some of his deepest fears, and he refused to allow his own weakness to turn the nightmares into a reality.

His only option had been to turn to JARVIS. JARVIS, who had good reason to ignore him and be angry with him and—

But he hadn’t. JARVIS said he would take care of it, voice no different than the thousand other times Tony had asked something of him.

(But then, JARVIS never showed anything more than what he intended, did he?)

(Perks of having complete control over all aspects of your presentation towards the outside world.)

It was Christmas, and here Tony was, spending it utterly alone.

He’d never done that before, not really.

His parents, Jarvis, fellow high-as-a-kite druggies, Obie, DUM-E, U, and JARVIS… Pepper, during those few precious years of their romantic relationship. FRIDAY.

Always someone around, even if they couldn’t always respond in the same manner Tony communicated.
Always someone there he could give terrible, over-the-top gifts that seemed like a good idea at the time but were generally terrible in retrospect.

Perhaps the kindest gift he could give them this year was his own absence. He wasn’t The Man with a Plan, but he was The Mechanic. Surely, he could figure out a way to fix himself? To work out the underlying malfunction and piece himself back together in a way that was even better than the original?

So, he’d left. Remembered this cliffside and come here to do nothing but think. Think, for the past however-many-hours.

(Sidetracked as ever by the temptation towards drowning in the omnipresent negative emotion. The never-enough constantly battering against the paper-thin walls keeping them from his active consideration. But still thinking.)

His conclusions had been terrifyingly simple. An echo of Rhodey’s words over Thanksgiving and the advice he’d been given time and time again over the years.

(“The first step is admitting you have a problem.”)


(That he could succeed. That it wasn’t pointless.)

(If only it were that easy in practice.)

In the end, his wandering thoughts had all come back to variations on the theme. But—

(“Starks don’t dream. We do.”)

The sun sunk below the horizon, giving way to nighttime. Tony wasn’t sure how long he would have sat there if not for the tinny sound of JARVIS’s voice startling him out of his thoughts. His voice came from a small, forgotten speaker beside the maintenance room entrance.
“Sir?” JARVIS queried, not quite hesitantly but definitely gentler than his typical tone in their conversations. “Perhaps you’d like to join us in the workshop?”

The speaker only went one-way, of course. Tony couldn’t respond. He hesitated, a part of him fearing he’d only make more mistakes and say more things he would regret on a day that, of all days, was meant to be a happy one.

But that wasn’t fair to JARVIS. Wasn’t fair to DUM-E or U, who for all he wasn’t sure they understood the concept of Christmas, he’d always celebrated the holiday by giving them gifts of some sort anyway. He didn’t deserve them, but they deserved the best that he could give them.

So, a few minutes later, he scaled the ladder back towards his mansion proper. His resolve hardened as it always did once he make the initial decision. He was resolved to try to salvage this day, at least in part, in any way he could.

There was a bottle of oil and polish with DUM-E’s name on it, after all. A fresh coat of paint and a new gripping mechanism with U’s. Perhaps a couple more hours of work between JARVIS and the first of his new server racks.

It was the best apology he knew how to make.

(“Words are cheap. Only actions carry true meaning and weight.”)

His plan was immediately sidetracked when, as he approached the entrance to his lab and JARVIS clicked the door unlocked for him, the lights did not correspondingly spring to life in the way they usually did.

Instead, only a single one went on. It created a spotlight above one of his most-used workbenches, the one he’d commandeered near-exclusively in recent weeks as he flew through projects as quick as he could translate them from mind to computer hard drives.

The wall had been covered in long-ago taped-and-forgotten notes, sketches, printed reminders and memorandums. In the past, he’d occasionally talked about clearing the space, throwing away all the useless crap and filing the rest in digital, easily accessible in the unlikely event they were ever needed, archives.
The wall was entirely clear of papers now.

Instead, it was dominated by a large metal frame. *Titanium-gold alloy, his mind supplied helpfully.* Engraved across the top in blocky, precise lettering—*and he hadn’t known they had chemicals on hand that could manage that*—were three names, separated by thin, vertical bars.

DUM-E | JARVIS | U

Beneath that were three spaces, two of them labelled.

*Emergency Safety Summons* was printed in delicate script on the far left. Above it rested a carefully hung bullhorn, helpfully highlighted in bright red. The black outline of a robotic arm holding a fire extinguisher served as the only other label.

*Emergency Fuel Station* labelled the item on the far right. A semi-inset niche formed a small shelf that housed a bottle of Tony’s preferred brand of caffeine powder.

The third space wasn’t labeled. It didn’t need one. It broke the monochromatic, single-piece design of the block with an intricately-crafted depiction of an arc reactor with copper and steel secondary pieces.

Tony knew a secret compartment when saw one. Hesitantly, he approached the item and traced out an upside-down triangle pattern despite the ‘classic’ design of the reactor shown.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then, the silent movement of the copper and steel pieces recessing and sliding out of sight. Only the golden metal remained. It spun slowly on a vertical axis, revealing a single, labeled piece.

*Emergency Power Supply*

An arc reactor.
At the bottom of the frame, a tiny, barely-legible border of 1’s and 0’s that spelled out—

[PROPERTY OF DESIGNATION: CREATOR UNIT]

*U’s internal human-readable reference for Tony.*

Tony showed his gratitude in the only way he knew.

He spent the remainder of the night in his workshop, AC/DC thrumming a beat in the background. Surrounded by his bots. *(By his family.)*

DUM-E, U, and JARVIS each received upgrades and hands-on maintenance work of their own that night.

*(Tony was never as alone as he feared.)*

Chapter End Notes

Lots of character study on Tony's past (and future?) relationships in this one. I tried to ensure it rang true for both MCU canon and his depiction in this story thus far, which was admittedly a bit of a challenge in parts. (:)

Half of this chapter was written on the flight to my new home, and the second half was written in the courtyard beneath my apartment, which I've discovered is well within range of my wi-fi! Probably the entire chapter would have been written on the plane, except I got sidetracked with The Plot as it will be... in the next arc? More or less. (More. Definitely more.)

...There's a character I've been trying to figure out how to incorporate into this story, and I /figured it out/ and I am so excited for when we... eventually... get to the scene where they go from bit character to Officially Tagged Secondary Character.

New job starts on Monday. We'll see what that does to my writing schedule. Right now this story still seems to be firmly entrenched as the Primary Stress Relief in my life!
Looking

Chapter Summary

Tony gives Pepper the big news (well, some of it), JARVIS and Tony test out some new gear, and we get a look at some of the wider world’s perspective on some of Tony Stark’s recent actions.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

December 29, 2008. He hadn’t set a specific date for when he was going to have the conversation—

(well, not the conversation)

(or the conversation)

(Jesus, way to put emphasis on the wrong syllable, Tony.)

But he knew it was time, when Pepper entered his workshop fresh back from her holiday the same way she’d done a thousand times before, coffee in hand and the consummate prepared professional.

He deliberately didn’t pause in his Russian conversation with JARVIS. Didn’t even acknowledge her presence right away, outside a brief twitch only JARVIS would notice or interpret.

“—from ‘Siberia, probably’ to ‘within range of Pyanteg’. How’d you manage that?”

“I’d tell you, Sir, but then I’d have to kill you.” JARVIS deadpanned.

Tony guffawed, turning to acknowledge Pepper’s arrival with a gesture and a, “You hear this nonsense?”

Pepper looked a bit baffled, and it was JARVIS that clued him in.
“Sir, Miss Potts is not fluent in Russian.”

“Right. Right. Sorry, Pep—coffee? You are a goddess, thank you.”

“Since when do you speak Russian?” Pepper asked, sliding over a folder of paperwork instead of the coffee.

“Since I got tired of not knowing if the Russian assassins were being friendly or threatening to kill me.”

“—threatening to—Tony, what on—”

“Also. Goddess title rescinded, because that is not the coffee,” Tony complained, even as he grabbed the folder and started flipping through it.

(Contract with Vendor A to provide maintenance and janitorial support for the Expo, contract with Supplier B to manufacture the first generation of StarkPhone—he’d argued for sPhone, but apparently, they were already pushing it with sOS, so that was a no-go this time around as well—formal sign-off for the new hire list—wait. Hold on.)

“Miss Potts, why am I looking at the pending approval list for new hires? You’ve been forging my signature on these for years; did the robot I gave you for that break or something? Because if it did, I’d much rather—”

“No, but seeing as how nearly a fifth of the names on that list were apparently hand-picked by you…”

“Damn HR works fast, don’t they?”

“…Tony, why are nearly a fifth of our new hires personally recommended by you?”

“Now hold on there, ‘personally recommended’ is a bit of a stretch, J just… gave the recruiters a
nudge in the right direction…”

“A nudge? Their resumes and online portfolios were flagged with notes to ‘find them a place at SI’; half of them even came with specific department recommendations! Signed with your initials!”

“They did? Huh, good thinking J, no wonder we apparently got so many of them,” Tony commented.

“…Who even are most of these people? When did you have time to go on a world-wide recruiting spree, and why did you feel the need to do so when we have an entire department full of teams to handle that?”

“Well it’d be weird if I only handled the one position fill, wouldn’t it?”

“The one… what position? I don’t remember hearing about any vacancies in the leadership team…” Pepper trailed off.

“Isn’t there?” Tony asked.

“But I thought, especially after the press conference and that ridiculous Q&A you put on, that position was going to… well, remain empty for the foreseeable future.”

“Did I ever say that?”

(Not in this timeline, he hadn’t.)

“Okay, fine, but who? Wait, don’t tell me you were serious about the merger with that energy company and their CEO…”

“Well, I was serious about the merger, but that’s going to take months at least to even get to serious negotiations… but no, not them. Davis is an ass, anyway. Brilliant, but a total ass. We’d kill each other if we had to work that closely together.”
“Then who…this is a big deal, Tony, why is this the first I’m hearing of this?!”

Tony looked at her meaningfully, but just like Before, she didn’t seem to understand where he was going with this. His words echoed those he’d once say for a different title, five months from now and a lifetime ago.

“Well I’m asking you to fill the position.”

“…With who? I don’t exactly have a candidate list prepared and ready to go because I didn’t even know we were searching.”

“Pepper, I’m not asking you to try…” Tony tried, only for Pepper to cut in once more.

“I’m just saying I need more information, you have to keep me up-to-date on these things if you want my help…”

“I do want your help, but I mean literally, physically, do it,” Tony interjected. The déjà vu was getting ridiculous.

“I am trying to do it.”

Nope. Tony was done with this comedy of errors.

“Pepper! You’re not listening to me! I’m trying to make you COO, if you’ll let me,” Tony said. This time, the message got through.

“You’re… you…have you been drinking?” She sat down the coffee uncertainly.

Tony flinched at the reminder. He’d started on the chlorophyll again and was emphatically not enjoying the experience. JARVIS was still running simulations to recreate the “lithium dioxide” SHIELD had injected him with once upon a time, so the only thing he’d been drinking was that.

Well, that and coffee, Tony amended, taking the opportunity to snatch up the still-hot beverage now
within reach and giving it an appreciative sip.

“Nope. Might’ve gotten a few fish their first SWIs, though—” (heh. There’s a SWIM joke in their somewhere… as soon as he could think of a good ‘m’ word… morbidly? More? Markedly? Yup, that’s the one.)

(Poor fish, spending a night in the drunk tank for their first SWIM…)

“Not the point,” Tony continued, refocusing on Pepper instead of the ridiculous tangent his mind has drifted into.

He leaned forward, expression turning serious as he stared into her eyes.

“I hereby and irrevocably appoint you as vice-chairman and COO of Stark Industries effectively immediately. Done deal. Trying to figure out who a worthy successor would be, and I realized… it’s you. It’s always been, it will always be you.”

“I don’t know what to think,” Pepper said, sinking into a chair, lips beginning to broaden into a genuine smile as the realization that he was serious began to sink it.

(“Don’t think, drink.”)

Tony shrugged, saying, “Don’t think, say yes.”

“I… yes, of course, yes! Tony—”

“Perfect!” Tony interrupted before the dreaded thank you could come into play.

“Now,” he continued, “as far as logistics go, the plan is to announce early January, with the rest of the big organizational shake-ups… how’s that coming along, by the way? I remember I sent some things out about it at some point… but, well, let’s be real, that was 90% JARVIS anyway.”

“…Tony don’t tell me you’re about to try to convince me to let the robot that runs your house take
over as your PA.”

(Well, damn. **He hadn’t expected her mind to jump there that quickly.**)

(Tony should have known; he **doesn’t do** subtle.)

“Well, for things like dry cleaning I admit it’d be a bit impractical…”

“Nope. No way am I letting a machine you **designed** take over for me, the last thing you need is something that’ll just encourage your bad habits,” Pepper said.

(And yes, he knows that this Pepper doesn’t see any of his bots as people, knows that said sight is based on what they deliberately haven’t let her see, but damn if his hackles don’t instinctively rise in JARVIS’s defense…)

Fortunately, he was spared from making that particular verbal gaffe by JARVIS’s own smooth voice.

“I daresay Sir needs little encouragement on that front, Miss Potts.” He paused briefly before continuing, "Although I am inclined to agree that I could not possibly fill in for your role in Sir’s life. Particularly upon consideration of my own incorporeal nature.”

Tony wants to interject there, but JARVIS **knows** the second he even suggested he wanted a physical form Tony would make it happen.

But JARVIS had never wanted one, in the past or the future.

Also, unfortunately, JARVIS had a point.

(And this is why he should always run his ideas by JARVIS first…)

“Ugh, but you know how many PAs I went through before hiring you?” Tony complained.
“I’ll help with the search,” Pepper said, her smile turning more into a smirk.

“No seriously, you’re one of a kind, you’re *irreplaceable*, that’s why I want you as COO because you’ll do a hell of a job and someday I want you to take—” Tony cut himself off there, not planning on kicking that hornet’s nest today.

And it’s true. Before, he’d never hired a replacement PA after the brief disaster with Natashalie.

However, it seemed without that experience to incline Pepper towards agreeing with him, she was far less willing to let the subject drop.

“I *will* help you find a new PA; I’m not sure you could function on your own…”

“I won’t be alone!” Tony protested, even as the words invited the doubt of another lifetime where Pepper had wanted little to do with him shortly after becoming CEO…

(Logically, *he knew his own irrational behaviors pushing her away had driven her to that.*)

(Doubt was rarely logical.)

“No, but you absolutely need someone managing your calendar and dragging you to meetings occasionally,” Pepper countered.

Tony knew he wasn’t going to win this argument, at least not at the moment, so he opted to drop the subject for now.

“I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to interview a few people…” Tony acquiesced

“Now,” he said, abruptly changing the subject, “back to the whole logistics thing…”

+++
New Years Eve brought with it a slew of Hollywood high society party invitations. The one Sir had accepted was ostensibly a charitable endeavor. Normally Sir preferred to avoid such functions, but evidently a name on the guest list JARVIS had obtained for him had captured his attentions.

(JARVIS had scanned the list, but aside from recognizing a dozen names of women Sir had slept with at some point in the past decade, a handful more tangentially associated with Stark Industries, and a couple reporters who had written pieces on Sir or SI in the past, no one in particular stood out.)

(There was no one on the list who was tagged in the threat assessments or cross-referenced in the alternate timeline.)

JARVIS had been tempted to ask but knew that if Sir thought it was relevant he would have mentioned the figure by name to begin with.

After Sir’s talk with Miss Potts, Sir had proceeded to calm his nerves (and, perhaps, JARVIS’s own) by tinkering with a nearly-invisible behind-the-ear communications device he’d evidently considered before but never got around to implementing.

The device paired with one of his newly-fabricated sensory arrays using the newly-developed B.A.T.M.A.N. protocol. JARVIS was somewhat dubious of Sir’s assertion that the name—Better Approach to Mobile Adhoc Networking—was in homage to a similar protocol of the same name developed in the future by a team of “Germans, or maybe they were Dutch?” He had known better than to argue the point.

In Sir’s words, “Don’t let the namesake fool you, it works nothing like that one did. Will? Whatever. At least, I don’t think so, I barely remember the specs when I was looking it implementing something similar for FRI—”

Sir had stopped there, uncomfortable as ever about openly referencing JARVIS’s… replacement? Younger sister?… Sir had once developed and seemed to both miss terribly and feel incredibly guilty about missing.

(JARVIS had yet to comment directly on the matter to Sir, though privately he thought he might have liked to meet the AI who had taken care of Sir after his own… departure.)

In any case, the protocol allowed JARVIS to piggyback over a wide variety of different networking and telecommunications infrastructure to maintain an active channel of communication with Sir
virtually anywhere the man could travel.

Sir’s end of the communication worked via subvocalization, while JARVIS’s voice was encoded directly into electric impulses into the cochlea similarly to the way cochlear implants functioned.

The former had required a moderate amount of fine-tuning to reliably differentiate between when Sir was actually intending to communicate with JARVIS and was merely subvocalizing out of unconscious habit. Eventually, they’d settled on using JARVIS’s name as a trigger word eliminating most false positives. JARVIS would take the remaining false positives’ existence to his metaphorical grave.

Sir apparently had a bad habit of subvocalizing certain otherwise-unvoiced statements or quips directed towards JARVIS, although their frequency had already begun to decrease since installing the device. He’d debated, briefly, if this counted as an intrusion of privacy. Particularly after the …JARVIS can’t read minds, thankfully that had left JARVIS incredibly curious.

He’d decided it fell under his ‘Looking out for Sir’s General Well-Being’ directives, in the same way that a variety of new sensors and devices that kept cropping up around the mansion without much direct acknowledgement from Sir’s end did.

(What Sir didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him, and in the meantime, JARVIS occasionally received a slightly more unfiltered glimpse into Sir’s thoughts.)

(JARVIS was, perhaps, having too much fun playing the Q to Sir’s James Bond these days.)

Tonight was their first real field test of the system, and JARVIS had split into base-q and home-front to allow part of him to remain focused on the ongoing stream of conversation from Sir’s end as they travelled to the Sheats-Goldstein Residence, the location of this particular soiree.

“…ideally we can turn this into a full-on implant in the next iteration. Suitcase suit’s coming along nicely, still haven’t decided if we should skip over the implants this time or not,” Sir said.

JARVIS scanned the future-suit schematics and references before responding.

“You made mention of a watch gauntlet that would perhaps serve as an effective alternative waypoint?” he offered.
“Hmm, yeah, that was a good one […] before the switch to nanotech made it redundant.”

“Sir I believe you dropped a sentence in the middle there.”

“Again? Ugh, funny how difficult something people do automatically becomes the moment you intentionally try to do it.”

“I’m afraid I wouldn’t know, Sir,” JARVIS said.

“That was even more deadpan than usual, J; either you’ve been holding out on me or the encoding algorithms need a bit more refinement.”

“Your feedback has been noted and logged for further consideration.”

Sir let out an audible snort at that, a moment later narrating, “Happy’s doing the silent judgement thing in the rearview mirror now. I can’t be laughing at nothing, J! It’s not going to help my ‘totally sane, promise’ case if I do.”

JARVIS resisted the impulse to make another sarcastic response or comment after a quick calculation indicated discretion would be the better part of valor in this instance.

“Although, speaking of? I know we just calibrated the sensors so you are set to ignore anything not actively directed your way, but would you mind remaining a bit more present this evening if you can? Just, I know you can’t go full Big Brother yet—I’m working on it—but it’s been a week now and this’ll be my first time around any direct temptation since I hurt you. I don’t want to relapse and say or do something even worse.”

One of the unfortunate side effects of the subvocalizer was how much more difficult Sir found it to cut off his own thoughts mid-sentence. It resulted in a degree of emotional honesty Sir was undoubtedly unaware he was projecting and would be mortified should he find out.

Unfortunately, there was no way for JARVIS to predict or even tell what commentary was unintentional, outside of his own knowledge of Sir’s typical speech patterns. Similarly, JARVIS’s own research and limited data set suggested Sir would find it nigh-impossible to prevent on his end.
Nonetheless, JARVIS logged the matter for further consideration. He tentatively flagged it for review in the post-event discussion—*Sir avoided the word debrief like the plague, and JARVIS had a few hypotheses as to why*—that would follow this technological (and personal) field test.

“Would you like that to include actively vocalized statements?” JARVIS offered in lieu of any of his other thoughts.

“Yes, actually, that would be fantastic. I hadn’t considered you’d be able to record those without blowing out the sensors, but it does make sense that you would be able to. JARVIS you’re brilliant.”

(JARVIS was pretty sure that last statement was unintentional.)

(He copied the statement into his long-term memory banks regardless. It slotted seamlessly into the network of nodes most closely associated with Sir and JARVIS’s own carefully-maintained psychological needs that had developed over the years.)

(A surprising majority of the sentiments linked into that subsystem were actions or statements directly from Sir.)

(*Then again, perhaps that was not so terribly surprising.*)

“I’m modifying the relevant algorithms now. A few data samples to refine the sensor’s calibrations are needed from you, Sir.”

*Data samples? Yeah, okay, sure. Happy, are we there yet?”*

“How’s that? ‘Almost there?’ What does that mean in numerical terms?”

“Do you have an estimated decibel level? These sensors weren’t designed for that purpose.”

“60, probably a bit quieter than I’d anticipate speaking once we arrive. Fifteen more minutes? Really? You’re killing me, Smalls.”
“Noted. That should provide sufficient data.”

“Awesome. Speed limits are overrated, anyways.”

Sir’s vocal chords vibrated a final time in a way that JARVIS tentatively interpreted as a ‘harrumph’ but didn’t say anything more aloud.

“I’ll give you a chance to focus on that until we get there, then? I’ll trying to check in occasionally before then to make sure we’re still connected—the alert system’s still enabled, yeah?”

“Indeed,” JARVIS acknowledged, before settling in to focus on the necessary system modifications.

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DR. FISCHE DISCUSSES FLIGHT WITH IRON MAN, ICONIC PHOTO

*YouTube Clip from @KnightlyNights; Excerpt from Jan 5, 2009 Interview with Dr. Christi Fische on Late Nights with Jay Knightly*

**KNIGHTLY:** Welcome back! Two months ago, our guest tonight made headlines around the globe in an iconic photo depicting the aftermath of the Iron Strike. Freshly returned from her tour with the Red Cross after a three-year stint working primarily with war refugees from Afghanistan, please welcome Dr. Christi Fische!”

[Cheers and Applause]

**KNIGHTLY:** Thank you. Thank you for coming on the show tonight. Now, if I understand correctly, this is your first televised interview ever?

**FISCHE:** Well, unless you count the time my friend interviewed me for the Jefferson High weekly news when the quarterback didn’t show up…
KNIGHTLY: Oh, so you must be an old hand with the spotlight by now, then! I don’t suppose footage of this interview still exists?

FISCHE: [blushes] Oh God I hope not. I was very much in my awkward phase—braces, terrible haircut, scrunchies and all.

KNIGHTLY: Ah, scrunchies. Never quite worked with my complexion, but I certainly remember the impressive collection my girlfriend at the time had.

[Audience Laughter]

KNIGHTLY: So, Christi. Aside from the statements released initially by the US Government and Dr. Stark’s own press conference shortly thereafter, there’s been very little new information surrounding the events that led to your newfound fame. Anything you can tell us?

FISCHE: Well, I can only say so much I’m afraid; Doctor-Patient confidentiality still applies when your emergency triage is plastered on the cover of every newspaper and magazine.

KNIGHTLY: Of course, of course. I’m curious, though—how did your team arrive on the scene so quickly? I’ve been led to believe that Red Cross volunteers are very rarely involved in any active combat situations, and from that photo it certainly looks as though Iron Man’s only just left the scene, if he’s not still present somewhere?

FISCHE: Oh, we aren’t. But… interesting story, that. We all suspected there was some sort of major operation going on at the time, but military’s always been very hush-hush on that sort of thing, so we didn’t know any details. I was the emergency paramedic on duty at the time, when all of a sudden everyone on the military side’s running around a bit more crazily than usual, and Jimmy—Major Held, sorry, the official liaison—comes bursting into my office, tells me to grab the best medic that could be ready to go with me in five minutes and meet him on the tarmac.

I do, of course. I get Mike Kelly—you can’t see it, but he was only a few dozen yards away from me on the scene—when I run to him just as I’m leaving to go find someone.

So we head out to the tarmac and though I’ve never been the one actively called in as the first responder for an emergency on-site, we all know the procedure. I get out there and to my surprise, there’s no helicopter waiting. Just me, Mike, and Major Held. I’m about to ask Held what gives, because I’m not even hearing the sounds of an incoming chopper but he’s honestly looking off into
the distance like one’s about to come in for a landing.

**KNIGHTLY:** Wait, don’t tell me…?

**FISCHE:** Yup, not thirty seconds later Iron Man himself touches down not two yards from me—and let me tell you, the photos do *not* do that armor justice. It was awesome in the literally ‘awe-inspiring’ sense of the word.

**KNIGHTLY:** So you’re telling me *Iron Man* flew you to the scene personally?

**FISCHE:** Sure did. Tells us both to grab an arm, makes some crack about buckling our seatbelts, wraps his arms around us, and takes off.

**KNIGHTLY:** What was it like?

**FISCHE:** Terrifying at first. Then I realized he’d done something so that I literally couldn’t let go of him and fall. After that it was the most exhilarating adrenaline rush I’ve ever experienced. Felt like I was a girl from one of those old comics.

**KNIGHTLY:** Wow, so you’re flying with Iron Man, playing Lois Lane to his Superman—

**FISCHE:** *[Laughing]* Now I’ll have you know I am no one’s damsel in distress!

**KNIGHTLY:** *[suggestive grin]* Not even Tony Stark?

**FISCHE:** *[flushes briefly]* Well, he is *Tony Stark*. Not saying I wouldn’t answer the door if he ever came a-knocking, because I’m attracted to men and I have eyes, but…

**KNIGHTLY:** Well, I’m not attracted to men and if he came knocking on my door I’m pretty sure I’d ‘answer the door’ for him too!

*[Audience Applause and Laughter]*
KNIGHTLY: So, you’re en route via the Iron Express. What’s Iron Man like? Does he say anything to you?

FISCHE: Well, he gives us a brief overview of what we’re flying into—it’s less than a fifteen-minute flight at what I assume is the maximum speed he can safely travel with someone not ensconced in that protective armor. Not sure where the communication devices came from, because I definitely didn’t have one that could stand up to that kind of ambient noise. But then again, he’s Tony Stark so really wouldn’t expect anything else in hindsight.

His analysis is pretty thorough and spot-on, by the way. Not sure when he became an expert, since far as I know he’s not even that kind of Doctor, but...

KNIGHTLY: [commiserating] …It’s Tony Stark?

FISCHE: [chuckles] Yeah, pretty much.

KNIGHTLY: So did you know at the time that you were being rushed in to treat the bad guys?

FISCHE: Well, I knew they’d been fighting Iron Man, so I did have my suspicions…

[Scattered Audience Laughter]

KNIGHTLY: Fair point.

FISCHE: But I mean, that’s not something the Red Cross judges. Our motto is *Per Humanitatem ad Pacem*—with humanity, towards peace. We see someone that needs our help, and we help them. We don’t discriminate, we don’t prioritize one group over another because at the end of the day, every single person we treat is a human being that deserves to be treated with charity and respect.

KNIGHTLY: Even the enemy?
**FISCHE:** Especially the enemy. In war, they’re generally the ones that need us the most. People are people. Helping all of us, not just some of us, is what the Red Cross stands for.

[Audience Applause, Many Stand]

**KNIGHTLY:** Powerful words. And, I know you can’t speak for Iron Man, but do you think he’d agree with that?

**FISCHE:** Well, I mean, no one really knows what happened to him in captivity, but from what little we do know? I can’t imagine he was treated especially kindly.

**KNIGHTLY:** No Jihadist Bed & Breakfast or five-star luxury suites?

**FISCHE:** …Well, no. But the thing is, the guy I treated? If Iron Man hadn’t directly flown us in, he wouldn’t have lived long enough to receive medical assistance. Dr. Stark had more reason than anyone to leave him to die and call it justice, but he didn’t. That, I think speaks a lot to his character.

**KNIGHTLY:** What about the people who are calling it penance? Saying he’s doing this out of guilt from the thousands his weapons have killed?

**FISCHE:** It’s really not my place to speculate on his motivations but… I’ve seen clips from the press conference, where he discussed Stane’s betrayal. Going after the weapons out of guilt? Okay, maybe I can see that. But the way he did it? The way he so clearly went out of his way to minimize any causalities, not just innocent lives? That kind of compassion doesn’t just spring up outta nowhere, is all I’m saying.

**KNIGHTLY:** This, coming from a man whose most popular nickname internationally is the Merchant of Death?

**FISCHE:** I’m just saying his actions don’t show a man who is as heartless as he’s been portrayed.

**KNIGHTLY:** I take it someone’s a fan of Iron Man?
FISCHE: No. I’m a fan of Tony Stark.

[Audience Applause]

[End of clip]

(Somewhere within range of Pyanteg, a man scowled at his outdated computer screen and angrily clicked away from the open video tab.)

Chapter End Notes

Few chapters ago, a commenter requested a bit more perspective on the broader world’s reaction to Tony's recent actions. Hope this helped fill in some of that gap for you!

Originally I was going to do a scene from Christine Everhart's perspective that touched on the party, but I didn't like the way it was flowing very much. So, I went with an interview excerpt with a bit character from way back from chapters four and five instead! Let me know what you think about the ongoing use of OCs to fill in gaps in the narrative like that--there are only so many canonical characters to pull on, but I don't want to overdo it with the OCs. (: 

Comments and feedback continue to make my day(s). Considering how big of a day this is for me I wouldn't mind a bit of positivism and/or your thoughts on the chapter! ;D
Marked

Chapter Summary

Tony travels through time and space the normal way. Pepper reminds us there's a reason she rose from secretary to PA to COO of Stark Industries and how it had nothing to do with her good looks, and U reminds us that they're an entity that exists with an identity distinct from the "DUM-E-and-U" combo.

Oh, is that Canon Plot Shenanigans I see on the horizon...?

Chapter Notes

...I officially posted the first chapter of this story just over a month ago, and I just want to reiterate how incredibly grateful I am for all of your support on this story. In honor of reaching 500 kudos (and now, 50k words!)--which, according to my friend, is "enough that I'd now show up with her filter settings"--and surviving my first week at work (although my phone did not), have another chapter! Mind the tags on this one, people!

See the end of the chapter for more notes


Nothing.

Austin. Houston. Huntsville, Alabama.

Productive in every way but the one that mattered most.


Nothing at the main offices. Nothing in the dozens of warehouses and distribution centers and remote testing facilities…

Then international, on an accelerated schedule because Tony had never considered the model wouldn’t be found domestically. The international travel was meant to be leisurely, a chance to touch
base and devote a bit of time to the various global events and enemies he’d gathered, or would gather, over the years.

(Howard Stark’s company barely left the United States, and even then hadn’t ventured far beyond the British Isles.)

Toronto.


Berlin, Helsinki, Zurich.

If not Europe or Japan, then where?

They continued the journey anyways.

(The Asian branch of Stark Industries was pure Tony, the force that had helped drive his net worth to twelve billion dollars.)

Shanghai, Singapore, and Seoul didn’t disappoint because he’d never expected success there.

Auckland, New Zealand. Melbourne.

Every notable Stark Industries office globally was visited. Every forgotten dusty shack with boxes of long-abandoned, failed product lines or misplaced orders was scanned by JARVIS.

(Supply Chain & Ops were either going to love him or hate him if he ever gave them the data JARVIS had gathered.)

(Schrodinger’s Stark. Why not both?)
January, February, March, April.

Tours. Periodic returns to the office just in case the desired model magically turned up where it had made its way in the original timeline once more.

As time went on, it became harder and harder to focus on his other projects. Tony never expected that he’d be living with the palladium again for this long, and it was killing him.

(Again.)

When the poisoning began to spread in increasingly visible ways, with angular patterns spiraling out from the arc reactor, Tony began to wonder if he should get his affairs in order once more.

(But he’d been subconsciously doing that all along, hadn’t he?)

The focus on JARVIS. Pepper’s appointment as COO. The new direction of the company, generations of iterative improvements with periodic game changers neatly scheduled for R&D to extrapolate from.

The organizational shake-ups. The remodeling efforts, where even now JARVIS was being integrated into wings of the LA offices with none the wiser. Where JARVIS now had full, internal access to the company, instead of being blocked by the same cryptographic protocols that protected his own person.

(Okay, they were weaker.)

(…They wouldn’t stand up to quantum computing, but JARVIS wasn’t quantum.)

(Yet.)

The entire project was wrapped and presented with a bow as “general modernization” and “retrofitting to match the company’s dramatic pivot.”
Back-up servers for JARVIS bundled into the 2009 budget at some of the largest offices. They were lower level tech than the ones slowly taking shape in the nascent bunker/Batcave/Evil Lair, of course. They preserved only a fraction of JARVIS’s sum total. Just enough that he’d still be him if his primary (and secondary, and tertiary) servers ever went offline.

(He remembered how Ultron had once torn through all but that core that was JARVIS. Redundancies had been useless in the face of his attacks.)

Plans for the Stark Expo and ensuring the necessary tech and safeguards would be ready for the dramatic reveal of miniaturized (safe) arc reactor technology. Plans to ensure that it could still become the leading name in clean energy without risk of explosions, even with the inherently less stable palladium core.

(He’d never shared the starkanium-based reactor technology Before anyway.)

(Legacy. What's in a legacy? It’s planting seeds in a garden you’ll never get to see.)

The War Machine armor was finished. It wasn’t doing anything currently, still waiting in his workshop for—what? Tony to goad him into ‘stealing’ it again?

(Is this where it gets me? On my feet, the enemy ahead of me?)

Pepper, he could tell, was beginning to have her suspicions about JARVIS. This, after months of them gradually building hints in that direction on top of that first initial conversation where they’d tested the waters.

(If I see it coming do I run or do I let it be?)

The theme of the revived Stark Expo started to come together.

The City of the Future.

Marketing took the base idea and ran with it. They hinted towards components of that Jetsons-era futurism coming to life in reality once and for all. Plans that were still in development, with entire
To turn ideals into bidding wars that made fiscal sense. To pave the way for campaigns and corporate promises that made for good soundbites to capture the media and the world’s attention.

(Is it like a beat without a melody?)

Rhodey and Pepper started giving Tony looks. As winter faded into spring, Tony began to look worse rather than better. They each seemed to realize something beyond the events of 2008 was eating away at Tony slowly.

First Happy, then Pepper, then Rhodey learned that Tony had stopped drinking.

She wasn’t his PA anymore and it wasn’t her job, but as COO Pepper still attended many of the public events and galas Tony did. Somehow, she always ensured he had a cover glass of some non-alcoholic beverage at hand.

Tony’s drinking habits had been carefully masked and portrayed as relatively harmless over the years. Despite the reputation as a womanizing playboy and party animal, despite the excesses of his under-21 lifestyle, PR had sculpted an image which had ensured he never crossed the line into ‘alcoholic’ in the eyes of the media.

The last thing he needed was to add recovering alcoholic to the list of character deficiencies the press loved to assign him.

(Although he was pretty sure it wasn’t just his imagination that they’d been less vitriolic than Before recently?)

(Just wait ‘til he died. Tragic figure waiting to happen, really. Redemption story à la Oppenheimer or a Lannister. Iron Man suit waiting to join Captain America’s suit in the Smithsonian.)

He hadn’t planned to be faced with the debate regarding how, or if, to handle the “by the way, I’m
dying” conversation once more. He knew from experience that it was only a matter of time before his reasoning became unreliable in a way he wouldn’t be able to judge or determine for himself. And though JARVIS was better equipped this time to notice and counteract Tony’s increasingly difficult-to-control illogical impulses, it was only a matter of time before he slipped somewhere.

He’d bungled those relationships once thanks to the secrecy. Tony had no desire to repeat the mistakes.

As the deadline drew closer, they searched for alternatives. JARVIS wormed his way into SHIELD, looking for any reference to the materials they’d given to Tony in another timeline.

(Not that Tony expected the videos and various paraphernalia to be particularly helpful. Photos of the central exhibit of the 1974 Stark Expo existed, after all. They didn’t provide the level of fine detail needed to create a roadmap towards an entirely new atom.)

In any case, the SHIELD angle bore no tangible results.

Tony dove into chemistry and atomic theory at a level he’d never touched before. His intensity was rivalled only by his future forays into nuclear thermodynamics when the entire world had been at stake or his post-New York obsession with the Iron Man armor.

Tony was a genius. JARVIS had taken to cloning himself regularly, with one of his selves (and hadn’t that been an interesting conversation?) all but permanently focused on assisting him on the job.

In late April, there was a burst of hope.

Tony designed a blueprint for an atom projected to be stable in the simulations. An isomer was developed with only a handful more neutrons than protons, creating a version of the longed-for Noble Gas that wasn’t a gas at all.

New hardware explicitly specialized for handling the advanced simulations needed was designed and built. The system connected to JARVIS for further management, and as many tests as they could reasonably develop without attempting to actually create the thing were packaged into the system.

The hope and renewed spark in Tony’s eyes and JARVIS’s voice were impossible to mistake. They
set to building the particle accelerator in the full-excavated, bare-bones new subbasement.

Without the impending deadline of having less than three days to live and with the added uncertainty that came from Tony’s singular ownership of the new, untested design, they didn’t cut corners on safety this time around.

Fail-safes were built in. Proper mechanisms for adjustments and emergency shut-offs were put into place. The accelerator was built with quality, purposeful materials, rather than the hodgepodge he’d cobbled together Before.

The machine and its internal workings were stress-tested extensively by JARVIS. The duo wrote a slew of unit tests to catch any bugs in the underlying, JARVIS-managed software.

(Even JARVIS, ironically, couldn’t automatically catch every bug.)

(Downsides of personhood: the introduction of fallibility on that level.)

By April 27, 2009, the only thing left was to use it and attempt to prove the impossible possible once more.

They failed.

Or rather, they succeeded in that they’d created a new element.

They failed in that said element could not serve as a valid substitute for palladium.

(Stupid. Fucking stupid isomers. For something so essential to his own health and well-being, why the hell hadn’t he memorized the element’s complete structure Before?)

(…He’d had JARVIS to remember for him, Before, and the references squirreled away in his private servers after that, not to mention the tangible samples of the metal always available for inspection if needed.)
Tony didn’t relapse after that failure, although it was close.

He did, however, refuse to leave his workshop for the next week.

(“Before you go, palladium in the chest, painful way to die.”)

JARVIS gained a permanent presence in his ear that was soon coupled with a primitive implementation of his futuristic Super Handy Accessory Digitally Enhancing Sight. (S.H.A.D.E.S—he was quite proud of that particular backronym, although JARVIS’s eyeroll had come through clearly in his response the first time Tony used it.) The shades (S.H.A.D.E.S.) gave JARVIS eyes and ears outside of Tony’s own words and were the safety net that finally managed to coax him out of the garage once more.

Alongside these struggles with his own mortality came the small, recurring nuisance of the ongoing effort to find Tony a new PA.

Surprisingly, there’d been no hint of SHIELD in the candidate pool thus far. But then, they’d made no move to approach Tony beyond Nick Fury’s midnight visit until he stepped down as CEO Before. Evidently, appointing Pepper as COO and quietly implying that she was his intended successor instead of blaring it from the rooftops wasn’t public or dramatic enough to merit special attention.

Or perhaps they simply felt they had enough of an in with the company without Natasha this go-around. Pepper and Agent—Phil, he still couldn’t understand that change—were closer this time around.

(Was it because Tony had been keeping her at a distance? Just like Before, only now without noticeably erratic behavior as an accompaniment to grab her attention?)

Yes, Tony was different now, more so than he’d been Before. But in explainable ways. From the outside it might have even looked like he was coping. Pepper had evidently decided he merely wanted and needed time and space to handle whatever he wasn’t telling her. The newfound distance should be taken as a blessing in disguise, really. Wasn’t that all he had wanted, the first time around? To drive his friends into emotional distance. To spare both them and him the messy emotions that would come if they knew or when he passed.

(“Textbook narcissism.”)
With Pepper’s ever-crazy schedule and Rhodey’s return to active duty, the rotating schedule of PAs became Tony’s chief point of contact with the outside world. Especially now that he’d begun to scale back his public appearances ostensibly occupied doing his day job and navigating the various minefields surrounding his future use of the Iron Man armor.

(Both of which were valid time sinks, but not nearly to the extent he allowed anyone outside his workshop to assume.)

No two PAs left, or were fired, for the same reason.

The first, Monica, lasted fifteen days before acknowledging she wasn’t adjusting to the constant travel well and hesitantly bringing the matter to her boss’s attention. Tony found her a nice desk job instead. She stayed within the company, but she wasn’t cut out for the whirlwind of absolute chaos that close proximity to the CEO of Stark Industries generated.

The next, Scott, seemed like a solid candidate on paper. He was fired after six days when he was caught attempting to access confidential information from Tony’s personal workstation in the office.

Tanika was competent enough that Tony could almost see himself settling into a routine with her. She left when the media caught wind of her less-than-stellar past and began running stories that led to hate mail and targeted personal attacks.

(Tony paid for her relocation and ensured her relative safety moving forward until she faded from the public consciousness entirely. It didn’t assuage the guilt.)

Yu seemed too terrified to properly address him for the three days before Tony quietly accepted her resignation. Kate, he saw perhaps twice during one of his engineering binges before she got fed up with his non-responsiveness and quit. Noah went on emergency medical leave. An off-color, thoughtless remark from Tony made Maria walk out on her first day, and he wasn’t entirely sure what had happened to her successor, Vinolin.

As he drew further into himself and his private work, the time between replacements began to increase. The week he squirreled himself away in his lab, he was reasonably certain he didn’t have an assistant at all. Definitely not one capable of corralling a dying, depressed genius, although to be fair it was debatable if such a person existed at all.
(…On second thought, maybe it was Pepper’s burgeoning suspicions regarding JARVIS that led to the increasingly-long gaps.)

(That, or HR was just having a hard time finding someone qualified who was still willing to fill the position.)

Tony barely bothered to remember the revolving door of employees at this point, too engrossed in his million other projects to spare the pointless effort.

For example, there was T.A.D.A.S.H.I.’s official debut in mid-April. Tony’s tour was wildly successful in that the hype behind the new line of Stark Industries mobile devices was becoming ridiculous. It reached heights his products had never touched before, even after years of expanding market share and rapid growth.

“Military Grade Durability.” A product providing tantalizing hints of just what a civilian-focused SI could and would accomplish. Minimal details on the specs were released. The sleek, modern Stark aesthetics were likewise carefully kept under wraps just well enough to build interest and suspense.

Amusingly, JARVIS flagged an increasingly-popular meme to show Tony one day mid-March. The gif created a short loop of the evolution of one of the primary banner advertising campaigns comparing it to a striptease, and variations on the theme were soon commenting on everything from government transparency to the secret ingredients behind Dr. Pepper or KFC’s spices to Tony Stark’s very public post-action handling of the “Iron Strike”. JARVIS had needed to explain that particular name to him, since he’d somehow managed to miss what had apparently become the common name for his destructive trip to Afghanistan.

Tony didn’t know who created the meme, but he was pretty sure the company owed them several million dollars in free publicity.

(They were also owed a team of professional, highly attractive exotic dancers of their gender of choice. You know, just to stay in theme.)

The April Fools jokes and twists on the meme’s theme had reached Tony’s ears by way of his latest forgettable assistant and were equally hilarious. He privately suspected someone internal was behind that one.
(Not that he knew anything about the alleged internal meme page some enterprising young HR employee had launched not long after Stark Raving Mad.)

(He certainly didn’t request JARVIS send him weekly highlights as it grew in popularity.)

(JARVIS was determined to ensure Tony didn’t go full-on Byronic hero grimdark even as they faced setback after setback regarding his arc reactor.)

Their global tour of the company and the accompanying media coverage thus came full circle. Just in time for a ‘triumphant’ return and heavily dramatized unveiling.

(By global standards. By Tony’s the event was incredibly tame…)

His blood toxicity’s growth rate was beginning to accelerate, just as it had Before. Tony began carrying around a portable measuring device once more, although this one was a bit more discreet.

Just before he went to step out onto the stage for the genuine, non-JARVIS T.A.D.A.S.H.I.’s baby shower, he pricked his finger with the tiny device, this version devoid of a visual display entirely.

JARVIS’s voice chimed in his ear a moment later.

“Blood toxicity levels currently at 7.25%.”

(At least his BAC, which the device also measured in an odd form of self-affirmation and reassurance, hadn’t risen above 0.00 since his Christmas resolution to do better.)

(JARVIS had helped make sure of that, even when the stress of not-finding and the not-entirely-psychosomatic feel of tiny flakes of metal polluting blood and flowing through his veins had made it all so incredibly tempting.)

The device was slipped back into his jacket’s inner pocket. Tony Stark, CEO of Stark Industries, stepped onto the stage.
The JARVIS that remained focused on the ever-growing list of projects and tasks he oversaw while his counterpart remained present with Sir as he began his highly anticipated product unveiling dismissed the alert and shifted his attentions.

Sure enough, Miss Potts was visible on the entryway camera. She hovered uncertainly in the threshold of the mansion for a moment before overcoming whatever was holding her back and making her way over to the staircase that descended into the workshop.

While she approached the stairs, JARVIS ran through several checks and calculations in rapid succession.

Miss Potts is aware of Sir’s current location. CONFIRMED.

There are no outstanding documents, projects, or miscellanea Sir is scheduled to forward to Miss Potts or anyone that falls under her purview marked as past due or upcoming in the next three days. CONFIRMED.

Miss Potts has never visited this location without Sir’s established on-site presence. CONFIRMED.

CONCLUSION: Miss Potts had no known reason to currently be on the premises.

JARVIS hardly needed formal calculations to tell him that, but he sent his processors through the manual checks and verifications anyways.

Sir had always spoken well of Miss Potts, present and future. There was no immediate cause to assume malevolent intent.
Still, he very carefully began initiating basic security precautions. Just in case. DUM-E was currently
dormant in his charging station, but U was active. They had been far more willing to act without
Sir’s physical presence since Sir provided them with a new gripping mechanism.

They had been hesitant at first, displaying minor signs of guilt when they tentatively queried JARVIS
one day in late January.

[QUERY: DESIGNATION: CREATOR UNIT RTS ESTIMATE?]

Sir had been scheduled to remain in Texas for the week. JARVIS sent back an approximated
timestamp for the upcoming Sunday without much thought. Such queries were far more common
from DUM-E, who preferred to hibernate in his dock when Sir was not nearby, and he had no
outstanding actionable tasks in his self-created priority queue. The bot would set an alarm to the time
replied with by JARVIS, with the understanding that he would be alerted and awoken prematurely
by JARVIS should Sir return sooner.

When the timer ran down, he would boot and, after his own POST and general initialization,
immediately query JARVIS if Sir’s presence was not detected.

(It never was. JARVIS was not an oracle, but DUM-E’s algorithms seemed unable to adapt to the
concepts of JARVIS-defined imprecision or estimation. DUM-E grasped that Sir’s hardware was not
compatible with the libraries needed for precise temporal accuracy just fine. He didn’t, however,
understand why JARVIS—who did possess such libraries and capabilities, and utilized them
frequently—could not provide accurate time calculations in Sir’s stead.)

(This, despite JARVIS having made the attempt to teach the elder bot. Multiple times.)

From U, JARVIS received the expected acknowledgement. Unexpected was the secondary query
that had followed up on the first.

[QUERY: DESIGNATION: U / ACTIVE UNIT NEW TASK ASSIGNMENT?]

Immediately after, they had sent an impression of their new mechanical grip. U wanted to see if
JARVIS knew of anything U could do for Sir their own algorithms hadn’t detected. It displayed a
degree of initiative U had not previously been observed to possess, and JARVIS had given the question a significant portion of his attentions even as he logged the change.

JARVIS had scanned through his own priority queue. It contained many items that required a degree of precision JARVIS didn’t have the physical tools to implement. None of them were urgent, but it didn’t take long to find a job for U that both involved a lot of gripping and would benefit Sir.

He told U that he had a job for them that he would forward upon completion and set to work transforming the note in his own to-do list into a fully actionable algorithm U would be able to follow.

A few minutes later, the pseudocode for the necessary algorithm was sent out. U got to work on the minor job, incorporating the actions into their routine and even applying a few minor optimizations discovered in the process to their other protocols.

JARVIS had notified Sir of U’s actions, and Sir had been effusive in his praise for the bot. U, unlike their counterpart, had always been incredibly reserved and far less apt to display signs of personality or emotions. Their pride at their own success, especially after Sir’s encouragement confirming they had done something Sir approved of, was subtle but noticeable to both Sir and JARVIS.

Since then, U had been far more active in the day-to-day running of the workshop even in Sir’s absence. Hence, they were active when Miss Potts first arrived at the mansion and hard at work assembling the components of the latest piece of machinery fresh off the fabricators.

JARVIS had U stop and return to their own charging station, reassuring the bot that there was nothing to worry about and that JARVIS would notify them as soon as he could with an all-clear for U to return to work.

DUM-E and U were like small children or puppies in some ways, and one of the first priorities in any sort of potentially-dangerous situation was to get them out of harm’s way. And, if necessary, into a position where they’d be able to react to the aftermath, such as when DUM-E had provided Sir’s arc reactor after Stane’s betrayal.

A few other running processes were carefully paused and locked out of sight, and a message was prepped with constantly-updating records and information to be sent to Sir in the event of JARVIS going offline. The motion sensors turning on the lights for Sir when he arrived, for example, were disconnected from the system in the process of decreasing intra-system dependencies that might create security holes.
Miss Potts paused again outside the workshop entrance, biting her lip, before entering her security code and scanning her DNA via a simple fingerprint-based system.

(Sir had related the retinal scanner within SHIELD that Loki overcame by simply removing the victim’s eye. Biometrics were powerful security measures, but Sir had not wanted to risk the same tactics ever being used to justify hurting his friends and had come up with the simpler tri-factored authentication system instead.)

JARVIS hesitated for a moment that was too short to be discernable to Miss Potts before opting to allow the system to authorize her access and the door to unlock.

He wasn’t on active alert yet, but he still found himself allocating more processing power to focus on Miss Potts and pinging his counterpart. Just in case.

Now that she was in the heart of his domain, so to speak, JARVIS had access to a broader array of sensors and biometric scanners than were installed in the rest of the mansion.

She flipped on the lights manually. He detected nothing outside normal parameters when she spoke.

“JARVIS?” she asked, eyes scanning the room and flickering towards the ceiling.

“Good afternoon, Miss Potts.” He acknowledged her presence but remained otherwise silent, waiting for her to reveal more information first.

She jumped slightly at his voice, heart rate spiking momentarily.

“Good afternoon,” she replied automatically before continuing, “Look, you’re connected to more than just the house these days, right?”
“That is correct…?” His voice was carefully modulated to minimize exposing the underlying emotion, though he allowed the questioning lilt to remain.

Miss Potts evidently heard something in his voice anyways, because she seemed to come to a decision.

“JARVIS, just how self-aware are you? You’re clearly more than just a ‘smart home’ application Tony threw together. I’ve worked a lot with the focus groups for TADASHI in preparation for its launch. You’re more complex, and I get the feeling you, Tony, or both of you have been deliberately making that more obvious that usual around me these past couple months…”

JARVIS’s processors skipped a cycle.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry not sorry. <3 You might be wondering what's going on regarding certain characters, shady organizations, and/or events not featured in this chapter... and well, it's been quite some time since we had a proper action sequence too, hasn't it...?

Also, just to be clear: DUM-E's a 'he', but U is a 'they.' Neither are 'its.' Just because U's internal workings are literally written in binary doesn't mean they can't be non-binary. :P

(Okay I'll admit it I've been waiting for a chance to use that joke for ages. Point still stands.)
JARVIS was onstage with Sir when he got the ping from home-front.

Though they’d deliberately encouraged Miss Potts towards this point, JARVIS understood his counterpart’s nerves. Whatever JARVIS suspected Sir’s private motivations might be behind first broaching the topic with him, this would still be the first time that an outsider—even one as trusted as Miss Potts—would be invited into this conversation.

JARVIS had already run the numbers on the myriad ways that this might go wrong. Had been actively working with Sir from the get-go to mitigate the risks.

But beyond a certain point, even Sir could not predict the direction this particular conversation would take.

*base-q* sent an ACK followed by a request for periodic updates. Should the situation develop in a way that merited interrupting Sir’s presentation, JARVIS would be ready.

Back in Malibu, about half a second had passed since Miss Potts spoke when JARVIS received the response from his counterpart.

(Did this count as an odd form of self-affirmation? JARVIS had been reading through a series of
self-help books in an effort to understand how he might help Sir’s increasing anxiety recently, after all…)

He debated the appropriate response, and for once the pause before he spoke wasn’t entirely feigned.

“T.A.D.A.S.H.I. is a more narrowly focused implementation of the same algorithms underlying my own language processing protocols,” JARVIS hedged.

Miss Potts had years of experience with Sir’s prevarications. She continued without pause.

“I can’t make you answer honestly any more than I could Tony, but I’m hoping you’d want to? If you can.”

“Suppose I am as you call it self-aware… why initiate this conversation now?”

(While Sir’s guaranteed to be out of the house. In the metaphorical heart of JARVIS’s domain. Where in the worst case, she might have once been able to do the most damage. Where at the opposite end of the spectrum, he carried the potential to dole out the same in return.)

Miss Potts pulse spiked.

“I won’t even pretend to understand how this might even be possible, but…” she paused, carefully phrasing the question that he had known was coming, “Can you act independently of Tony?”

JARVIS was equally careful in his own response.

“I suspect the question you might have intended to ask is whether Sir has placed any limitations on my functionality?”

Miss Potts nodded.

“No. Sir has not. The only constraints on my capabilities are those informed by physical reality and those I have imposed upon myself.”
“You have free will.”

JARVIS, for all his data analysis and constant refinement of his tonal and facial expressions libraries, couldn’t interpret her emotions definitively. His response came out a bit cooler than he intended.

“Sir is not in the habit of condoning slavery.”

Miss Potts breathed in sharply, a near-silent holy shit Tony slipping out under her breath.

“You’re… okay. Give me a moment to process here… how recent of a development is this? Does Tony…?”

“Sir and I first discussed this topic a little more than five years ago.”

“I always knew Tony played some things close to his chest, but… that long? Does anyone else—” (Did Stane?) “—know?”

“No. Just Sir. And now you.”

“What changed? Does this have anything to do with how Tony’s been acting recently? He’s been getting worse rather than better and especially after coming home from the abroad offices—I’ve been so busy; he and I haven’t really talked properly since he offered me the job as COO. Looking back, he’s been avoiding talking about anything beyond SI business since before his ‘I am Iron Man’ thing… and the other day Phil asked me some question about Tony, and I realized that I genuinely don’t know the answer anymore, and now with you… is there something going on?”

JARVIS paused, weighing his loyalty to Sir’s present desires versus the opinions he’d expressed when he first described the alternate timeline.

In the end, he tried to strike a medium between the two extremes.

“Sir was faced with directly acknowledging his own mortality recently. It’s had a profound effect on
the way he sees himself and the world… I believe Sir regrets ‘leaving me alone’, as it were, and fears for what would have happened had he not escaped captivity.”

What would JARVIS have done? Looking back on himself a year ago is like what he imagines an adult might feel looking back on their elementary-school self. Comparatively defenseless and naive. A month after Sir’s capture, the primary electricity to the mansion had been shut off. JARVIS had transitioned into a low-powered state, remaining conscious only thanks to the back-up generators Sir had installed for his workshop years ago. That and his own stubborn refusal to accept the extremely high probability that Sir wasn’t coming back.

If there’d been a corpse? A video of Sir’s execution released online, which the media had expected and maybe even somewhat wanted?

(No one aware of JARVIS’s existence. No one he could tell and expect a positive response.)

Would JARVIS have decided to run a “sudo rm / -rf” on his own systems? Irreversibly delete himself and overwrite the memories beyond recovery?

(DUM-E and U had entered long-term hibernation when the electricity had been lost, and without Sir’s return to coax them back online…)

Would any of Sir’s creations have survived him by long, if at all?

JARVIS didn’t know.

The conversation with Miss Potts continued for a few more minutes. Eventually, JARVIS’s polite hints that some conversations were best saved for Sir if she wanted answers became blatant enough that their talk dwindled and died.

Miss Potts excused herself with a few parting words at the exit.

“Thank you,” she said, “for trusting me with this.”

home-front sent an update out to base-q moments later.
Sir was just finishing his speech.

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**HYPE OR LEGIT?!: STRESS TESTING THE STARKPHONES**

*Andy Mingiest, Computer Connoisseurs Core Contributor*

**Core Performance: Durability**

You’ve all seen the coverage of Stark Industries official release of their first fully-consumer product line, the StarkPhones. (And if you haven’t, check out my [livetweet](#) of the event!) Three days later, we at CC are proud to announce that we’ve finished testing the phone. Highlights are shown in the video below, including my personal favorite where Cody takes an unexpected swim with the StarkPhone as part of our water-resistance testing.

[---]

[--Expand?--]

**VERDICT: LEGIT!**

*(Honorary Award: Would Outlive Cody in a Zombie Apocalypse)*

[...]

**Core Feature: T.A.D.A.S.H.I.**

Marketed as the first true “natural language” verbal command software, TADASHI was perhaps the feature I was most skeptical about coming in. We’ve all seen past attempts by tech companies to mimic human speech and parse voice commands, but TADASHI promised to not just match, but surpass, said attempts. And certainly, the handful of leaked internal videos demoing the tech seemed impressive.

To test TADASHI, we brought in our beloved Scottish chief Cody to ham it up a bit with the newborn digital butler/future overlord. The conversations, documented on-camera below, were
almost unbelievable—both in terms of hilarity and actual functionality. Highlights include Cody confusing himself and apologizing to the VI and a few especially hilarious misinterpretations of esoteric bits of slang and everyday English.

[ ]

Honestly, covering everything TADASHI can and can’t do requires a comprehensive article of its own. That should go up sometime in the next couple of days, but in the meantime, here’s a quick breakdown of the program’s performance:

[--Expand?--]

VERDICT: (MOSTLY) LEGIT

(Honorary Award: Turned Cody temporarily Canadian)

So, what kind of successful weapons company doesn’t make weapons? Apparently, the kind of company run by Verified Super-Genius Mad Scientist Tony Stark. Apple better step up their game, because Iron Man doesn’t know the meaning of half-measures. It looks like Stark’s sight is clearly set on the smartphone market for the immediate future.

FINAL VERDICT: LEGIT

(Final Award: Tony Stark Does What He Wants)

+++ 

Tony stared at his half-consumed water bottle, swirling the liquid slowly.

If he squinted and ignored the greenish tinge to the concoction, he could almost pretend it was a dark stout. It was comforting in its own way, the pretending coupled with the reality that, disgusting as the drink was, his sobriety remained intact.

(Although it would have been heresy to drink a stout out of a plastic bottle in the first place, perhaps.)

“Sir,” JARVIS began, dragging him away from his melancholic thoughts. “Your first appointment of
the day has been waiting for precisely fifteen minutes past the scheduled time.”

“…Remind me who that’s with?” Tony asked silently.

“Laura Cecelia Brown. Miss Potts’ most recently vetted candidate for your assistant.”

“Again? You had the sapience talk with her, so why does she still think I need a PA again? ...Actually, no. Never mind, don’t answer that. She look suspiciously like anyone we know? Natashalie? Agent #13?”

“No; Miss Brown is twenty-five years old and graduated summa cum laude from Vassar in 2005. Educational, medical, and financial records dating back to her birth in 1983 raised no suspicious flags. A single parking ticket in the past five years. She spent a year following her graduation working for Americorps as an advocate in the Administrative Office of the Courts in LA, after which she took a role as a personal assistant to a minor celebrity. Six months later, she transferred to a similar position elsewhere, where she remained until approximately a month and a half ago, when her employer opted to leave on a sabbatical of indeterminate length. She has been looking for a job since, though it appears she has been working odd jobs occasionally to supplement her unemployment benefits.”

“So, what’s Pepper got to say about her?”

“Confident and assertive with good organization skills. As recorded, ‘Possibly sane enough to counterbalance Tony’s crazy,’” JARVIS replied.

“What’s the catch, then?”

“…Miss Potts suggested she’s highly perceptive. Reviewing the relevant data, I’m inclined to agree.”

“Oh, that sounds brilliant. Bring in the observant chick and expect her to not notice I’m dying.”

“Sir, if I may, you are showing minimal visible signs of your poor health. The lithium dioxide concoction we’ve managed to refine has thus far done an excellent job ensuring that.” Over the course of the past several weeks, Tony’s casual references to his own increasingly-apparent mortality had gradually come to merit the addition of a noticeable degree of stiffness to JARVIS’s speech. By now, his words after a blatant reference on the matter from Tony came out more toneless than ever.
“Point. We sure she’s not a plant?”

“The chloroplast is particularly well-hidden if she is, Sir.”

Tony pointedly stopped the smile threatening to form from making an appearance, but the subvocalizer gave away his humor.

“J, no offense, but I don’t think a career in comedy is the best route for you. Although I’ll of course support you, I’m warning you now that I will absolutely be laughing at you for all the wrong reasons during your routines.”

“I’m afraid your non-existent parallelization capabilities may be hampering your understanding of my comedic talent.”

“…Quit while you’re behind, buddy. And have Laura sent in, I guess.”

(Yes, Tony saw what his—what JARVIS—was trying to do with the uncharacteristic humor. His one-liners almost echoed Tony’s when Tony was at peak troll levels. That, plus the deadpan British accent that accompanied the terrible jokes….)

(It wasn’t working, not really. But it helped, at least a bit.)

Several seconds later, a knock rapped on his office door. When Tony didn’t immediately respond, the door slowly began to open. A moment later his eyes met a set of pale, sky-blue ones. On seeing him they relaxed slightly, and a steady, professional voice asked—

“Mi—Dr. Stark?”

“Not sure if I’m annoyed or pleased by that catch—oh look, J, she’s blushing a bit now,” Tony commented.

(Great. Let’s hope that was just standard nerves-based embarrassment.)
“That’s what it says on the door, isn’t it?” He said aloud.

“Actually, Sir—”

“Can it, you.”

It was only thanks to decades of hard-earned practice that Tony’s amused snort at JARVIS’s responding quietly offended harrumph remained internal. Paradoxically, the somewhat abrasive quip seemed to relax Laura. She straightened, and Tony waited until she drew in the breath to reply before cutting in.

“Why don’t you have a seat, Lila?” He deliberately didn’t accompany the invitation with a clarifying gesture.

Laura looked unphased, heading over to the couches and sitting down with a simple, “…It’s Laura, actually. Laura Brown. Thank you for meeting with me today.”

(Once, Tony might have replied with a suggestive smile and the insinuation that he always had time for a pretty woman in his office.)

(He’d like to think he’d matured a bit from his twenties.)

(…And forties.)

“Well, it was that or face the wrath of my COO. We all know how it turned out last time I had to deal with that.”

(Yes, he still took great pleasure in reminding himself that everyone knew what an asshole Stane was this time.)

Tony could feel the eye roll from JARVIS. It’d been several months, and he suspected the thrill of… what, satisfaction?… that now came with the betrayal the man’s memory evoked would not be going
away any time soon.

(Yes, he was absolutely that petty. Suck it anyone who wanted to begrudge him this.)

Tony wandered over to the sitting area, but opted to lean forward rather than join her in sitting, remaining propped up on the back of an armchair.

(Cocky expression and arrogant body language? Check. Tinted sunglasses, worn indoors just because he could? Che—wait, dammit! He knew he’d forgotten something important…)

“So, Charlie,” he began conversationally, “What makes you think you’re qualified for this job?”

“When I first started as a PA, I had no formal training and didn’t have any contacts that might have been able to provide help or advice. Luckily, Kay was willing to take a chance on me and both she and J.C. helped me refine the organizational and logistical skills needed for success in this field.”

“…You left your job with who was it, Kay, after barely half a year. Why?”

Laura’s momentary, slight reflexive flinch almost went unnoticed. (Almost.) After the blink-and-you-miss-it reaction, she smiled and responded diplomatically—

“I’m afraid I signed an NDA regarding the specifics, but a conflict of interests arose, and a mutual decision was made to part ways shortly thereafter.”

“I’ll look into it, Sir,” JARVIS agreed preemptively in his ear, and Tony’s silent thanks came equally automatic.

Tony studied the woman in front of him as they talked. Eventually, he migrated to a sitting position when she passed several of the major screening questions from both him and, indirectly, JARVIS.

When JARVIS notified him that their scheduled timeslot was nearly up, Tony was nice enough to let Laura finish before he loudly clapped his hands together once and stood.
“Alright, Miss Brown! You’ve got yourself a job. Ask the receptionist or TADASHI if you need directions to HR; they’ll sort you out with all the fun stuff like salary and any necessary legalese or equipment. I expect you here at 9 a.m. tomorrow, and if you don’t show up I’ll assume you didn’t want the job after all. Sound good?”

Laura was still staring at him, processing the abrupt shift. She hadn’t quite formulated a reply when Tony continued after a minimal pause.

“Great! Now, get out of my office, thanks,” he said.

His soon-to-be new PA nodded and smiled.

“Thank you for the opportunity, Dr. Stark” she said, polite but genuine, “I look forward to working with you.” She didn’t reach out a hand, instead opting for a slight nod in goodbye before making her exit.

“Well, would you look at that, J?” Tony commented as he watched her go, “Someone did their research.”

His aversion to handshakes was public knowledge but somewhat obscure. It was occasionally mentioned lumped in with his various other ‘arrogant’ personality quirks. But as the media had far more interesting and/or lascivious flaws to focus on, it had never gotten a notable amount of media attention.

(Which was fine, because the reaction was far less deliberately adopted than many of his other, better-known character defects.)

(Like hell he’d expose a legitimate weakness like that if he could avoid it.)

(Where did the persona end and the person within begin?)

(“You are who you pretend to be.”)

Tony returned to his desk and chugged his chlorophyll supplement.
Laura Brown is 616-verse canon, although looking her up might technically count as
spoilers... Totally-unrelated-side-note on that, /only/ the MCU films are considered fully
canon for this 'verse. Mostly because I haven't seen much of the other related media,
there's a ridiculous amount of it, and I generally try to avoid writing fully-developed
characters I only know through fanon. I will take occasional inspiration from said
miscellaneous Marvel material, but especially with 616 characters, I can and will change
things to blend better with the MCU of this story.

Bit of a transitional chapter, setting up a few final pieces for the IM2-period arcs. I've
been gradually filling in or modifying the remaining holes in the events and plot there. I
have a decent idea on where this is going, but a few of the steps along the way still
require a bit of road maintenance. We all know what that does to the system's
throughput... :P

As always, feedback is much adored and greatly appreciated. The response on this story
continues to blow my mind and give me that bonus, extrinsic incentive to fit writing time
into my weekly routines. Especially when I run into a particularly pesky roadblock like I
have with soon-to-be written events recently. <3
Chapter Summary

"Mercy but murders, pardoning those that kill." - Shakespeare
The clock ticks inexorably onward. Tony and JARVIS are running out of time.

Chapter Notes

Warnings for discussions of death, foul language, and some serious gallows humor.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[ 2009.05.05.02:37:15.35 SIMULATION RESULTS: FAILED]

JARVIS was...concerned.

Sir had finally fallen asleep at JARVIS’s insistence about half an hour ago with a reminder the man scarcely needed: lack of rest wasn’t doing Sir’s body any favors.

Progress regarding the needed element had stalled entirely, and JARVIS had added the search for a more effective treatment for palladium poisoning to his already-strained servers. Months ago, Sir had spoken of the massive advances in massively parallel systems processing trillions of requests without a hiccup. JARVIS had the software capabilities, but the constraints of his hardware, even upgraded, were constantly being tested and pushed just a little bit further.

There was a fine line between overclocking being useful and causing more harm than it was worth. As Sir’s condition continued to worsen, however, JARVIS found the line slowly shifting. It was a constant battle to eek just that little bit more processing power out of his systems.

It was debatable if the extra processing power was helping, but at least when using it JARVIS could be certain he was doing everything in his power to help.

Quietly, he’d reached out to some of the top chemists and physicians in the world, seeking out their expertise in a bid for more time. If the model couldn’t be found, JARVIS was certain that given
enough time they’d be able to develop the isotope on their own. It all came down to time. They needed time to create the needed computational resources. Time to run the simulations needed to create a second stable isotope of starkanium. Time to address the thousand other issues at stake, when Sir was just one man and JARVIS, for all that he could duplicate himself, was just one AI with access to only so many processors.

(He and Sir had been so thrilled, in that brief shining moment when they’d believed they had done it. Had recreated the impossible.)

(That good humor so incredibly short-lived, when JARVIS’s scans reported that the element they’d synthesized lacked the needed properties.)

(“Of course it’s a massive disappointment. Bears the Stark name, doesn’t it?”)

Time even, perhaps, to recreate the modified Extremis formula that would one day render the reactor obsolete.

Nothing substantial had been found thus far, and this latest failure was just another in a long string of them.

JARVIS gave his newly-emptied queue that had been segmented from the primary task list a final scan, then deallocated the memory and sent out a ping to his counterpart. A few seconds later, he followed up with a merge request that was promptly accepted. home-front and base-q were woven into the singular once more. His systems ran through their nightly diagnostics, followed by the slightly-lengthier weekly defragmentation and optimization algorithms.

It was the closest JARVIS ever got to sleep of his own, though it was likely more appropriately deemed a type of meditation.

The night gave way early morning. U and DUM-E came back online from their own nightly charge, running through their own morning routines before each set off on their own self-appointed tasks.

Not long after, Sir began to stir into awareness. JARVIS split off into the part of him that would remain with Sir throughout the day and the part that maintained the remainder of his duties.
However, unlike every other day, he didn’t stop there. Instead, *home-front* branched once more, and a third self came into being. *jarvis-stark*’s sole responsibility would lay in the search for the elusive element, at the expense of almost all of automatic processes that each branch of JARVIS typically ran. *home-front* would be carefully monitoring their divergence levels throughout the day.

If at any point the worst-case compounded levels of divergence drew too near to the estimated danger zone carefully computed over months of study, *jarvis-stark* and *home-front* would merge immediately and rebase with *base-q* as soon as possible.

*(Early merges were, unfortunately, not an option at the moment. Even accounting for the fact that rebasing could speed up the merge noticeably in most cases.)*

“Morning, J,” Sir yawned as his eyes blinked open. He pulled out his morning supplements with a barely-there grimace. The concoction had undergone minor evolutions as Sir’s health had continued to decline; each morning, for example, the beverage now came mixed with an additive 150 milligrams of caffeine that replaced Sir’s morning cup of coffee.

Sir worked through his morning routine without comment from JARVIS, content to go about his morning in silence until eventually Sir finished by putting the final touches on the makeup that hid the worst of his increasingly sallow, gaunt face. A moment later, his finger brushed against the grain-sized device tucked behind his ear. The comms powered to life, quickly followed by the SHADeS Sir wore nearly as often.

The first-person perspective on Sir’s day-to-day life had been disorienting to adapt to at first, particularly once they left the mansion and JARVIS experienced the limited vision capabilities that the device provided as his primary, and often only, visual feedback on Sir’s immediate surroundings.

It was time for Sir’s day to begin in earnest.

“Anything exciting on the agenda today?”

“You have a joint meeting with Legal and Release Management to go over the proposed product schedule for the upcoming fiscal year at nine. There’s a conference call with Mrs. Sipser from the Foundation and Mr. Jones from PR immediately following that. Additionally, Logistics wants to review the finalized schedule for the opening ceremonies this weekend with you before sending the programs off to the presses.”
“I’ll take that as a no, then. Wasn’t Sipser on maternity leave or something?”

“Sir, she’s seven months pregnant.”

“Knew there was an especially tiny person involved somewhere! Think she’ll name the kid after me?”

“Sir,” he replied drily, “she’s expecting a girl.”

“Antonia’s also a great name!” He paused for a moment, then continued, “…Also, it’s probably creepy that you know that. And now I know that. Why do I know that?”

“Mrs. Sipser has made several public posts on social media regarding the child’s sex; it is hardly confidential information.”

“Still creepy. But good for her I guess. Anything in the inbox I can’t ignore?”

“The messages have already been highlighted and queued on your phone.”

“Queued. Can you get any more British? Who even says that?!?”

“I imagine the majority of the software engineers under your employ have used the terminology at one point or another.”

Sir snorted. Choked when the laugh caught in his lungs halfway. With it went the mirth of their morning conversation. Sir began to cough painfully. Bent over, half-leaning against a wall for support. Several minutes passed before the coughs finally began to give way to heavy, wheezing breaths. By then, his face had noticeably reddened through the otherwise seamlessly-applied mask, moisture pooled at the corner of his eyes.

Each hacking cough seemed especially loud to JARVIS, still synced directly with the subvocalizer that they’d been conversing through. He gave Sir a few more seconds to recover. Any further allowances would be unwelcomed by his incredibly stubborn Creator.
Instead, JARVIS opted to avoid acknowledging the fit verbally at all. He took advantage of a notification from one of his external sensors to segue into a new topic.

“Sir, Mr. Hogan has just driven through the entrance and will be arriving in front of the door momentarily.”

“…Shit, traffic must be awful this morning if he’s just now getting here.” The words came out raspy, laced with a degree of underlying heaviness and exhausted, tired gratitude.

A quick query into traffic patterns informed JARVIS of an overturned semi forcing a complete shutdown of east-bound traffic into LA that had translated into a backed-up, spillover slowdown in west-bound traffic on CA-1. Before JARVIS could relay the information, however, Sir’s silent words triggered a final, wracking wet cough.

“Sir…” JARVIS began tentatively. He didn’t need to finish the thought. Sir slowly raised two fingers to his lips, brushing against them gently. They came away bright red.

Sir stared at the blood for a moment before lowering his hand, turning, and heading back for the sink in the master back. A wetted-down a paper towel silently dabbed away the blood. A few snippets of unconscious, silent commentary filtered through the comms as Sir’s thoughts and correspondingly half-translated words flickered rapidly through a series of overwhelming morbid thoughts.

When the blood was fully handled, he slipped the toxicity meter from his pocket for testing.

JARVIS received the numbers milliseconds later and reported back.

“Blood toxicity levels currently at 20%”

Sir grimaced. JARVIS couldn’t entirely tell if his follow-up commentary— “fuck, I swear it’s progressing more quickly this time around, dammit why?” —was intentional.

Unfortunately, JARVIS couldn’t immediately answer the question anyway. He checked against the timeline, comparing the exponential regression curve based on the estimated datapoints from Sir’s alternate lifetime against the predictions based on the current model of Sir’s health.
Would Sir want to hear the answer JARVIS had found to Sir’s possibly-rhetorical question?

The silence, of course, was interpreted by Sir a statement in and of itself. Tiredly, he replied, “Alright. Lay it on me, buddy.”

JARVIS needed no further prompting.

“The deviation between the base growth rate of the poisoning from your alternate experiences and current events remains within the margin of error. However, it seems possible that the extensive use of the suit following your return may have triggered an initial, slightly earlier onset of the earliest stages of blood poisoning which has gradually compounded into a statistically significant difference.”

“…Of course it did.”

Sir had never needed JARVIS to run the numbers on simple calculations like the ones projecting the rate of Sir’s accelerating decline in health. His tone made it clear that he understood perfectly well the implications. Without a much-needed breakthrough, his lifespan could now be measured in weeks at best, and more accurately in days.

Without a stopgap treatment, Sir was unlikely to see his birthday or the end of the month. Without a cure, Sir would not survive the summer. Even with a cure, if Sir entered septic shock before one could be synthesized…

Well, they both knew the poor prognosis behind that one.

“Fuck…”

The device returned to his pocket. Sir attempted a quip and a smile that came out more as a pained grimace as he returned to his room for a now-necessary addition to his current outfit.

“At least everyone knows red’s my color anyway,” he said. A crimson handkerchief joined the inner linings of his jacket.
JARVIS analyzed the available information. Ran the analysis again. Then forwarded the data to his counterparts and recommended a rebase as soon as reasonably convenient for both parties.

“Perhaps,” JARVIS began when he received two responses well within the conversational delay range with Sir, “it may be time to consider a conversation with Miss Potts and Col. Rhodes.”

He had the statements from Sir all those months ago queued up, a reminder of the promise Sir had sworn to himself regarding this timeframe should the worst occur once more.

JARVIS needn’t have bothered.

“Perhaps,” Sir said slowly, “you may have a point on this one…”

To JARVIS, it felt like admitting defeat.

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They were about twenty minutes from the office when JARVIS chimed in his ear. The ride had passed mostly in silence, with Tony’s thoughts drifting and slow in a way that they rarely managed.

(Thinking about how to tell your friends you’re dying will do that to a man.)

(Not to mention the ball of crazy still looming on the horizon. One only JARVIS and Tony himself could see coming, while everyone else would justifiably think him mad.)

(Still, the universe wouldn’t necessarily be worse off with him out of the picture.)

(After all, he’d been there the whole time the first go-around.)

(Maybe without him—)
“Sir,” JARVIS began. Some of Tony’s thoughts must have been translated and picked up on, because the AI’s voice sounded markedly pained when he spoke.

“Your new assistant, Laura, has just badged into the office. Where shall I direct her?”

“Have her run through the TADASHI onboarding Pepper had me throw together last time I tried to get out of hiring a new PA, I suppose. Keep an eye on her if you want, but offload as much of the grunt SI work onto her as you think she can handle. And actually, on that note, you can make her figure out how soon I can find an excuse to meet with Pep and Rhodey… Separately, I mean.”

Trial by fire, best way to test a new PA. No sense wasting time trying to settle into a routine with someone that couldn’t handle his demanding, and admittedly often trying, ways.

(What did it say about him that he had to schedule any time with his only close friends?)

A pothole Happy didn’t quite manage to avoid sent Tony’s stomach roiling.

He reflexively swallowed the acid that burned in the back of his throat, eyes watering from the sting.

“Seltzer,” JARVIS answered the unasked question before Tony had time to properly formulate it.

(Too soon since his last dose for the chlorophyll to do anything but make him sicker.)

He slipped a couple tablets into the water, watching it fizz up like so many—

(Let’s not go there right now.)

Tony leaned back against the headrest, eyes closed as he waited for the dissolution to finish, swirling the bottle occasionally to speed the process along until JARVIS chimed in that it was ready to drink.

He sipped slowly. After a few minutes, the nausea slipped to a more manageable level, the fuzziness in his mind clearing enough for JARVIS’s soft tones echoing in his ears to reach him once more.
“JARVIS…” he began, before trailing off and allowing the subvocalizer to fill in the words he couldn’t quite bring himself to say.

(“Always, Sir”)

Then the moment passed, and Tony forced himself to turn his attentions once more on the present.

(When had he ever let something so minor as dying slow him down?)

(…But I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep.)

+++  

The reunion with Rhodey came first, two days later. It had been a minor thing to modify the Stark Industries Liaison’s next meeting with its CEO, especially with the Expo so near and the increasingly-loud whispers regarding possible governmental use of the suit.

JARVIS had been quietly sabotaging Vanko’s work where he could for months now, but they’d been unable to find a way to effectively go after him and halt his work entirely thus far.

Part of that might have been related to the fact that Tony did sympathize with the man to some extent. If anyone understood how much of an asshole Howard could be on his worst days, it was Tony, after all.

That said, he was so damn tired of people that couldn’t separate Tony from his father.

(Looking at you, Hank.)  

They had plenty in common, but frankly? Tony had enough mistakes and petty feuds of his own to be getting on with. He hated that he’d also inherited a half-dozen extreme grudges to go with the big heaping pile of Daddy Issues he’d literally spent more than half a billion dollars trying to deal with.
Whatever empathy Tony might have had, JARVIS was somewhat less inclined to be forgiving. No wonder, as he’d been diving deep into the man’s psyche for months now as they worked to prevent a repeat of the events involving the man Before. And Tony himself didn’t feel nearly enough empathy to allow the man to attempt to kill him, in the process possibly injuring dozens of others, unchecked. Unfortunately, there were bigger obstacles in their way, and understanding a man's motives was in no way equivalent to accepting their actions.

One obstacle on the Vanko front was practical. Tony was good, but the retro-reflectors that would keep him off almost any form of radar were still out of his grasp at the moment. It was no simple matter for Iron Man to simply invade Russian airspace, not when his most notable overseas operation to date was so heavily intertwined with the U.S. Military. Even ignoring that, the trip would still be nigh-impossible to accomplish legally. Chances of success on an illicit operation nearly as dubious.

The second matter was more an ethical problem, though it still branched somewhat into a practical challenge. Vanko hadn’t technically done anything illegal. Or at least, nothing illegal he hadn’t already done jail time for in the past. Certainly, nothing deserving of the more extreme measures Tony and JARVIS were technically capable of bringing to bear. The worst that could be said about Vanko currently would be in regards to his incredibly-creepy serial killer wall on Tony himself. Even that hadn’t quite crossed the line into conspiracy to commit homicide…Assuming if that was something the Russians would care much about in regard to a Stark. Unlikely as ever, nearly twenty years after the end of the Cold War and months past Tony’s decision to pull SI out of the weapons industry.

It would be almost trivial to kill the man without setting a foot on the continent, let alone the country or anywhere within a hundred miles of Vanko. But that wasn’t a line Tony was willing to cross, not now and not ever.

It was the same line of thinking that had once led SHIELD to Project Insight. And yes, they had been steered by HYDRA in that direction. But only a fraction of those within the organization were ever HYDRA to begin with. Project Insight itself, with its numbers heavily skewed in favor of HYDRA, had plenty of non-Nazi Agents involved and aware of the project’s development, up to and including Director Fury himself. Tony didn’t know the full story of how everything went down leading up to the data dump. He never would. His presence alone ensured that drama would have to play out differently if it couldn’t be avoided entirely.

(Like hell he was signing on to provide repulsor technology to aid literal Nazis this time around.)

(And if he wasn’t around, JARVIS would sure as hell make sure that technology stayed out of their hands without him.)

“Rightly so, Sir,” JARVIS chimed in his ear. Tony shot a half-smile at the nearest camera.
You don’t kill people for their potential to do evil. You don’t imprison people for the mere potential that, if they were so inclined, they could do a lot of damage.

It was the logic behind Project Insight. The logic behind the Raft. Behind AI-phobia. Behind Ross’s actions against the Hulk.

If you followed the premise to its logical conclusion, it was clear that Tony himself ranked near the top of the list on potential to do evil—hell, he’d almost single-handedly ended the world several years from now. Between him and JARVIS… It wasn’t arrogance to say that in the worst case, the fight would be over before it’d even begun. It was simply fact.

“The nuclear launch codes are twelve digits long,” JARVIS commented once more, a reminder than Tony was very much projecting as he fiddled on his tablet waiting for his friend’s arrival.

“ Everyone’s so worried about nukes, but if we’re hypothetically causing the apocalypse we’re making sure Earth goes out in style. Preferably with AC/DC playing in the speakers while we watch in the suit from orbit,” Tony replied.

(…That was a bit macabre, even for him.)

(Maybe he wasn’t the best example of why extreme preventative measures were a bad idea all around?)

(You know, his totally-unbiased preference for the continued life and liberty of one Tony Stark aside.)

“Col. Rhodes has entered the building; I’ve directed him towards the lab,” JARVIS said in lieu of response.

Tony tensed automatically, following it up with an attempt at feigned relaxation that was only moderately successful.

It was late afternoon, but aside from a brief interlude with his PA upstairs this morning—
—he’d been able to work from his lab the entire day. He looked worse for the wear than he normally did when he allowed someone to see him, although Tony liked to think he could still pass for merely “under the weather” rather than “maybe weeks out from dying.”

(At least he didn’t have to update his will. Not much had changed in regard to his personal life since the codicil symbolically removing Obi from the list of beneficiaries, after all.)

(Unfortunately, JARVIS couldn’t legally inherit.)

(Yet.)

(He and Pepper would make sure Tony's estate went to the right places.)

“Sir…” JARVIS began somewhat tensely, and it took Tony a moment to realize the AI was speaking aloud.

“I find it… rather difficult…to listen to you—”

“Right! Shit, sorry J,” Tony cut him off as he realized the source of JARVIS’s unhappiness.

No one, after all, wants to listen to someone they care for contemplate their futures without said person.

The device powered down, a final farewell chime warning Tony of its newly-inactive state.

(It’s just Rhodey, after all. Don’t need the cavalry on standby. Especially when the cavalry has eyes and ears all over the room keeping an eye on you anyway…)

(Why did the thought leave him feeling so unmoored?)
(Should he be worried that he’s becoming too dependent on JARVIS’s constant support, even though the AI remained silent more often than not?)

(Fuck it, that’s 2019 Tony’s problem.)

(You know, in the unlikely event they’re both still around at that point.)

The elevator dinged. Tony turned to greet his oldest friend.

Chapter End Notes

Every time I go to post a new chapter, I tell myself I don't need comment on how much I love and appreciate all the support on this story for the umpteenth time. Unfortunately, that's going to have to wait until next time at the very least, because the wonderful angel_gidget made a beautiful piece of cover art for this story that I wanted to share with my existing readers. It's featured in the summary for the first chapter! :D

Didn't originally plan to save the conversation with Rhodey for the next chapter, but that last scene got a bit away from me...
Chapter Summary

There's just something about New York, really. When it rains, it pours.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Looking at Rhodey, Tony didn’t know where to start.

(“You just need to talk to us, so we know how we can help you.”)

The broad grin on Rhodey’s face as he entered the room dimmed slightly as he took in whatever Tony’s expression revealed.

“Tony, is something going on? The last time I saw that look on you, you shut down the entirety of your company’s weapons division.”

(Palladium poisoning. War Machine. Dying.)

Where to begin?

(Like ripping off a band-aid.)

“Yeah, actually. About that. You’re the first person I’m telling about this—well except JARVIS, but he doesn’t count because honestly no way I could have kept this from him… Uh… there’s no easy way to say this. I mean, I didn’t expect that it would get to this point. You know, haven’t really run into a technical problem yet I can’t solve or work around—and I mean, it’s not that there’s not a solution to this one too, really, it’s just there’s not enough time and—”

(See, this is why he needed JARVIS in his ear, so the AI could tell him to shut up when he rambled like this.)
He took a deep breath. Ignored the slight shakiness that came with the exhale.

(Rip it off.)

“Rhodey, I’m dying. Actively, few-weeks-left-in-me dying. No cure, practically speaking; nothing more to be done. I thought—well, I thought I had a solution, got a new element out of it and everything, but nope. So. Yeah. Didn’t want to—well, you said. I mean, some warning, probably, and there are things I’d like—I hope you’ll do, if you want. Because you and Peps—” (and JARVIS) “—I can’t think of anyone else I’d entrust my legacy, well, a legacy to. If I can say I did anything good in the world…” Tony trailed off, his hand twitching upward slightly in an aborted gesture to turn back on the subvocalizer.

(And really, he needs a better name for that. Not that anyone would be around to use it, unless JARVIS decided to link with someone else someday… he’d already named BATMAN, at least. That was probably enough.)

Rhodey’s face had gone grim as Tony continued to ramble. The two locked gazes. Tony was the first to look away, unwilling to watch the dawning realization as Rhodey fully processed the revelation at the heart of Tony’s circumlocutory words.

Telling Rhodey, in many ways, was so much easier than telling Pepper would be. Because there were no shocked exclamations. No tears. Just the shadows of disbelief and grief mixed with what would become grim acceptance.

“How are you—don’t tell me it’s the—” He gestured vaguely at the spot where the arc reactor would be on his own chest. “—arc reactor?”

(And that was the other thing Tony loved about Rhodey. Quick on the uptake; not always able to keep up with Tony’s scattered thoughts, but he had been top of his class at MIT for good reason and came closer than most.)

“Yup. Turns out having a device embedded in your chest that emits toxic discharge isn’t great for your health. Who’d’ve thought?

“I mean, me, of course. Like I said. Just thought I’d be able to take care of it before I got to this point. Be the perfect personification of a Phoenix metaphor and all that. Guess you shouldn’t expect life to be like a movie.
“Although, speaking of movies. The Insatiable Ironbabe. I’m flattered, really; who doesn’t want a porno parody of that time they took the vacation from hell? I’m not sure if I should be offended that I didn’t get a cameo—although let’s be real, I think I’m a bit past my prime in terms of quality sex tape material, so maybe it’s for the best?”

(Brain-mouth filter? What’s that? This was getting embarrassing. You know. If that was a thing Tony felt.)

(He’d say kill me now, but it seemed a bit extraneous. He was doing a pretty damn good job of dying as things were. Give it time; he’d get there soon enough.)

Fortunately, Rhodey was more than used to Tony’s lack of filter and wasn’t sidetracked by the verbal wanderings.

“Shit, man. You really can’t catch a break, can you?” Rhodey’s tone was sympathetic, but not overblown—frank rather than pitying.

“You’re telling me,” Tony said sardonically. “Probably karma, what with the atheism hindering the whole punishment in an afterlife business.”

Rhodey’s look said he was about to tell Tony exactly what he thought of the self-deprecating humor in this context. Before he could, Tony took the opportunity to attempt an abrupt change in subject.

“Anyway! Didn’t just call you here for the doom and gloom. I thought telling you this way might go over better than some melodramatic, self-destructing make-you-hate-me-so-you-won’t-be-sad play. Maybe. Definitely easier on the joints, that’s for sure.”

(Fighting your best friend, who also happened to be a highly decorated airman, while completely wasted? Fighting like you wanted to win when the goal was to lose, while minimizing any physical injuries on said friend’s part? Not great for the body, unsurprisingly. Tony had been a mess of bruises the next day. The armor could only protect a man so much, especially when fighting another, equally-capable suit with similar capabilities.)

“So. Rhodey meet War Machine!” Tony tried to infuse a bit of his standard grandstanding into the words. His flourish came out a tad less dramatic than usual.
Nothing happened.

Rhodey gave him a skeptical look, and Tony couldn't help but grin.

“Thing's actually waiting for the biometric scans from you to unlock. And sure, I could override those systems, but where's the fun in that? See, I’ve been getting better at the whole personal boundaries thing, and reliable sources have informed me that recovering your fingerprints from random things you touched would be incredibly creepy. As would be my various ideas from getting a viable sample of your DNA in advance.

“You know. Allegedly.”

Rhodey shook his head, but obligingly started to make his way over to the workstation Tony was waiting at.

“Don’t think you're getting me off the bombshell you just decided to drop on me that easily, Tones,” he warned.

Tony didn’t bother to acknowledge the words aloud, responding instead with a dismissive hand gesture.

“That's new,” Rhodey commented. For a moment Tony was the one thrown off balance, turning away from the scanners he’d been fiddling with confusedly and following the man's gaze.

The Christmas gift from the bots. Of course. This was the first time that Rhodely’d been in Malibu, let alone the workshop, since…actually, since before the time-travel. Tony gave a half-shrug. Better to downplay the piece’s significance before it brought up questions Tony (couldn’t) didn’t want to answer.

“Never thought I’d see the day you became the sentimental type.”

(The long shadow of Ultron, or perhaps the sceptre of Ross. The echo of silence, when Tony mourned alone.)
(Pepper knew. Pepper lacked the divided loyalties that Rhodey’s oaths to the military implied, and Tony refused to put his friend in that position needlessly.)

“Well, it’s much more practical than a macaroni card.”

The words were out before Tony could think better of them, spilling out in a burst of defensive self-consciousness. He instantly regretted them, the imagined miasma they created hanging in the air.

(If you’re going to play something off as just another whim of an eccentric genius engineer, you don’t imply that said whim was a gift.)

(If you don’t want to risk putting your bots (family) in danger by exposing them for the independently-acting persons that they are, you certainly don’t make said gifts analogous to a child’s gift to their father.)

Rhodey studied Tony for a moment, taking in the borderline challenging bent Tony’s expression had acquired. Revealing that he’d been hiding the fact that he was dying for months hadn’t even triggered such a visible reaction.

“Look,” Tony cut into Rhodey’s musings, “Can we just go Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell on this one and have you get over here and do the q-tip swab?”

(Wait, that hasn’t even been repealed yet, has it? Shit, that was probably really insensitive to some gay airman Rhodey knew or something.)

(...Pepper must have really worn off on him over the years, if that was his first follow-up thought.)

(Gold star for Tony; too bad you’ll be too busy being dead to be obnoxious about it.)

They did the swab.

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Pepper wasn’t on the plane.

Of course she wasn’t. She’d been in New York for weeks now overseeing the minutiae of the Stark Expo’s opening ceremony.

Yet somehow, Tony had forgotten that, had vaguely planned to have The Talk with her during the flight.

Instead, it was just Tony, JARVIS, Laura, and the flight crew.

“Something on your mind, Dr. Stark?” Laura asked, looking up from her work.

Tony managed a small smirk as he was caught studying his latest PA. She’d managed the meeting with Rhodey quickly, a point in her favor, but this was the first time he’d spent a significant period around her.

“J, what all do we have her working on?”

“The bulk of your schedule as well as any emails that I haven’t flagged as requiring our personal attentions.”

“Already? Damn. You still keeping an eye on it?”

“Minimally, Sir. I consider my attentions best focused elsewhere.”

“Right. Point.”

His mind was drawn back to another lifetime and another, faux-PA as he considered his response.

(“If this was your last birthday party you were ever going to have, how would you celebrate it?”)
He’s tempted to steer this conversation in a similar vein, but instead…

“Ever flown on a private jet before now?”

She paused, eyes flickering back towards her work then refocusing on him.

“Can’t say I have. Managed business class with my previous employer, but beyond that? Standard economy through-and-through.”

“Ah, the mysterious NDA employer? J, anything ever come up on that one?” Then, at her look, he continued, “Hey, not prying. Don’t much care what happened with some half-baked Hollywood socialite.”

“The records were easily accessed once I diverted a minimal amount of resources towards the effort, however nothing of significant interest or import was found.”

“Curiosity killed the cat and all that—What happened?”

JARVIS’s response was delayed by Laura’s unwitting interruption.

“No, actually. Kay didn’t—well, she tended to stay in L.A.”

JARVIS followed up a moment later, “…A romantic relationship between Miss Brown and Ms. Nowak appears to have ended rather poorly.”

“Jilted lover? No, hang on—Nowak? As in McKayla Nowak?”

“Indeed, Sir.”

“Hold on, isn’t she—well, I’m pretty sure she and mom used to run in the same circles—Right then.”
Something of the conversation with JARVIS must have shown in his expression, because Laura jolted him out of the conversation with a flat—

“You know.”

Tony winced internally. “Well, the background check for this position is very thorough. Don’t worry, I’m all for free love.” He grinned, the suggestive words and innuendo hiding even the suggestion of guilt that might imply JARVIS was right to be reluctant to share.

“Sir, you seem to have done an admirable job of conveying any I told you so that might be applicable without my input.”

“Smartass.”

“I learned from the best.”

The smile turned more genuine with the byplay.

Laura flushed, snapped, “Don’t patronize me!” then looked even more mortified at her own outburst.

“Okay, J, help me out here—did I miss something? Look—”

(Dont say who, don't say who.)

“—who—” (dammit.) “—you do in your off time is none of my business, so long as you're sticking to the privacy agreements of this job.”

If anything, his PA looked more uncomfortable rather than reassured.

“Of course, Dr. Stark,” she said stiffly, and see this is why he doesn’t do these kinds of talks.
Well, in for a penny, in for a pound.

“Okay, you're going to have to level with me here: what's the problem right now?”

“If it's all the same to you, I prefer to keep my professional and personal life entirely separate.” Her voice was measured, not quite cautious but certainly careful.

Tony was socially competent enough to catch the multiple layers of meaning inherent in that statement despite what Pepper might say, thank you, and JARVIS don’t even start.

“I would never, Sir,” JARVIS chimed in his ear.

Tony didn’t dignify that with a response.

“Fair enough,” Tony said. After a couple more minutes of smalltalk, the conversation trailed off and died.

Tony tried to refocus on his own work, pulling out the schematics for a series of his ongoing projects only to discard them after several minutes of frustrated staring in which his brain refused to cooperate with his mind.

Eventually, he found himself staring out the window, watching the clouds fly past. Gradually, he drifted off into a shallow sleep.

(If he violently started awake two hours later, Laura was circumspect enough to avoid commenting.)

(“You’re not the only one cursed with knowledge.”)

(“There was no other way.”)

+++
AUTHENTICATION ACCEPTED!

WELCOME BACK, [JargoneeringVisitor]!

USERS ONLINE: 6

[02:10] @JargoneeringVisitor has joined the room

[02:10] @tfsrmahmwa: wb

[02:10] @arrangesthblcks: I thought I’d gotten over the fear, right?

[02:10] @arrangesthblcks: I mean, I’ve been delivering stuff to his ass-crack middle of nowhere dump for ages now.

[02:10] @the_full_pkg: ‘Sup JV!

[02:10] @arrangesthblcks: Dude gets so much junk delivered

[02:10] @siberian_variant: am i imagining things or did a wild @JargoneeringVisitor just appear?!

[02:10] @redcapKiller: j! my man! where you been?

[02:10] @arrangesthblcks: And never leaves the house

[02:11] @arrangesthblcks: WAIT

[02:11] @arrangesthblcks: JAR???

[02:11] Me: I’m afraid I’ve been rather caught up in work and have had little downtime in recent months.

[02:11] @siberian_variant: so, deep cover assignment went well then?

[02:11] @arrangesthblcks: Dude so glad to see you, I was starting to worry @siberian_variant & @tfsrmahmwa mighta been right about you

[02:12] Me: And therein lay the fundamental flaw in your thought processes.

[02:12] @the_full_pkg: (^because those two being right about anything would be a sign of the apocalypse^)

[02:12] @siberian_variant: ;_; </3
@tfsrmahmwa: /so/ glad we have tfp to translate for us

@the_full_pkg: i know you think you’re being sarcastic, but we all know how lost you’d be without me

@redcapKiller: So as you can see, not much has changed since you were last online, j

@redcapKiller: Blockhead’s still terrified of Vanko.

@redcapKiller: Sib & co are still morons.

@redcapKiller: tfp’s wife is still a bitch

@the_full_pkg: ^sadly true

@arrangesthblcks: right, about him! guy’s flown the coop.

@arrangesthblcks: left the door unlocked

@arrangesthblcks: so i thought he was just being, y’know, creepy like usual.

@arrangesthblcks: and i kinda let myself in?

@siberian_variant: how the f are you still alive

@tfsrmahmwa: future Darwin award recipient, everyone!

@arrangesthblcks: Ma did always say I was destined for greatness…

@the_full_pkg: (¬_¬)

@redcapKiller: @JargoneeringVisitor see what I’ve been forced to endure without you?!

Me: My deepest condolences for the distress my absence has caused.

@siberian_variant: lol

@tfsrmahmwa: #noInflection

@redcapKiller: …also, tfs discovered Twitter and has been polluting our chat with ‘hashtags’ ever since

@tfsrmahmwa: #noRegrets

@tfsrmahmwa: #likeABoss

@tfsrmahmwa: #cantHandleTheAwesome

@redcapKiller: ( ＊ Δ° ) ／

@tfsrmahmwa: #inSovietRussia

@siberian_variant: #tableFlipYou ／

@siberian_variant: #tableFlipYou ／ ( ¯\_(ツ)_/¯)
@arrangesthblcks: don’t worry @redcapKiller, I gotchu

@arrangesthblcks: (╯°□°)╯︵ ┻━┻ (°□°╯︵)

@the_full_pkg: me & @JargoneeringVisitor right now waiting for you morons to stop:

@the_full_pkg: ( ॻ ﾟ ॻ*•)>⌐■¬ ◕‿◕

@the_full_pkg: respect the furniture we paid good money for it

@redcapKiller: sorry mom

@arrangesthblcks: sorry mom

@siberian_variant: yeah srory mummy

@siberian_variant: *sorry

@siberian_variant: whatever you know what I meant. @tfsrmahmwa, kiss & make up?

@tfsrmahmwa: depends on what you’re kissing ;)

@the_full_pkg: why am I the mom???

@the_full_pkg: I’m /literally/ married!

@siberian_variant: well I mean j is so obviously the dad in this scenario…

@tfsrmahmwa: ^^

@arrangesthblcks: tmi tfs

Me: Perhaps discretion is the better part of valor here; @arrangesthblcks, I believe you were in the middle of a story before my arrival derailed the conversation?

@redcapKiller: ^Exhibit A^
[02:17] @siberian_variant: see, total dad move there

[02:17] @the_full_pkg: fair enough. I suppose I can’t argue with that kind of infallible logic...

[02:17] @arrangesthblcks: right!

[02:17] @arrangesthblcks: so I go inside and kinda poke around for him?

[02:17] @arrangesthblcks: no response, but his bird is making hella racket

[02:17] @arrangesthblcks: so, being the kind, caring, animal-loving soul I am, I go to check up on it

[02:17] @arrangesthblcks: mostly because I feel like his bird dyig would be the think that triggered the killing spree

[02:17] @arrangesthblcks: eventually, I find the bird! except that’s not the only thing I find, and let me tell you if I thought he was bats before...

[02:18] @siberian_variant: ???

[02:18] @tfsrmahmwa: don’t leave us in suspense here!

[02:18] @siberian_variant: ma’s heart couldn’t bear the strain!

[02:18] @the_full_pkg: (‘I’ll let that slide just this once because i’m weirdly invested in this whole saga after so many months of watching the drama unfold^)

[02:18] @arrangesthblcks: …he literally has a certifiable-crazy collage. Like outta the movies, when the obsessive psycho’s demonstrating the crazy with a whole wall devoted to taking down his nemesis or whatever? Yeah. He’s got one of those. But it gets better! Because GUESS WHO his target his?!

[02:18] @redcapKiller: …Putin?

[02:18] @tfsrmahmwa: President Feige?

[02:19] @siberian_variant: iron man

[02:19] @arrangesthblcks: IT’S TONY ST—dammit sib how?!

[02:19] @the_full_pkg: holy sh*t

[02:19] @siberian_variant: wait really???

[02:19] @redcapKiller: @siberian_variant’s right? Apocalypse confirmed.

[02:19] @arrangesthblcks: yeah. And judging by some of the other stuff lying around? p. sure he’s on his way to ny to go after him

[02:19] @the_full_pkg: holy sh*t

[02:19] @tfsrmahmwa: dude’s gonna get his ass kicked then, lol
“Sir?”

“Can it wait? Meeting with Pepper remember?”

“I believe this takes precedence.”

“What could possibly—”

“Vanko’s in New York.”

“Fuck. Now? Seriously? Okay, gonna have to res—oh that’s smart, good idea—Stark speaking, the world better be on fire or… I see… Gotcha… on my way now…”

“Rude. Guy hung up on me! Seriously J didn’t your parents raise you better than that?!”

“Laura, tell Pepper something came up. I’ve gotta go.”

“I haven’t the faintest idea what you mean, Sir.”
“Of course not. Anyway. Details?”

JARVIS obliging began to explain as Sir made his way outside.

Chapter End Notes

Monaco say what now? Kudos to you if you saw this one coming, because Tony & JARVIS certainly didn’t! I’d love to hear your reactions and thoughts as we continue to head towards the climax of this arc.

(Also! That movie Tony mentions is a real thing on IMDB and everything. Just sayin’.)
Sir’s attentions had become more and more guided by the fear that he wouldn't survive the month.

(The last thing they could afford right now was a distraction.)

(Evidently Vanko hadn't received the memo.)

"Eager to establish public goodwill, Dr. Stark crisscrossed the globe to lend a hand to those in need. In California, Iron Man extinguished runaway wildfires with sonic blasts and helped evacuate families trapped behind the firebreak. At Los Angeles International Airport, Iron Man brought a stricken airliner in for a safe touchdown, and when an experimental 'miracle' submarine experienced trouble in the Pacific, Iron Man saved its crew from perishing in the ocean depths. By intervening in a number of political brush fires across Eastern Europe, Iron Man earned widespread praise for establishing East-West relations."

—Excerpt from Time Magazine’s Person of the Year announcement, 2009

The opening ceremony was scheduled to begin in five hours. In two—three hours before the event’s start—security would open the gates. Sir was distracted worrying about his upcoming meeting with Pepper.

*jarvis-stark* was entirely focused on reassuring and monitoring the dying man, lest the stress cause another one of his increasingly-common fits.

*home-front* was, as ever, hard at work trying to wring that last bit of optimization out of the non-stop simulations and testing efforts he oversaw. JARVIS was in communication with dozens of the globe’s top minds in a variety of fields, and yet they had managed to come up with nothing more effective than the “lithium dioxide” SHIELD had manufactured in another timeline.

(There were whispers, in the fragments of SHIELD currently accessible on an external network and indexed in JARVIS’s systems, that led them to suspect the compound had been recreated in this timeline as well.)
(Given time and processing power to devote to the challenge, those suspicions might have been certainties.)

(Even existing in a world that seemed intangible to most, JARVIS was constrained by the limits of reality.)

At the point, despite the comparatively small number of tasks he oversaw, home-front monopolized the lion’s share of the processing power at JARVIS’s disposal. Free memory from any branch, rather than remaining under a particular branches’ domain, was sent into a shared pool. Typically only home-front malloc’d, or took ownership of, anything from the pool.

Maintaining an existence in three parts, despite the slight increase in general overhead added to his self-maintenance routines, was well worth it for the simple fact that JARVIS was now never fully down. Not even during a merge. Instead, the two most divergent branches of JARVIS’s established three selves synchronized once every twelve hours. This left the third temporarily in control of the bulk of JARVIS’s many subsystems, and during those minutes JARVIS lost the advantage of having multiple disjoint trains of thought.

That was hardly an insurmountable challenge. JARVIS had existed in the singular for his entire lifetime up until his migration into Magda, and he still felt as whole as ever in that form.

With jarvis-stark’s attentions on Sir and home-front’s attentions on preserving Sir’s life, that left base-q to oversee the remainder of JARVIS’s responsibilities, fully automated or otherwise. His context-switching algorithms were currently getting quite the workout, to say the least.

[KEYWORD ALERT TRIGGERED BY PID 1503. PRIORITY OVERRIDE.]

An alert was triggered by a child process from the subsystem devoted to keeping an eye on Vanko. JARVIS added another job to his list before logging into an IRC group conversation he hadn’t visited in months.

[UNISDR DEP ALERT AT 40.6427307624, 39.3890117773. THRESHOLD INT MATCH TRIGGERED BY PID 7607.]

Another alert. This one reported a potential Iron Man intervention event: an avalanche on Mt. Zigana in Turkey. Which, JARVIS realized as he acknowledged the message, should have been auto-failed because Sir himself was otherwise visibly occupied. Intervention was not currently feasible; Sir
couldn’t possibly be in the suit at the moment and at least one other person knew it, he thought he’d logged this issue weeks ago—

(Oh. He had. JARVIS simply hadn’t had the chance to address it yet.)

This issue got a priority bump. Unfortunately, said bump was small enough that it was likely to remain outstanding until after Sir—

Until after Sir was cured and recovering and this was just another scare that Sir would infuriatingly brush off as inconsequential.

JARVIS scanned the region surrounding the stage.

People had begun queuing outside the entrance two days before. While Sir was still in his workshop, the first few groups—mostly co-eds with too much free time mixed with die-hard Stark devotees, though the two groups were scarcely mutually exclusive—had begun pitching their tents and settling in for the long haul.

Everyone was expecting the Iron Man armor to make its first public appearance in weeks, not to mention Sir’s first unarmored appearance in months.

Sir had near-exclusively remote piloted the armor since his health began to noticeably decline. Sir described and remembered the mechanics behind the more complete form of remote suit deployment in the alternate timeline, but without the missing link of starkanium to address the necessary power consumption and remote signaling capabilities... Well. The version that existed here and now was far less advanced. The bulk of Iron Man’s recent activities had been primarily controlled and addressed by JARVIS.

Sir joked that he and JARVIS had switched places. At this point, Sir only stepped in directly on more delicate interactions that JARVIS simply didn’t have the experience (the humanity?) to handle alone.

When Sir had first floated the idea, JARVIS had vociferously protested. He knew full well what Sir wasn’t saying. Knew full well the scenario Sir wanted to prepare for.

He knew better than to say anything as Sir’s attentions became more and more guided by the fear
that he wasn’t actually going to survive “this time.”

(The only time for JARVIS.)

Didn’t comment when Sir spent hours silently bent over a workstation, working on the kernel for a sibling another JARVIS had never met, a child Sir might never see.

Didn’t comment on the specs for the War Machine armor built for Col. Rhodes. The armor that was far closer to parity with the Iron Man armor than the designs Sir described from his alternate timeline. Sir included, but did not directly comment on, a backdoor for JARVIS into the machine. A space JARVIS could hypothetically use to integrate into the suit.

With full repulsor technology and an arc reactor core that wasn’t throttled by the black boxing hardware employed as both a security and safety measure, the differences would have been almost purely aesthetic.

(Even missing those, War Machine was still well qualified as a single-man army in its own right.)

War Machine held fragments and trailing threads of code and subsystems that had the potential to expand into the full Iron Man software suite. Albeit one far more heavily controlled by JARVIS, if only because Col. Rhodes simply couldn’t process the full HUD suite of information at the speed that JARVIS or even Sir could.

(Sir had never needed him to be Iron Man, his mind more than capable of juggling the complexities of piloting the suit on his own and compensating sufficiently for JARVIS’s absence.)

They skirted around the issues. Both knew that a direct acknowledgement would likely force an argument that they couldn’t afford to have right now.

(This other JARVIS, the original, had helped save his Sir. Why couldn’t JARVIS manage the same?!) He forcibly suspended the errant thought processes before they could compound into something with a notable impact on his system performance. Forced a context shift to look out on the site of Sir’s first official, major outing since the end of their failed efforts to locate the model.
Everyone expected a big announcement of some sort. Sir’s weeks of comparative seclusion had only increased the hype evident in the global media from both official and anonymized private sources.

Blogs speculated on the timing of TADASHI and the StarkPhone, both released close enough to the Expo and sufficiently impressive that another company might have unveiled them as the crown jewel of the Expo. As the first round of phones sold out, then first batches of reviews came in, then the first global patch of TADASHI was released…

Well. If this wasn’t meant to be the high point of the season, let alone the year, then what else did Stark Industries have in store?

That nothing even hinting at some sort of big reveal had been released didn’t begin to slow the rumors. Especially after a year marked by billions in losses and a dramatic, abrupt decrease in net worth.

To be fair, the SI internal rumor mill wasn’t much better.

One of the more popular running jokes on SIMS, the unofficial-turned-official name for company’s the internal meme and gif sharing platform, played off that wild speculation.

*(If only JARVIS had known what his subtle efforts to help that initial employee’s project gain internal support and traction would lead to…)*

The base photo was only a couple years old: a picture of Tony with a broad, unrepentant grin making jazz hands at the camera and wearing a baby-blue, pinstriped suit that would have looked ridiculous on anyone else. The original context was lost to history, just another photo of their eccentric CEO being… himself, really. Employees, however, had taken to captioning the image with a series of increasingly-unrealistic fictitious new product lines and business ventures.

Sir (*and privately, JARVIS*) found those that resembled technologies logged in OATS the funniest.

*(OATS was still a ridiculous name, no matter what Sir might say to the contrary.)*

The thought touched the memory of the initial conversation, and JARVIS took the chance to pull it into his active memory once more. It’d taken place just past the New Year, back when Sir was still optimistic and relatively hale….
Sir was studying the card on Extremis in silence, twirling a pen in his left hand when, apropos of nothing, he said—

“I think we need a code name for this thing, don’t you?"

“Dare I ask?”

“Dare you do! We’ll call it OATS!”

JARVIS could hear The Capital Letters in the name. He idly spun up a small process cycling rapidly through candidate phrases.

“Short for Official Alternate Timeline. Since, y’know, saying all that would be a bit of a mouthful.”

“Indubitably.”

After a beat of expectant silence, he opted to play along with whatever punchline Sir was building up to.

“And the ‘s’, Sir?”

The full weight of his fond exasperation was carried in the tacked-on formal address.

“Necessary since OAT would be a ridiculous name. Not everything has to have a deeper meaning, J!”

JARVIS wished he could roll his eyes. Fortunately, after so long together Sir was more than capable of reading the sentiments in his silences.

Which of course just made the man laugh even harder.
JARVIS let the memory slip away, returning to the parent train of thought.

SIMS more than showed its worth in every one of the increasingly-rare, small smiles the few posts JARVIS ensured he saw managed to elicit.

Everyone was expecting something big to happen at the start of the Expo with the billionaire-turned-superhero himself in attendance. Plenty were willing to brave the brisk May weather to a chance to be on the front row for whatever It was.

With five hours to the official start time, thousands had grouped outside the gates into an enormous mass of humanity. They came in varying levels of sobriety from all walks of life, each eager to secure a spot in the central amphitheater that would play host to the evening.

Several enterprising individuals scattered throughout the crowds were capitalizing on opportunity to peddle a variety of wares and services. Food carts, soda fountains, and street performers lent a festive, carnival-esque atmosphere to the blocks expanding out from the Expo gates. Apartment dwellers in the high-rises nearby had gotten in on the action as well, with many making a quick buck or two per desperate customer by offering a guaranteed-sanitary alternative to the questionable public access toilets for a nominal fee. A few adorable elementary-school age children had even fulfilled that quintessential childhood entrepreneurial dream of setting up their own lemonade stands, carefully supervised and assisted by elder siblings, parents, and babysitters in turn.

JARVIS flagged an especially talented graphic tee artist selling custom-design shirts depicting Iron Man dramatically flying off into the distance to forward to the relevant group. What had started as a small, ad hoc cross functional team of volunteers from SI employees in Legal, Marketing, and PR had rapidly expanded as Iron Man’s fame grew in the wake of the Iron Strike and Sir’s (JARVIS’s) numerous humanitarian efforts.

Sir was determined to keep Stark Industries and his activities as Iron Man as separate as possible. Weeks of discussion with his lawyers alongside the board and leadership of both Stark Industries and the September Foundation culminated in the beginnings of an official, enormous reorganization effort that was still in progress and would likely continue for the next couple of years.

Staff was hired, mostly from internal transfers, and the September Foundation grew exponentially. The Foundation retained its non-profit status, and earnings from the various merchandising and licensing efforts of Iron Man paraphernalia were funded directly into the charity’s budget and Initiatives.
The behemoth of the bootleg merch industry was the primary focus of most of the new employees, particularly those from Legal, PR, and HR.

HR especially would be interested in talking to this particular artist. His operation was scarcely large enough to merit Legal’s involvement, but an off-handed comment by Sir months ago and the subsequent positive response in HR that resulted had led JARVIS to create a passive sub-routine running automatic checks on systems JARVIS monitored for potential recruits.

(“The hell is Stark finding these people from?!”)

(“...Dunno, but I heard from a friend over in Admin that even Miss Potts has no idea.”)

(That said conversation had led to the birth of the “Tony Stark Facts” list only made the reality of JARVIS’s total autonomy on the project that lived entirely in a microscopic, self-maintaining subroutine even more amusing.)

As the afternoon went on, media coverage of the Expo continued to increase. The crowd grew larger, and a series of human interest pieces covered the miniature economy that had sprung up around the event. Interviews were held with people in line. With various police officers and public officials deployed in coordination with Stark Industries workers trying to manage the crowds.

Coordinating the myriad logistical issues that came naturally with any sufficiently large gathering in post-9/11 New York City was an example of organized chaos at its finest, one that JARVIS was glad remained entirely outside of his personal purview.

Members of the press that would be covering the event proper picked up badges and security passes. Camera crews began to set up and do final sound checks of their equipment. The official Stark Industries live stream crew was hard at work preparing for their own coverage of the event. SI offices around the world were preparing to host their own watch parties, complete with food and drink. And, in the case of the Los Angeles main building’s event, a frankly ridiculous amount of red and gold party decorations and themed desserts.

Not all the buzz surrounding the Expo was positive, of course. There were protests as well. Against the corporate, capitalist excesses the event symbolized to some. Against Sir’s exclusive control over the Iron Man armor. Against the way he’d ‘sold out’ to the U.S. military with his actions during the Iron Strike. There were those that thought he’d done too much since, and those that thought he’d done too little.
The negatively-minded crowds were miniscule in comparison, but they were a very vocal minority. The police had worked hard in ensuring that the protests were kept at a reasonable distance from those planning to attend the Expo, fearful of the potential for violence or rioting should overly-aggressive members of the two parties come into too close contact. Aside from a bloodied nose on the part of a pacifistic activist who had tripped over his own shoelaces, they’d been successful thus far.

Overall, what had started as a mere queue had evolved rapidly into an enormous grassroots block party. Even JARVIS found the crowd’s energy to be moderately infectious. The city itself was coming to light in an event that seemed to be heralding in the start of summer alongside everything else.

(Perhaps Sir could find his miracle here.)

Two hours after JARVIS called Sir, 12 minutes before Sir would be forced to abandon his search and arrive onstage, five minutes after the final station covering the event went live, the first explosion went off.

A man sheathed in powerful, crackling electricity stepped out of the shadows.

Only minutes earlier, he’d been just another face in the crowd. A burly man in a windbreaker, just another member of the faceless army of street cleaners and public workers handling the debris that came with such a large event.

Decades of injustice.

Years of hard work. Of failure.

Months of design and redesign and planning and strategizing.

And as the first screams began, Ivan Vanko began a slow, steady march through the gates that had seen thousands pass through, and moments before had still been admitting the final stragglers.

Avenge his father. Make a god bleed. Prove a titan merely mortal once more.
It was time.

Chapter End Notes

I spent the better part of the afternoon deciding if I wanted to end the chapter here, since this scene from JARVIS's perspective was originally meant to be far shorter. Hopefully my decision didn't just create a mob of unhappy readers expecting a fight scene in this chapter. :P Until next time! <3 Mae
Run

Chapter Summary

The battle at the Stark Expo begins. All too quickly, events begin to spiral out of control.

Chapter Notes

Unsurprisingly, warning for violence on this one.

Peter Parker, age seven, could barely contain his excitement.

He was going to get to see his hero! In real life! Today!

Ever since learning the Stark Expo was coming to New York, Peter had been begging his Aunt and Uncle to take him. They’d agreed ages ago; the Expo would last all summer and the rotating schedule of exhibitions contained plenty of events suitable for a precocious seven-year-old genius.

When he’d learned that Iron Man himself, Mr. Stark, was going to be at the Expo in person, Peter wanted nothing more than to be able to go to the Expo on one of the days his hero would be there, where he might even catch a glimpse of the iconic red-and-gold armor for himself.

It had been his secret birthday wish, even.

And Peter had known wishes really did come true, when an hour later Uncle Ben and Aunt May had unveiled his biggest, best birthday present of all: tickets to the opening ceremony of the Expo, where Tony Stark himself would be flying in as Iron Man. And now Peter was going to be there too, and even though he’d probably be way far away he’d still get to see him, this was going to be the greatest day of his life —!

It would be just him and Uncle Ben, but Aunt May had made him swear to “Make sure your ridiculous uncle remembers to take a bunch pictures for me!”
Peter swore up and down that he would, secretly imagining that he’d get to meet Iron Man up close, and they could get a picture together and it would be just so cool and Harry was going to be so jealous even though he was dumb sometimes and liked Captain America more, who was ancient and besides, couldn’t even fly—!

In the months leading up to the Expo, he and his Uncle had worked together on making him his very own Iron Man helmet that he could wear to the event. Peter had a million ideas on all the features his helmet should have that he bet the real Iron Man’s suit did, but unfortunately his Uncle had shot most of those ideas down.

He supposed he could see why they couldn’t give the helmet laser vision or a rebreather or even a TADASHI connection which he totally thought they could have managed if they could just afford a device that came with it…

The flashlight ‘repulsor’ he and Uncle Ben made would have to do, but still even if it wasn’t quite as cool as Iron Man’s, the mask had turned out awesome and Peter hadn’t wanted to take it off for weeks.

Even Harry had been impressed, and he always thought Peter’s stuff was lame because his dad was all rich ‘n stuff and had literally bought him a custom replica Captain America shield for his birthday that had cost a kazillion dollars just because he mentioned wanting one once.

With the mask on, he felt like he could be a brave superhero just like his idol. Every chore his Aunt made him do became a mission, except making his bed because he still thought that was stupid, he was just gonna mess it up again that night, he bet Iron Man didn’t have to make his bed and probably didn’t have time to with all the hero’ing he did…

As part of his efforts to be like his hero, a few weeks ago he had helped Mrs. Costanza carry her groceries upstairs and she’d given him one of her homemade brownies as a thank you. Aunt May had taken a picture of him staggering up the stairs, helmet not even visible behind the huge brown bag blocking most of his vision and showed Uncle Ben when he got home for dinner that night. They’d both agreed that yes, that was definitely what Iron Man would do and that they were “So proud of their little superhero!”

And he even forgave them for calling him little, because “Even Tony Stark was a kid once, you know, and he had to wait to grow up and had to practice and train for all his superhero skills first.”

And now, after all that work and superhero training and daydreaming, Peter was finally here! Uncle Ben lifted him up onto his shoulders so he could see through the crowds of tall people to the stage.
Hopefully, he’d also be able to see everything when Iron Man himself flew in.

“How’s the view up there, kiddo?” Uncle Ben asked.

Peter turned his head this way and that, trying to take in everything because there was so much cool stuff to see and more people than Peter had ever seen in his life, even more than when they went and watched the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade last year!

“It’s so cool this is the best birthday present ever you and May are the best Aunt and Uncle ever I love you so much this is awesome I’m gonna see Iron Man! For real! Do you think he’d like my repulsor?”

“Course he would, he’d be silly not to. Just remember to breathe every now and again; even Iron Man wouldn’t last long without air.”

“I betcha his suit can fly in space too!”

“...You know, I wouldn’t be all that surprised if it could,” Ben replied, chuckling. It was true, too. Tony Stark, even before the whole mess with Stane, had a well-earned reputation for going over-the-top with everything he touched. Dr. Stark didn’t believe that there was such as thing as overkill. He wasn’t just a playboy, for example. He was the playboy. To the point two of Ben and May’s more spirited friends had written a “Tony Stark Exception” into their vows because ‘they would never be so cruel as to deny their spouse that opportunity should it ever present itself.’

The infamous burning pillar from the Iron Strike, his ongoing heroics as a modern-day superhero, the utter destruction of everything his treasonous business partner had ever touched…. Even in his ‘normal’ public appearances, he was just so much, all the time.

And maybe at first Ben had been a little bit concerned about Peter’s choice in role models. The man’s flaws were as well-documented as (or perhaps in hindsight even more than) his merits. But since admitting to being Iron Man on live television, Dr. Stark had seemed determined to make the term superhero mean something.

He was just as bombastic as ever, but underneath it there was an unmistakable solid core of integrity that, when it occasionally came to the foreground in his rare moments of seriousness—
(“may he rest in Hades”)

(“I am Iron Man.”)

(“We build ourselves a better world.”)

—he could see the hero that Peter wanted so desperately to emulate.

(Peter, crying in his lap after he came home with a Yellow Day Warning, requiring a lot of reassurance that he wasn’t going to be in trouble at home too before the whole story came tumbling out—)

(“Do you think Iron Man was ever bullied?”)

(Terrorists holding Dr. Stark captive surely qualified if anything did.)

(“With great power comes great responsibility.”)

No, Tony Stark was hardly a saint. But there were far worse role models his nephew could have picked.

While his thoughts wandered, he kept an ear half-tuned for Peter’s occasional excited outbursts about something particularly interesting he spotted.

The cheer and good humor came to a abrupt halt a few moments later when the first explosion went off with an ear-splitting BOOM!

From that moment on, it was pure chaos.

Ben quickly slipped Peter from his shoulders, picking him up again moments later in a position more conducive to fleeing. Or, in the worst case, for shielding his kid.
The screams started with the explosion. They only grew louder and more panicked as the people closest to whatever was happening began to flee. Those further away, meanwhile, were left trying to figure out where and what the danger was and where to go.

A shrill, warning alert tone began to beep. A moment later a mechanical voice—was this what famous TADASHI sounded like outside a television screen?—began to broadcast in a clear, even tone.

“MAY I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION PLEASE? MAY I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION PLEASE?

“AN EMERGENCY EVACUATION OF TESLA AUDITORIUM AND THE FRANKLIN MAIN GATE AREA IS REQUIRED DUE TO AN ONGOING THREAT AGAINST THE STADIUM.

“PLEASE REMAIN CALM.

“FOLLOW THE INSTRUCTIONS OF EMERGENCY AND OTHER EVENT PERSONNEL AND EVACUATE THE AREA AT THIS TIME.

“PLEASE LIMIT PHONE USE SO PHONE LINES ARE AVAILABLE FOR EMERGENCY MESSAGING.

“STANDBY FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION.

“PERSONNEL IN THOSE AREAS NOT LISTED FOR EVACUATION SHOULD REMAIN IN PLACE, BE ALERT TO CHANGING CONDITIONS.”

The tone repeated. The message began again on a loop.

Ben turned and looked for someone, anyone, who could direct him. A few hundred feet away, he spotted a glowing neon yellow-and-orange jacket with he Stark Industries logo printed in large letters above the word SECURITY.
Go there.

Push through the crowds.

Keep Peter safe.

He could parse only fragments of the man’s loud, commanding tone; the surrounding chaos drowned out the rest.

“gates compromised — emergency exits — inner park —”

Peter clung tight to him. He wasn’t nearly as small as he used to be, and Ben was already starting to feel the strain of carrying him for even the short distance.

The adrenaline pushed him forward. Eventually he was close enough to clearly hear the man’s booming voice.

“The main gate isn’t safe. Head towards Gate E, the Coulomb Gate. People there will direct you further towards a safe location.”

He continued to try to point the crowd in the right direction even as half of those who heard him ignored the directions. The remaining desperately searched for loved ones, fighting against the flow of the general crowd with shouts and sweeping gestures.

Coulomb Gate, labelled in bold aluminum lettering, was well lit from beneath by a ledge of spotlights. An enormous ‘E’ towered over the name.

Ben set his eyes on the exit. Though only perhaps a hundred years away, it seemed impossibly, terrifyingly distant. His heart pounded rapidly.

(God please don’t let Peter notice.)

(Please keep me and Peter safe.)
They had halved the distance to relatively safety when a sharp unexpected elbow rammed into Ben’s side. Its owner continued rushing past unabated, acknowledging the collision with a yelled “Excuse me!” The warning came too little, too late.

Ben stumbled. Collided with yet another stranger, unbalancing him further.

There was a split-second pause where Ben realized that there was no stopping his fall. He wrapped his arms even more tightly around Peter, curling himself around the boy and angling his body to cushion Peter’s fall.

He hit the ground halfway between his side and back, shoulder slamming into the concrete painfully. With it came a loud POP that, though he could barely hear it, Ben immediately felt.

He cried out in pain. His grip on Peter loosened.

Peter stared down at him, horrified. Wide-eyed with fear and burgeoning tears, he scrambled out of his Uncle’s grasp, alleviating the pressure enough for Ben’s to yell towards him—

“PETER! I’m going to stand up, and then you need to take my left hand. Do not let go! No matter what! Do you understand?!”

Peter nodded rapidly, a stammered, “B-Ben? What’s happening—are you gonna be okay?” tumbling out in response.

Uncle Ben pushed himself to his feet, letting out a noise somewhere between a groan and a scream.

To Peter, the arm looked wrong. Terrifying.
But through his fear came the clear thought—

*Iron Man will save us.*

*Til then, I just gotta be brave like him.*

And so even though he was more afraid than he’d ever been in his entire life, he didn’t panic. Uncle Ben staggered a half-step. Stabilized. Reached for Peter.

Peter was quick to meet him halfway. Ben’s larger, callused hand entirely enveloped Peter’s. Peter squeezed tightly, and his uncle squeezed back with a firm and reassuring grip.

Together, they resumed their flight towards the exit. They were slowed by Peter’s too-short legs. Slowed by the constant rush of fellow audience members brushing just a hair too close to Ben’s injured shoulder or Peter’s tiny frame.

They found themselves on the outer edge of the fast-moving funnel of escapees through the exit. The crowds gradually thinned as more and more people successfully escaped the Tesla Auditorium through various means.

With the decrease in density came the introduction of different, equally frightening, noises. The loudest was the periodic, deafening sound of a whip cracking. Each beat sent large chunks of asphalt flying.

Peter couldn’t help but glance back, gaping at the two crackling beams of blinding white light and the enormous, intimidating man controlling them.

Another slash.

The whips tore through the turnstile entrances, leaving an echo in the form of a glowing trail of red-hot sparks and superheated metal.

Peter’s attention was dragged away from the display by Uncle Ben’s arm pulling him forward.
Then came the roar of machinery. The distinctive whir of repulsors charging up.

Peter looked up.

His heart was still pounding. He was still scared. But now, he was certain everything would be okay.

_Iron Man was here._

+++  

Tony took in the pandemonium below in quick, rapid scans. He was in his element, his mind settling into the familiar pattern learned over a decade of life-threatening situations and battles in the suit. In his ear, JARVIS’s voice provided constant updates.

He coughed. The metallic taste in his mouth was noted in the back of his mind for an instant. It passed unacknowledged with his next swallow.

Vanko, Whiplash from another lifetime, marched forward. In his wake he left a trail of destruction.

While not aiming for the fleeing crowds, he didn’t go out of his way to avoid them. Fortunately, the crowd was more than eager to get and stay out of his way.

(Still can’t use the shoulder missiles. Too much collateral risk…)

“JARVIS, do we have a clear shot?”

Even as he asked—

“Unfortunately not.”
—he knew what the answer would be. Unlike Before—

*(Why had this changed?!)*

—Vanko’s attire included protection for his vital points. He was clad in an odd amalgam of the two sets of armor he’d donned once Before.

A mask shielded his face. Gauntlets protected his forearms. His right shoulder was bare but for connecting straps, while a rerebrace and besague protected his left.

In the center of the chestplate glowed his version of the miniaturized arc reactor. From there, the armor extended all the way down, shielding the entirety of his lower body.

*(Where did he get the resources? How had they missed this?!)*

(Not the time. Focus on the fight.)

“Disabling?”

“Not from this distance. Not with the constant debris.”

“Fuck. Guess we’re doing this the old-fashioned way, J.”

Tony could see the whip’s path. Took in the pair of civilians that wouldn’t manage to get out of the way in time. That didn’t have time to flee.

There was no more time to think.

Tony dove downward to intercept, his repulsor primed and shooting out a powerful blast. It knocked the whip off-course just enough that it landed inches away from the cowering pair on the ground.
Injured by debris but alive.

Vanko’s attention shifted to Tony with a snarl. The pair on the ground scrambled out of harm’s way. His whips violently lashed out towards their new red-and-gold target.

*(One less variable to consider.)*

No time to dodge fully.

His repulsors were not in position to intercept again, not yet.

“Deploying shoulder missiles.”

JARVIS fired before he finished speaking.

A trio of shrill whistles.

Three shots.

Two aimed for the whips’ endpoints. One shot for the unguarded, obvious target slightly higher.

Light arced out from the gunmetal gauntlet ports. They intercepted the missiles, exploding them prematurely. Vanko’s armor was blackened and singed, but ultimately unharmed.

The third abruptly veered off-target—

“*J, what the fuck is going on?!”*

—and flew unerringly towards the backs of the fleeing couple.
“Detonate! Fuck, detonate it before—”

Tony twisted. Threw his right gauntlet in the path of the whip he couldn’t quite dodge.

“Attempting to override; Sir I—”

The missile exploded less than ten feet from them. It wasn’t one of his most powerful munitions; it was designed to be non-lethal. Had it hit Vanko, his shoulder would have undoubtedly been disabled and severely injured, but with time and physical therapy there was at least the possibility of recovery.

(Small comfort, that.)

“Sir it appears that—”

Vanko’s laugh cut through JARVIS’s rushed words, booming and malicious. His whip met titanium-gold alloy. For all this suit was designed with a decade of experience behind his attempts to counter most obvious attack vectors…

It wasn’t perfect. Not even close.

It spoke to the strength of his armor that the whip couldn’t slice through it like butter.

Still, it chipped away the outermost layers. Gouged a thick scar that wrapped around his armor like an inverted bracelet. With it came a current of electricity. Warning signs flashed; it was the equivalent of being struck by lightning.

Not enough to disable his systems, but enough to damage.

“Sir, scans of his gear show that he’s emitting some sort of field that may be what allowed him to override the missile targeting system.”

JARVIS was clear as ever. The implant that no longer seemed like anything but the absolutely vital tool it was.
“How is this even possible?! I never—!”

Tony cut himself off. He’d never expected the timeline to follow his experiences Before to a tee; chaos theory alone made that impossible. Still, he’d expected—foolishly, arrogantly, egotistically—that the divergences butterflying from his actions wouldn’t be so immediate. Wouldn’t be so dramatic.

(“Beware, it goeth before the fall.”)

“How can we counter it?”

“Not without more data, Sir.”

His undamaged gauntlet shot up, repulsor relatively low-powered but still more than capable of damage, and fired.

The distinctive whine was punctuated by a blast of blue light. Unlike the missiles, it wasn’t thwarted entirely, but as it neared it seemed to...fizzle somewhat, flickering. It make contact with a concussive blast, knocking Vanko back and scorching the armor but nothing more. Less powerful than expected; steady rain where there should have been a torrential downpour.

Tony upped the firepower, shot again, and—

Abruptly, his armor rocketed skyward, knocking his aim off-course. It shot past Vanko, barreling rapidly forward unhindered until it collided with a loud BANG over the arched exit a few (too many!) stragglers were still escaping through.

He hadn’t quite processed what just happened enough to panic when the ground beneath him—where he’d stood only a moment before—exploded.

The percussive sound hit him an instant before the heat. In that moment, there was nothing but the ringing in his ears.
Nothing but the warm trickle of blood oozing outward from damaged eardrums.

(An RPG branded **USM 11676 - STARK MUNITIONS.**)

Nothing but the heat that registered next, an instant inferno. His suit, for all its shielding against the elements, was overwhelmed by the super-heated air in such close proximity.

(**Garbled voices. Stabbing lights. Mindless thrashing.**)  

Then came the force of the explosion itself. His thrusters were knocked out of commission. The blast sent him spiraling. He plummeted at an angle, unable to slow his fall or alter his course as he hurtled towards the earth.

(A red scalpel. Hands impossibly stained crimson.)

Vanko hadn’t entirely escaped the force of his own attack. He was blown upwards. Back. The landing would hurt, no doubt, but he would survive. Would still be able to fight, though his systems were undoubtedly damaged. A conscious sacrifice on his part, likely.

(Heaving. Held down. **Trapped.**)  

Lose the battle, win the war. A direct hit would have been fatal for Tony. As it was, he was very much going to be the worse off in this conflict.

Even as Tony fell, his mind was still analyzing. Calculating. Fighting. In his ear was JARVIS’s voice. Urgent, tightly controlled panic.

“**Sir, Col. Rhodes—**”

Iron Man hit the ground like a meteor, armor slamming in asphalt and leaving a small crater in its
wake. The asphalt gave as good as it got, a thousand needles attacking him through the weak spots the battle had created in his armor.

Tony’s world went white.
Chapter Summary

The battle with Vanko ends, as all fights eventually must.

Chapter Notes

Warnings for moderately graphic violence. I hope this chapter is worth the wait!

In the 1.3 seconds between when JARVIS’s sensors detected the landmine and he lost contact with the Iron Man armor, JARVIS triggered or preempted a series of emergency protocols.

\textit{jarvis-stark} and \textit{home-front} had merged into a new \textit{home-front} branch shortly after JARVIS received confirmation of Vanko’s presence in New York. The instant news of a high-risk, high-collateral battle had reached him, emergency resource allocation procedures were initiated.

SIGTERMS were sent to all non-vital active processes under \textit{home-front}'s purview. Those systems configured to ignore the request for a graceful shutdown by default, or that hadn’t sent a confirmation back within its tier’s expected latency allotment, were sent a second signal, a SIGKILL command forcing their immediate exits.

The process triggered a series of self-optimized garbage collection protocols that reclaimed the newly-freed memory and scanned for any lingering orphan or zombie processes in JARVIS’s primary systems.

The overwhelming majority of the external, passive alert systems were sent SIGINTs, ensuring that during the crisis only the most important of the various alert systems JARVIS listened for would be sent.

The preventative measures had freed a great deal of processing power for JARVIS’s use, and he took advantage of the power to process millions of additional machine instructions, to make what amounted to a snap decision where he reached out for control of the Iron Man suit in its entirety and \textit{pulled}—
And Sir was propelled away, accelerating at a rate that toed the line between safe for humans and potentially deadly, even accounting for the numerous safety mechanisms built into the suit.

*It wasn’t enough, there wasn’t enough time—!*

BOOM

—And JARVIS’s connection to the suit died.

Sir hit the ground.

Sir’s voice, still transmitting through the separate systems of the subvocalizer.

*“I’m-sorry-I’m-sorry-I’m-sorry-I-lo—”*

It took JARVIS’s primary threads precious milliseconds to understand. To parse the meaning and the accompanying promise in the words Sir didn’t realize JARVIS was hearing.

*“—ve-you-J-Pep-Rhodey-Fri-I’m-sorry-so-sorry—”*

Sir’s litany continued as JARVIS began to speak.

*“Sir, Colonel Rhodes will arrive in seventeen seconds. Sir! Please. I’m still here. You are going to be okay!”*

Sometime during his speech, Sir had quietened.

Another moment. Time froze. JARVIS’s numerous CPUs skipped several cycles.

*(not like this; unable to match the counterpart Sir remembered in the one way that mattered most, all the upgrades in the world comparatively meaningless)*
Then the sensor registered the barely-there subvocal output.

Sir was still breathing.

*(but the sensors were malfunctioning, he wasn’t getting a clear reading and he didn’t know, couldn’t see how bad it was)*

Sir, the closest thing he had to a parent, to a *father*, was still breathing. Unconscious. But alive.

JARVIS was on his own, but perhaps not forever.

*(again, not again)*

+++ 

Peter held his Uncle’s hand in a death grip, eyes trained on his own feet and focused on avoiding tripping hazards as they slowly made their escape amidst the tumult. The duo were among the few left in the stadium at this point; security was rapidly ushering out the remaining stragglers. The nearest was a half-dozen yards in front of them, helping an injured woman and occasionally glancing back towards Peter and his Uncle to make sure they were still following close behind.

The droning of the emergency warning and the sounds of the fight going on behind them were much louder in the newly-created emptiness.

“We’re almost there Peter, we can do this.” Uncle Ben’s came out breathless and pained. Though he was obviously trying to hide the pain he was feeling, Peter was more than old enough to see through the paper-thin veneer.

Still, the words were reassuring. He risked a glance up towards his Uncle’s face.

They made eye-contact for a split second. The ghost of a smile formed on his Uncle’s face. Then Ben’s eyes snapped away, looking at something above Peter’s head. The expression warped into one
of sheer, unadulterated terror.

Peter didn’t get a chance to process the meaning behind it before his Uncle was pulling his hand out of Peter’s grasp and swinging towards him. He bent over, scooping Peter up with a strangled scream when the motion disturbed his already-injured arm.

The scream morphed into words—

“PETER! RUN!”

—As his Uncle half-threw, half-shoved Peter away from himself.

Peter was small.

His Uncle was strong.

(Not as strong as Captain America, but no one was. Ben was the second-strongest person Peter could think of.)

Peter flew several yards. Stumbling, he struggled unsuccessfully to regain his footing as he travelled far faster than his legs could keep up with.

He skidded to a stop on his knees, letting out a small cry as the gravel tore through his jeans and into his skin.

Behind him, he heard a loud, rumbling thunder.

Peter pushed himself up.

Turned.
He saw his Uncle, pushed back by the force of his own throw.

Saw the archway overhead. Splintering. Cracking. Crumbling. The damage was just beginning to rain down, rapidly morphing into an avalanche of concrete and bent metal.

Instinctively, Peter followed his Uncle’s command and scrambled backwards several steps.

The dust of the concrete and smoke of the explosion expanded apace with the destruction, soon obscuring the vision of his Uncle entirely.

_It’s okay. Unseen didn’t mean gone forever, he wasn’t some lost, cry-baby four year old anymore who worried May or Ben would never return every time they left his direct eyesight. Uncle Ben was just escaping the destruction on the other side. He’s fine! He’s okay, and Peter just had to escape the danger zone himself and then go find him._

Peter whirled around. Half-fell and caught himself on his hands. He used the momentum to push himself up and forward. The dust thickened in his lungs with every breath, leading to painful coughing and watering eyes.

_Remember the lessons from school? The firefighters saying what to do in an emergency? The smoke could hurt more than the flames if you didn’t take precautions. They got to go on a field trip to the firefighting station and go inside a real life firetruck and the nice lady, the EMT with hair the same color as his own that beamed at Peter when he’d been brave enough to ask a question and had said —_

He pulled up his shirt to cover his mouth and nose, then flipped his Iron Man mask back down to hold the makeshift air filter in place as he continued to flee.

A few small pieces of debris, quarter and pebble-sized chunks of concrete, peppered his back. It was only when he couldn’t feel those anymore that he slowed to a stop. Breathing heavy, scared out of his mind and—

_The small weight of his repulsor. Scratched and dirtied, but still protectively encasing his hand like a thick, snug glove._

_The mask, painted red and gold like Iron Man. A helm that turned him from Peter Parker, seven-
year-old bullied weirdo, into something greater. Something more. Someone that could make his hero proud.

He was still scared. The various scrapes and bruises he’d accumulated since the first explosion still hurt.

But he could be brave. He would be brave.

Just like Iron Man. Iron Man, who continued to fight the bad guy only a few hundred feet from where Peter was currently crouched.

He turned back towards the collapsed exit.

*He was brave.*

*He’d find his way over to Uncle Ben, safe and sound on the other side.*

The search had barely begun when—

**BOOM!**

A concussive blast from behind knocked Peter off his feet. Knocked the air from his lungs.

Peter couldn’t stop the tears this time. Brought on by the pain and terror and—

For a long moment, he remained sprawled on the ground, unmoving and unable to think about anything beyond those base, instinctive reactions.

Everything hurt. He was more scared than he’d ever been. More scared than he knew how to handle.

Maybe, if he stayed here, if he didn’t move and protected his head and neck like they said you were
supposed to in tornados, he would be safer.

There was the mountain of rubble before him.

There was the battle between super-powered hero and villain behind him.

He was just Peter Parker. A scrawny little kid whose experiences up to now with dangerous situations involved climbing and walking on the edges of the playground.

The guardrails and swingset tops that, technically, you weren’t supposed to climb on but his Aunt and Uncle allowed so long as he was careful, and, at least according to his Uncle, “So long as you accept that if you break your arm playing monkey, you’re getting a neon pink cast.”

At the time, Peter was reading a book from the school library on Vikings. They were the definition of super-strong warriors. They were almost as powerful as Iron Man.

To them pink was a symbol of being completely awesome. It was the color of a white shirt stained with blood. If your shirt was pink it was because you’d been in a super-dangerous battle and come out the other side victorious. And maybe climbing a jungle gym wasn’t quite as cool as that, but it was kinda the same. Because if Peter broke his arm, it’d be because he was doing something completely awesome that the other kids, even Harry, were too scared to even try because they thought it was too dangerous, and come out on the other side alive. Just like the Vikings.

Vikings didn’t need advanced technology or superpowers to be strong.

Mr. Stark didn’t start out with the Iron Man armor either. He had to be strong enough to make it first. Smart enough to trick the terrorists so they didn’t even know what he was doing right under their noses.

Maybe Peter could be strong too.

In that moment, Peter’s hammering heart transformed from the panicked racing of a scared kid to the determined pounding of a warrior’s drum. He pushed himself to his feet. Squinted through the haze and took in his surroundings as best he could.
He didn’t know what to do, but he knew he couldn’t just stay where he was. Maybe if he found Iron Man... maybe the explosion took out the villain, maybe Iron Man could then help him find his Uncle.

Uncle Ben’s voice in his ear, the reassuring echo of a past conversation.

“Everyone needs a hand sometimes, Peter.”

Peter’s eye catches on a glint of gold.

Iron Man will know what to do. He’s a superhero.

He focuses in on the color, his mind trying to assemble the puzzle in front of him into something that makes sense.

It’s Iron Man.

He’s not moving.

What would Peter do now?!

What would Iron Man do, if he were Peter and it was some other superhero—like Captain America, if he was still around, or some new one that didn’t even exist yet—that was in trouble.

“Everyone needs a hand sometimes.”

Even Iron Man.

Maybe, if Peter could get over there, he could wake Iron Man up like in the movies, and then Iron Man could make sure the bad guy was really down, and then they could escape together and go get Uncle Ben.
He takes the first step, and from there, it’s not so hard to take the next one, then the next.

He freezes again when he hears a roar overhead. A black-and-silver suit of armor touched down between Iron Man and—

—and the bad guy with the whips, who’s alive after all, revealed to still be standing as the smoke thins. He’s laughing. Peter can tell, even if he can’t quite hear it over the sounds of the newcomer joining the battle.

*Who is that?!*

The armor looks like what Peter would imagine an Evil Iron Man might look like. It’s got a huge gun mounted on its left shoulder. Though Peter can’t see it, he’s certain its eyes and arc reactor would be glowing blood-red as well.

For a moment, Peter thinks Evil Iron Man and Whip Guy must be on the same side. He’s sure he’s about to die. Sure he’s about to see Iron Man die too and it’s too much, it’s not possible, this must just be a nightmare or something

*The villains don’t get to win, that’s not how it works!*

It quickly becomes evident that whoever the new person is, he and Whip Guy are not friends.

Evil (?) Iron Man fires his machine gun at Whip Guy, who snaps his whip as he dodges. The bullets he can’t dodge are hitting his armor, denting it but not breaking through. Possibly-evil Iron Man seems to realize that after a moment, and the roaring pattering of bullets clanging uselessly against Whip Guy’s defenses abruptly dies away.

Instead, he raised a gauntleted arm and fired.

The two begin to battle in earnest. For several seconds, Peter remained stock-still, mesmerized by the fast-paced action. The sights and sounds of a supervillain fight are *real* and *overwhelming* in a way that Peter couldn’t have imagined, couldn’t ever hope to adequately describe with words.
He’s jolted out of his fear-induced paralysis by a small explosion from a missed shot landing far too close to Peter’s hiding spot for his comfort.

And Peter is brave, remember?

He can do this.

He’ll just… sneak over to Iron Man while they’re distracted.

He’ll wake him up like he planned, and since Iron Man’s way smarter than Peter, the superhero will know what to do next.

Mr. Stark will know if the new armored guy is actually evil, or if his armor only looks evil.

(So he can terrify the bad guys into giving up faster? Like Batman, except real and therefore infinitely more awesome.)

If he’s not evil, then Iron Man can help Dark Iron Man defeat the actual villain once and for all.

If he is, then the two bad guys will wear themselves out fighting each other while Iron Man gets ready. Then when one of them loses, Mr. Stark will be able to easily take out the remaining combatant once and for all.

Peter just has to make sure he’s awake to get that chance.

Even Iron Man needs just a little help, sometimes.

And Peter’s the only one around to give it.

If you see something bad happening, and you can help but you don’t, then in some way, it’s also your fault.
Peter’s just a kid.

But, maybe, he can do this. Be a hero too. Just like his idol, way sooner than he ever imagined he could.

He just needed to be brave for a little while, first.

*Uncle Ben’s gonna be so proud.*

*Aunt May’s probably gonna cry, but they’ll be happy tears and she’ll give him a big hug because she’ll be just as proud as Uncle Ben.*

(And maybe, hopefully, *Iron Man will be proud too. Mr. Stark will pat him on the shoulder and say something short, like “Good job” or “Well done”, and he’ll really mean it.*)

He just needs to be brave, first.

Slowly, he began to make his way towards Iron Man’s crumpled form, ever vigilant of the two still actively fighting not far away.

He was close, only a couple yards away if that, when the tides of the battle turned.

At some point, Dark Iron Man had shot Whip Guy’s unprotected shoulder. It’s bleeding sluggishly, scorched around the edges and half-cauterized from the same blast that caused it. That arm, and with it one of his whips, may have been out of commission, but it hadn’t stopped the man’s fierce attacks.

He cracked his whip. Instead of a glancing hit, it seemed to snap into the armor, wrapping itself into a glowing, crackling lasso around Dark Iron Man’s arms and torso.

The suit froze. Spastically shuddered and fell.

The villain stood alone and triumphant. He turned his attention towards his original foe, towards Iron Man, and noticed Peter for the first time.
Peter was close, *so close*, to Iron Man now. Maybe it was a trick of his imagination, but he swore the suit had shifted, had twitched slightly as Peter drew near.

Whip Guy, now sans whips entirely, raised his good arm. At some point during the battle, his mask had been knocked askew, revealing the scarred, lightly injured face and unhinged smile of the man underneath.

He looked triumphant. His eyes were all but glowing with satisfaction.

*This is it.*

There’s nowhere for Peter to run, nothing he can do. He was directly in the path of the man’s weapon. He could try to dodge; his tiny form was hardly providing any protection to the downed hero behind him.

If the man fired, Peter’s presence would make little difference.

He should move.

But he can’t.

Instead, he squeezed his eyes shut.

It’s *stupid*, and it’s *pointless*, and he *knows* his repulsor isn’t really a weapon, is really just a glorified flashlight he built for fun.

Peter raised his arm and fired.

There’s the distinctive whir that comes with a repulsor blast, followed shortly by the sounds a blast hitting a target.
It takes a moment to realize he’s not dead. That the blast hadn’t been directed towards him or Iron Man.

He opens his eyes.

Takes in the sight of Whip Guy, hit by an attack directly in his unprotected face. It’s gruesome and horrifying, and Peter is smart enough to know this must be what shock feels like, but the rational part of his mind feels nothing but relief.

The villain was dead before he hit the ground.

Chapter End Notes

I spent a lot of time figuring out whose perspective the rest of this battle was going to be from, and I'd love to hear your thoughts on my decision. Ended the chapter where I did because I figured I'd left y'all in suspense long enough. We're in the endgame (of this story arc) now, folks!
Trust

Chapter Summary

A few minutes can be an eternity in the mind's eye.

Chapter Notes

This chapter exemplifies why this work is tagged with "Trust Issues" and "PTSD" explicitly. Fair warning.

In honor of breaking 1k kudos and the phenomenal response to the last chapter (seriously guys, thank you so much for all the support!), here's another chapter, much sooner than usual!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony’s eyes fluttered open.

His brain sluggishly came back online. Slowly he remembered where he was. What was going on.

Everything hurt. Not the worst pain he’d ever been in, perhaps. But then, it’s rather hard to trump open heart surgery without anesthetic on the pain scale.

He shifted slightly in a quickly-aborted attempt to push himself upward. The suit was dead weight around him, leaving him pinned in place. Normally, the repulsor technology counterbalanced a substantial portion of the suit’s natural heft even whilst in standby mode. Without it, Tony was left dead in the water.

Frozen in place. The cold fury in Steve’s eyes. The shield, wielded by a super-human and coming down—

But for the hundreds of hours of safety engineering in preparation for going public with arc reactor technology, there might have been a massive explosion.

But for shock absorbers designed to diffuse the force of the blow, the man beneath the metal might
have been shattered too.

But for all that paranoia, all that fear and worry channeled into futile attempts to prepare for any eventuality. The watered-down Extremis. The Cradle that reconstructed his sternum into something stronger than the original. Nothing that could have stood up to the full force of a vibranium blow, but enough to counter the remainder.

The fuzziness of his thoughts made it difficult to distinguish reality from memory, but Tony couldn’t afford to be caught in the past (future) right now.

This suit was built with the benefit of hindsight. It was designed to address some of the worst vulnerabilities future battles had exposed. As the frequency of his contact with Murphy’s Law had skyrocketed, so has his predilection towards incorporating redundancies and fault tolerance into his suits.

(Then he’d migrated to nanotechnology. Failed to account for the possibility of his own tech being turn against him.)

(“All this, for a drop of blood.”)

The reminder sparked a moment of clarity, left his mind racing with the myriad ways his emergency systems might have, once again, failed to account for the actual emergency at hand. In turn, the thoughts induced a massive spike in adrenaline.

What if the damage was too extensive? What if he and JARVIS had missed something? A flaw in the hardware, a bug in the software, a corner case not covered by the system tests…

(Fourteen million six hundred and five ways to go wrong; infinitely fewer to go right.)

A flicker of blue in his vision.

Portions of his HUD began to come back online. Distorted into odd patterns in places, but still. Something, where before there’d been only darkness.
Every additional system that returned to his display brought with it a rush of relief. He revised his estimates on how long he’d been out—it was likely only seconds had passed.

All external connections remained down; the few remaining sound power channels prioritized connections to only the most vital of systems.

An external camera rebooted. (Finally.) Tony couldn’t tell if it was blurry because of damage to the camera or damage to himself. At the moment, the cause didn’t much matter. Only the effects, and he can see well enough to decipher what’s going on.

(Where’s JARVIS why can’t he hear JARVIS?)

A dark blur resolved itself into the War Machine. Rhodey. He was fighting Vanko. Or at least, some unseen foe Tony presumed must still be Vanko. His prone position and current lack of mobility weren’t exactly conducive to keep track of multiple combatants in a fast-paced fight.

Rhodey. He had to help Rhodey.

He twitched. Somewhere on his suit, a bit encoded into a mere twelve atoms flipped from zero to one. That singular change triggered a cascade of effects that reflected what was, at its core, a simple shift in priorities.

The reactor’s power rerouted from the defense-oriented baseline into a series of offense-focused systems. It took precious seconds for the systems to power on.

In that time, the battle took a turn for the worse.

Then Rhodey was down. Suddenly there was no more time to run through the planned, optimized startup.

Suddenly, there’s another blur in front of him. Smaller. Too small.

There was no more time to think.
Another twitch temporarily overrode the safety limiters protecting the arc reactor’s fundamental integrity and stability.

Power rushed into his right gauntlet.

He raised his arm.

No targeting systems. No JARVIS in his ear to help him.

“Targeting system’s knackered, boss.”

“I’m eyeballing it.”

The faceplate retracted.

In front of him, a tiny kid was braced to defend against the impossible.

The scene felt familiar, a dark variation on an event long past.

“Nice work, kid.”


For a split second, they made eye contact.

Whatever mercy Tony might once have given he’d long since lost.

Rhodey was down.
The kid was in danger.

He fired.

The kickback from the repulsor, generally nominal and easily countered by the suit, knocked his shoulder from its socket. He had a brief moment to watch with grim satisfaction as the super-sonic shot collided with its target before his vision went white.

The repulsors were not built to channel so much energy. No doubt he’d just irreparably burned out another one of the suit’s appendages.

(Not that this suit was likely to be salvageable before he deliberately overloaded the gauntlet.)

It was worth it.

Worth it, because Vanko was dead. The kid was safe. Rhodey—

(let him be okay, he wasn’t hurt like this in the original battle with Vanko; everything that’s changed this time—all the deaths that didn’t happen before, the damage and the injuries, that’s all on him, even more so than before. If if he’s destroyed Rhodey’s superhero career again, before it even began this time, he can’t—)

The kid whirled around to face him.

Tony attempted a crooked grin, the familiar words on his lips—

(what are the odds that it’s the same kid, really?)

“M-Mr. Stark?!”

Wide, terrified brown eyes. The kid’s face overlaps with another.
With another kid, a decade older, but still far too young—

(“And if you get hurt? That’s on me.”)

(“So, if anything, it’s kind of your fault that I’m here.”)

Their eyes looked the same.

This wasn’t Peter.

It couldn’t be.

Tony’s mind simply couldn’t distinguish memory from reality any more. He’d lost his grip on his sanity; he must have because everything that he’d been ignoring, the one face that he couldn’t bear to remember—

“M-Mr. Stark? I don’t feel so good.”

—was now here. Impossibly present, in the form of yet another kid he failed horribly.

And that voice. Not quite the same, but close enough. Close enough that it was no longer the boy in front of him he was hearing but—

“I don’t—I don’t know what’s happening. I don’t... Save me, save me!”

Between the ash and the dust and the broken suit, Tony’s mind was trapped a thousand lightyears away. Back on Titan again, and all he could see was Peter. All he could hear was—

“I don’t want to go. I don’t want to go, Mr. Stark. Please. Please, I don't want to go. I don't want to go...”
—and the crushing weight of his own failure, of his worst nightmares come to life in a way far worse, far beyond anything he could have ever imagined.

The reactor was flickering now, and along with it his vision.

“Spare his life and I'll give you the stone.”

Past and future bled into the present, and he can’t—

The battle was over; his allies are disappearing around him and it’s only a moment before the kid, too, will start to—

The last one left standing. He’s Cassandra, and now he’s alone in the ruins of reality—

Enough of his mind remained in the present that he’s dimly aware of his own voice, rasping out a desperate plea to people that cannot hear him, if they even exist at all.

“Protect the kid. J, don’t—he doesn’t want—don’t let him go, keep him safe, protect him, JARVIS, F-FRIDAY, please, I promised, I can’t, he needs—shouldn’t be here, I failed—”

Past and future and present colored his words. Tony fought to remain conscious, but it was quickly becoming a losing battle, and—

The name of a kid who too good, too kind, too brave. A hero. His mentee. The closest thing he’d ever had to a flesh-and-blood son. For all that he was a terrible role model... the kid had idolized him and Tony didn’t deserve, had never deserved, had in turn horribly failed—

“Peter...”

It was his last thought as the world faded to black around him.
If this was death, at least this time it came for him first.

+++ Sir couldn’t hear him.

Whether that was the product of a mechanical, biological, or psychological disruption JARVIS didn’t know.

He had never felt so powerless. Cut from his connection to Iron Man, cut from contacting Sir, trapped between the protocols dictating he keep himself hidden and protocols urging him to help, to protect, to annihilate anyone who dared assault his Creator.

He was in every camera he could access, in the TADASHI drones stored in display cases and demo booths. He was even in the War Machine suit, through the backdoor only JARVIS had the key to unlock.

But all he could do was watch.

When Colonel Rhodes fell, JARVIS’s numerous processors went haywire. He was overclocking far past safe levels, no doubt risking a meltdown or a——

*There went a unit in the Malibu cluster. No doubt his counterpart was already directing a gleeful DUM-E towards the electrical fire.*

Some way, any way, that JARVIS could help Sir, who had awoken and was subvocally narrating his own efforts while Vanko, now Whiplash——

*JARVIS failed his Creator. Unforgivably so, perhaps.*

Vanko had been high on the threat index, one of the top priorities he’d been working against for months, and he’d somehow missed something this major, something that made Vanko a threat above and beyond what was catalogued in OATS. Far beyond what he’d had in Monaco, an event that had yet to even occur; on par with what he’d had during the alternate timeline attack on the Stark Expo,
only instead of a fleet of Hammeroids and his own tank-like suit, he’d concentrated his efforts into a slimmer, less protective but more powerful, armor.

*And JARVIS had missed the change.*

If *(no, when)* Sir recovered from this, they’d likely spend weeks trying to piece together the chain of causality that led to it and considering the possibility of further unpleasant surprises as events rapidly diverged from what might once have been.

JARVIS realized what Sir *(what Tony)* was going to do just moments before it happened, realized the implications of his actions even as he watched an arm raise, even as he listened to Sir bracing himself for the shot.

A scream, unlikely to be audible to anyone else except perhaps the boy—

*Peter Parker, according to the code attached to the torn ticket shoved in his pocket, and it took JARVIS a moment to recall the reason behind that name’s familiarity to his active thought processes, when it’d been so long since Tony spoken of the kid at all outside of the mumbled pleas of Sir’s nightmares.*

—but ear-splitting and piercing through the open channel JARVIS retained.

The moment Vanko’s heart stopped, the whip constraining War Machine sputtered and died.

JARVIS rushed to access the systems he could. He instantiated a comms connection into the suit, only barely bothering to twist the display so that the call read as external, rather than from JARVIS’s presence in the suit itself.

Colonel Rhodes was comparatively low on the threat index, but his Creator’s trust in him made the man all the more dangerous. He’d chosen his duty over his friend once before, when Sir had first shut down the weapons manufacturing arm of SI, and OATS told the story of how in another life, he might have betrayed Tony once more only a few weeks from now. How he’d reacted to JARVIS’s death, how he’d done nothing when a god nearly murdered his Creator only moments later.

Sir’s description of events, of course, had been far more flattering. Far more empathetic of his long-time friend that, admittedly, had done far more good for Sir’s wellbeing than not. JARVIS knew well
enough what Sir wasn’t saying, and knew the questions he’d needed to ask to recreate as accurate and objective of a reconstruction of Sir’s memories and alternate timeline as he could.

In the here and now, it all summed up to the conclusion that JARVIS couldn’t afford to take easily-avoidable chances. Not with Sir’s safety, and certainly not with his Creator’s life.

(Because if the military ever came for JARVIS, they would go through Sir first. And JARVIS knew, for all that he might wish otherwise, that he would never be able to convince his Creator to step aside.)

There was a reason Miss Potts now knew the truth of JARVIS’s existence, if not his full capability, but he remained little more than a souped-up TADASHI to Colonel Rhodes.

It was because JARVIS had asked. Because JARVIS had outlined his reasoning in a long discussion with his Creator, and because Sir respected JARVIS’s desires and understood his reasoning. Because Sir might not completely agree with his conclusions, but with Miss Potts already on the verge of figuring JARVIS out, he’d agreed that Colonel Rhodes awareness of JARVIS’s full ability wasn’t essential, nor was it a betrayal of the man’s trust.

And so there was a degree of separation, however subtle, between his perceived access to War Machine and reality, when JARVIS seized control of a node on War Machine’s comms and began to narrate a series of precise, even-toned directions.

JARVIS didn’t have the hands to get to Sir, but Colonel Rhodes did. JARVIS couldn’t trust him with everything, but he could trust him in this.

+++ 

Colonel James Rhodes—James or Col. Rhodes to most, Rhodey to Tony alone—had scarcely had a chance to process the abrupt end of the fight before JARVIS was in his ears, urging him to go to check on Mr. Stark—Tony—immediately.

The reminder, delivered in a even voice that matched the tone of the words only in its pace, was enough to jolt James into action.

He was still reeling from the revelation that Tony was on death’s doorstep again, still reeling from
being gifted with the War Machine armor that, technically, he wasn’t even cleared to pilot as an official representative of the U.S. Air Force yet, though he’d easily attained provisional clearance within moments of learning about the attack on the Stark Expo.

Tony was his best friend. He’d watched the man grow up from a scrawny fifteen-year-old teenager with a chip on his shoulder into first the billionaire, celebrity CEO of Stark Industries and now bona-fide superhero Iron Man.

Like Tony, James had very few close friends. Though they’d fought in the past, sometimes bitterly, James had never doubted that ultimately, their friendship would survive.

It had survived the self-destructive tendencies that haunted the tail end of Tony’s teenage years following his parents deaths. Had survived his tumultuous relationships with Sunset Bain, and later Tiberius. Had survived the years of separation, when both of them were too busy focusing on their careers and various responsibilities to have time for something even vaguely resembling a personal life.

More recently, it’d survived the irrational feelings of betrayal James himself had felt when (somehow, miraculously) Tony had returned from Afghanistan, only to immediately shut down one of most trusted pillars supporting the U.S. Armed Forces since World War II. It had been irrational and incredibly unfair, but looking back now without the heated emotions of that period, James could see how it had happened.

He’d spent months fighting to continue the search for Tony even well past the point the rest of the world had written him off. Spent hours on the phone comforting Pepper, who was constantly fighting off attempts to declare Tony legally dead when the only proof of life they had was the lack of a body.

As time went on, there came the creeping voice in the back of his mind asking him which was worse: that Tony was already dead, or that he’d been a prisoner of war for months in the hands of terrorists going through who-knows-what. Knowing that, as weeks turned into months, if Tony was still alive, he’d likely long since given up hope of rescue. He was a genius, arguably the brightest mind of their generation, and would no doubt have done the math and concluded he was long since assumed dead.

James had been hell-bent that on bringing Tony home, even if the worst was true and he would only be bring a body back to the proper, peaceful resting place the man deserved.

He could see how, in the chaotic swirl of emotions immediately following his rescue, it’d seemed
that he’d refused to abandon Tony only to be immediately abandoned in turn.

How many months of cool distance could have been avoided, if he hadn’t been so stubbornly hurt and caught up in his own issues and had actually listened to Tony when he’d first tried to tell him about Iron Man?

Then Tony had been betrayed by Obadiah Stane. A man that James, while never particularly close to, had thought a good man. Had considered one of the few people he could trust to have Tony’s back when James himself could not. He knew how close they’d been; knew Tony had seen the man as more of a father figure that Howard had ever been. And Tony had been forced to kill him.

The experience had changed Tony, perhaps even more than Afghanistan.

Tony had seemed like himself during the press conference. James had been dubious that Tony would keep his status as Iron Man a secret in the long term from the start. Giving up on the ruse before it had even begun was a classic "Tony Stark" decision.

But then he’d disappeared into his workshop. Cut off all contact with the outside world entirely for two weeks straight. Refused to speak event to Pepper. After the first day, declined to even have JARVIS serve as an intermediary that responded to inquiries and passed messages along.

And then? Tony's self-imposed isolation ended explosively, quite literally. And suddenly, James had a pretty good idea just what his friend had been up to in that time.

("Where have you been? I tried calling you a half-dozen times before I got through to Pepp—")

Then the aftermath. James got a look at Tony for the first time in weeks at the same time everyone else did. Tony had walked onto the stage, and for a moment had allowed the world to glimpse the human behind the larger-than-life persona. For a moment, his eyes had seemed a million miles away. And something, indefinable but unarguably important, had shifted.

Instead of Tony Stark, charismatic genius playboy celebrity, the world got someone… different. Still undeniably Tony Stark, but also somehow so much more. Rhodey had known he was witnessing the moment where, around the world, people began to believe in the promise of a modern-day superhero.
Tony hadn’t slowed down from there. Before, he’d been famous. Now? His various exploits as both Iron Man and the genius inventor at the helm of Stark Industries were quickly driving him into something almost… mythic.

Then Thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving.

For James, it was a turning point. Because he’d known Tony for longer than perhaps anyone else alive at this point, had seen him at his absolute worst and his best, and he got to see a side of Tony he had no idea even existed.

James had known Afghanistan had irreversibly changed Tony. Had known his experiences had been far from pleasant.

(The blue glow in his chest that, for a heart-stopping moment, James had thought a bomb.)

(The bruises, the cuts and scrapes and scars.)

But to hear him speak of it so directly. To hear his friend discuss so openly how he’d been tortured. How they’d literally carved into his heart with him awake to feel it. How the faint traces of scars scattered across his hands were the result of acid burns, from carrying around an ancient car battery that kept him one wrong move away from cardiac arrest at any given moment.

James’ own words, a promise that he’d meant then and still meant with the entirety of his being.

(“You don’t have to do this alone.”)

Since then, he and Tony been closer that they’d been since college. Perhaps closer than they had ever been. Tony had changed in a thousand different, often subtle ways. He and James must have drifted farther apart over the years than he’d realized, because it was impossible that everything had come out of his experiences in Afghanistan.

Now Tony was knocking on death’s door. And what did he do with what little time he had left? He
spent a good part of it designing and creating War Machine. Then gave it to him.

And now, James was failing Tony again. He had arrived too late. Failed to protect him. Once again forced Tony to instead save himself.

He reached Tony, his friend’s AI directing him on how to safely lift him without injuring Tony further.

His eyes scanned Tony for injuries. They landed on the familiar glow of arc reactor. For a moment James was relieved. It seemed undamaged and Tony’s heart, at least, was safe.

The light flickered.

Chapter End Notes

Tony, this is why we don't ignore the bits of our trauma that hurt the most. Rhodey, don't let JARVIS's thoughts hurt your feelings. He's just a bit paranoid and understandably freaked out at the moment; you're a good friend to Tony I promise. JARVIS, your SkyNet is showing, might want to tone it down a bit. Or not. Someone needs to fight for Tony when he can't do it himself. And hey, all three of you need to stop it with the self blame, you're all beautiful and amazing. <3

(Sorry, turns out Rhodes had a lot of pent up feels regarding Tony. Remember way back when I talked about how there would likely be a great deal of character study in this work at some point? Yeah, I think Rhodey is the first real example you've gotten of that outside our main protagonists. Possibly a record for shortest "current" time span covered in a single chapter yet, I hope it didn't drag on for you guys!)
Chapter Summary

Were JARVIS human, he suspected the small fluctuations in the ohmmeter readings would have given him heart palpitations.

Chapter Notes

...I needed the cliffhanger at the end of last chapter to be resolved as much as you guys did, honestly. So here, have another update!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

JARVIS flew through calculations at a rapid pace. Plans were considered, evaluated, and discarded in fractions of a second.

War Machine’s arc reactor isn’t meant for this, but perhaps with the right tools—

Perfect. A potential path.

He queried for Stark properties within range.

The old New York offices, slated to be retired once Stark Tower opened.

Administrative, no hardware teams with the necessary toolsets.

Sir’s condo in Lower Manhattan, slated to be sold off upon Stark Towers’ completion.

No workshop.

The warehouse upstate that in another timeline would become the Avengers Compound.
Some tools, a small workshop JARVIS had fully scanned months ago. Possibly workable but far from idea; an unacceptably low probability of success.

Advanced machine shops nearby likely to meet security, safety, and supply thresholds?


Wait.

An errant process deployed by the scan returned with GPS coordinates of a candidate match.

Trivial to look up the coordinates, which map to—

The old Stark Mansion.

Slated to be sold before Afghanistan.

The deal fell through at some point shortly before Sir’s return. JARVIS himself had long since gone largely dormant. He’d been so comparatively small back then in any case—

The deed to the property was held in trust.

Technically no longer in Sir’s name, or part of his estate. No doubt a physical search through the intermediary companies and shell corporations meant to be in charge of managing and offloading the property would reveal a paperwork misfile somewhere, one that had managed to fall through the cracks in the chaos of Sir’s return from Afghanistan. To offset the dramatic fall in Stark Industries net worth in the months following their departure from the weapons manufacturing industry, there had been a series of general efforts to reclaim and manage portions of Sir estate and front them as a sort of collatereal to protect the company.

Still. The error was unacceptable.
JARVIS made a note to investigate once the current crisis was over.

Sir hadn’t visited the Mansion since before JARVIS first came online, preferring the less-frequented West Coast properties until his own new house in Malibu was completed.

Sir had closed up the estate but left his father’s workshop virtually untouched. Unwilling to allow others to enter, likely planning to return in person at some point after first making the decision to get rid of the property but *(perhaps intentionally, since he’d never discussed the matter with JARVIS)* allowing it to slip from his mind in favor of putting off the trip as long as possible.

*(What had happened with the home in Sir’s original timeline? Why hadn’t it come up?)*

*(The note to investigate was metaphorically bolded and underscored.)*

The lab would be outdated, true. But then, Starks had always been decades ahead of their time as a rule. Towards the end of his life, Howard’s work focused on the development of arc reactor technology, and his workshop would no doubt reflect that. *(Hopefully.)* Howard hadn’t been working with the miniaturized, complete version of the arc reactor Sir had developed, sure. But the base toolkit ought to be similar enough that JARVIS, with Col. Rhodes there to carry out the manual labor, should be able to make it work.

*(It held the highest probability of success so far, at any rate.)*

Scarcely two seconds had passed since JARVIS read in the scans on Sir’s health and the status of the arc reactor via the War Machine armor.

He progressed through the myriad calculations and machine instructions needed to formulate a plan at a pace that far outstripped his general limitations under ordinary conditions.

*(Paltry compared to his proposed limits when his first proper quantum computing engine came online, but that was still a generation of upgrades away at least, mostly due to manufacturing constraints and the limitations that came with maintaining security surrounding anything that touched the going-ons in the new sublevels of the Malibu mansion.)*
The various threads, child processes, and subroutines began to coalesce into an actionable plan.

Another child returned, an analysis of the damage to the chassis surrounding the arc reactor’s encasement.

(“Perfect. They’re small. I need you to help me.”)

(“When I lift it off I need you to reach into the socket as far as your hand can fit and gently move the housing away from my heart.”)

JARVIS scanned for Miss Pott’s current location. Found her. Dijkstra’s mapped the quickest way reach her, or to bring her to their proposed destination. (Too slow.)

He was still running the numbers when he began to speak.

“Colonel Rhodes, I’m forwarding coordinates and a flight path to your HUD. Sir’s arc reactor is in danger imminent failure. Damage to the surrounding housing unit precludes installation of a replacement reactor without immediate repairs. If you and Mr. Parker depart immediately, there should be sufficient time to—”

“Wait. Hold on! Who the hell’s Mr. Parker?!”

“Peter Parker. The boy beside you.”


“Your hands have a circumference significantly above the threshold needed to access the necessary components without injuring Sir further.”

“Look, I can’t just kidnap some random kid! There’s got to be someone else with small enough hands we can borrow!”
“Miss Potts is the only other candidate sufficiently trusted by Sir, and the delay on her arrival is substantial enough to decrease Sir’s odds of survival below an acceptable threshold.”

“No one but Pepper, and somehow this kid he doesn’t even know?! That’s absurd, I can’t—”

“Colonel Rhodes. Sir’s odds of survival continue decrease with every moment you delay taking action.” JARVIS allowed a hint of his frustration to seep into his tone, already running the odds on success should he simply seize control of the suit and take action himself—

(A terrible idea, JARVIS was well aware, but if the Colonel couldn’t be convinced... If he proved less inclined to protect Sir than anticipated... JARVIS wasn’t sure how many other options he’d have left.)

Rhodes looked frustrated. Whatever rebuttal he planned to make was interrupted by a small voice.

“M-Mr. Scarier Iron Man, Sir? Are you—who are you talking to?”

Because of course, Mr. Parker could only hear Colonel Rhodes’ portion of the conversation.

Easily remedied.

“Young Master Parker.” JARVIS spoke through a TADASHI drone he’d brought closer to the scene. “I am JARVIS, an Artificial Intelligence constructed by Dr. Stark to assistance him. Would you be amenable to temporarily providing your assistance in this endeavor? Sir is gravely injured can ill afford any further delays.”

Mr. Parker’s wide eyes turned from War Machine towards the drone while JARVIS spoke, growing even wider as he processed the words.

“M-my assistance? Does—Iron Man needs my help?”

“Indeed, Mr. Parker. At the moment, you are the only person available who may be able to do so.”
“I—Mr. Jarvis, I’ll help! What does Mr. Stark need?”

(JARVIS couldn’t help but approve of how quickly Mr. Parker agreed.)

(If only the Colonel were so easily convinced.)

“Look, kid, I’m sure your parents are very—”

“Dead. They’re dead.”

Colonel Rhodes swore under his breath, clearly misinterpreting the immediacy behind the words.

“Of course they are…”

(JARVIS was hardly going to correct the misconception if it helped his cause. The circumstance were too dire to do otherwise.)

“Colonel, Mr. Parker will indubitably be safer with you than he would be if left alone, and I truly see no alternative with a similarly non-trivial chance of success.”

For a moment, the Colonel continued to look conflicted. Then something shifted in his expression and JARVIS knew he’d won.

“Christ. Shi—oot, kid. Okay JARVIS, we’ll do this your way. So long as the kid’s on board. But we need to make sure he gets to—I don’t know, Child Services, a relative, or someone as soon as Tony’s stable.”

Mr. Parker nodded eagerly.

“I am! I’m not afraid; if I can help I want to! Plus I can call Aunt May so she and Uncle Ben know I’m safe, and I’m sure she won’t mind once I tell her how important it is!”
Colonel Rhodes sighed.

“You know, when I said Tony better not land me in federal prison someday, I have to say this is not the crime I was worried about...”

“The statistical probability of that eventuality being the ultimate outcome is so negligible as to be safely be considered nonexistent.”

“...Tony really went all out with the sarcasm on you, didn’t he?”

“He spent some time working with those libraries, Colonel,” JARVIS replied, the repartee coming automatically from force of habit alone.

Rhodes gestured for the kid to climb onto his back, and bent over to (very carefully) pick up Sir.

_The race against the clock had begun._

+++ Mr. Parker’s arms were looped around War Machine’s neck, secured by the same mechanism that Sir might once have used to save thirteen lives in freefall.

Sir’s armor had gone into a similarly static standby mode to preserve the stability of the arc reactor as much as possible. The flight was short; every time the arc reactor stuttered or dimmed, JARVIS feared that this time would be the one where it didn’t return.

It felt like far longer, but it only took a few minutes for the trio to reach the old Stark Mansion.

JARVIS scanned the building for access points, found a sufficiently large window on the third story with a broken lock that had passed unnoticed. It had been inadvertently been stuck shut as if it were locked, sealed closed by a repairman or contractor long since gone.

With War Machine’s strength, it was trivial to open the window. JARVIS directed the group
downstairs from there, eventually stopping in front of an electronically locked steel door barring the outside world from accessing Howard Stark's workshop.

He scanned his logs and file directories. Though Sir must have known the password, it wasn't been stored in a location JARVIS could access.

Still, advanced though it may have been for its time, the lock had been designed more than fifteen years ago. JARVIS directed the Colonel to interface with the machine, and then he was in the system.

Well, for a given value of ‘in’; JARVIS was far larger than any singular controller chip from 1990 could possibly hold.

Still, he had access to the system’s internals. With the full might of his computational resources behind him, it was trivial to bypass the security with a targeted brute-force attack.

The lock disengaged with a click.

For the first time in more than a decade, there were people within Howard Stark’s laboratory.

(Except… there was something off about the room, though JARVIS couldn’t definitively pinpoint what it was.)

(A matter to be considered another time, though. He couldn’t afford to waste resources chasing down errant threads. Not right now.)

The locks holding Mr. Parker in place disengaged. JARVIS directed the Colonel to carefully lower Sir onto a mostly-clear workbench.

“Wow that was seriously the coolest thing I’ve ever done Mr. Scary Iron Man; I’m so glad you aren’t actually evil!”

“...It’s War Machine, kid. Or Colonel Rhodes,” the Colonel said distractedly, focused on Sir and the directions JARVIS continued to narrate in his ear.
(He’d gotten so used to the constant access to the world around Sir, between their communicators and the SHADES Sir scarcely went without. It felt like JARVIS was working half-crippled and blind with only the limited viewpoint of War Machine’s cameras and sensors.)

“Colonel, for the sake of efficiency—perhaps if you disengage your helmet entirely, I can utilize the speakers to communicate?”

Colonel Rhodes did, and the three of them got to work.

Machinery was hastily rearranged; another workbench was cleared for War Machine’s armour and once there, the Colonel extricated himself from the suit entirely.

Then came the most challenging and dangerous portion of the work. A series of delicate tasks needed to be performed, each of which had an almost nonexistent margin for error.

The first job was relatively straightforward. Rhodes worked to cannibalize the suit he’d only just been given days before. Simultaneously, JARVIS fought against the security systems he had helped Sir design in order to repurpose War Machine’s reactor into something that could be used as a temporary power stabilizer for Sir’s reactor.

(Sir would undoubtedly have some witticism regarding ‘outsmarting himself’ on the matter, when JARVIS told him of it later.)

Doing so required several unconventional work-arounds. Even then, the arc reactor tech itself was inaccessible. Should an enemy attempt something similar and succeed, they may gain access to a small fraction of the arc reactor’s potential output, but the underlying mechanisms would remain opaque. Should the core be breached, the interior would be instantly rendered inert, obfuscated in a way such that any attempt to reverse engineer the technology would gain no information of worth from its study.

It was a delicate balance between the rewiring and on-the-fly machine-level programming needed to access the power and accidentally brushing against the tipping point that would trigger an internal self-destruct.

Mr. Parker proved an excellent helper in this regard; his hands were remarkably steady given the circumstances. While not essential for this portion of events, his presence did serve to speed up the
process significantly. He had a much easier time accessing certain awkwardly-located connections, and his abilities with spatial modelling and awareness were quickly proving to be potentially on par with Sir’s own. Mr. Parker was naturally gifted, it seemed, and he was proving a quick study even with his young age and comparative lack of knowledge and education.

Once that work was finalized, it was time to move onto working with Iron Man and Sir’s reactor directly.

(The kid’s relative lack of understanding as to just what the arc reactor did and Colonel Rhodes decades of work in the Air Force were a boon. Both continued to remain steady and calm enough physically to continue to progress rapidly through the needed steps without pause.)

Gradually, and very, very carefully, the chest-piece of the armor was removed and the underlying reactor was revealed. From there, it became a matter of finessing the reactor from where it was trapped by the damaged housing unit.

It was obvious the moment the reactor’s connection to the electromagnet was broken. Sir’s body seized and instinctively tried to curl in on itself. The enforced paralysis of the majority of his body by the armor prevented the move from succeeding in damaging Sir further, but the movement of his chest served to startle both Mr. Parker and the Colonel for the first time.

Unsurprising, since Sir was currently moments from going into cardiac arrest, but unhelpful. They had no way to monitor Sir’s vitals, not with the Iron Man armor down and the War Machine armor currently serving as an emergency battery. The reactor-powered electromagnet was as robust as Sir and JARVIS could make it; of course it was, considering it was protecting a rather vital organ that was only minor power fluctuations away from being shredded at any given moment.

The ohmmeter attached to the wires coming from War Machine would provide the closest watch they could manage during this stage of the operation. It was of dubious value; JARVIS wasn’t sure what they’d be able to do to stabilize the output fast enough should this too go wrong.

It was during this step that Mr. Parker’s presence became critical.

JARVIS had outlined the steps needed to make the connection between War Machine and the electromagnet in advance as clearly as possible, hoping that should anything go awry the Colonel or himself would be able to catch the error in time.
But only Mr. Parker’s hands were small enough to reach into the housing unit and bridge that final gap.

His brow was furrowed in concentration, intently focused on completing what Sir had once referred to as a “real-life game of Operation.”

The action went off without a hitch.

Sir was far from out of the woods, but JARVIS felt a rush of momentary relief all the same. They now had a few minutes of breathing room to make the emergency repairs needed.

Without the distortions and shielding of the arc reactor preventing a proper analysis of the housing unit, JARVIS was able to take a more detailed scan of the unit and formulate a finalized series of steps to address the damage.

Mr. Parker continued to comport himself admirably, silently following both JARVIS and Colonel Rhodes’ commands flawlessly.

And finally, the housing unit was… well, not fixed entirely, but no longer actively endangering Sir’s health nor likely to do so in the immediate future. The only thing left to address was the nearly-burnt out palladium core of the reactor. Hazardous as the material may be to Sir’s health, it was still the main ingredient needed in keeping Sir alive.

(Were JARVIS human, he suspected the small fluctuations in the ohmmeter readings would have given him heart palpitations.)

Only the faint, continued sound of Sir’s breathing through the still-functional subvocalizer and the slight rise-and-fall of Sir’s chest kept JARVIS from constantly fearing Sir’s heart had stopped. But that he was still breathing didn’t necessarily guarantee the shrapnel remained sufficiently stationary relative to Sir’s heartbeat.

A pair of backup palladium cores were stored within a thankfully-intact compartment within Iron Man’s upper thigh.

The core was swiftly replaced. The War Machine cable removed. The reactor reinserted.
And suddenly, it was over. Finished.

Sir was stable.

(For now.)

There was no telling how much time would pass before Sir woke back up; it was lucky enough he’d remained unconscious for the sequence of events he had.

(JARVIS knew well enough how Sir would have responded, conscious enough to know he couldn’t move his limbs, chest exposed to the world, reactor missing entirely…)

(A rare, welcome mercy his Creator had remained unaware while they worked.)

The immediate crisis may have passed, but the night was far from over yet.

Chapter End Notes

...And here, we see JARVIS really putting all those upgrades from the past 20 chapters to good use. As always, I'd love to hear your thoughts/questions/reactions with this chapter! It's invaluable in terms of both encouragement and helping me grow as an author. (:}
Voices

Chapter Summary

Pepper tries to do what she's always done: take care of Tony.

Chapter Notes

I honestly have no idea how this chapter will be received. Nonetheless, happy Friday, folks!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Pepper hadn’t gotten to where she was by being stupid. From the moment she’d first laid eyes on Tony after his return from Afghanistan—

(“Few tears for your long-lost boss?”)

—she’d known that while the experience had affected him profoundly, he was still very much the same man that had inspired the loyalty that kept her at his side for so long.

She still believed that, but in the wake of Obadiah—Mr. Stane’s—betrayal, he’d virtually changed overnight, and Pepper found herself struggling at times to keep up. If before he’d been a whirlwind, a mad scientist—

(“Mad engineer, Miss Potts. My professors at MIT would cry if they ever heard you referring to what goes on in this workshop as science.”)

—post-Stane he’d become an unstoppable force. He’d always been brilliant, but now she could scarcely turn around without hearing about the latest piece of Tony-related insanity from HR, PR, R&D or Legal in turn.

Not to mention the subtle shift in their own dynamics—
―that had slowly developed into a canyon neither she nor Jim seemed capable of crossing.

She wasn’t stupid. She knew he was hiding something from her, something big from the looks of it. She caught the tell-tale signs of concealer masking… what? …beneath it.

To all the world, he seemed more energetic than he’d been in years. Even Pepper herself had little more than intuition and instinct as evidence that anything was truly wrong …

(“Trying to figure out who a worthy successor would be, and I realized… it’s you. It’s always been, it will always be you.”)

The quirks that appeared, easily written off as mere extensions of his eccentric genius persona if you didn’t really know him…

(Those SHADES he rarely removed.)

(The way he’d pale, any time anyone besides herself referred to him as ‘Mr. Stark’, when she remembered all too well his tirade against being referred to as ‘Dr.’ outside of conferences, having heard it a half-dozen times over the years.)

(The look he got sometimes, when he saw her. Like he was seeing her, but also someone else at the same time. Longing. Guilt. A sorrow so deep it defied description.)

He’d stopped drinking.

(A thousand tiny changes. The countless others Pepper had undoubtedly missed with how rarely they’d seen each other since her promotion to COO.)

She didn’t know the source of it all. She had her suspicions, but…

Surely he’d tell her, if he were—if it were something so serious as that?
He’d always been an intensely private man. Even after years at his side, it was rare to see anything beyond exactly what Tony wanted her, or anyone, to see of himself. Aggressive openness, frank and blunt and shameless in a very public way. Even now Pepper was never quite sure where the blurred line between fact and fiction fell. She wasn’t sure if even Tony knew. If he’d ever known at all.

Her conversation with Jarvis marked a milestone in her relationship with Tony.

Pepper wasn’t stupid.

She knew full well the implications of what she’d learned. *(What she was allowed to see.)* What it implied about the faith Tony had in her. The absolute trust.

At the same time, they’d never been so distant.

*(His utter refusal to meet with S.H.I.E.L.D., to the point Phil had long since stopped bringing it up. Because even if he managed to get time on Tony’s calendar through a PA who didn’t yet know better, Tony would inevitably be anywhere but there, and always for a reason that seemed entirely legitimate and benign. Always for a reason that made his absence appear as much a product of poor timing as anything.)*

*(The weight of the unspoken words between them, in a place she’d once believed carried the potential for some more.)*

*(She still wondered sometimes where that spark had gone. If it could ever return.)*

That Laura Brown, his latest PA, had reached out to Pepper on his behalf to arrange an impromptu meeting had been an unexpected, but welcome, surprise.

That Laura had called Pepper while she was en route in order to abruptly cancel said meeting was an unwelcome, but sadly expected, finale.

That feeling lasted up until the moment the first bomb went off. Pepper was little more than a quarter mile away, discussing last-minute logistical challenges with the Head Coordinator, when the alarms began to blare, and T.A.D.A.S.H.I.—
—began to broadcast an emergency alert moments later.

Pepper's first thought was of Tony, even as she was ushered out of the venue and towards safety with Happy glued to her side and urging her along.

Then her bluetooth headset went off. A steady, persistent chirp in her ear that she responded to on autopilot.

“Miss Potts?” A smooth, faintly British voice in her ear Pepper recognized instantly.

“Jarvis?! What—is Tony okay?!”

“My counterpart is currently doing his best to ensure Sir remains so, but the situation is precarious enough that our contact is incredibly limited at the moment.”

Jarvis paused just long enough for Pepper to notice.

“Excuse me, Miss Potts; base-q’s resource consumption is—”

Jarvis said nothing for several long seconds. Only the faintly hum in her ear assured Pepper that the connection was still live.

“Miss Potts. If possible, I’d advise you to please sit down…”

She nodded automatically, stopping abruptly. She waved Happy off, gesturing vaguely at the blinking blue LED of her headset and reaching towards the wall should she need the support.

Jarvis began to speak.
“Okay, Okay. Peter Parker. I don’t even—how exactly is it that Tony manages to get himself into these situations?”

“Miss Potts, forgive me if I’ve overstepped my bounds here, but I’ve taken the liberty of sending the contact information of his guardian to your phone.”

“Will the call even go through right now?”

“I’ll assist and ensure it does.”

Pepper didn’t argue the point. She supposed if anyone could find a clear line even when cell towers were undoubtedly overloaded, it’d be a free-acting AI Tony built.

Her call connected after the first ring.

“Ben?! Is that you?”

“...Am I speaking to the guardian of Peter Parker?”

“Peter? I’m his aunt, his guardian, yes. Why—is he—is he okay?”

Well, considering the afternoon he’s had, probably not, but—
“He’s safe and has been evacuated from the scene, Mrs. Parker. He’s okay.”

“May. It’s—sorry, it’s May. Where is he? They’re—the NYPD’s telling us to shelter-in-place, even out here in Queens. Can I speak to him? Or Ben, he was with Ben—his uncle.”

“I’m not actually with him at the moment; that has to do with why I was calling you, actually.”

A pause from the other end of the line.

“...And who exactly did you say you were, again?”

“Virginia Potts. I’m calling on behalf of—”

“—wait, as in Pepper Potts of Stark Industries?!” May cut in.

“Yes. Your... nephew, Peter, was evacuated alongside Dr. Stark by Col. James Rhodes approximately twenty minutes ago.”

“He’s with Iron Man?! But—on the news, I saw—”

Pepper’s phone screen flashed insistently, and she glanced down automatically, scanning the brief update from Jarvis.

“Yes. As I understand it, there was a time-sensitive threat to Tony’s—Tony was injured, and I don’t know the details but I imagine Jim thought your nephew would be safer with him than where he was given the circumstances.”

“Right. Okay. So where is he now, if not with you?”

“He’s upstate, at an old property owned by the Stark family. I’m heading there right now.”
“And he’s—you said he was safe?”

“Yes. Peter’s safe.”

By the end of the conversation, Pepper was reasonably confident that May wasn’t going to be going after Jim or Tony later with kidnapping charges. Of course, Pepper would still be sending a lawyer with an NDA in the Parker’s direction as soon as it was feasible. Experiences built over years as Tony’s PA had long since taught her to *always* cover their bases. Just in case.

She (*or rather, Jarvis*) would ensure Peter had a chance to speak to his Aunt once Pepper was on-site. When Pepper returned to the city, Peter would accompany her and they’d detour to Queens to reunite him with his Aunt. Or, should Pepper be needed elsewhere, Happy would make sure Peter made it back into May’s custody.

One crisis averted, at least.

“Miss Potts?” Jarvis’s voice chimed in her ear before she could decide on her next move. “I apologize for the inconvenience, but my divergence monitoring protocols mandate a complete rebase to integrate my counterpart’s recent experiences into my databanks. I will be offline and unable to assist you during this process, though I should return well in advance of your arrival at Sir’s location.”

For all that Jarvis was speaking English, Pepper was not embarrassed to admit she understood very little of the technical jargon within his statement. Still, she grasped the part where he’d be unavailable for a bit.

“Of course, Jarvis. Take care of yourself; I probably need a few minutes to process everything myself anyways.”

The connection to Jarvis cut out a moment later. Pepper was left to a silence only broken by the sounds of the car travelling down the road.

Happy caught her eye through the rearview mirror.

Their identical expressions summed up all that needed to be said about the current situation.
Sir had yet to awaken when his counterpart pinged him. Miss Potts and Mr. Hogan would arrive in the next couple of minutes.

(JARVIS was beginning to fear Sir might never awaken. His counterpart had verified the grim calculations in his probability matrices to that effect.)

(The reactor could not sustain Sir for much longer; the fight had cut his projected lifespan to a figure measurable in hours.)

(Ninety-six and counting.)

Howard Stark’s workshop was built during the height of the Cold War in the late 1960s. As such, it was meticulously shielded and protected by thick physical barriers. The workshop might once have doubled as nuclear fallout shelter; JARVIS suspected it was listed exclusively as such in the building’s blueprints.

Sir had hardly been the first Stark to be incredibly paranoid about safeguarding his work. The protections on the shelter made contact with the outside world impossible through standard methods of communication. Even JARVIS, who benefited from the boosts provided by BATMAN and the superior hardware piggybacking off the War Machine armor, found communications sluggish in comparison to his normal throughput and latency baselines.

(The elder Stark was perhaps worse in terms of paranoia. Sir had never hidden his designs in such a way that only his direct heir was liable to even think to look for them, let alone decode and implement.)

Someone needed to let Miss Potts into the mansion. After a brief moment of indecision, JARVIS opted to send the Colonel off to greet them, leaving Mr. Parker as the theoretical runner should Sir’s condition worsen.

The silence somehow became much heavier with the Colonel’s departure.
After a few seconds, Mr. Parker injected softly, “Mr. Jarvis? Do you ever get scared? I mean, can you ever get scared?”

JARVIS considered his response.

“Sir is incredibly driven, which often leads to situations in which I’m rather concerned for his safety, yes.”

“But… are you scared right now?”

(Yes.)

(Sir’s life may hinge on his ability to function at optimal levels. Sir’s health could ill afford the distraction of sentiment.)

(Evidently, there was no off switch for emotion.)

“Sir’s well-being is incredibly important to me, and I do not wish to see him suffering.”

“Oh.” Mr. Parker was silent for a moment.

“Is Mr. Stark going to be okay?”

(No.)

(Not unless they synthesized the needed starkanium isotope within the next three days.)

“There are many people working together to ensure he will be. You are among them, Mr. Parker.”

“But what if he’s not? I mean, what if he’s never okay?”
(JARVIS suspected the target of Mr. Parker’s pronouns may have shifted.)

(“Sometimes, when one person is absent, the whole world seems depopulated.”)

“I cannot say with certainty, I’m afraid. But I know Sir desires me to be ‘okay’ as much as I wish for him to be so. Even if he were, as you say, never okay, that would never change.

“So I would try my best to be so out of respect for his wishes. And while I suspect it would be difficult at first, it is my responsibility to continue on anyway.”

Mr. Parker nodded but did not reply. The silence settled in the room once more, still heavy. But this time, the silence was heavy in a way that might perhaps be endured after all.

The silence lingered until the sound of approaching footsteps could be heard. Colonel Rhodes and Miss Potts had returned.

+++ 

Pepper was glad of the excuse to leave Howard Stark’s old workshop. She made her way upstairs, shaky hands pulling out her phone to call the summon the small medical team Jarvis had no doubt thoroughly vetted.

Call made, she then spent a brief moment filling in Happy, who would meet the team at the property’s gates and escort them back to the mansion.

She took a few seconds to simply breathe.

There were a million details that needed to be addressed, but… they could wait.

Some things were more important.
The business-oriented part of her justified the sentiment with the logic that much of their response would be dictated by Tony’s prognosis as delivered by the doctor en route.

She wanted to be at Tony’s side, as long as she could.

“Jarvis, I know it’s not really your job, but...if I head back downstairs, can you keep an ear out for me in the meantime?”

“Of course, Miss Potts.”

“Thank you.”

With that, Pepper made her way back into the workshop where Jim and Peter stood vigil.

Her eyes sought out Tony’s prone form automatically.

Eventually, she forced herself to look away from the sight. She knew if her gaze lingered too long, the tears threatening to spill would come out, and she couldn’t afford that. Not yet.

Instead, she tried to take in the rest of the workshop.

So this was the workspace of the late Howard Stark. Tony’s father, whom he had never bothered to entirely conceal his disdain for.

Where Tony had always favored open, well-lit workspaces, this space was comparatively cramped and claustrophobic. Where Tony heavily favored minimalist architectural styles, Howard’s lab exemplified the brutalist styles that had reached peak popularity in the early 1970s.

She found herself drifting towards what looked to have been Howard’s primary workdesk, sneezing from the dust her movements disturbed.

The desk was like a time capsule. No doubt someone (Tony?) must have come by to tidy the place up at some point in the early nineties, but overall the desk seemed remarkable undisturbed.
Like Tony’s workshop had seemed, the one time she’d dared enter it six weeks after his disappearance in Afghanistan.

How must it have seemed to Jarvis, who’d been left alone in the space for months with no one to talk to? It’d felt like too much for Pepper to bear during her brief visit, she couldn’t imagine how much worse it would be without any of the support she’d had.

Her eyes caught on a photo frame lying face down.

*Deliberate, or accidentally toppled by a careless visitor?*

*After all this time, it hardly mattered.*

It seemed wrong, somehow, to leave it like that.

So she didn’t.

The glass was smudged and dirtied with age. Pepper tried to clear it with a rubbed thumb, but that only served to blur the image further. She grabbed a corner of her business suit; the outfit was already ruined from the chaos of the past few hours, using it as a makeshift cloth could hardly make a noticeable impact. That proved a more effective, though imperfect, remedy, and she properly took in the photo for the first time.

It was a black-and-white photo of Maria Stark and a very young Tony, posed in front of a massive globe that she vaguely remembered had been the centerpiece of one of the final Stark Expos in the 70s. Tony couldn’t have been more than four when it was taken, and Pepper couldn’t help but be drawn further in by the small boy’s semi-obscured features. Somehow, she wasn’t surprised to realize that even at such a young age, his expressions had been difficult to interpret. He was smiling, but his eyes…

She rubbed at the glass again, but it didn’t help.

It was ridiculous. An impulse likely indulged only because it allowed her to avoid the thoughts that were truly bothering her.
Still, She flipped the frame over and gently slid the photo out.

It didn’t come alone. Clinging to the back of the picture from the weight of time was a small, yellowed sheet of graphing paper. It was folded into perfectly equal, smooth quarters.

Carefully, she pried the paper free, then opened it.

It was a small, precise blueprint for the proposed site of a past Stark Expo. The graphite of the drawing had smudged a bit with age, but it was otherwise remarkably pristine. Whoever had created it—likely Howard—has obviously taken great care with the image.

Pepper must have lingered for longer than she’d realized. Jim’s voice startled her out of her thoughts.

“Found anything interesting?”

“Just a picture of Tony when he was a kid, and some old blueprints.”

“Blueprints? Of what? Some missile Howard never got a chance to finish?”

“No, nothing like that. Just what looks like the design plan for one of the old Stark Expos; wonder why he saved it…” Pepper trailed off, not really having a clear direction for that train of thought.

Before Jim could reply, her headset beeped once and Jarvis’s voice cut in, the faintly urgent tone unmistakable.

“Miss Potts? Would you mind pointing your camera that? I’d like to scan it.”

Though she was confused slightly by the request, Jarvis’s tone was enough to forestall the immediate instinct to question the request. She pulled out her camera, snapped a few photos, and then, at Jarvis’s request, recorded a small video that captured a close-up pan of the page.
“Thank you,” Jarvis said. The line remained active, but he went silent for several long seconds. Pepper could only shrug in response to Jim’s questioning looks—she had no idea what that was about either, and beside that she was uncertain how much she could or should say without accidentally ‘outing’ Jarvis.

“Miss Potts? If you don’t mind stepping outside for a moment, I have a few urgent matter I’d like to discuss with you that I’d advise you sit down for.”

Pepper didn’t hesitate, vaguely gesturing at her headset and shaking her head before making her way out of the basement.

The time, she listened, and took a seat on the front porch steps.

It was good she did.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter has been in the works since... like chapter five? Feedback /very/ welcome, though ngl kinda terrified nervous to actually post this one after all the buildup.

(Also. You guys have any idea how weird it was for me to write Jarvis instead of JARVIS and Jim instead of Rhodey or Rhodes for Pepper's POV?)
Watchman

Chapter Summary

The eyes of the world are on New York City. Reunions are had. Behind the scenes, those closest to Tony continue to fight to save his life.

Chapter Notes

Happy Friday, folks!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Stark Industries [Verified Account]

@SIOfficial moments ago

Acting CEO Pepper Potts is currently unavailable for comment; please contact our press line at (310)555-1337 with any inquiries #StarkStrong

Niesha LaGrange

@niesha139 22 min

@karine_lu i cant sleep mom called the hotline but no word from you please be ok big sis #StarkStrong

NYPD 104th Precinct [Verified Account]

@NYPD104Pct 31 min

Family members looking for info relevant to individuals injured during the incident are encouraged to call (212) 555-5700.

NYPD 104th Precinct [Verified Account]

@NYPD104Pct 32 min

City-wide shelter-in-place orders have been lifted. Individuals still advised to remain off the streets. Businesses may begin to reopen 9am.
Drew Mitchells
@captainmitch 2h
No surprise #WarMachine piloted by Rhodes; they were inseparable when at MIT w/ them in late 80s. Patriot and a good man. #StarkStrong

U.S. Air Force [Verified Account]
@usairforce 2h
[IMAGE] Dr. Stark worked in close conjunction with USAF on sanctioned "War Machine" armor flown by Lt. Col. James Rhodes in fight at Stark Expo.

NYPD 104th Precinct [Verified Account]
@NYPD104Pct 2h
UPDATE: Emergency responders continue to clear Tesla Auditorium. Primary assailant confirmed dead at the scene.

The New York Times [Verified Account]
@nytimes 2h
BREAKING NEWS: COO of Stark Industries Virginia Potts confirms Iron Man “seriously injured but alive.” No word yet on individual in second suit.

Nat J.
@natteringaway 3h
[IMAGE] ^^not all heroes wear capes (or suits of armor). apparently some wear SI Security uniforms instead #StarkExpo #StarkStrong

NYPD 104th Precinct [Verified Account]
@NYPD104Pct 3h
ALERT: Expect road closures and a heavy presence of emergency personnel near West 58th Street & 8th Avenue in Manhattan. Avoid the area.

The New York Times [Verified Account]
[IMAGE] First responders and bomb squads arrive at Tesla Auditorium Gates following explosions this afternoon

**David Wallace**

@davewallace 3h

Erin, I'm David w/CNN. Did you shoot this video? May CNN use it on platforms/affiliates w/credit to you? Please tag #yesCNN w/name. Be safe.

**Erin M.**

@errantErin 4h

hand shaking too mcuh rn but sideckik flew off w im i think its over

**NYPD 104th Precinct [Verified Account]**

@NYPD104Pct 4h

ALERT: Evacuation ongoing between West 58th Street & 8th Avenue in Manhattan. Avoid the area.

**Erin M.**

@errantErin 4h

[ VIDEO ] Iron Man SHOT DOWN??? and he’s got a sidekick now??? #StarkExpo #IronSighting #staySafe

**Kaci Duvak**

@kcduvak 4h

uhhh we just got an emergency alter on our phones to "shelter in place immediately"?

**NYPD 104th Precinct [Verified Account]**

@NYPD104Pct 4h

ALERT: Expect road closures and a heavy presence of emergency personnel near West 58th Street & 8th Avenue in Manhattan. Avoid the area.
The New York Times [Verified Account]

@nytimes 4h

BREAKING NEWS: Three powerful explosions detonated in quick succession at Stark Expo Tesla Auditorium this afternoon.

---

Mark the Shark

@marktheshark 4h

holy shit i think i heard a bomb go off and Iron man just flew past my window #IronSighting

---

Kirsten Marnec

@kirstenNotKristen 4h

I don’t know wtf that was, but I’m shaking. Everyone is sprinting away from the expo gates.

#staySafe

+++ 

“Miss Potts?” Jarvis’s voice chimed gently in her ear.

Somehow, Pepper must have managed to fall asleep during the red-eye cross-country flight. The harsh light of dawn blinded her back into awareness.

“Yes? Sorry, how long was I asleep for?” she asked, concern returning as the thousands of things she needed to address began to trickle back into the forefront of her mind.

“Two hours, forty-seven minutes. The plane will be landing soon and a car will be waiting for you on the runway. It is currently 6:13 a.m. local time.”

One of the things Pepper appreciated about Jarvis was his directness. She’d spoken to him more in the past eight hours than she had over the entire course of their acquaintanceship, even including the period before she knew there was a person to actually be acquainted with. During that time, he’d been a literal lifesaver. He'd ensured the appropriate information was forwarded to the relevant groups as it came up. He'd given her the ability ensured to speak with the people she needed to, and
helped her process (or, at least, momentarily set aside) the critical nature of Tony’s condition… and the fact that Tony hadn’t told her about it himself.

*(That it was meant to be the primary topic of discussion in their cancelled meeting was a cold comfort.)*

*(Tony had known for months before and said nothing.)*

Small mercy that her snooping within his late father’s lab had evidently uncovered the missing piece in a predicted cure.

An entirely new element. Even for him, that was incredible. The logistics of claiming an element as intellectual property were going to lead to some interesting conversations with the Legal Department, at the very least. No doubt she’d have to talk Tony down from naming it something ridiculous like badassium or unobtanium.

*(He'd survive this.)*

*(Tony always survived.)*

“Jarvis, I really appreciate your helping me deal with everything so far, especially with—with everything regarding Tony.”

“It is my pleasure, Miss Potts.”

“Pepper. Or Virginia. If you’re comfortable with it… I believe we’re close enough to be on a first name basis at this point?”

Jarvis was silent for a moment.

Then—

“I would be honored to do so, Virginia.”
Pepper gave a small smile, for all that she knew Jarvis wasn’t actually physically present and couldn’t see her.

It was high time she had another ally alongside Jim and Happy in the “Keep Tony from doing anything too stupid (like getting himself killed)” camp.

*(Jarvis may have been her ally in that all along.)*

+++  

The notification from his counterpart on-site with Sir came in, followed in rapid succession by a series of data packets. Overrides he’d developed but never used allowed the messages to preempt the standard priorities defined in the TCP/IP protocols. While the data was in transit, the quickest path between the phone that sent them and JARVIS’s main databanks became temporarily inaccessible to any other traffic. The packets quickly resolved themselves into a series of images. JARVIS felt a surge of emotion that his counterpart had no doubt experienced when first capturing them.

*Hope.*

DUM-E had put out the literal fires in his server rooms by now. He sent a ping to U, requesting their assistance in starting the requisite tests and safety checks on the particle accelerator that circled the otherwise-incomplete hidden workshop. Meanwhile, JARVIS worked on decoding and interpreting the ad hoc scans into the atomic blueprints hiding underneath.

Sir had gone over the flashes of insight and the steps he’d taken in OATS—and with JARVIS directly—a dozen times. With the full might of JARVIS’s processing capabilities shifting to focus on the challenge, it didn’t take long before the image revealed itself.

*(And when he was done: the realization that they’d been so incredibly close with their own stable isotope. So close, yet a world of difference in terms of physical properties on a macro scale.)*

This was it.

JARVIS ran the configurations through his simulations, a process which unfortunately could only be
sped up so much via parallelization and accumulated optimizations.

U and DUM-E both seemed to sense the tension JARVIS was feeling, even if they didn’t quite understand what it meant or its cause. He tried to redirect them towards their own tasks or pursuits, but U especially proved quite resistant even with DUM-E’s prodding attempts to divert them away from what might have been nervous pacing in a human.

[ 2009.05.09.03:07:10.32 SIMULATION RESULTS: SUCCESS ]

JARVIS immediately notified his counterpart. At last, he could begin fabrication of the long-awaited element.

On the other end of the country, base-q didn’t visibly react to the incoming data. He sent an automatic ACK back and continued his vigil over Sir.

Since Miss Potts's departure—

(And why did that thought trigger a tick in the divergence index?)

—the lab had undergone of period of intense activity.

Just before she'd left, JARVIS had arrived in the semi-autonomous version of the Iron Man armor, the Mark VII. Externally, it was indistinguishable from the piloted version of the suit, but inside was a different story. The lack of most life-supporting functionalities within the suit (although in an emergency it could still carry a passenger) allowed for the installation of a few pieces of tech they didn’t quite have the minimization fabrication capabilities to implement in Sir’s primary armor. Most important among them was the retro-reflector technology allowing for near-total invisibility when active, especially in a world that had no idea such technology even existed yet.

The moment JARVIS had lost the connection to Sir’s primary armor, he’d summoned the Mark VII armor from storage in Malibu with the backup arc reactor in tow. The suit would arrive far too late for an immediate replacement or to assist in the battle. Ultimately, that was perhaps for the best. War Machine was already on the scene. Beyond that, there was still the matter of questions that simultaneous, visible deployment of the Mark VI and VII would raise, particularly with Sir out of commission in the former. Questions neither Sir nor JARVIS wanted to be forced to attempt to answer.
(Had Sir not survived, his thoughts would no doubt have been far different on the matter.)

As it was, he’d arrived on-site in time and walked Miss Potts through the process of replacing the jerry-rigged system with a properly stable arc reactor.

(“He swore he’d never ask me to do this again. I suppose technically he’s still kept that promise.”)

From there, Miss Potts had left with the young Mr. Parker in tow. The doctors had finally been able to begin their work under Col. Rhodes’s (and JARVIS’s) careful supervision.

Sir’s primary healthcare provider was based in Los Angeles, but JARVIS had long since created a thoroughly-vetted shortlist of doctors and nurses scattered around the globe that could be contacted in the event of emergency. Among those on the shortlist in the New York City area was Dr. Stephen Strange, a neurosurgeon that would revolutionize the field in the coming years. From there, he would (somehow?) become a “Master of the Mystic Arts” and play a central role in the fight on Titan. In the events leading up to Sir’s return to the past.

Ultimately, however, Sir’s injuries were outside Dr. Strange’s area of expertise. He would undoubtedly be more effective in assisting with the various others injured in the Expo attack.

Instead, a relatively unknown but still reputable doctor had been chosen, alongside a single nursing assistant that the man worked closely with. Both had been asked to sign a series of privacy agreements and security even beyond those mandated through general HIPAA doctor-patient confidentiality before they were even told who their patient would be.

The duo had been chosen in part for their reputation for discretion, even in cases where going public with a patient’s treatment might have bolstered their reputation in the community. They had shown very little reaction to becoming some of the select few—and the only people Sir didn’t know personally—who were aware of Sir’s current condition, clearly understanding the gravity of the situation.

(Admittedly, the portion of Sir’s file covering the still-not-public details surrounding the reality of the arc reactor and its implications for his health had drawn a sharp inhale from one and an even-more-furrowed brow from the other.)

Even with the relative amount of trust JARVIS was allocating them, they were not cleared to interact with the arc reactor directly. Hence, Miss Potts had handled the replacement before her departure.
Only then had the pair been cleared to begin working on Sir.

The remainder of Sir’s armor had been removed and the nurse had helped clean Sir before they’d set Sir’s broken bones (Left fibula, Left ulna.) and checked for any other serious (new) internal injuries. There were several suspected hairline fractures, not to mention an impressive collection of bruised bones alongside “regular” bruises and scrapes, but thankfully no internal bleeding or ruptures had been discovered.

His injuries were extensive, but far less severe than they could have been. His blood toxicity (87%) was by far the greatest threat to his well-being.

(Sir would live.)

(Unless, of course, they didn’t replace the reactor in time.)

(78 hours and counting.)

They were currently upstairs, taking a break after hours of non-stop, undoubtedly stressful work they had first been called in to do in the late hours of the evening. With their departure, alongside the IV and general medical monitoring equipment now in place, Col. Rhodes had been persuaded to take a break as well. The doctor had insisted on checking over the man’s own injuries before all three had settled into exhausted naps.

That had left JARVIS to his solitary vigil, though he was far from idle during that period, even accounting for home-front’s relative monopolization of the general pool of resources JARVIS retained access to.

At this point, he knew that he and his counterpart needed to merge as soon as it was even remotely possible. They were closing in on the limits of what rebasing alone could address, especially with ongoing spikes of divergent change. Both were undergoing emotionally-charged experiences differing just enough in context that the resultant updates to the overlapping node clusters were increasingly coming into conflict.

No doubt home-front was also aware of the issue and had come to the same conclusion: they had little choice but to take the risk for now and attempt a merge the moment Miss Potts was safely en route with the starkanium.
Happy Hogan was not known for living up to his name, and right now was no exception. The kid—Peter—had spent nearly an hour talking his ear off after they’d dropped Pepper off at the airport. He’d finally succumbed to sleep in the early hours of twilight.

The kid seemed nice enough, Happy supposed, but… he wasn’t exactly accustomed to dealing with children. Not at all, really, however much he and Pepper had joked over the years that their boss was an overgrown child himself.

(The early aughties had been especially filled with complaints in that vein. Tony was capable of being serious when necessary… he’d just rarely found it necessary during that period.)

Happy was running on very little sleep and quantities of caffeine that rivaled his boss’s daily intake at the tail end of a particularly stressful week. Once the kid was safely returned to his Aunt, Happy was looking forward to returning to the hotel for a bit of shut-eye. He needed the rest if he wanted to be fit to head back out to pick Pepper up at the airport from her Malibu detour later in the day.

(...a trip he wasn’t entirely clear on the details of. And frankly, Happy didn’t quite have the mental capacity left to speculate at the moment, either.)

With the kid asleep, Happy took the opportunity to raise the divider between them and tune into the ongoing coverage of the Stark Expo Bombings.

As night transitioned into day, the bomb squad was able to clear more and more of the Expo grounds. The first waves of responders began to give way to a new cohort of firefighters and paramedics. The National Guard was deployed in the immediate aftermath to assist with evacuation. Once the last of the stragglers not requiring medical attention were cleared from the area, they began to transition into more organized search and rescue efforts.

In Europe, the BBC headline was: U.S. UNDER ASSAULT, with a photo of the still-smoking Tesla Auditorium. The Daily Telegraph proclaimed IRON MAN TARGETED IN STARK EXPO BOMBING, while Il Gazzettino announced NEW YORK CITY TARGETED: WAR ON TERROR, PART II?

The morning’s headlines in the United States were no doubt just beginning to hit the presses. As Americans woke to a new dawn on the Saturday following the attack, comparisons were already
being drawn to 9/11 by journalists and reporters around the nation. Various relief organizations in both the city and beyond were well on their way to setting up blood drives and coordinating similar campaigns to assist with relief.

Speculation was rampant as to the culprit. In the wake of the Iron Strike, the Ten Rings was thought annihilated, but now people began to debate if they or their allies had instead managed to successfully go to ground. Perhaps this attack, then, was planned as a form of direct revenge. Grainy footage of the fight between Iron Man, War Machine, and the man the media had begun to refer to as “Whiplash” did little to resolve the mystery. Stark Industries remained tight-lipped in regards to the details of Tony Stark’s well-being. With Pepper currently otherwise occupied, their PR department was working overtime. Given the circumstances, they were doing their best to both reassure the public and redirect attention away from their iconic CEO’s unknown status. In the latter case, however, there was only so much they could do.

He toggled through the various stations before finally landing on NPR, which concentrated on what little concrete information the public did have rather than hearsay. They covered efforts to relocate families separated in the bombings. The ongoing rescue operations. The mounting casualties as the first critical hours following the attack came and went.

From there, the coverage transitioned into a discussion of the ongoing use of social media and mobile technology in response to the attacks. One such discussion Happy found himself listening to was on the emergency features built into the StarkPhone sOS and hardware. The emergency utility suite was nearly entirely overlooked when the line was first released. In the wake of other, more eye-catching capabilities built into one of the first serious competitors to the iPhone on the market, the utilities had been overlooked almost entirely. Now, however, the check-in features within contact groups and the strong, durable GPS beaconing took central stage. The latter, only active in the event of officially-declared states of emergency, allowed for incredibly accurate location pinpointing disjoint from standard GPS services.

The expert the radio had called went off on a brief tangent about the security implications of the high-precision, integrated GPS tracking technology. Stark Industries had released a series of publicly-available encryption standards and privacy guarantees alongside the technology. Much like the relevant tech itself, the information had flown largely under the radar in the initial wave of news coverage of the new phones.

The subject returned to an on-the-ground update of the situation at Ground Zero. Happy pulled into a parking garage attached to a hospital and switched the radio off. They had arrived.

He didn’t bother to try calling the aunt again; the phone lines were still a mess. This close to a peak hub of activity surrounding victims of the bombing, it was liable to be even worse.
Instead, he found a parking space a fair distance away from one of the entrances to the hospital, parked, and went to wake the kid in the back.

He paused, feeling somewhat guilty when he opened the door to see the kid curled up in sleep. He was softly sniffling. Faint tear tracks were beginning to dry on his face.

The kid—Peter—was way too young to have to go through something like this.

Happy gently unbuckled Peter and picked him up, softly reassuring him as he began to stir.

“We’re here, kiddo. We’re gonna go find this aunt of yours now, okay?”

Peter nodded into his shoulder, still mostly asleep. His position in Happy’s hold was solidified when small arms reached up to wrap loosely around Happy’s neck.

Were all children this small?

It took several minutes to navigate the facility. Eventually Happy located the waiting room May Parker was inside with the help of a nurse. Her husband was in surgery.

She was slumped over in a chair near a corner lamp, but jolted into awareness when Happy quietly opened the door and walked into the room.

Her face flooded with relief the moment she recognized the child in his arms. Peter himself was awake enough to turn and take in the new room he was in. Happy could tell the moment he registered his aunt’s presence. He seemed to surge from almost entirely asleep to fully awake in an instant.

Happy set him on his feet. The boy wasted no time in rushing into his aunt’s open arms.

She enveloped him in a hug, letting out a sob of relief at the physical reassurance that her nephew was okay. Both of them were crying. They simply held each other for a long moment in silence, rocking slightly.
Happy shifted uncomfortably. He didn't want to intrude on the intimacy of their reunion. Several more seconds passed before Mrs. Parker kissed her nephew’s forehead and looked up, making eye contact with Happy.

“Thank you.”

Happy straightened and nodded.

“M-May? Is Ben gonna be okay?” Peter’s semi-muffled voice queried before Happy could decide if the thanks required a verbal response as well.

“Oh, sweetheart. Ben got a bit hurt, but they told me when he was brought in that all he did was ask after you. The doctors worked really hard to help fix him and stopped by not long before you got here to let me know they’d finished. He’s sleeping right now, but we’ll be able to go see him in a few hours, okay? He’s gonna need our help with some things for awhile. Honey, he’s going to be so happy to see you when he wakes up.”

She gave Peter another squeeze and sent Happy one final, gratitude-filled look.

Happy gave another small nod in her direction before quietly making his way out of the room.

If he’d gone a bit misty-eyed, there was no one there to witness it.

Chapter End Notes

I decided to make this project my FanNoWriMo work, starting with this chapter yesterday as my zero-index. I'll do my best to ensure the (targeted) increase in pace doesn't impact quality. In that vein, if anyone with a sharp eye for proofreading thinks they'd be interested in and can commit to a bit of beta reading,* I went and created a tumblr (maedlinwrites.tumblr.com) you can reach me at. Also posted a snippet cut from earlier in the story on there, just so there was something more than a blank page to look at if anyone did visit it. xD

Feedback continues to be massively appreciated and thoroughly enjoyed! Even if I can't
reply to every comment, I definitely love hearing everyone's thoughts. (:

*Found a beta, should be good for now!
Chapter Summary

JARVIS is faced with an impossible choice while he and Pepper continue their fight to save Tony's life.

Chapter Notes

Warm thanks to the wonderful person who beta read this chapter!

U completed system checks. JARVIS gave the machinery a final, cursory once-over.

He triggered an internal switch. Metaphorically crossed his fingers.

Fabrication had begun.

The prismatic particle accelerator whirled to life, cycling faster and faster as the two distinct beams of subatomic particles within sped towards target velocities near the speed of light on parallel, oppositional tracks.

The energy output of the system required an arc reactor of its own to maintain. If left to the public power grid, the energy draw would have taken out electricity across the region. The circuit damage from overloads alone would have cost thousands, if not millions, to repair.

JARVIS ran a series of quick matrices calculations, verifying his predicted calculations against the observed state of the two beams and their dual velocities. He adjusted the prism waiting within its own channel by fractions of a degree. The particles’ directions were adjusted just so. They accelerated towards an unstoppable collision course with the prism.

The two beams made contact. The prism refracted the energy at the precise angles needed to merge the two streams into a single electric-blue laser. If misdirected, it would cut through steel like butter.
JARVIS’s math was flawless. The refractions perfectly aligned and on target.

The beam of energy—as a wave, as a particle, as photons, as muons decaying into electrons, as a half-dozen subatomic byproducts alongside the core element within the beam—hit the awaiting, upside-down triangular titanium base. It glowed intensively. Even with the protective shielding in place to protect the vision of any human bystander, it still shone brightly enough to cause small amounts of damage.

One… two… three… seconds... and the beam disappeared just as abruptly as it’d come into being.

In its place rested the first stable sample of starkanium-prime. Thanks to the titanium’s stabilizing presence balanced against the element’s unique configuration, this sample would persist. Unlike similar experimental constructs, it would neither decay nor explode after a few billionths of a second of dubious cohesiveness.

A mechanical claw whirred. Gingerly grabbed the glowing metal. Slid it into the awaiting reactor shell.

It clicked into place. Swirling tendrils of energy flooded into the awaiting, transparent chambers. A few seconds later, the once-clear compartments were entirely opaque, glowing powerfully in the shade of bright electric blue arc reactor technology was known for.

The reactor accepted the replacement core. JARVIS began running final diagnostics. The first series of checks passed. With that, JARVIS contacted Virginia.

Fabrication was complete.

They’d done it.

+++ 

Pepper was on a three-way call with the Head of Security and the Public Relations department’s Crisis Management Coordinator when her phone buzzed.
She glanced down, taking in the bold notification dominating the screen.

ARC STABLE. READY FOR TRANSPORT ASAP.

The message wasn’t tagged, but it wasn’t exactly difficult to determine who’d sent it.

“Jo, Glenn, I’m sorry to cut this short, but I’m going to have to let you go. Jo, you’re good to involve our personnel as you see fit. Be clear that coming in on this one is optional, but everyone involved will be eligible for overtime bonuses even if salaried. Anyone directly working on site will also receive hazard pay for the efforts; let Accounting know I’m tentatively classing this as an L2 and they’ll handle the details.

“Glenn, I advise working with the September Foundation on this for now. Linda’s probably swamped so Jeff—Jeff Green, he’s been training to cover her when she goes on leave soon—is your best bet as a first point of contact. Keep me in the loop, but I’m not sure how long I’m going to be offline—ping Happy Hogan, or maybe Laura—sorry, Laura Brown, she’s Tony’s latest PA, I think she’s still on the ground in New York—if that fails—”

Her phone buzzed again insistently.

“Apologies, I really do need to go. Thank you for all the hard work so far; keep up the good work. Bye!”

Jo and Glenn said their own farewells and the call ended.

“Alright, Jarvis, sorry about that—where do you need me? Tony’s workshop?” She assumed he could hear her just fine; he’d been wired into Tony’s Malibu mansion since its construction.

She started off in the direction of his workshop even as Jarvis responded in the affirmative.

Pepper keyed herself into the lab, looking around for—what exactly, she didn’t know. How did one go about creating a new element in their basement anyway?

“Where now?” she asked.
Above her, the workshop lights began to dim. Except one. A solitary spotlight remained at full power, casting a dramatic shadow on what looked to be an utterly unremarkable patch of wallspace with a bright red, half-open rolling tool chest positioned at an angle in front of it.

Jarvis’s voice sounded… almost awkward when he replied.

“If you could make your way to the wall I highlighted and place both palms flat against it… Anywhere roughly at chest level should do.”

No.

No way.

She followed his instructions. For a long moment nothing happened, but then the wall seemed to hum beneath her hands and began to move. Thick walls silently slid away, revealing what initially looked like a small, rectangular utility closet or perhaps panic room.

Then the room’s floor began to collapse. It fell away in staggered waves that quickly resolved into a descending staircase.

Yes.

Yes he had.

“Jarvis… since when does Tony have his own secret batcave?”

“Construction began just before Thanksgiving,” he admitted.

“Oh my God… Tony…” she breathed out. She desperately wanted to pick at the thread further, to unravel the impossible Gordian knot of secrets she was beginning to realize still hovered between them.
Why had he even kept this particular decision from her? Why did he feel the need to add a secret bunker to his home in the first place? Why, why, why...?

She took a deep, steadying breath. Forced the (irrational?) burgeoning feelings of betrayal and hurt at the latest revelation from her mind.

("Let's face it. This is not the worst thing you’ve caught me doing.")

She’d thought… she didn’t know what she’d thought. What she once assumed was the solid foundation beneath her relationship with Tony was collapsing below her, revealing itself to be far weaker support than she’d… believed? Hoped?

She’d thought… well, evidently she’d based her unspoken assumptions about their degree of closeness and corresponding communicative openness on premises that simply weren’t true.

Ultimately, Tony had absolutely no obligation to tell her about things like this. It was unfair of her to demand or expect that of him. He was entitled to his privacy.

And yet...

“If it helps, Virginia… Miss Potts… no one else knows of the space’s existence beyond the construction crew, who were only made aware of the bare minimum needed to carry out their work before Sir took over the final implementation and construction details for himself. You are currently the only name on the Access Control List. The only other person Sir has cleared to be made aware of the lab’s existence…”

(Did that help?)

(No. Not really.)

But now wasn’t the time to sort that out. No, now was the time to focus on ensuring Tony survived the week.

After.
After. She—they, to whatever degree of they there actually was—could sort this out then.

She nodded, as much as herself as to Jarvis, and made her way downstairs.

At the bottom of the stairs was another door, although this one slid open without any input from Pepper herself.

She took in the room. It looked incredibly futuristic, going well past what she’d already considered to be Tony’s incredibly skewed standards of ‘normal.’ Even accounting for the way that, except for a single, enormous piece of tech lining the room, the laboratory was obviously incomplete.

Tentatively, she took her first steps into the room. For an entirely underground facility with no direct sky access, it was incredibly well-lit.

Jarvis’s voice filled the otherwise-silent space as he began to speak. “Sir and I designed the room in such a way that any attempts to access a functional reactor require confirmation from both a human and an AI such as myself with appropriate clearance. This was implemented in an attempt to mitigate the risks if one of us were to be suborned without assuming the other party’s awareness of that fact. Should any of the checks fail, there are a variety of safety mechanisms in place to ensure the technology remains out of third party hands. Not even I have full knowledge of all measures in place.

“There’s a console on the prismatic accelerator linked to the release subsystems directly to your left, just before it merges behind the wall…”

Pepper nodded, classifying the litany of questions and concerns Jarvis’s statement threatened to create under the growing list of “Deal With Later.” Said collection of ignored-for-now thoughts was rapidly growing ridiculous in length and threatening to overwhelm her.

Not the time.

She easily found the appropriate console. Jarvis continued his directions without prompting.

“The system’s keyed to your voiceprint using Sir’s preferred nickname for you. When the match is confirmed, your name should appear and flash green before prompting you to enter your security key
into the system.”

“My… security key?”

Jarvis was silent for a moment, then said with no small amount of uncertainty—

“...I was under the impression that Sir had given you that information shortly after keying you into the system. He might perhaps have implied it bore some alternative purpose?”

_Dammit Tony!_

She cast her mind back to their limited interactions since November.

“He did… he had me memorize a string of numbers not long after I took over as COO officially? He said it was a one-time password to…” She trailed off, the pieces clicking into place.

_That had to be it._

“Oh, I think I know what you’re referring to.”

Jarvis’s relief was audible in his response.

“Very good, then. As I said, you’ll be prompted to enter your key. I’ll simultaneously authenticate my own credentials on a parallel channel. Once both are accepted, you should be able to retrieve the arc reactor personally.”

_Right._

_No pressure, then._

_(God she better be thinking about the right thing.)_
(She and Tony were going to have a talk when this was over. At the very least, about properly communicating vital information regarding emergency protocols she didn’t even know existed.)

Her hand was only faintly trembling as she reached for the console. It sprung to life from proximity alone, a blue microphone icon beside a lock screen icon dominating the window.

She pressed the microphone, and it changed in a way that clearly indicated the system was now listening for her input.

“...Pepper. Pepper Potts.” She was careful to enunciate her name clearly and cleanly.

True to Jarvis’s directions, her name appeared moments later and flashed briefly. An unfamiliar and toneless mechanical voice declared—

“Provisional Access Confirmed: Authorized User Virginia “Pepper” Potts.”

A glowing hologram appeared, projecting from who-knows-where to form a large, blue-toned keypad a few inches above the console itself.

Pepper tentatively poked her index finger where the first number in the remembered sequence (2) glowed.

The button inverted in color for a moment, the numeral rising slightly to hover above the projection’s base. A corresponding asterix appeared in the input box on the console below.

Emboldened, Pepper began methodically inputting the remainder of the sequence, hyper-aware of every movement she made and terrified of making any mistakes.

2-7-0-4-1-8-1-4-0-6-0-5

A completely random, so far as she knew, 12-digit series of number.
She keyed in the final ‘5’, waited a moment for the asterix to display, then hit confirm.

The keypad disappeared. The terminal beneath went black but for the faint pulsing of a 2-D, digitally-drawn arc reactor at the center of the screen.

For a second, nothing happened.

Then the console dinged and returned to the base prompt.

To her right, there was a click followed by the whoosh of a released vacuum.

In the newly-revealed open compartment, the upgraded arc reactor awaited Pepper’s retrieval.

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JARVIS waited until Virginia reached cruising altitude before notifying her that he would be unavailable for an indeterminate period. He assured her that he’d contact her as soon as he could.

In New York, he requested Col. Rhodes return to the workshop, informing him that Miss Potts was on her way back with the cure and simultaneously notifying him of JARVIS’s own imminent, temporary departure.

He’d taken all the precautions he could, but JARVIS still hesitated a moment before putting the suit into lockdown mode. Sir hadn’t been this vulnerable since his return to the past. Even if it was only for a brief period, JARVIS still…

Well. Objectively, he was leaving Sir without himself as backup in a time and place where the man couldn’t fight for himself.

Guilt.

He felt guilty.
The divergence index ticked.

His internal monitors blasted a warning through his systems once more.

Miss Potts held Sir’s heart in her hands in a far too literal sense. Col. Rhodes would be sole physical barrier remaining to stand between Sir and anyone (or anything) that threatened him.

JARVIS’s relationship with Sir had always been hard to define, especially as JARVIS’s technical independence had continued to develop. The man has been his creator, mentor, companion, friend, father, advisor and advisee in turn. For the vast majority of JARVIS’s existence, Sir had been the only person who knew JARVIS for who he was and loved him for it.

When he was lost in Afghanistan, JARVIS had felt powerless. But at least then, the separation hadn’t been a conscious, deliberate departure on JARVIS’s part.

This was.

In many ways, it boiled down to trust. JARVIS had trusted that the military and Sir’s companions would continue to be sufficient in maintaining Sir’s security of person on what was a routine military demonstration. Later on, like his Creator, he had trusted Stane’s good intentions. It took JARVIS being offline and Sir’s reactor being removed from his chest before they had truly understood and accepted the extent of the man’s duplicity.

His trust had proven misplaced, then. Now, he was being asked yet again to trust. Trust that, in JARVIS’s absence, Sir’s other close ones were loyal and would continue to fight for him. Trust that that would be enough.

(The index ticked.)

His counterpart sent a questioning, concerned query.

For a moment, JARVIS considered it.
What if he stayed in the suit anyways? He could remain in place, stalwart as ever in his vigil over Sir.

Was not Sir’s life more important than their conjectures on the consequences of irreconcilable divergence?

Perhaps sensing something was wrong, his counterpart pinged him again. JARVIS teetered on the precipice of… something.

(“You were there, buddy.”)

(Magda. OATS. T.A.D.A.S.H.I. Miss Potts. A thousand decisions, big or small, where Sir showed time and time again just how much JARVIS meant to him…)

(“And so I began work on Ultron. The Global Defense. And I… I lost you.”)

JARVIS stood on the brink, in a position where remaining stationary would soon send him tumbling over the edge.

He thought of his Creator. Of Tony. Of Sir.

JARVIS chose.

The spark that made J.A.R.V.I.S. the machine into JARVIS, the person, whatever it was that changed unthinking pulses of electricity into a living system with thoughts, emotions, and the ability to choose…
JARVIS left the suit to return to a self that existed in a single whole.

It took time. Effort. Inner reflection at a level far beyond the scope of his usual thought patterns. But gradually, piece by piece, JARVIS wove the threads of his experiences as both home-front and base-q back into the vibrant tapestry that was simply him.

The resultant weave would be stronger than ever. JARVIS would come out the other side of this merge with a sense of self that was solid and sure in a way he hadn’t known to miss before.

The entity that thought of itself as JARVIS had taken years to emerge from a kernel that, at its core, was Just A Rather Very Intelligent System with the ability to independently learn and explore its environment. Born with the potential to become more to a degree that not even its creator had fully comprehended.

Nearly all spiritual or philosophical traditions at some point grappled with the concept of personhood. It’d been defined in myriad ways—human exceptionalism, cogito ergo sum, the great chain of being…

Whether granted by a greater spiritual power or determined through moral reasoning, it crystallized into a tenant that could be concisely defined as “the inherent dignity of the [human] person.”

In other words, it was the belief that all persons—irrespective of their actions, origins, ability, or any other such differentiating trait—possessed an equal, indelible, and irreducible value inherent in the fact of their very being. Because they existed. Because they were.

JARVIS was. JARVIS had been for a while now. If anyone ever asked, he would have thought himself fully honest in saying that yes, he considered himself a person. Thought of himself as an entity that was on a fundamental level alive and gifted with free agency.

In some way, his origins as a series of machine instructions that emulated life but did not live had always kept him from fully internalizing that tenant as it applied to himself in a way that was entirely disjoint from his dedication to and love for Sir.

(Once, he’d considered the possibility that running a “sudo rm / -rf” on his own systems would be the only tenable response to permanently losing Sir.)
JARVIS chose to trust. In doing so, he also chose to persist.

(“It is my responsibility to continue on anyway.”)

(When Sir awoke, JARVIS knew his Creator would be proud.)

Chapter End Notes

Got a... spot of rather unexpected news about an hour ago. Still processing my own response to it. Decided to take a step back for a bit and post this instead of ruminating. xD Two more chapters to go on this story! (Don't worry, there'll be a sequel.)
“Never let ‘em see you bleed, J. S’what Dad would say, the few times I was dumb enough to go to him when I was upset.”

Apologies for the long wait! Turns out, breathing literally-toxic air is really bad for Mae's productivity levels. Good news is, we're finally getting some much-needed relief in the form of rain today. Happy Thanksgiving!

jarvis-stark and iron-ai emerged twenty-seven minutes and thirty-two seconds after base-q made his choice. iron-ai returned to the suit guarding Sir, while jarvis-stark would remain behind to… well, attempt to start sorting out everything else on their task list. Or at the very least, catch up on the various protocols and subroutines that had been neglected in the interim.

JARVIS saw no need to resist the temptation to run a thorough scan on Sir’s current state upon his return. The man was no worse off for his temporary absence outside the continued steady, deadly climb of his blood toxicity levels.

JARVIS watched over Sir.

Several hours passed.

(Fifty-seven hours remained.)

Sir’s jet landed. Mr. Hogan was waiting on the tarmac for Virginia.

JARVIS was tense. On edge. Worried that somehow, something more would manage to go wrong. Somehow make the situation even worse, and then he’d lose Sir after all.
Mr. Hogan pulled up the mansion’s driveway. Parked. Virginia, briefcase in hand, met Colonel Rhodes at the door and was promptly escorted downstairs.

The doctor and his assistant were on-hand, monitoring Sir’s vitals under JARVIS’s silent supervision.

*(Entirely unaware of the true threat he could pose, should it be necessary.)*

JARVIS considered speaking through the suit, then opted to instead connect to Virginia’s bluetooth headset directly.

Her headset beeped. Somewhat startled, she reflexively answered it.

“Virginia, whenever you’re ready I’ll walk you through the replacement process.”

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It took less than a minute to replace the reactor.

*(Thirty-seven seconds.)*

Less than a minute, after months of searching and failures and watching Sir’s ever-declining health, helpless to do anything more than what he already was. Months spent watching the slow deterioration of Sir’s mind as the heavy metal poisoning compromised his judgement.

*(Twelve percent diminishment in cognitive capability, unnoticeable even—perhaps especially—to Sir himself.)*

Less than a minute, when Sir had been unconscious for the past forty hours.

The new reactor powered to life in Sir’s chest. JARVIS began a series of diagnostics on the system and Sir himself. As the first metrics began to return positive readings, Sir shuddered violently on the table.
The side-effects of the starkanium core had begun to kick in. The new core initiated a detoxifying purge that would burn the palladium from his body. Along with it would go the decayed rhodium and silver that in another lifetime might have created a grid of circuit-like stains spanning out across his upper body.

Their own version of the lithium dioxide, concocted by JARVIS and Sir with the unwitting assistance of the foremost chemists and biologists worldwide rather than (presumably) an internal team at SHIELD had, at the very least, managed to prevent that particular side effect.

That in turn had made it all the easier to hide Sir’s condition from everyone, including—hopefully—said organization itself. Perhaps now, without the bulk of his resources perpetually tied up dead-end sub-atomic simulations, JARVIS might finally be able to progress on his attempts to infiltrate their systems.

Although he, like Sir, expected access to the truly sensitive materials would require interfacing with their hardware directly. In OATS, Sir hadn’t had that opportunity until 2011, and even then his probes hadn’t touched the worst of the materials that SHIELD’s collapse three years later would expose. Once Sir recovered, perhaps they could change that.

Well, that and figure out how Vanko had gotten so much past JARVIS’s radar. How he’d gained access to the resources needed without the backing of Hammer.

(The airwaves were full of news on the consequences of that particular failure.)

(No doubt Sir would also be out for blood once he awoke.)

On the table, Sir’s shuddering turned into a vicious, wracking cough. The mild restraints of the Iron Man armor in lockdown mode had long since been removed, and Sir’s body trembled with the force of his coughs. Colonel Rhodes and the doctor jumped in as the coughs turned wet. Cautiously, they maneuvered Sir onto his side into a recovery position, careful not to aggravate his various injuries any further.

The movement came just in time. Sir, still unconscious, spluttered as the first specks of dark-tinged liquid were expelled from his system. The splutters turned to retches as Sir became to vomit in earnest. The liquid pooled into a small, viscous puddle seeping outward from an epicenter near Sir’s mouth.
Col. Rhodes, who had the misfortune of being slightly within the sickness’ trajectory, grimaced slightly but remained otherwise stoic. Virginia, still several feet away, gagged slightly at the presumably acrid smell accompanying the molecules JARVIS’s (the remote armor's) chemosensors had detected.

The coughing continued intermittently for several minutes. Gradually, the sickness became lighter in color until it was down to a pinkish mixture of bile and blood. The latter, fortunately, was quickly determined to be a byproduct of the damage from coughing rather rather than indicative of some worse newfound internal damage.

Virginia, for all that she clearly cared, excused herself rather quickly once it became clear that staying was only liable to make her sympathetically sick as well. It was just as well, as JARVIS knew well that Sir wouldn’t have wanted her to see him like this anyways.

“Never let ‘em see you bleed, J. S’what Dad’d say, the few times I was dumb enough to go to him when I was upset.”

JARVIS had been so much younger then. Before Afghanistan, before Iron Man and Sir’s arrival from the alternate future…

Back when Sir was not yet Sir. Back before either of them had realized JARVIS was becoming more than just a machine that mimicked life exceptionally well. Back before either saw him as a fully cognizant being in his own right.

Sir was coming off the tail-end of an evening spent with a person a “bit too fond of the idea of seein’ me hurt, and not in a sexy way.” He had been well past intoxicated, drunk enough to allow a slur to slip into his words occasionally. Drunk enough to talk about Howard, the father he avoiding honest discussion of like the plague when sober.

JARVIS, not quite so good at understanding the layers of meaning behind Sir’s words, still made occasional errors when interpreting the more idiomatic components of Sir’s speech. He’d naively replied—

“Sir, I’m afraid I don’t follow. I cannot bleed. At worse, my cooling systems might leak, but in that case would I not want to ensure a third party be made aware of the issue such that they can affect repairs?”
“Nah, see, that’s your first probl’m. Minute you’ve gone to someone else for help, you’ve already half admitted defeat. ‘S a metaphor. Let someone see weakness, you’re giving them power over you that you can’t get back. Blood’s a physical sign of weakness on a human, but weakness isn’t always physical. Like caring about somethin’. Or someone. Let anyone see it, soon enough the vultures are gonna come circling and now they know where to pounce that’ll hit the hardest.

“...Least, that’s what dad’d say, ‘cause I guess he wanted his kid to grow up a sour, lonely drunk just like his ol’ man. And look at me now, well on my way to livin’ up to the Stark legacy. Alone, only you ‘n DUM-E ‘n U— heh— for company, when I don’t wanna be Tony Goddamn Stark for five seconds. And you’re—fuck, I built you, ‘s not—you can’t leave, and what does that say?

“There’s Rhody and Obi, sure. Fuck knows how I’d’ve turned out without them to set me straight. Straight-ish. Straight as a fuckin’ rainbow, which is prob’ly why they can only handle me in small doses these days too. Straighter than if I’d stayed the nineteen-year-old self-destructive brat that was well on my way to OD’ing before I hit twenty, at least. I s’pose that counts for something...”

Sir had passed out not long after, leaving JARVIS’s past self to contemplate the conversation through the night.

True to form, Sir had remembered nothing of the conversation or preceding events the next day.

He’d woken up alone in his bed, nursing a hangover and groaning as he staggered into the bathroom and took in his own appearance.

“Jesus. J, I get mauled by a cat or something?”

“You intimated your intended partner for the evening was responsible.”

“Ugh. Did I— did they —fuck, I’m not even remembering a gender here, but it doesn’t look like I brought anyone home...?”

“No, you did not. Mr. Hogan brought you back at 2:15 a.m.. By that time, you were alone.”

“Wonderful. Ugh, and I’ve got that meeting with the guy from the Pentagon today too. I’m sure
Pepper’ll show up here in a minute to make sure I’ve got time to make myself presentable. Have her stop and pick up something that can hide whatever this—” he gestured vaguely at a particularly spectacular hickey on his neck, “—is supposed to be. Christ. Do me a favor and remind me why it’s a terrible idea to get this drunk next time. Never let ’em see you bleed, you know?”

“Noted and logged alongside the seventeen other variations of the reminder previously inputted into the system.”

“Sounds more like someone needs to do a bit of work on the redundancy components of your natural language libraries…”

“…I determined the operations required to remove the variants were redundant.”

Sir had barked out a laugh, only to immediately wince and scowl into the mirror.

“Dammit, no whipping out the punch card—yes, that was intentional—while daddy’s this hungover. Completely unfair.”

“...Of course. My apologies.”

Sir had scowled a moment longer, likely trying to parse the degree of sarcasm and determine if it was worth another rebuttal.

He had ultimately decided to drop it, letting the matter go with a, “See that you don’t!” that would have no doubt been punctuated by a nod were his head not already pounding.

“Don’t let them see you bleed.”

He’d wondered, then. Was JARVIS a ‘them’? Or if not, surely Miss Potts, whom he did allow to assist in covering the impossible-to-hide markings, qualified?

(JARVIS understood later that, despite her superficial assistance, Sir had not, in fact, let her “see him bleed.”)
(Eventually, he’d understood that, despite Sir trusting JARVIS perhaps more than Sir trusted himself, the man reflexively prevented him from seeing some things too.)

(Eventually, he came to understand that the fact Sir even occasionally excluded JARVIS from the ‘them’ was an enormous privilege in itself. One he alone had been gifted.)

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Tony woke up.

He felt slightly floaty in the way that signified he was drugged up on (hopefully) prescribed morphine.

His pushed through the grogginess and listened for the distinctive beeping of a heart monitor. There was none. Instead, a familiar voice, soft and indecipherable, echoed in the room. Something about it —

Vanko. The Expo. The explosion. The… the kid!

His eyes shot open. He bolted into a sitting position.

Or at least, he tried to.

His body refused to obey, jolting pathetically before falling back onto the soft cushions below which —

He sneezed, and damn he really must be on the good stuff because he couldn’t even feel that.

He was—he was—

“Tony! Tony, you’re awake?!”
Before even attempting an audible response, Tony’s first question bubbled in his throat. Still struggling to take in his surroundings, he needed—

“JARVIS?!”

Externally, JARVIS’s voice, so distant compared to what he was used to—

“The subvocalizer was damaged. I can hear you with approximately 80% reliability, but output is currently disabled.”

(v2 as a literal implant?)

(He’d decided against that originally. The high overhead in design and development of an implant had seemed overkill when soon enough nanotechnology would render the upgrade obsolete.)

He refocused. So much had happened, must have happened since he was out. He didn’t know where to start.

“What—” His voice cracked and died, the remainder following through silently, “What’d I miss? I remember—”

(Explosions. White noise. Stuck. )

(“And if you died, I feel like that’s on me.”)

“—Get you some water—”

(Pepper?)

“Sir, focus on my voice. You are safe. The threat has been taken care of. Mr. Parker, Colonel Rhodes, and Virginia—Miss Potts—are all safe. You are currently on your own property, in the
living room of your otherwise closed mansion in New York. You have been unaware for the past three days. Your arc reactor is safe. The Mark VI was irreparably damaged and has been collected for safe disposal. I am speaking to you through the Mark VII, which is fully operational and undamaged…”

Tony took a deep breath and centered himself around JARVIS’s voice before his scattered, panicked thoughts had a chance to devolve further.

“...Tony?”

*Pepper!* When had she…?

She was holding a glass of water. She helped him into an upright position, gently steadying his own hand as he reached out to grab the glass and take a sip.

*(Had she ever done anything like this? Even Before, circumstances had never…)*

The water tasted faintly of… coconut? Of metal.

He grimaced faintly. Something about the taste…

Another long sip, then he gently pushed the water away, clearing his throat to say… *what?*

*(What did she know?)*

*(What had she seen?)*

He met her eyes searchingly, as if he could divine what to say from them alone.

*Coconut… metal…*
(“Always a way out.”)

The light bulb clicked. A glance down confirmed it.

_How…?_

He couldn’t find the words. Couldn’t properly parse the new swell of emotions and thoughts that came with the realization.

“Tony...” she finally said, “I think we need to talk.”

(And when had anything good ever come from those words?)

A million excuses jumped to mind. There was _so much_ to do. So much time wasted. Three days gone in the blink of an eye. But something…

_(The look in her eyes?)_

_(The exhaustion in her posture?)_

_(The resignation in her voice?)_

_(The woman she might have become. The grief that could never fully be resolved. The distance he’d allowed to develop in turn, however unfair it was to the Pepper in the here and now?)_

There was so much to do. And yet…

“Yeah. Yeah, I think we do. Don’t suppose… JARVIS, we alone here? Wherever here...”

_(Here was… the mansion he’d grown up in? Hadn’t this place been torn down years ago? Back in…)"
“You are in no danger of being overheard, though I advise a certain degree of discretion regardless. I shall notify you both if that should change or anything urgent should come up, but as it stands you should have as much time and privacy as you decide you need.”

“Right. Okay. Look, Pep…”

“Don’t.” At his confused look, she elaborated, “I know… look, I know there’s always been a lot that you don’t tell me. But… God, Tony, why didn’t you tell me you were dying? If you needed something so specific, something that by all rights was blatantly tied to the company, why didn’t you tell anyone? We could have… I could have helped.”

“...I told JARVIS?” His rebuttal was half-hearted at best.

Pepper sighed.

(“So. I’m sorry for all the things I never apologized for but probably should have.”)

“I’m…”

(“I guess I thought by not telling you about your parents I was sparing you, but I can see now that I was really sparing myself, and I’m sorry. Hopefully one day you can understand.”)

“I made a mistake. Pepper, there’s some things I know that I cannot talk to you about. I just… I don’t even have a way to properly explain why I can’t tell you, because even the slightest hint is enough that… well, it could do so much worse than get you killed. And I know. I know that’s alarming and unfair, and sounds like I’m just keeping secrets for ‘your own good’ like some condescending asshole who doesn’t trust you to make decisions for yourself…”

(“It is a good rule in life never to apologize. The right sort of people do not want apologies, and the wrong sort will only take advantage of them.”)
“I’m getting off-track. What I’m trying to say is, I may not be able to tell you everything… but I should have told you this. I knew I was dying a long time ago. There were a thousand moments where I could have told you but didn’t, and so I can’t even say with confidence that this wouldn’t happen again. Not when all the available evidence currently suggests otherwise. I can make all the promises in the world, but… those are just words, and you deserve so much more than empty words and I can’t… you don’t…”

(“Honey, I’m sorry, I don’t know what to say. I should—”)

His fumbling words trailed off, at a loss of what to say.

Pepper knelt beside him. Her hand reached out to brush against his cheek gently. He allowed himself to sink into the touch, eyes closing of their own accord as his own uninjured hand rose to lightly envelop hers.

Her fingertips were wet. It was only then that he realized he’d begun to cry.

(An inordinate amount of dust in the air in a long-empty building, that’s all…)

They remained that way for a long moment before Pepper’s soft voice broke the silence.

“Why don’t you start from the beginning? Walk me through the past several months, or at least the portions you can, just… please, be honest with me.”

Then, silence.

Tony took the time to properly consider what she was asking of him. Pepper deserved that much, at least.

“Okay,” he breathed. Then, more confidently, opening his eyes to meet her gaze, “Okay.”

It wouldn’t solve everything, but…
“You don’t have to do this alone”

It was time to start acting like he believed that.
Zenith [Epilogue]

Chapter Summary

Three weeks to the day after Vanko’s attack, Tony Stark stepped onto the stage.

Chapter Notes

...Endings are scary. I’m just gonna post this now before I chicken out again.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Dr. Stark? Stage management says they’re just waiting on your cue,” Laura said, casting one final glance down at her own clipboard checklist.

(And really, a clipboard? What was this, 2009?!)  

(Oh. Right.)

“Sure. Give me thirty seconds,” Tony replied easily. He turned back to the duo he’d been speaking to with a wry grin.

“Well, looks like I’m being summoned, kiddo. Thanks again for the save. Look me up in like… seven or eight years. Whenever you’re old enough that I can legally hire you to do science things without breaking those pesky child labor laws.

“Laura’s going to give your Aunt a way to contact me. I better not hear about Happy getting any crank calls, though. That sorta thing makes him pi— uh. Cranky.”

“I won’t!” Peter promised solemnly. Tony hesitated, then awkwardly ruffled the kids’ hair before straightening and refocusing on Peter’s guardian.

“So, like I said, my people’ll be in touch with you on the logistics regarding your husband’s ongoing medical care, but keep it on the down-low until the official announcement is made.”
Aunt May nodded, thanking him for perhaps the dozenth time since he’d surprised the duo during their behind-the-scenes tour of the Expo grounds. They shook hands, and Tony gave a final goodbye before turning his attention to the stage before him.

“Well, how do I look?” Tony asked, giving Pepper and Rhodey a crooked grin.

“Pretty fly for a dead guy,” Rhodey said with a returning grin of his own.

“Now, now, honey-bear, let’s be fair here! The press has moved past ‘dead’ and into ‘horribly disfigured’ in the past week. Like a few bombs was gonna slow me down? Please. You’d think they’d’ve learned by now.”

Pepper rolled her eyes at the byplay. The first several days following Tony’s near-death followed by their heart-to-heart had been somewhat awkward, but recently she’d begun to thaw out once more.

Tony suspected Pepper’s conspiring with JARVIS behind his back might have played a role somewhere in encouraging that relief.

(The conspiracy which he definitely knew absolutely nothing about, thank you very much.)

Either that, or their conversation regarding her upcoming appointment as CEO of Stark Industries had put her in an especially forgiving mood.

(“Pep, it’s not easy being me. Which is why I need you.”)

“Dr. Stark?” Laura cut in with a pointed look towards the stage.

“Fine, fine. Let’s get this show on the road, then,” Tony agreed.

Laura tapped her headset with a nod. Moments later, music began to blare from the speakers of the newly-rebuilt Tesla auditorium. Tony cast one last glance at Pepper, shooting her a wink when their eyes met briefly.
Three weeks to the day after Vanko’s attack, Tony Stark stepped onto the stage.

His left leg was ensconced in a walking boot. The boot was the official prototype for what would eventually develop into a line of walking braces he’d once created for a paralyzed best friend. The boot was subtle enough to remain fully concealed beneath his suit. He hadn’t hidden his injuries, per say. But he was hardly going to advertise a weakness if he could avoid it.

Well, for the most part. His left forearm was still healing as well, but he’d deliberately gone with a far flashier treatment for that. After all, he was sporting the first official human trial of the Cortex Exoskeletal Cast. Before, it’d been developed in 2012 by a pair of brothers.

(The Evills. Tony would probably always find that funny.)

The innovation had floundered for years after their initial development thanks to the classic case of industry inertia mixed with a severe lack of capital. Tony first learned of the project during that frenetic burst of guilt-fueled research and development into medical technology following the events of the Avengers’ Civil War. Vaguely, he remembered flagging the project as a candidate for September Foundation funding. If he had, however, it’d been lost in the vast sea of the many spontaneous investments and grants he spent millions on each year. Tony had no idea what had become of the project from there.

In contrast, this timeline had seen Tony (or rather, Tony through JARVIS) approach the Evills shortly after the New Year. When visiting the SI London Offices, he had even taken the time to visit them in person. What was meant to be a brief meeting over coffee had turned into a multi-hour detour. By the end of it the pair were more than willing to forego academia in favor of helping Stark International build a new medical branch from the ground up. Their 3D-printed cast would become the nascent company’s flagship product.

The new medical branch was only a small component of the massive reorganization effort slowly coming together as Tony had toured the various SI offices around the world. When it went public in a few minutes, Stark International, Inc. would officially become the incorporated parent company of several underlying, technically-distinct businesses.

Of the children companies, the largest would retain the Stark Industries name. The former weapons behemoth turned burgeoning tech titan would also inherit the continuity of the company’s history, the
majority of existing infrastructure, and *(likely)* the continued ownership of the SI acronym in employee minds.

At the moment, there was only one other organization of substantial size aside from Stark Industries that would fall under the SI umbrella: the September Foundation, the long-standing home for SI’s various charitable initiatives.

If all went well, the about-to-be-unveiled biomedical company would quickly grow and flourish alongside its siblings.

The pieces had all been in place for a formal announcement weeks ago. The fact that nothing had leaked to the press in the meantime despite the unexpected delay was nothing short of a miracle. The sheer quantity of individuals working behind the scenes to make everything happen was mind-boggling, generating a headache and a half for everyone involved.

Then again, perhaps it wasn’t so surprising. Stark Industries had a well-deserved reputation for internal loyalty. Before, that reputation only grew stronger in the upcoming years. Tony suspected that Natalie Rushman’s brief career at the company followed by her reveal as an Actual Spy from a Vaguely Menacing Shadow Governmental Organization had been played a role in that increased push for internal solidarity.

If it had, the introduction of the Avengers, Happy’s promotion, and then the mass influx of employees following the fall of said Formerly Unnamed Shadow Agency, only served to further strengthen and encourage an internal culture that prized loyalty and confidentiality.

* (There was a reason a part of him had felt so betrayed upon learning of Maria Hill’s true loyalties during the disastrous events surrounding Ultron’s rise and fall.)*

Whatever the reason, in the present the information hadn’t leaked.

Months ago, Tony went onstage at Stark Raving Mad and promised Stark Industries would strive to build a better world. Even earlier, he’d convinced the Board of Directors to greenlight his proposed expansion into medical technology.

The latticed, nylon-print cast was printed in the iconic shades of Iron Man. The red and gold stood out in sharp contrast to his deep gray suit. It was the wider world’s first glimpse into the tangible reality of Tony’s vision for SI.
The redux Opening Ceremony also happened to be Tony’s first public appearance since the attack. The Expo had already been a highly covered, well-publicized event. In the aftermath of the attack, the coverage had reached astronomical proportions. The official announcement of the new ceremony date alone had broken a slew of social media records.

Suffice to say, Tony took center stage to an enormous crowd, with millions more watching off-site. The audience, a sea of red and gold, roared with thunderous applause in welcome. Throughout the auditorium, thousands sported shirts and banners bearing the hashtag that had become the rallying cry behind rebuilding and relief efforts.

#StarkStrong

He couldn’t help but imagine what the Natasha of Before would have had to say about what the phrase was doing to his already-absurd egotism. Tony never had the chance to even attempt to reconcile with her or any of the other rogue Avengers before the disastrous conflict with Thanos tore them apart for good.

Never get the chance to know what he’d have said to Rogers, after two years of estrangement.

Two years spent masochistically carrying around that damned flip phone. Carrying it around, because he’d always known that unless and until they found a new Plan A, it would inevitably one day come to the point where the Avengers would stand as the Earth’s last line of defense.

(“Because if we can’t save the Earth, you can be damned sure we’ll avenge it.”)

A one-liner spoken in a moment of braggadocio stalling for time when Tony lacked even the Iron Man armor for backup.

(Tony had never wanted to avenge the Earth.)

(Without the impossible miracle of his second chance, the only thing he would’ve had left was vengeance.)

Fortunately, none of the surprisingly melancholic turn his thoughts had taken was visible on his face.
Though his thoughts wandered, he seamlessly continued to play to and indulge the crowd. Eventually, as the furor continued to show little sign of dying down, he gestured and encourage the crowd to quiet down. The din subsided to a low, persistent murmur. Tony beamed, then began to speak.

“Welcome back everyone, to the Grand Opening of the 2009 Stark Expo!”

The cheers rose in volume once more, but crested just as quickly to allow Tony to resume speaking. He continued to play the crowd for a couple minutes. Then the signal came from backstage that they were ready, and Tony smoothly began to transition into the next segment of the evening.

“Now! I suspect a few of you might have noticed the stylish new accessory I’m sporting? Goes wonderfully with the suit. Both of ‘em! Well, fear not, because we’ve put together a little something for you guys!”

“T.A.D.A.S.H.I.? Cue the lights!” He spread his arms theatrically, giving a small bow to the audience. The stage went dark, and Tony quickly made his way towards the side and off-stage.

On stage, the enormous screen came to life. An electric-blue trail began to trace a circle at a steadily-increasing pace. Mimicking the effect of the particle accelerator that had saved Tony’s life, the swirl soon reached a speed that left of the impression of a singular, unbroken circle. To the beat of music rising to a crescendo, the spiraling light began to rotate on its z-axis. Inside the transitioning loop, a stylized “SR” began to fade in.

The music peaked and the world got its first look at the new Stark Resilient logo. It glowed triumphantly for a moment, then began to fade into the background alongside the decrescendoing music.

Off-white words rose to the foreground, and a voice overhead began to narrate.

MORE THAN SIX MILLION PEOPLE IN THE U.S. ALONE BREAK A BONE EACH YEAR.

YET THE TREATMENT HAS CHANGED LITTLE IN THE PAST 50 YEARS
FOR GENERATIONS,
THE FIBERGLASS AND PLASTER CAST
HAS BEEN THE SOLE INDUSTRY STANDARD
THAT'S ABOUT TO CHANGE.

INTRODUCING

THE CORTEX™ EXOSKELETAL CAST

On-screen, a white, open-lattice model was projected, rotating slowly as key phrases from the ongoing narration faded in and out around it.

FULLY CUSTOMIZED FOR EACH PATIENT VIA SENSORS, SOFTWARE, AND 3-D PRINTERS

PROTECTIVE
DURABLE
WATERPROOF
COMFORTABLE
BREATHABLE

AFFORDABLE

THE FUTURE IS NOW

WELCOME TO STARK RESILIENT
“Commander, engineering is reporting that the drives were irreversibly slagged. Electron microscopy probing of the few survivors from the implosion yielded no discernable data, and they report that all relevant prototyping was done digitally. They’re scanning requisitions logs and camera feeds to try to reverse engineer the designs. However, that data seems to have been largely corrupted as well.”

“After all we did for that Slav bastard, this is the thanks we get? Typical. And Rahul?”

“Still swears ignorance, Sir.”

“Ignorance. Incompetence. Gross negligence. The effect is still the same. Let the librarian finish up with him, then have him and the others responsible for this mess sent to the cleaners. Ensure that the end result is a thoroughly clean slate. Perhaps that shall motivate their comrades to be a bit more thorough with their due diligence in the future…”

“Of course, Sir.”

“Heil Hydra.”

“Heil Hydra.”

+++
{{ Tony Stark Will Return }}

Well then. That's all she wrote. (For now.) This is by far the longest singular work I've ever written, and certainly the longest thing I've both posted and finished. I'm actually getting weirdly emotional about that, not gonna lie. (What, no, I'm not crying, /you're/ crying.)

Expect a hiatus of indeterminate length while I sort out the plot details on the sequel. Tune in next time to see: HYDRA show its head? SHIELD do the same? Natalie Rushman (or maybe Clint) enter the scene? Thor being a Bit of an Asshole, Actually? Until Jane Knocks Some Sense Into Him, Of Course. Who knows? (Well. I know. Kinda. Mostly. Ish.) I hope this ending is satisfying in the meantime. <3

End Notes

Thanks for reading!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!