The Price We Pay
by aliaoftwoworlds

Summary

For as long as he can remember, Tony’s been followed by a ghost. Every time he nears death, the ghost appears and gives him a choice, and every time, his answer is the same.

Until it’s not.

Notes

This is a slightly weird idea, but it popped into my head and wouldn’t leave me alone until I at least planned out the story, and then I liked it too much to not write it right away. I know I still haven’t updated my bitter series, I’m sorry, for some reason these other ideas just keep taking over.

The death and dying tag is in the tags but not as an archive warning for major character death because it’s not exactly a traditional “death,” and the theme is sort of explored throughout. I don’t want to ruin the story, but you’ll see what I mean. I wouldn’t consider it “permanent character death,” but if you’re bothered by themes of death and attempted suicide, I’d stay away from this one. There’s also some references to Howard being a pretty shitty father, but nothing that’s explicitly detailed child abuse, and one very brief reference to nonconsensual underage groping/implied potential sexual activity.

A note: I know there’s a discrepancy in Tony’s age when his parents died. The official date of their death is 1991, which would supposedly make Tony 21, but in the first Iron Man they
talk about Tony taking over the company at 21 and imply that several years had passed with Stane at the wheel before Tony took over, so I’m going with him being 17 at the time, because that’s when he graduated MIT and it seemed in the first movie (and the flashback in CW) like that was around the time his parents died.

I also want to mention that I still haven’t seen Infinity War, so please forgive me if the scenes/references to it aren’t completely accurate here. I know pretty much everything that happens plot-wise, but the details are spotty. The IW parts are going to be fairly vague, but still, I might get something wrong.

He’s not sure where it comes from, why it’s there, or even what it is. His earliest lasting memory of it is when he’s six years old, but there could have been incidents before that that he just doesn’t remember, for all he knows.

What Tony does know is that for as long as he can remember, he’s been followed by a ghost. Haunted, maybe, but that word always seems to mean frightening noises and unexplained movements and the creepy feeling of being watched, and that doesn’t really apply to Tony. All he has is this… thing that shows up when he’s in serious danger.

Not that he understands that at first, as a child. The first time he remembers seeing it, he’s only six, and manages to climb over a banister and fall twenty feet to the marble floor below. The manor isn’t exactly child friendly, his parents are busy (they always are, even at such a young age he’s already learned this) and Jarvis is occupied tending to Ana, who’s sick with something that has her stuck in bed and worrying all the adults. So Tony’s left alone, and like he usually does when he’s alone and bored and already far too smart for his own good, he gets into trouble. It’s not like he’s trying to get hurt, but he doesn’t carefully consider the potential consequences of getting over the thing until he’s slipped and he’s falling and everything is black.

And then he’s lying there on the ground, blinking up at the ceiling. He sits up and looks around and immediately can tell that something is wrong. His head hurts a whole lot, so does one of his arms and just about every other part too, but it feels… weird, wrong, tingly, like it’s not a real hurt. Something about the room looks wrong, too, a little blurry like there’s a film over everything.

And then he sees the man. Standing to the side, just silently watching. Tony doesn’t recognize him, doesn’t know who he is, even though he usually knows all of the staff in the house. And unlike the walls and the furniture and everything else right now, the man looks sharp and clear.

Tony knows that he fell far and hard. He’s pretty sure he’s hurt a lot worse than it seems right now. He thinks of some of the things his mom has told him. “Are you an angel?” he asks the man.

The man smiles at him, and it’s a sad smile. The kind his mom gets a lot. “No,” the man says, and Tony believes him. His mom describes angels as heavenly beings, beautiful and wonderful and full of God’s light. This man just looks like a guy, kind of old and tired and sad.

“Oh,” Tony says. He’s not supposed to talk to strangers, he knows that, but he’s also always thought that rule isn’t really absolute with him. Half the staff are practically strangers to him, but he’s supposed to talk to them. He doesn’t go to normal school, there aren’t any other kids his age in the manor or nearby, and his parents are almost never around. Aside from Jarvis, who’s he supposed to talk to, if not strangers?
He waits, not sure what to say to the man. He wonders if the man is a ghost, like in movies, haunting the house. And if that means Tony’s a ghost now, too. Maybe he died when he fell, just splatted on the ground and died right there, and now he’s going to haunt the house along with this man. If that’s the case, Tony supposes he should get to know his fellow ghost.

But the man is moving forward to stand right in front of Tony, looking down at him. The man has a look on his face like Jarvis gets when he knows Tony’s done something bad and he needs to reprimand him, but he really doesn’t want to. The look like he’s putting something off, and Tony wonders what that’s about.

“You’ll survive this,” the man says after a short pause.

Tony waits for more, but the man doesn’t say anything else. “Okay, well… thanks?” Tony says, not sure how he should be responding to that. So he’s not a ghost after all, apparently, or at least not for long. But how does the man know he’ll live through this? Maybe he’s just guessing.

“So do you want my help?” the man asks.

“No,” Tony’s saying before he even thinks about it. He’s not actually sure what the offer is for; help with his injuries, help with waking up in the real world—assuming this is some kind of ghost-world where people go when they almost die—or maybe just help standing up, but whatever it is, Tony doesn’t need the help. He might only be six, but he’s already used to doing things on his own. And maybe he’s bending the rules and talking to a stranger, but he definitely knows he shouldn’t let a stranger touch him.

The ghost-man nods, and before Tony can do more than blink, just fades from sight. The walls ripple like a freaky dream, and suddenly Tony’s entire body feels unbearably heavy. The hurt in his head spikes into something really sharp and pounding and he can’t hold himself up anymore, slumping back to the floor in the position he fell in. The blurriness fades from the walls and they look normal again, but he only sees it for a second before everything is black again.

He wakes up in the hospital, with both his parents and Jarvis fretting over him. He forgets about the weird ghost in the immediate aftermath of waking up, where the hurts are real and so are his parents’ tears and he really just wants to be held by his mom.

Later, when his mom asks him what happened, looking for more details beyond his dad’s angry (scared, Mom tells him, he was scared for Tony, that’s why he yelled) “why the hell would you go over the railing,” he tells her about the man. He can’t exactly remember every detail, but he tells his mom as much as he can. He’s not sure if she’s ever gotten really hurt before, or come close to dying, but he wonders what her ghost looks like. Maybe it’s the same old guy for everyone.

But his mom doesn’t get it. She listens to his story with a sad little smile like the one the ghost had, and then she hugs him tight and tells him that he must have a guardian angel. That’s when Tony realizes that what happened to him must not have ever happened to her. The man said he wasn’t an angel, and Tony believed him. His mom doesn’t understand.

A few days later, he confesses the story to Jarvis when he gets a moment. Jarvis knows practically everything, he talks to Tony a lot about grown up things that other adults won’t, and he won’t tell Tony not to talk about “silly things” like his dad would. But Jarvis doesn’t understand either. He tells Tony some things about “near-death experiences” and how people say they’ve seen their loved ones or had an out-of-body experience, but none of them really sound like what happened to Tony. The man was so real.

Eventually, Tony drops it. He moves on, and he doesn’t go near the stair railings again (at least for
about a month), and he nearly forgets about the man.

Until a few years later, when during his fourth kidnapping attempt that year, the wannabe thugs get a little carried away when he tells them that his dad won’t pay ransoms. He’s already gotten himself out of their stupid, cheap handcuffs and that’s rattled them. They’re bigger than him, but a hell of a lot dumber, and he knows he’ll get a chance to escape pretty soon if he keeps irritating them and throwing them off their game. Hopefully he can be home by dinner and his dad won’t be too annoyed.

But he might overdo it a little with provoking them, because one of them has big, sweaty hands wrapped around his neck and is squeezing to the point that Tony’s thrashing in sheer panic at the lack of air, fearless front be damned. Breathing is an essential part of the whole escape plan.

The guy must keep his disgusting hands on Tony a little too long, because everything is a little wavy in Tony’s vision. The thug’s mouth is moving, but it’s slowing down and Tony can’t hear what he’s saying over the buzzing in his ears anyway, and it really is slow, isn’t it?

It’s been years since that first incident, so Tony doesn’t make the connection at first. The first time, it was just him alone in the big foyer of the house, so he didn’t actually know what had happened to time in the real world. But now, with the thugs slowing down until they’re seemingly frozen in place and everything going blurry around him again, he understands what’s happening just before it does.

The guy’s hands loosen around his throat and he can just barely breathe, but he’s still stuck in place. He’s not sure what would happen if he tried to pry the hands from around his neck, but they feel like iron around him. He doesn’t think he can change these circumstances.

Instead, he looks around as much as he can within his prison. Sure enough, there’s the man from a few years ago, the ghost. He looks the same as Tony remembers, same clothes even. It goes faster this time.

“You’ll survive this,” the man says, and Tony nods. He figures the morons who grabbed him hoping to get money out of his dad won’t actually kill him. Nobody pays for a corpse, and these guys, though they’re obviously lowlifes, probably aren’t keen on becoming murderers.

“Do you want help?” Tony shakes his head this time, as much as he can. Since he got back to the real world or whatever last time with no problem, he assumes what the man is asking is whether he wants help with the situation. At six, he didn’t really understand the question, and he was too proud to ask for help anyway. He’s ten now, and mature enough to know that whatever help the man is offering probably comes with a price. For now, he’ll just accept the man’s declaration that he’s going to survive this and deal with whatever comes next. What help could a ghost give him in the real world, anyway?

The ghost nods and fades away. The hands on his throat tighten again and he loses what air he’d gained during the break in reality. The blurriness of his surroundings doesn’t change this time, but that’s probably because of the lack of oxygen. Soon enough, black spots are crawling across his vision and all his senses are fading out.

He wakes up on the floor gasping for breath and hacking through a throat that feels like he’s swallowed a box of nails. The thugs are arguing with each other in the background, shouting at the one that practically killed Tony. Like he thought, they’re not interested in becoming murderers and they’re pissed at the guy who went overboard.

It takes him a few minutes to recover, and a few more to escape. They’re distracted, dissent in the ranks now that one has nearly lost it, and his opportunity comes sooner than he’d thought. He gets
home, pulls a scarf up around his neck to hide any marks, and hopes he can put the whole thing out of his mind.

It doesn’t work; turns out real life isn’t like the movies, where someone can be strangled until they’re unconscious and then pop right back up and act like nothing happened, with maybe a few dramatic bruises to show for it. Instead, his throat slowly swells uncomfortably for the next couple of hours, with him sneaking glasses of plain ice from the kitchen and trying to swallow pieces of it at a time to reduce the swelling enough that he doesn’t feel like he’s suffocating.

That doesn’t work, either, and he ends up banging on Jarvis’s door just before dinner, frantic and gasping for what little breath he can get through his nearly-closed throat. He ends up in the emergency room again, and the entire thing is a gigantic scene that he absolutely didn’t need. One look at his father’s face is enough to know he’s pissed, and not just at the assholes who kidnapped Tony. Tony’s been through the lessons, he should have been watching his surroundings more carefully, he shouldn’t have provoked them so much, he should have gotten away before any of this happened. He has to stay overnight in the ER, and then when he goes home he sounds like he’s been gargling with gravel for the next week. He still feels like he has to fight for breath for several days, and he ends up with hideous green and purple bruises and red marks ringing his throat for weeks that have to be painfully covered with layers of makeup before he’s allowed out in public.

The next time it happens is an accident in the lab. He’s fourteen and his brain is about fifteen years ahead of both his own body and the technological capabilities of his available materials. He isn’t technically supposed to be working on what he’s working on, but if he completes it and shows it to his dad he might actually impress him for once, and Howard won’t really care that Tony broke some rules once he sees the finished product.

Except it doesn’t work out that way, because there’s a slight miscalculation and the thing explodes and nearly takes Tony with it. It’s the same routine again, except this time he gets a distorted view of the rubble-strewn lab and the remains of several of his dad’s projects, and he’s so distracted by the coming dread that he barely acknowledges the ghost. He’s told he’ll survive this, he refuses help, he wakes up in the hospital. Later, when Howard has finished chewing him out, he reflects that the ghost isn’t very helpful and his cryptic message isn’t very specific. Tony might have survived this, but some of the things Howard said to him make him wish he hadn’t.

He’s off to college not long after that, and that’s supposed to be a good thing, finally getting away from his parents, among intelligent peers, free to express his creative genius and work on the kinds of projects he loves. But somehow everything just gets worse. He might be far past every other student there intellectually, but he’s far behind them physically, and that’s what seems to matter to them. He doesn’t really have any social skills, he doesn’t know how to handle his alcohol (though he sure learns fast), he misses home and he hates himself for it.

He might be drinking way too much even for a college kid, headed down a nasty path in his father’s footsteps and disgusted with himself for it, but he has no interest in drugs. Still, just once in his first few weeks of college, he bought an entire bottle of pills from another student. Why the hell not. And four months in, when everything’s becoming overwhelming and he hates himself for missing home and getting drunk and groped by people twice his age and waking up not sure what happened the previous night and not having any idea how to make friends and being weak enough to want real friends so badly, he locks himself in his dorm bathroom and downs half the bottle of unknown pills with some cheap whiskey.

When the world goes fuzzy, he gets up off the bathroom floor, still stumbling and weaving from the effects of the pills and alcohol, even blunted as they are by this non-reality. But fuck it if he isn’t going to stand up and face the bastard. And he’s there, the asshole, standing there looking at Tony
like he’s the most pathetic, pitiable thing on the planet, and Tony hates him right then. “Don’t you dare say it,” Tony says, wishing he sounded angry instead of shaky and terrified and near tears.

The damn ghost, hallucination, whatever the fuck he is, just stares at Tony, looking like he’s near tears himself, and that pisses Tony off even more. Why does this stupid ghost give a shit about Tony? He doesn’t do anything but stand there uselessly. “You’ll survive this,” the ghost says, and Tony sobs and slumps to his knees on the bathroom floor. “Do you want help?”

“Will you help me die?” Tony asks without looking up.

“No.”

Tony jerks his head up and leaps to his feet, refusing to give into the dizziness that tries to take him back down again. “Then what’s the point of you?” he practically screams into the ghost’s face, pulling at his hair, now crying openly. “What do you want?”

“I’m here to offer you a choice,” the ghost says after a long moment. “Ask for help, or don’t.”

“Why?”

Instead of a real answer, the ghost tells him, “The day you ask for my help will be the last time you ever see me.”

The cryptic shit is annoying, and Tony is tired and depressed and angry and he just wants this, everything, to be over. He tries to open his mouth to ask what the hell that’s supposed to mean, but suddenly the dizziness is overwhelming and he’s dragged back to the floor. He wants to prevent himself from falling, to talk to the stupid ghost some more, even to just cling to whatever weird mini-afterlife he’s in rather than go back to his shitty real one, but he can’t. He can’t fight it, and soon enough he’s jolted back into the real world by his own stomach violently expelling everything he’d just swallowed, and then everything he ate in the last month, or so it feels.

There’s a hand on his shoulder, another on his hip, and a panicked voice in his ear, saying his name. It’s his roommate, James something, decent enough guy who got into MIT because of his brains rather than his family connections and has had enough sense so far to keep the hell away from Tony. Tony’s surprised he’s bothering to sound so worried right now, but then, they only have the one bathroom and Tony’s making a mess of it.

Tony throws up again, all over the floor in front of his face, and he’s too fucked up to be bothered about the mess. But he finds just enough coherency to force his eyes open and look right at his roommate and slur out “please don’t tell anyone” before collapsing.

He wakes up in a hospital, again. Maybe the weird, cryptic ghost of his isn’t actually a sign of his impending death, but just an incoming hospital visit. Considering how his stomach and his head feel right now, he’s not eager to test the theory out again any time soon.

His roommate’s sitting by his bedside, which is pretty weird. Tony wonders if he’s only been out for the trip to the hospital, but James has a particle physics book open on his lap and an overnight bag on the floor next to him, and he looks like he’s been here a few hours at least. When Tony lets out an involuntary groan, James’s eyes snap up to meet his, his face blank.

“I said you went to a party and they convinced you to try it out, so they don’t think you did it on purpose. I also told them I called your parents, but I didn’t. You seemed pretty insistent on that, so I figured I’d at least find out why before I ratted you out.”

That’s surprising. Also doesn’t exactly seem responsible, but Tony’s not about to look this gift horse
in the mouth. “Thanks,” he croaks out, and James grabs a cup of water off the bedside table at the sound of his hoarse voice.

He only gets a few minutes’ reprieve before James is scooting even closer to his bed and giving him a sharp look. “So. Talk to me.”

Tony’s first, instinctive response is to ask why the hell he should care, but he swallows it back. James didn’t tell anyone anything yet, which is more than Tony could have hoped for. And Tony is tired and hungry and aching inside and out and he’s still pretty sure he’d rather not be alive anymore, and there’s no real judgment on James’s face, just open curiosity and something like hurt, like James would be honestly upset if Tony died, which makes so little sense that Tony just blurts out the truth before he can think better of it.

He talks for nearly an hour and James just listens. Tony tells him things he’s never told anyone, confesses all the reasons he’d concluded that his life isn’t worth living, why he doesn’t fit in here but can’t go back home and how no one sees him as anything but the son of a rich businessman, which is what he’s destined to be, and why he can’t let anyone see him as anything else, because he’s been strictly taught—and found out for himself through experience—that everything that could possibly be seen as a weakness can and will be used against him. He tells him how he’s spent most of his life desperately trying to impress a father who seems like he’ll never approve of anything Tony does, and how much it hurts to be compared to Captain Fucking America like he’ll never live up to a literal legend and that makes him worthless. He tells him how he’s closer to his butler than either of his parents, and how Jarvis is great and Tony’s pretty sure he actually does care for him like a son, but he can never really be sure, because Jarvis is paid to be there, after all.

The only thing he doesn’t tell James about is the ghost that stalks his near-death experiences, because he’s long since concluded that this is something unique to him. For all he knows it really is just a hallucination or some fucked up recurring dream, but even if it is real and some sort of otherworldly or magical or as-yet-unexplained scientific happening, if he tried to explain it to other people he’d probably just earn himself a ticket to years of therapy.

Things get a little better after that. It’s not like the one conversation has fixed everything, but he actually has a friend now, go figure. A fairly embarrassing way to make a friend, but he’ll take it. Rhodey earns Tony’s trust pretty fast—the initial incident went a long way toward that and being true to his word on not telling anyone that it was a suicide attempt helps too—and becomes just about the only person on the planet that doesn’t judge Tony’s every move or constantly pick him apart looking for exploitable weaknesses. He’s not all that incredibly impressed by Tony’s wealth or fame or connections and he doesn’t take Tony’s bullshit. It’s a breath of fresh air that Tony needs.

The next time isn’t a suicide attempt, not really. He does drink himself practically to death, but his parents have just died and everything is a nightmare and he just wanted to forget about all the pain for a while. It’s not like he was intending it to be the end, but… he also wouldn’t entirely mind if it was.

He’s seventeen this time, and he’s growing into himself, finally on the right side of puberty (though it looks like he’ll never exactly be tall, much to his lament) and being told often (and hating it every time) how much he looks like his father. He’s seeing his own face in magazines and newspapers and everywhere else a lot more now that he’s legally an adult and therefore fodder for lecherous paparazzi, not to mention all the news and awards he’s racking up. It’s not entirely a surprise, then, just a sort of weary acceptance, when he finally realizes why the ghost looks vaguely familiar: it’s not some bastardized version of his father. It’s him.

Six year old Tony’s judgment of the ghost as a sad, tired old man wasn’t that far off, though now that
Tony is pretty much an adult he can say that ghost-Tony isn’t exactly old, maybe forties or fifties. He looks like he’s lived every one of them, though, and the thought should frighten Tony or fill him with dread, but he’s already practically numb from his parents, and he’s known for a long time now that nothing in his life is ever going to be easy.

He still doesn’t understand the ghost’s purpose. Is this what he’s going to end up like, in the future? Does future-him get some clichéd talk-to-your-past-self chance to fix his mistakes? If so, why is he so cryptic and difficult, and what does that mean for the current Tony? Is he supposed to be taking the offered help when he nearly dies? In the end, thinking about it just gives him even more questions and a headache. They go through the usual pattern and Tony wakes up on the floor with Rhodey bending over him again, not as frantic this time. Rhodey thinks he just drank himself into unconsciousness out of grief, and Tony’s fine with him never knowing how close he apparently came to dying.

Afghanistan is a fucking nightmare. He hasn’t even processed all the soldiers he just saw die, but this time isn’t like before. He fades in and out of reality, the ghost appearing and disappearing by his side. Memory and sensory input come in flashes instead of a continuous stream like he’s used to and it’s disorienting. What he is sure of is that it hurts. His chest hurts like hell, and the unceasing pain combined with the flashes of disturbing images and rough manhandling and fetid breath shouting foreign words might drive him insane.

It’s bad enough that when he truly fades out, when the terrorists around him grind to a halt and the world goes fuzzy for real this time, he’s still screaming, even though he knows that the pain is dulled in this fake-world. He thrashes where he’s lying on a table, held down and held open and oh fuck, his chest is wide open in front of him, he can raise his head and look down at his own insides and he heaves violently, but this ghost world won’t let him vomit, just the extra awful sensation of it on top of what’s already happening to him.

He can’t think, can’t process, just knows that the ghost is standing there above him and he needs to breathe enough to say something. To ask for help, because this must be what the ghost has been waiting for. But before he can say anything, the ghost says the familiar words.

“You’ll survive this.”

That doesn’t seem possible right now. Maybe the ghost is lying. Or maybe… maybe he survives this because he asks for help. Is this a riddle? If it is, there’s no way he’s coherent enough to solve it right now. All he knows is that everything hurts more than he’d thought possible and he needs it to stop. He manages to gasp in just enough air to roll his head toward the ghost and croak out, “hel—” before his voice fails him.

The ghost must know what he means. If it really is him, he lived through this, however the hell that works, he knows what Tony wants. Or he asked for help from his own ghost—which doesn’t make any sense, but nothing does right now. It doesn’t matter, Tony’s going to do it, whatever happens. Maybe it’ll turn out to really just be a hallucination and nothing will happen.

Except the ghost is speaking again, looking down at him. “If you ask for my help now, it’ll be the only chance you get.”

He says it like a warning, but Tony doesn’t care. He can’t—can’t think, can’t process, can’t make a decision, he just knows that he needs this to stop. He tries to nod but his head barely moves, opens his mouth to drag in enough air to confirm that he wants, needs the help—

—and screams as he’s jolted back into his body in real time by the feeling of a hand in his chest and an open wire sparking against his skin. He can’t do anything but scream himself hoarse as he tries to
writhe in place but is held down by multiple sets of strong arms. He feels straps being tightened across his arms and hands pulling on his ankles hard enough to threaten to wrench them out of place as he tries to kick his way away from the all-consuming pain in his chest.

He fades in and out of reality, but evidently doesn’t come so close to death again, because the ghost never reappears. He ends up waking up attached to a car battery in a cave full of terrorists and doing nothing much but waiting for death. When they reveal why he’s still alive, when he refuses to bend to their will and finds out what he’s really made of when they begin torturing him, he sees the ghost just one more time.

His lungs are full of water instead of an open chest full of blood this time, but it’s just as hard to speak. Still, this time… it feels like a matter of pride, or penance. If he’s going to die here, like this, then let it happen. Maybe it’s what he deserves. If these people are really getting hold of so many of his weapons, maybe it’s better for the world if they go overboard and drown him in a cave.

The ghost tells him he’ll survive this and he’s honestly not sure if he’s disappointed or not. It doesn’t mean much to him; for all he knows, they won’t drown him this time, but he’ll be seeing the ghost again in a week, or tomorrow, or in ten minutes. When he asks if Tony wants help, it isn’t so hard to shake his head. All he has to do is think of the soldiers he saw die in the attack. Of Yinsen, stuck in a cave taking care of the rich asshole who created the weapons used to bomb his home and terrify his family, who never gave a thought before to the people he was hurting, just prided himself on helping the ones back home.

Well, that’s not entirely true—he just hadn’t looked. He doesn’t know how so many of his weapons got into the hands of terrorists. In a company so large, a few slips are inevitable, but nothing like this. Tony’s always been very strict about contracts and shipping receipts and inventory, and in fact he’d been tightening security lately because of some reports coming to him that seemed slightly off, but… he hadn’t dived deep into those reports like he should have. If they’d led him here, if he’d known this was happening, he never would have let it continue. But he’d just thrown in some token extra security and told himself he’d get to it “later” and gone off to find something to drink, probably.

So he says no to the ghost without too much difficulty. Whatever he’s going through here, it’s penance for him, and he’ll live or die on his own terms. It’s the same stubbornness that made him say no to the ghost when he was six years old, just with more understanding and experience behind him.

That doesn’t mean he doesn’t sometimes regret it, as the next few weeks turn into months. He occasionally wishes he hadn’t said no with such conviction, once or twice even thinks about what would happen if he just yanked out the car battery—or later the miniaturized reactor—and let himself fade and die, that or see what happens when he says yes to the ghost. Assuming it really is more than a hallucination, what kind of power does the thing have? Could it get him out of here—him and Yinsen? Could it help him kill a terrorist cell? He doesn’t know the answer, and he doesn’t like unknowns, so he sticks to staying alive and working it out himself.

When Obie rips out the reactor and leaves him to die, he’s so stunned and incensed by the betrayal that he doesn’t even think before saying no to the ghost’s offer of help. Immediately afterward, he wonders if it was the right decision, if the ghost could have helped him guarantee Pepper’s safety, but he’s too focused on Stane to really think about it. It turns out okay in the end, anyway, as okay as it can be when the man his father trusted, he trusted, who practically helped raise him, turns out to be a damn maniac who’s tried to have Tony killed multiple times now.

Things get both better and worse after it’s all over. Iron Man feels like a calling, one that he understands in a way no one else seems to. Even when he’s being poisoned by the reactor and actively helping his life fall apart around him, he doesn’t ever come close enough for a visit from the
ghost Tony. But he’s starting to recognize more of that ghost in himself, and see how he’s leading toward that future. He’s not sure what that means, but he knows this life that he’s chosen is aging him a hell of a lot faster than sleeping around and abusing alcohol alone ever did. He’s willingly putting burdens on himself that he’d never have taken on in his youth, and it’s not hard to imagine how that will lead to him becoming that weary, slumped, hollowed-out ghost that haunts his almost-deaths.

When New York and the Avengers happen and he goes through the wormhole, he comes to an understanding. Of what’s really out there, and what’s coming for them. Of the fact that they’re nowhere near prepared, and that none of the dangers he’s faced thus far in his life have come close to even a fraction of what his future holds. He realizes that if this ghost really can offer him something, some kind of help in a life-threatening situation, and he’ll only get one shot at it, then he needs to save it for when it’s really necessary. When more than just his life is on the line.

So when he goes through the surgery to get the arc removed and almost dies on the table, he refuses the ghost’s offer, even though it’s hard. He wants to be selfish, this once, because for the first time in a long time, he has a lot to live for. There haven’t been a lot of times in his life that he’s actively wanted to die, but this is one of the first in a long time that he really wants to live, so it’s difficult to say no this one time.

The ghost tells him he’ll survive, as usual, but as he’s already learned, “survival” is a pretty low bar all on its own. He could survive this but end up bed-bound and intubated for the rest of his life, or with severe brain damage, or paralyzed, or any number of other awful options. And in the privacy of his own thoughts, he admits to himself that he’d rather die than live that life. There are strong, amazing, inspirational people out there who make the most of bad situations and can overcome that kind of overwhelming disability to live truly fulfilling lives, but Tony doesn’t think he’s one of them. He might be able to do it if forced, but if he knew it was going to happen, he’d seriously consider taking the ghost’s offer now, no matter how selfish it would make him feel. The only thing holding him back from considering it now is the memory of New York and the knowledge of what’s coming.

He does ask, this time, because he needs to know. “When I do ask for your help, what happens?” He’s not really expecting an answer at all, so it surprises him when he gets one. “There’s a price to pay for cheating death,” the ghost tells him.

Which is still fairly cryptic and unhelpful, but it’s more of an answer than he was expecting. “Cheating death” doesn’t exactly make sense, considering every time he’s seen the ghost so far he’s been told he’ll survive, but maybe that’s how this ends. Maybe one of these days, the ghost will tell him that he won’t survive, and he’ll be forced to accept the offered help or die. “I’m guessing you can’t be any more specific than that?” he says, and the ghost shakes his head solemnly. “Well, let me know if you have anything more to offer. I’m not big on signing contracts without knowing what the fine print says, not anymore.”

And just before he’s jolted back into reality by the surgeons bringing him back, the ghost says, “What would be worth it to you?”

That question haunts him for a while. It’s been relatively easy, so far, to tell himself that he’ll put off asking for help until something more than just his life is on the line. But how does he judge that? How will he know when the time comes? What if he accepts help thinking that he’s in the worst possible situation, only for everything to get infinitely worse—what if he wastes his chance? And how many lives—or which ones—are worth it? If he’d had the chance just before Pepper fell during the Extremis incident, would he have taken it? What if Rhodey had been about to die too?

All of these questions add to his nightmares, as if they weren’t bad enough. He obsesses over them
through a few more awful near-death experiences, most of them while fighting bad guys. He doesn’t come close during the Ultron incident, which is almost a shame. That might have been enough to prompt him to accept the help—except that Ultron was his own creation, not an alien’s. He’s capable of causing untold destruction and ending plenty of lives, as it turns out, but it’s still not on the scale of what he saw through the wormhole. His head feels fuzzy and full of nothing much besides anxiety and fear. He has several more selfish moments when he wishes that Ultron had nearly taken him out at the same time as JARVIS, because he’d have happily given up his one chance with his ghost to save his AI, his son and brother and best friend.

He gets his hair cut shorter and sees it graying at the temples and watches the bags beneath his eyes grow even darker and become pretty much permanent, and he resolutely ignores the fact that he’s looking more and more like his ghost every day. He has enough PTSD-fueled nightmares and anxiety attacks already without adding in the crippling fear that the moment he looks just like the ghost that haunts him is the moment the inevitable alien attack will come.

If he thought Afghanistan was a nightmare, Siberia might be worse. Rogers’s betrayal isn’t quite as personal as Stane’s was, but at least Tony didn’t know, back in the cave, that Obie had been the one to sell him out. Everything had come in waves back then. Now, he has to find out all at once that Howard and his drinking weren’t what killed his mother, that instead, the man who did it is the guy his supposed “friend” has been using Tony’s money and resources and goodwill to search for, and that all that time, Captain Self-Righteous has known about the Starks and deliberately not told him.

His rage burns hot enough to dissolve the tears that want to fall, but not enough to make him go full out when he fights them, which he later might regret. When he’s lying in the snow in a dead suit with a broken arm and shattered ribs throbbing, blood bubbling in his throat every time he forces another breath through a chest that won’t cooperate, and feeling nothing but pain and loss, for just a moment, he wishes he’d just used one of the missiles, let FRIDAY take over completely and just kill them. Barnes he might have regretted later, because even mere hours after the fact, he can already recognize that the man wasn’t really responsible. But Rogers… well, he’s kidding himself if he thinks he wouldn’t regret killing Rogers, no matter what the bastard has done to him. But he wishes he could have done it without hating himself. He wishes he could stop loving people who take the heart he willingly offers them and crush it.

He feels like he’s devolved when the ghost shows up this time. The last few times, over the years since New York, he’s had a purpose. He’s said no to the ghost with both the conviction of knowing that something worse is coming that he needs to be ready for, and the feeling that he has something worth living for. Now, it’s like he’s seventeen again, watching his parents’ funeral and feeling like he wouldn’t mind if he were being buried along with them. The Avengers are done, and Iron Man alone can’t protect the Earth. He can’t even keep his team from turning on each other and falling apart. He can’t fix anything, not even his own personal life. Pepper left him because he’s a mess and they both know it, and now it turns out not even the friends he thought he had in the Avengers gave a single shit about him. Rhodey, the only one who’s ever really cared about him, stood by him, and look where that got him. For the first time in nearly a decade, when the ghost tells him he’ll survive this, Tony wishes he wouldn’t.

But there still is something more coming, and he still might need another chance to make things right. He’s clawed his way out of worse holes and he’ll do it again. So for just a few minutes, in the privacy of this half-life with just his own ghost to witness it, he sits and wallows in his guilt and his depression and he might cry, just a little. And then he pulls himself together and tells the ghost to let him be, and he goes back to lying in the freezing cold and struggling for every breath, fading in and out of consciousness, the cold seeping its way into his core until he’s so disoriented that he doesn’t remember a single second of Vision’s rescue.
He wakes up in the hospital next to Rhodey and he gets to work. He can’t devolve, he can’t fall into depression, because he knows what’s coming and now there’s nothing, no system in place to even try to fend it off. He keeps a close eye on the Parker kid and watches him grow with a paternal pride that might scare him if he stopped to really think about it. He and Pepper work things out—of all the miracles he’s seen and denied in his life, that anyone like her would ever want to come back to him is the most unbelievable, but he’s too happy with her to be suspicious of it—and before he knows it they’re engaged and isn’t that just fucking incredible. He gets Rhodey walking and back into his suit in practically no time at all. He builds his nanotech suit, because he’ll need it, and now more than ever, he’s got something to come back to. He starts thinking of the future alien attack as something to live through, not to live to.

The ghost stays in the back of his mind. The details are always a little blurry when he’s not actually in that half-dead reality with him, but Tony knows he’s damn close now. When he looks in the mirror he sees the man who comes to tell him that he’ll survive when he’s close to death. He sees the choice he has to make looming ever closer.

It all happens so fast. He’s so focused on everything going on, on Thanos and the donut ship and keeping Peter safe and whatever the hell is going on with Strange, he doesn’t have time to think about the ghost and the choice he’s offered and his potential death. Not until his own weapon is shoved through him and Strange is surrendering the Time Stone to Thanos why, why would you do that and everything happening is a little jerky, like a bad film reel, and before he knows it it’s all slowed and the pain is his side dulls and he’s kneeling in front of himself, he’s become this ghost, the day is here.

“You’ll survive this,” the ghost says, and Tony nods. Strange had sacrificed the Time Stone, sacrificed everything, for Tony’s life, which was idiotic… except it’s occurring to him, for the first time, that Strange is a magician, and it’s possible he knows what no one else does. If he’s responsible for, or knows about, Tony’s ghost and the choice he’s been given, then maybe he knows that whatever will happen when Tony asks for help here, it will save the world.

Tony looks up at himself and the message of survival. It should carry hope, but it doesn’t. “Will anyone else?” he asks, and the ghost just stares at him.

He doesn’t expect an answer, and this time he doesn’t get one. Not that it matters. It’s time, that the ghost looks exactly like he does in this moment is proof enough of that. If he had time to think about it he might go insane trying to parse out self-fulfilling prophecies and the rules of apparent time travel or whatever the hell the ghost obeys, but he doesn’t. He’s ready to say yes this time, whatever will come of it.

But when he opens his mouth to say it, what comes out is a groan as he’s jolted back into reality. It’s Peter helping him up, and he’s dizzy and confused and what’s happening? If this isn’t his chance, what is? Has he done something different than he was supposed to, is everyone going to live after all, he doesn’t understand…

And then Peter’s gone. It feels like it happens over several long hours and less than a second simultaneously. He can’t do anything but listen to this kid, this boy he’s coming to see as a son, beg not to go and then dissolve in his arms and he’s holding the dust that used to be a person, one of the best people he’s ever known and someone he was responsible for and…

And a moment of clarity comes to him. He takes a shaky breath and sits up straight. His hands don’t shake as he reaches for his wound and claws at it. He feels warm blood course over his hands, but he barely feels the pain in his side, and he keeps going, shoves his own hands into his body and rips at his flesh. Nebula is approaching, yelling something at him, but he can’t be bothered to listen. He’s
Then the ghost is in front of him again and he’s standing, confronting the ghost before anything can drag him back to reality. “Fix this,” he snarls, and the ghost nods.

“There’s a price to pay,” the ghost warns, but he must already know Tony’s answer. If he is Tony, he knows.

“I don’t care. If it can save half the population, save Peter, if it can keep Thanos from destroying everything, I don’t care what the price is. Just fix it.”

The ghost nods again and holds out a hand, and Tony takes it without hesitating. He touches the ghost for the first, and last, time, and the world dissolves around him.

Everything happens too fast to really process. The world rewinds, first, and he’s back at the beginning of the fight, before they’d lost their grip on Thanos. Then everything moves forward again, but too fast, like he’s skipping through parts, body on autopilot. Or controlled by a force he doesn’t understand. Whatever it is, the fight changes this time around. Thanos doesn’t escape their grip this time. They manage to get the gauntlet off him, and suddenly Tony is holding it, putting his arm inside it.

There’s a power like none he’s ever imagined coursing through him, and it scares him. Whatever force is pulling the world forward too fast is helping him keep control, he thinks, but it all happens too fast to really process. The damage done is fixed and Thanos is dead, the Infinity Stones contained and the gauntlet destroyed, and everything goes back to normal speed, the influence of whatever he’d agreed to when he’d asked for the ghost’s help finally gone.

Everyone is alive. Well, almost everyone. The woman Quill was asking about, Gamora, died before the rewind that Tony caused. Anyone else that Thanos killed before that has stayed dead, too. But Peter and Strange are still alive, Quill and the rest of his team, and half the population of the Earth. They’ve done it; they’ve won.

Tony tries not to think too hard about what he’d agreed to, about the price he’ll eventually have to pay for what happened, for the life he didn’t live, the reality he escaped. He understands, now, what the ghost had told him about cheating death. It wasn’t his own death he cheated, but the deaths of billions and of some of his closest loved ones. The price for that can’t be insignificant. But… as long as he’s the only one who has to pay it, it’ll be worth it.

His life isn’t easy by any means, but it’s happy. He marries Pepper like he’d promised, though the twins’ names end up being Anna and Lily, not quite like the dream he’d had before the invasion. Rhodey becomes their godfather—and Tony the godfather to Rhodey’s kids when they come along—and Peter the unofficially adopted older brother. There’s not really an official declaration, his work just sort of fades out, but eventually Tony does retire Iron Man. He leaves the protection of the world and the superheroeing to the new generation, people like Peter and Harley and all the other genius kids who come out of the woodwork.

In this life, with Thanos’s invasion unsuccessful and the world grateful to its heroes, the disgraced former Avengers end up coming back. Tony just considers it among small mercies that he never has to interact with them again. Not for lack of trying; Pepper and Rhodey have to work pretty hard for a while to keep them, particularly Rogers, from getting in at Tony, demanding his time and attention. But eventually, Rogers seems to accept that Tony has washed his hands of them and wants nothing to do with them. He doesn’t hold any grudges, doesn’t want to see them hurt. He just wants to be left alone, and he is.
He does accept one letter, an apology from Barnes. It comes seven months after the failed invasion, a week after Barnes officially completes his therapy. It’s rambling and not entirely coherent, but it’s sincere and Tony appreciates it. He sends his own in return, and his real apology comes in the form of the new identity he offers, which Barnes gratefully accepts. A way to get away from the rabid public. Barnes has no interest in becoming a superhero or living in the spotlight. He probably remains in contact with Rogers, but Tony really doesn’t care. He considers the whole thing settled, and after a few years, he finally stops ever thinking about it.

Tony Stark dies at 83, after a life well lived. It’s peaceful, with his wife and children and grandchildren by his side. His family, and the world, mourn the passing of a great man, and celebrate an incredible life. It’s exactly what he would have wanted.

And after closing his eyes in his bed at home, closing the door on the life he’d been willing to sacrifice anything for, he finds himself standing in front of the ghost he hasn’t seen in nearly 40 years. The ghost of a life he left behind, a death he cheated, and he knows the time has come to pay the price he owes to the universe.

“So,” he says, “I guess the time has come,” and the ghost smiles sadly at him. “Name your price.” He’s apprehensive, for sure, but he’s long since accepted the inevitability of this.

“You can’t just abandon the life you left behind,” the ghost tells him, and an awful understanding dawns on Tony. “The world you escaped still exists, and it needs a Tony Stark. It’s time for you to fulfill that role.”

Tony swallows. “Tell me, if you’re allowed to—the life I just lived, was it real? Was it just a long dream, a giant hallucination, or did it really happen?” He doesn’t know how the answer will affect him, if it even will, but he wants to know.

“It was real,” the ghost tells him. “Time and the fabric of reality aren’t as linear as we’ve always thought. You lived that entire life in the blink of an eye in the one you left. It’s all still waiting for you.”

“So what are you?” Tony asks, finally. All these years and he’s never really asked outright, but he has a feeling he wouldn’t have gotten an answer if he’d asked earlier.

“I’m a part of the cycle. Like the one who guided me, like you will be for the next one. I’m almost finished, but you’re not.”

“Do they teach you riddles in the afterlife or something?” Tony asks, aware that he might not have much time before he’s thrown back into the life he cheated. He’d like answers, now that he’s finally facing the consequences of his choice so long ago.

The ghost smiles again, a small, sad thing. “This is my last duty to you. If you live out the life that you left behind, then when you die, you’ll become me. You’ll take my place in the cycle and you’ll guide the next variation, the next Tony Stark.”

“And what happens if I don’t live it out? If I just kill myself and escape it early?”

“Then the cycle will be broken. The next iteration of the cycle will be the last. That Tony Stark will live out just one life, with no ghost appearing when he nearly dies. And when the battle with Thanos comes, he will simply go through one reality, without the option to live another. So it’s up to you. Was it worth it?”

Tony’s not sure he understands, and he doesn’t think the decision is really so simple, not when he’s
facing living through the imminent tragedy that he abandoned before. Yet the answer to that question really is simple. If he could have the choice, knowing everything he knows now, would he choose to take this detour before finishing out the life he’d left behind, to have these memories to both hold onto and mourn? “Yes. It was worth it.”

He gets a real smile this time, one he finally understands. This ghost is him, the Tony before he was Tony. He lived through all the same things that Tony just did, plus the life Tony is about to go back to. The thought gives him some strength; if countless Tony Starks before him have done this, he can too. “Then it’s time,” the ghost tells him.

“Wait—how does this work? What’s—what started the cycle, how does it even happen, just… what?” Tony has a million questions about the physics or the science or the magic or whatever is behind this entire thing, but he doesn’t get an answer. Instead the blank world he’s standing in fades out, and suddenly he’s in a younger, battered body, kneeling on Titan with the dust that was Peter coating his hands. No easing into it, then. Christ.

He manages. With time, some of the memories of the life he escaped to begin to fade. He can’t quite smell the perfume Pepper used for the last twenty years, can’t remember what his daughters’ hands in his felt like. But he remembers their faces. He remembers the happiness. And he holds onto that through everything that comes in this nightmare of a life.

He keeps his promise, and he keeps going until he’s killed by something other than his own choice. He doesn’t kill himself, and he doesn’t throw himself purposely into danger or in front of a weapon needlessly. Knowing he can never speak a word of any of it to anyone in this reality, he privately holds onto the memories of the other life he got to live and he makes it through this one.

And in the end, when he finally becomes the mysterious ghost that haunts a young, innocent, naïve Tony Stark, he understands.

End Notes

Obviously in the IW sequel all the people Thanos disintegrated are going to come back, there’s no way Marvel will leave them dead. Everything will probably be good in the end, but since we don’t know yet what happens to Tony and in this story he’s escaping a pretty hellish life, I’m going with either (a) everyone stays dead or (b) everyone does come back when they eventually defeat Thanos, but things aren’t the same and Tony doesn’t really get a happy ending. However you want to picture it, I purposely left it vague.

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