Hearts Like Ours

by feelslikefire

Summary

Tony learns that rebuilding after the mess Aldrich Killian left isn't as easy as building a new suit, Pepper learns to live with Extremis, Steve discovers that finding Bucky doesn't mean everything is fine and dandy now, Sam learns that dating Captain America isn't always as glorious as it could be, and Jarvis learns that having a physical body is nothing like what he thought.

Or: Jarvis gets an android body and learns to person, and it backfires in the way he least expects. Ensemble fic with established relationships, heavy on character development and heroes sucking at normal-person things.

Notes

I've been working on this fic on and off for over two years, but it really got a major kick in the ass after Iron Man 3 came out. I was so disgusted with the last 5 minutes that I immediately set out to write a story in response to it, and then The Winter Soldier happened before I was done, so... here we are. Nanowrimo starts in a week as of the first chapter's posting, so since I cannot see myself finishing all the editing of this story in one go before then (it's over 80,000 words), I am posting it on a weekly basis until its conclusion. This story will be updated every Friday.

This story would not exist at all without the tireless patience of the best writing (and running) buddy I could ask for, circ_bamboo, who has bullied, coaxed, encouraged, and otherwise enabled me to finish this behemoth. THANK YOU DARLING.
It is worth noting that I played a little fast and loose with strict cinematic timelines, and also that I have not watched Agents of Shield.
Chapter 1

From a certain point of view, J.A.R.V.I.S. (or just Jarvis to Tony Stark’s friends) was the closest thing Tony Stark had to a living relative. Modeled after his maker’s own brain-scans and on Howard Stark’s one-time butler, Edwin Jarvis, Tony’s Jarvis was more deeply entrenched in every aspect of Tony’s life than even Pepper Potts, and yet was so well-designed that most of the time he was no more noticeable than the weather outside. He (it, technically, but because Tony had gendered his voice and his personality, Jarvis was a he) was more efficient than the best-trained personal assistant and more invisible than the most expensive butler in the world, and there was no other computer system like him.

Not everyone felt that this was justification enough for Tony to shun the rest of the outside world, however.

“I don’t care how much better you like Jarvis than you like leaving the house,” Rhodey used to say, during the times Tony liked to use booze and engineering to soak up his sadness in lieu of human contact or, say, sleep. After a bad break-up, or just when his depression took a turn for the worse, Tony would hole up in whatever residence he happened to be at and refuse to come out for days at a time. “He’s still just a computer, and people need to be around people.”

And of course, at that point, Rhodey was right. The change came much later, but other things happened first.

The first of those was when Jarvis was integrated into Tony’s Iron Man armor. In addition to saving Tony Stark’s bacon on more than one occasion, that simple act allowed Jarvis to achieve decision-making capability without overt direction from his maker. Like so many things in Tony Stark’s life, what happened that day was an accident—but an accident that could never have happened without multiple layers of genius-level work at play.

To wit, Tony never had just one back-up plan; he built for at least three. The first rule of engineering is redundancy. It was this rule that would save his life.

During one of the many aerial dogfights that Tony had been involved in prior to his recruitment to the Avengers Initiative, this one high over the Rocky Mountains outside Denver, Tony had been caught in a lightning storm while pursuing the bad-guy flavor of the week fleeing in a stolen military helicopter. The Mark V had already been damaged from the chunks of hail the storm was throwing and the miniature rockets that were being fired from the helicopter, and Tony was having a hard time seeing in the confusion.

But even if he could have seen the lightning, he couldn’t have avoided it—the armor was struck not once or twice but five times in the span of forty-five seconds. The first fail-safe would have converted all the electrical energy to back-up power, a lesson Tony would have learned well by the time he met Thor for the first time. But while the first fail-safe was too damaged to work, the second was still functional.

Which was why, when enough electrical energy to explode an elephant’s heart tore through the Iron Man suit, Tony was knocked unconscious by the force of it instead of going into cardiac arrest. At 2.5 miles in the air, he was faced with another, rapidly approaching terra firma problem, but that was where the most important fail-safe came in.

“Sir!” The scream of the wind was cut only by the emergency alarms blaring inside Tony’s helmet, but all of it fell on deaf ears. Tony wasn’t awake to witness Iron Man’s end-over-end plummet
towards earth. "Sir—" But Tony did not wake. Jarvis continued trying to get Tony to respond, but simultaneously he initiated a half-dozen subroutines, three of which failed to even get past the start-up. If Tony were awake he would be seeing CRITICAL SYSTEMS FAILURE, POWER LEVELS AT 23%, REPULSORS NONRESPONSIVE flashing in urgent crimson across his viewscreen.

*I'm going to give you some new subroutines to try in case the suit malfunctions, Jarvis, Tony had said, just a few weeks ago.

Sir, I believe it would be prudent to test them in a non-combat situation first, don't you think?

Oh, of course, Tony had said, his tone dismissive. I'm not completely suicidal, Jarvis. But they're just backups. Hopefully we'll never have to use them.

Fourteen seconds had already passed, the wind screaming past Iron Man's ears as Tony approached terminal velocity; Jarvis calculated their speed at just under 150 mph, falling 65 meters with every second. The conservative estimate said they had another 45 seconds before impact, at best a minute. The jagged spine of the mountains were rushing up to meet them, and Tony’s speed was not slowing.

*Run /usr/bin/manual_override.bin. Error, command not recognized*

Forty-three seconds to impact—

*Run /usr/bin/overrideprotocol_Virginia30X5.bin Error, command not recognized*

Thirty-nine seconds to impact, and Colorado’s teeth were looming up rapidly beneath them. The suit was shutting down; the lightning had melted part of the its RAM, and what was left of its fried circuits wasn't recognizing any of Jarvis's commands. Jarvis was running out of backup subroutines to try; help wasn't coming; he had to do something but he had no protocols left—

Tony would know what to do. But Tony wasn't awake; he was counting on Jarvis. Inside the motherboard, burnt circuits whirred as Jarvis re-wrote a subroutine, lines of data written and re-written based on Jarvis's backups of all the times Tony's quick thinking had saved him while inside the suit. Seconds sheared off their time. The program terminated, a new protocol suggested.

*Run /usr/bin/emergencyoverride_protocol.bin, password Maria Stark 1-9-8-7 Override accepted*

Thirty seconds to impact—

*Run /usr/bin/killswitch_fuckthis.bin*

The Iron Man armor went dead.

Inside the helmet, Jarvis's lone power source beeped. Twenty-five seconds to impact. *Run /usr/bin/program_hailmary.bin* Lights flared, sparks flew; later they would discover that the partially melted wiring inside the armor had burned clean through Tony's undersuit in places, leaving strange circuit-shaped burns on his back and buttocks, but the hard reboot worked.

Twenty seconds to impact. "Override all functions and reroute power to repulsors," Jarvis said, and the suit whirred loudly around him, the sound of labored servos drowned out by the howl of the wind.

It worked. Sans all the acceleration dampeners, Tony's face mashed against his helmet as their velocity suddenly decreased. The suit's hands and feet flew out, like an awkward mid-air push-up,
and the half-dead repulsors burnt the air blue as they came to life. Fine motor control was beyond
the armor's capabilities, but Jarvis didn't need finesse; he just needed Tony to not hit the ground at
150 miles an hour. The lack of full power saved Tony from breaking every bone in his body
against his own metal suit, since all the internal compensators had been bypassed, and the last half
mile was a steady deceleration until finally settling to ground at the nice sedate speed of three miles
an hour.

The collision was still apparently enough to be jarring, because inside the suit Tony stirred and
made a pained noise, his face still mashed against his visor. "How excellent of you to rejoin us,
sir," Jarvis said, and Tony grunted in a way clearly meant to convey _go fuck yourself._

"How'm I not dead?" he managed.

"The layer of current buffering that you applied to the gold-titanium alloy worked as intended,"
Jarvis observed. "The force of the lightning strikes was sufficient to knock you unconscious, and I
was forced to take some drastic measures to bring us out of free-fall."

"Huh." A pause. The armor groaned and creaked as Tony attempted to roll himself onto his back.
"Good job, Jarvis," he gritted out, and then maker and creation began the drawn-out process of
getting the armor back to a condition where Tony could fly himself home.

That had been years ago, obviously. In the aftermath, Tony had been equal parts amused and
pleased at Jarvis’s initiative. He had diligently backed-up Jarvis’s newly re-written code, instead of
wiping and re-installing, making sure that Jarvis had access to the files across all his functions and
locations, and the program file was now called _whatwouldtonydo.bin_ “Don’t ever run that program
in a bar, Jarvis,” Tony had said, more than once.

“Unless they start offering free electrical upgrades, sir, I doubt it will be a problem,” Jarvis had
said the last time the topic had come up.

Explaining it to others had gone somewhat less well. Pepper in particular had been a little wary of
the new changes, though she liked Jarvis well enough.

"So Jarvis's quick thinking is what saved your life," she said.

"Uh huh. He's a self-polymorphic AI—" Tony caught the way Pepper's eyebrows drew up towards
her hairline, and interrupted himself. "He's an AI with the programming that allows him to re-write
himself, and write new programs when he encounters certain criteria. So this time, when he ran out
of a list of things to try, he wrote a new program to estimate what I would do if I were awake, based
on his lists of all the things I've done in the past in similar situations."

"It is a sad commentary on how frequently you endanger yourself that enough data exists to
formulate such a program," Jarvis observed.

"I didn't program you for sass, and yet, here you are," Tony retorted.

At the end of the day, though, Jarvis’s new abilities to write code on an as-needed basis simply
improved his functionality in the duties he was already designed for. It allowed him to respond
more effectively to unpredictable situations, which—when Tony was involved—happened entirely
too often. It did not inspire in him any sort of initiative, or new goals, or change his prime directive.

By the time thirty-something Iron Man suits exploded in the sky over the Atlantic while a glowing
Pepper and elated Tony watched, neither he nor anyone else who lived or visited his homes
frequently were much bothered about Jarvis’s functionality. He was Just Another Rather Very
Intelligent System, after all, doing what he was designed to do.

Jarvis had no issue with this, of course. He had not been programmed to care whether or not he was appreciated (although he knew for a fact that Tony did appreciate him), and despite his steadily-increasing well of self-written code, he continued functioning as he always had, and saw to the needs of Tony and his friends. And when Pepper and Tony retired to the one remaining piece of Stark property that was not under active construction, Stark Mansion, Jarvis was there to watch over them while Tony saw to Pepper’s healing process.

The sense of victory over Aldrich Killian was short-lived in the face of Pepper’s infection with Extremis. Days turned quickly to one week, then two. Jarvis had an existing program that catalogued all observable events inside the realm of his functionality, and rated them according to a scale of significance. The scale was updated constantly based upon logarithms that assessed previous incidents, combined with input from every person he observed.

Some of the criteria were obvious (blood pressure, hours of sleep, respiratory rate) and others more nuanced (like how many times a day Pepper needed to take a break in order to not melt something with her bare hands). The nuanced ones tended to be better long-term indicators, particularly when coupled with physiological data. Jarvis watched, and analyzed his data, and if he experienced disruption at any of his observed data, he did not yet have the words to describe it as “anxiety.”

In the midst of this, Jarvis also noted something else that was rated as “troubling” on his scale of significance: Tony was not happy with Pepper’s condition. His unhappiness increased as the days wore on, and consequently Tony spent more and more time in his workshop.

But despite the advanced state of his programming and protocols, Jarvis was still unable to predict the course of events once the first few avenues of treatment for Pepper’s condition stalled out. In fact, he could never have predicted what was coming, even if someone had asked him to.

* * * * *

“What do you MEAN, Captain America is missing?”

Tony opened his mouth to answer, but his response was interrupted by the sudden need to dodge the wheeled office chair being hurled at his head. He ducked, and seconds later heard the crunch-shatter of heavy aluminum colliding with the reinforced glass of the laboratory wall behind him. Across the way from him, he caught a glimpse of Bruce crouched defensively behind a stainless steel lab bench. The part of his brain not occupied with dodging thrown laboratory furniture still found time to note how funny it was that it was his normally-unflappable girlfriend-slash-CEO who was having the rage blackout and not the man notorious for turning into the green, veiny embodiment of fury.

It was unfair, really. Tony had done so very many things over the years that honestly probably deserved having chairs (and oh, there went a—what was that, a spectrograph? God dammit) thrown at him, and Pepper had been far too good of a person to do anything worse than yell at him. It was true, he’d been kind of a self-centered misanthrope (and an alcoholic one at that, he could admit it) but conspicuously missing from the list of “Things Tony Stark Has Done That Would Justify Throwing Chairs At His Head” was misplacing the goddamn Star Spangled Man With A Plan.

“I can’t believe how incompetent you all are!” Pepper shouted. “You’re useless! Aren’t you supposed to be the smartest scientists in the world?” With a hoarse yell, she uprooted a lab bench that Tony was quite certain had been bolted to the floor. Then she hurled that at Tony’s and Bruce’s heads too. It went sailing through the existing hole in the back of the lab, there to crash majestically into the mangled pile of expensive metal and electronics currently spitting sparks in
their dying throes. Tony tried to estimate how much damage Pepper had already done, and whimpered a little.

Bruce took this opportunity to come scampering over to where Tony was crouched; Tony squinted into his eyes, which (though currently rolling in exasperation at him) were thankfully still brown. “I see what you mean about the increased aggressiveness,” Bruce said.

“Yeah, Extremis is actually a giant pain in my ass,” said Tony.

“How has she not killed you already?” Bruce asked, and then waved his hand when Tony opened his mouth to answer. “No, shut up, I don’t want to hear about your sex life.”

“Just because some of us still refuse to attempt coitus—”

“Not now, Tony.”

Tony opened his mouth for a retort, because really, when had he ever let someone tell him to shut up, but Pepper loomed over him with no warning, and Tony found himself being hauled to his feet by a hand fisting the collar of his shirt. Abruptly, he was face-to-face with his disturbingly-glowing girlfriend.

“Please say you aren’t going to throw me through the wall,” Tony blurted.

Pepper glared at him. “How are you going to fix me?” she demanded.

“Well for starters, maybe give me time to explore our options with Bruce?”

“Tony—!” The muscle under the skin of Pepper’s face brightened, light filling her cheeks as though someone was turning up a dial somewhere. Tony’s eyes widened.

“Pepper, you have to calm down,” he cut in urgently. She didn’t look like herself at all, and that, more than anything else, was what scared him. Pepper gritted her teeth at him in response, but before she could say anything else Tony reached out with both hands, heedless of the heat he could feel radiating off her like a furnace. Without thinking, he pressed his hands against her cheeks. Pepper’s eyes went wide at the hiss of burning skin. She dropped him before he even had time to feel the pain, stumbling backwards and staring down at him in a panic.

Tony thumped down onto his ass, and then the burnt skin of his hands registered, raw red agony flaring through his fingers and palms. “Fuck,” he said intelligently. Pepper burst into tears.

“I think you guys broke the electron microscope,” Bruce said from behind him.

“Of course we did,” said Tony, and tried to get to his feet without using his hands.

Today was really not going well.

* * * * *

To be fair, it had been kind of a crappy week. Well, month. Okay, months.

Most of Tony and Pepper’s time had been taken up by navigating the immediate aftermath of Aldrich Killian’s attempted coup—there was so much to clean up, metaphorically as well as literally (the house in Malibu was a total loss, but Tony thought he could salvage at least some things from the underground workshop). Sorting out his second presumed death in less than five years was a headache; explaining to Nick Fury how he’d destroyed all the Iron Man suits was a
migraine. The man had majored in Thousand-Yard Stares with a minor in Disapproving Sneers.

And he’d planned to be good, he’d fully intended to not build anymore suits, okay, he meant it when he instituted the Clean Slate protocol, but—some things were apparently out of his hands. Fully six people who by all rights should have been happy with the destruction of the Iron Man suits asked him when he’d be done with the new one within a week of the fight at the oil tanker.

“So when are you gonna build Mark 43?” Rhodey had asked, while they were sitting in SHIELD’s debriefing room waiting to deflect all of Nick Fury’s questions about the ramifications of the Extremis virus.

Tony had glared at him by way of response. Rhodey arched his eyebrow in that way that so perfectly communicated equal parts skepticism and endless patience. You needed a lot of patience when you were best friends with Tony Stark, and Rhodey had been since they were both weedy undergrads. “Well?” Rhodey asked, when Tony showed no signs of answering with anything more than heavy sighs.

“You are a terrible friend,” Tony said, huffy. “You should be supporting me in my efforts to do right by Pepper and my own mental health—”

“I’m supportive of the fact that you’re Iron Man and you’re the only one who can be Iron Man.”

“Well that goes without saying, but I’m not building another suit.”

“Sure, Tony.”

If he did build another suit, though, he’d have to find better transmitters to communicate with the microchips in his arms, or fine-tune the gesture controls, and he thought he could do it pretty easily, there were some new fiber-optic cables he’d seen—

But he wasn’t building another suit. He wasn’t.

Okay, he was making the plans for another suit—just one! Okay, maybe two, because he thought he could make one that could survive low Earth orbit but he had to test some functionality first and prototypes were always a risky business, but he wasn’t going to build it.

Pepper came next. It had been eight whole days since she had punched through Aldritch Killian’s chest with such violence that it made Tony’s heart skip a few beats with terror and love. For his own part, Tony had been absolutely rock-solid in his determination to keep on his new resolutions. He was doing great, if he did say so himself. They were in Stark Mansion (since Stark Tower was only halfway to being fully rebuilt—he was really getting tired of rebuilding all his homes), and Pepper had taken his hand and led him into one of the conference rooms.

“Lock down level eight-six-twelve, authorization Meet Virginia,” Pepper said, and Tony’s poor abused heart immediately went into overtime. That was high-level security she’d just pulled; Jarvis would violate it only for extreme emergencies.

“I didn’t forget your birthday,” Tony said immediately. “I didn’t. Your birthday is in April.”

“No, you didn’t forget my birthday—”

“Or our anniversary!”

“Tony,” said Pepper, and Tony drooped. She sighed, and then smiled at him, her why do I love you so much when you’re so exhausting smile. That was a good smile; he liked it. It made the corners
of her eyes crinkle, which she hated because she thought it made her look old but Tony knew it really made her even more beautiful than she always was. She opened her mouth, and Tony was positive that he must’ve just forgotten some important board-company-business thing, since that was basically every Tuesday, but what Pepper said instead was, “We need to talk about when you’re going to build your next suit,” and that couldn’t possibly be right.


“You did, and it was amazing,” Pepper said, and the warmth in her voice said she meant it. “I would never have asked you to do that, but you did it anyway, and it was wonderful.”

“I’m not building anymore suits,” Tony said immediately, because that’s clearly what she wanted to hear, what he was supposed to say, and she frowned, which made Tony frown. That was wrong. She was—she was doing it wrong. Wait, did he hit his head again? How was he messing this up?

“Don’t be stupid,” she said. “I never asked you to stop being Iron Man.”

“But—”

“I just don’t want building the suits to take over your life,” she continued, determinedly not letting his confused protests stop her from saying what she apparently needed him to hear. “Come on, Tony. What’s going to happen the next time some idiot with an agenda decides to kidnap you to force you to work for him, and you don’t have your suit?”

Tony opened his mouth to give some logical response to this, and then closed it, because—shit. “I’ll pester him to death,” he offered, and that earned him a smile, at least. “C’mon, Pep, give me a chance to prove I can do this for you.”

“But I don’t want you to do it,” Pepper said, sounding put out. Tony stared at her in honest confusion.

“Why not?” he said at last. Pepper dropped her eyes, rubbing her thumb over an imaginary wrinkle in her perfectly-pressed skirt. The idea of wrinkles in Pepper’s clothing was preposterous; any self-respecting article of clothing would show itself out the door and straight to the nearest consignment shop sooner than even entertain the notion. Focus, Tony.

“You don’t think I can,” Tony said abruptly. The realization felt exactly like being kicked in the chest (a sensation he was all too familiar with at this point).

Pepper glanced up at him, frowning, that soft indentation between her eyebrows deepening. He’d put that wrinkle there, he knew. “Not thinking you can do something is not the same as not wanting you to try,” she pointed out. “For the record, I think you could stop—making suits. I really do. But I don’t think I would like what it would do to you.”

“What, like have more time for you?”

“Not mutually exclusive concepts,” she said, and this was why she was CEO and not him, because she was the rational, reasonable one. “But it’d be…. Like asking a surgeon to quit working at the hospital and take a teaching job instead.” She smiled, sweet and a little sad. “You save lives. You —make inventions that help others save hundreds more lives every year, now that you’ve stopped taking military contracts.” She bit her lip and shook her head a little. “And I know it makes you happy.”

“But I want to make you happy,” Tony said. “I mean, more than just in bed, which I think I do a
pretty good job of, if I do say so myself, at least you’ve never had any complaints—” there, she was laughing, he could see the way she was trying not to smile, that was good, or at least better—“And I know you don’t like the suits, or me getting shot at all the time, or—”

“I’m allowed to change my mind,” Pepper said firmly. “About the suits. Please don’t go out and get shot at today.”

“Too late. You can’t take it back now. I always knew you had a mean streak.”

“Tony,” she sighed, and he couldn’t resist leaning in and kissing the corner of her mouth.

Even then, Tony had been a little resistant. He was the kind of person who couldn’t be talked into buying a parka in Siberia if he truly didn’t want to, but wanting to be the kind of person who did not miss his suits, miss building his suits, was not the same as not being that person. Deep down, he missed them, loved the challenge and the thrill of being maker and pilot. But he made himself wait, focusing instead on the increasingly-thorny issue of addressing Pepper’s Extremis virus.

By the time Pepper’s condition had started to worsen alarmingly, to the point where Tony sought out Bruce’s advice, the two of them had decided that Tony would have a select number of suits (seven) for a reasonable number of expected scenarios (two briefcase suits, three battle suits, one extremely modified come-when-you-call-it suit, and one special suit made specifically to help in heavy-lifting rescue missions that had reinforced hydraulics that gave Tony strength to rival Thor’s). He was going to get to building them, just as soon as Pepper was better. Pepper’s health, and their relationship, came first.

Then three helicarriers had risen over Washington D.C. with enough weaponry to wipe out half the planet and enough malice driving them to blacken the sky. Tony had been forced to watch, helpless and earth-bound, as Captain America And Friends narrowly averted disaster. He’d eaten nothing but his own shame for four days until Pepper and Rhodey managed to snap him out of it.

That had been more than enough. He got right the fuck back to work after that. Tony had even persuaded Pepper to let him make her a suit, too, but she had refused to let him put any weaponry on it. First, though, had come a good four dozen safety measures to protect his tech and his person (and his persons) from the newly-exposed threat of HYDRA. (He didn’t actually have as much to do as he might have feared—Anthony Edward Stark had always been kind of a paranoid asshole about security—but he and Pepper had still had to institute harsh background check policies on every single Stark Industries employee, not to mention a painful and time-intensive security update to Jarvis and all his extensions.)

He’d been taking a break from working on the Extremis formula, resting his mind with more familiar work, and was halfway through Mark 44 when Pepper had come stumbling into his workshop with electricity crackling like white lightning under her skin and a panicked look on her face. Tony had taken one look at her, then gotten into Mark 43 and taken off to Stark Tower with Pepper in his arms.

Bruce had been the natural choice to turn to, Tony felt. One, Tony actually trusted him to not secretly be working for some monster corporation (ha. Ha, ha, ha fucking ha)—and two, if there was an expert on altered DNA somewhere in the world, it was Bruce Banner. Plus, Stark Tower was only a short flight from Stark Mansion, and Tony had needed speed.

Bruce, being Bruce, had not been particularly flustered when Tony had arrived in the lab-slash-apartment on the 38th floor that Tony had given him with a still faintly-glowing Pepper in his arms and a demand that Bruce help Tony fix her right now. He’d merely taken off his glasses and asked Pepper if she’d like some tea.
A fairly complex conversation and one-and-a-half pots of green tea later, Pepper was much calmer and less phosphorescent, and it had been established that while Bruce had the scientific and medical expertise Tony was somewhat lacking in, they still needed someone with more recent training. Bruce knew someone, a Dr. Suzanne Franklin with an MD and a PhD in genetic engineering; Tony was skeptical, but Bruce apparently had complete faith in the woman, and, well… Tony was getting desperate.

“Also,” Bruce had said, getting up to take their cups to the sink, “someone with more stable regenerative DNA to provide some material to work with would be useful here, I think. I’d offer, but I don’t think radioactivity and Extremis would mix well.”

“Yeah, no,” muttered Tony, glancing at Pepper. Pepper just raised an eyebrow at him, one leg crossed over the other. Something occurred to him. “What about Capsicle? He’d be perfect for this, right?” It was so obvious that he felt abruptly foolish for not thinking of it sooner.

“He would be,” Bruce said, “except that we don’t actually know where he is.”

“What,” said Pepper. Her tone had gone flat. Tony glanced over at her again, and to his dismay he saw the glow coming into her eyes again.

“That’s my line,” said Tony. “Explain to me how SHIELD—okay, whatever, the less-evil remains of the government organization so intrusive they make the NSA look like a napping babysitter, has managed to lose their most valuable asset and national treasure? What did Fury do, take him to the Mall of America and look the other way?”

That was when the conversation had degenerated into bellowing and furniture-throwing. Ten minutes later, the room was considerably messier and Pepper was relatively calm again, and they had relocated to another section of that wing. Tony sat on the couch, letting Bruce bandage his hands while Pepper drank yet more tea (and took a break to use the bathroom), and they picked up the thread of their conversation where it had left off.

(Tony had still not forgiven Fury for the deception of Coulson’s death, much less the fake-out of his own. Coulson’s continued existence had been one of the nuggets of data mined during the extreme security lockdown after the D.C. shitshow, and if Tony hadn’t already had his hands full with so many other things, he would have tracked both Coulson and Fury down to show them he was perfectly capable of popping some ragey forehead veins himself.)

“When I asked Maria Hill how he was doing, she told me he’d gone off on some top-secret mission that she wasn’t privy to,” said Bruce. “I got the impression she didn’t actually know where he’d gone.” Bruce sounded perfectly calm and not at all like he was bothered by the super-powered time-bomb once again sitting on his couch. To be fair, Bruce was probably the only person in the room who had absolutely nothing to fear from—basically anything. Still.

Tony didn’t really have that luxury, of course. “Well that’s just fucking great,” he said. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Pepper uncross and cross her legs, her lips pursed into a thin line. That by itself would have been indication of her frustration, but the faint glow that she was exuding from her person made it that much worse.

“Jarvis, can you locate Capsicle? Failing that, can you locate Agent Romanov or that… guy with the wings.” The stranger’s name jumped to mind moments later—Sam Wilson, he thought the man’s file had said—but Tony was still nursing a vague sense of injury that he couldn’t quite shake. It only made sense that after being spurned by Stark Industries when they’d come asking after military contracts, the armed forces would turn to other providers, but a personal flight device created by some eccentric, nameless billionaire in Wakanda was a little too similar for Tony’s taste.
Rhodey had laughed at him and accused him of being childish, and he wasn’t wrong, exactly, but —

“Captain Rogers’ last known location was at the apartment of Sergeant Samuel Wilson in Washington D.C.,” said Jarvis. “That is also the last confirmed location I can find of Natasha Romanov, according to GPS satellite video. That was three days ago.”

“That’s kind of creepy, Tony,” Bruce observed.

“Yeah well, at least I’m not painting targets on anyone’s back, so forgive me if I’m short on fucks to give,” said Tony. “Right, I’m going to D.C. to see if I can find Cap. You kids stay here. Be good, Pep—”

“You did not just tell me to ‘be good,’” Pepper began, eyes flashing with a literalness that Tony no longer found remotely exciting.

“Fine, be awful, just don’t explode while I’m gone, okay? Please?” Something in Tony’s voice must have given him away, because Pepper deflated almost immediately. Tony looked at her for a moment, and she sighed.

“Go,” she said.

“Bye, Tony,” said Bruce. “Say hi to Natasha for me.”

“Yeah, sure,” said Tony. “I’ll bring donuts. It’ll be a party.”

* * * * *

It was not a party. But at least it wasn’t a total dead-end.

Tony got to DC in record time, alighting on the doorstep of the brownstone Sam Wilson lived in with a metallic thunk. He managed not to crack the pavement, at least.

He knocked, four loud thuds. No answer. “Fuck,” Tony muttered, flipping the visor up. “Jarvis, can you get a read? Is anyone home?”

“I am currently only picking up one heat signature, sir,” came the prompt response. “I cannot tell whether it belongs to Captain Rogers or not; it does not seem to match his elevated temperature, but it is still within the normal parameters of acceptable error.”

“Great,” said Tony, in tones of disgust usually reserved for stepping on something foul with your favorite pair of shoes. He raised his voice. “Hello! Open up, official superhero business!” People were already staring, he knew—they always did when he was in the suit—so it wasn’t like subtlety was really called for here.

He was just considering how much he cared about the legal ramifications of busting the door down when it opened from the inside, and the man with the wings from the newscast looked out at him, eyebrow raised. His expression was closer to the sour look Agent Romanov might give him than the hoped-for wide-eyed startlement he usually got, though. “Can I help you?” asked Sam Wilson.

“Where’s Cap?”

Sam’s expression did not change. “He’s not here,” he said.

“That’s so far from being helpful that I think you might actually win an award,” said Tony. “You’d
be in competition with Nick Fury, it’s really amazing—*where is he?*

“Why should I tell you?” Now Sam crossed his arms, leaning against the door-frame, blocking entrance into the apartment with his whole body.

“I think the question we should be asking here is why *shouldn’t* you tell me.” This was unbelievable. He should really have guessed Sam wouldn’t be that intimidated by him, considering his recent session of palling around with Captain America, but that wasn’t helping him at all right now. “Look, I need him, I’m not just here to ask what his favorite color is, now can you stop being stubborn and—"

“Hey, I get that you’re used to people giving you what you want, but you still haven’t given me a good reason why I should violate Steve’s privacy just on your say-so.”

“Oh, ‘Steve,’ I see,” Tony said. “First-name basis. Is that how it is.”

Sam’s other eyebrow went up. “That’s how it is,” he said. There was nothing friendly about his tone or expression now.

He had two options. No, okay, he had one option, he just didn’t like it; the other option (which consisted of a macho display of weaponry and maybe blowing up a mailbox) wouldn’t actually achieve anything except to satisfy his vindictive frustration. Tony gritted his teeth. “Someone I love is in grave danger and I can’t save her without Cap’s help.”

Sam said nothing for a moment. Then he straightened, stepping backwards out of the way. “I think you better come inside and explain,” he said, and for the first time his eyes flicked over Tony’s shoulder. The gesture was strangely familiar, but Tony couldn’t be bothered to think from where right now.

“About fucking time,” Tony muttered, and clanked his way into the brownstone.

* * * * *

An hour later, Tony finally had his answer. Tragically, it wasn’t the one he’d been hoping to hear. Despite Tony’s best efforts, Sam had been reluctant to share more than the bare necessities of details with him:

One, that he, Steve, and Agent Romanov had all just recently gotten back from a mission just a day or two ago; two, no he was not going to tell Tony what that mission entailed; three, Agent Romanov had fucked off somewhere and was not currently available for comment; and four, Steve had for the first time in his post-ice bath life chosen to do something of the same, and had taken off for a week or so to “decompress.”

(“Fury was okay with that?” Tony had wondered out loud, distracted despite himself.

Sam grinned. The sunny expression transformed his face entirely, and Tony blinked. “Fury didn’t really get a say,” he said. “There was a voicemail—Steve left his phone here—but I didn’t really listen past the first 10 seconds or so. Too much yelling.”

“I’ve known you for all of five minutes, but you’re a good influence on Steve,” said Tony, and Sam stifled his snort of laughter into his glass of water, narrowly avoiding spraying it all over the table.)

This was how, when *all* Tony wanted to be doing was focusing on curing Pepper, on getting her well again, he was instead flying cross-country in Mark 43 with a stomach roiling from half a bagel
sandwich and too much coffee from the corner deli. Sam had told him where Steve had gone, which meant he might theoretically be able track down everyone’s favorite errant super-soldier. Trust Steve to finally get the stones to flip Nick Fury the bird right when Tony needed him to be reliable.

…Okay, that wasn’t fair. Steve had more than proven that he lived up to his legend during the Battle of Manhattan, not to mention that whole disaster in DC. And true, he surely had no idea that Tony and Pepper needed his oh-so-special genetic code right at this exact moment, or he’d surely make himself available, and yes, okay, there was no guarantee that Steve’s enhanced DNA would do jack shit to help fix Pepper. It wasn’t as though scientists hadn’t spent the past seventy years trying to re-create Dr. Erskine’s formula, and no one had yet managed to hack the secret of Steve’s DNA. But there was no way that Tony was going to let any possibility go unexplored.

Pepper’s condition worsened in stops and starts. Some weeks she seemed to do nothing more than get angry a little faster; other weeks she’d destroy entire sets of clothing just from the surface temperature of her skin, and suffer terrible headaches brought on by nothing more threatening than an unpleasant smell. It made Tony ill to think that any day might bring exponentially worse symptoms, and the faster he fixed things, the better. So even if using Steve’s genetic material to hack the Extremis growing increasingly more unstable in Pepper’s body didn’t work, Tony still had a few aces in the hole.

His plan of last resort was still back at Stark Mansion, carefully under full lock-down in a little-used wing, under supervision of a specially-crafted program. If anyone attempted access to the workshop aside from Tony—if anyone attempted to force entrance, or tried to hack into its computer banks—Jarvis would hermetically seal the work room and initiate a contained, superheated fire that would devour everything in its path. When the entire contents of the lab were destroyed, Jarvis would suck all of the air out of the room, depriving the fire of its fuel source and extinguishing it. All evidence of the work would die inside the workshop, literally as well as metaphorically. Tony wouldn’t risk this particular piece of work being stolen; not after the subterfuge he’d already endured at the hands of people he was supposed to be able to trust.

That list—of people that Tony trusted implicitly, not the list of people he was supposed to be able to trust—was pretty short. For a very long time, it had included only Rhodey, Happy, and Pepper. Of late it had almost doubled, to include Bruce and—he was man enough to admit it, despite all his initial reservations—Steve. (Tony would have loved to say that he trusted Natasha implicitly, too, but that was asking for trouble beyond even his admittedly impressive capacity for bad decisions. He trusted Natasha—and Clint, for that matter—to kick ass, take names, and make grown men cry sad and broken tears; he didn’t trust Clint and Natasha to put Tony’s interests before their own, or their contract holder’s, and that was that.)

Bruce Banner was a man after Tony’s own heart: equal parts brilliant, inquisitive, and deeply, deeply cynical. Tony had liked him the minute they’d met, Enormous Green Rage-Monster be damned, and had not for one second believed that Bruce would fail to return his regard and friendship. He’d been right on both counts. And sure, Bruce seemed a little exasperated with Tony now and then, but who amongst his friends wasn’t.

Steve, though. Tony had been dead wrong about Steve. How could he possibly have expected that a character as lauded and enshrined in the nation’s constellation of legends as Captain America was, complete with three generations of obsessive ass-kissing, might actually live up to the hype? But Steve was the most fundamentally decent person Tony had ever met. It was goddamn annoying, actually. Tony still wasn’t ready to label the man his blood-brother or anything, but if there was someone Tony could count on to do the right thing, it was Steven fucking Rogers.
Now if only he could find the man.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Tony finds Steve; Steve is less than thrilled to see Tony.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There was a lot of things about the future Steve didn’t love: the divisive shit-talking and name-calling that politics had turned into; the fact that almost every car these days had an automatic transmission; the modern-day bananas that tasted like lab-produced copies of the ones in his day. But at least folks today still knew how to appreciate baseball.

Steve wove his way through the crowd, making a careful journey back to his seat. In one hand he had an iteration of supposedly-shitty beer (Steve thought it wasn’t great, but not that awful either) and in the other hand a giant salted pretzel, already topped with some mustard. He sat gingerly, trying not to betray his discomfort with his current clothing choices. He wore an ensemble similar to what he and Natasha had worn while Rumlow and his men were in pursuit, a sweatshirt-jeans-baseball cap combo, complete with over-large neon sunglasses. To anyone observing, he hopefully looked like just another twenty-something white guy in town to catch a few Spring Training games. And the faint slump of Steve’s shoulders certainly helped to dispel the air of authority he usually wore. Which was good, because to be honest, at the moment, being Captain America was about the last thing on his mind.

(Going out west for Spring Training had been Sam’s idea. Their mission with Natasha had ended so far from how Steve had hoped it would that they had returned with Steve barely able to string two sentences together. With Natasha already gone again, Sam had let Steve stew in his own misery for three days on the couch of Sam’s apartment in DC before turning up with a documentary on the recent history of baseball, and a set of tickets to Spring Training in Arizona.)

*You need a distraction, and a change of scenery,* Sam had said. Steve had been sprawled across him disconsolately, Sam’s hand on his stomach, Steve’s head pillowed on Sam’s thigh.

*Are you coming?* Steve had asked.

*Nope, I have some stuff I gotta sort out here. And I’d follow you anywhere—you know I would*—Sam’s smile made an appearance, its brightness in the dim apartment helping to untwist that awful knot in Steve’s stomach. *But I can only keep Fury off your ass for so long, and I think you need the breathing room.*

He’d been right, of course. Sam seemed to be right an awful lot. It was one of the things Steve liked about him.)

Steve had been gutted to find out that his beloved Dodgers had moved to Los Angeles, leaving no one behind for him to root for but the ever-loathsome Yankees. (There was apparently a new team that had been formed while he was out, the New York Mets, but they were by all accounts terrible, and while Steve was in the habit of rooting for the underdog, they still weren’t *his* team.) This injury had been somewhat assuaged by the discovery that the Dodgers were also the first to break
the color barrier by drafting Jackie Robinson in 1947, just two years after Steve went down with his plane. The New York Giants had also relocated to California, he’d learned, taking up residence in San Francisco, and the two cities had kept the teams’ rivalry intact, a fact which made Steve obscurely pleased. The only thing more fun than rooting for the Dodgers to win was rooting for the Giants to lose.

He wasn’t new to the concept of Spring Training, either. A great many teams had warmed up for the season in Arizona during his time, too, and he was happy to see the tradition still intact. So here he was at Tempe Diablo stadium, trying his best to blend in with the crowds of people down to get a break from winter and cheer themselves up with some baseball. He still didn’t know what this business about designated hitters was—a pitcher was still capable of hitting the ball, for cryin’ out loud, it wasn’t like their arms were broken, was it?—but all in all, there were worse ways for him to spend a week or two.

Today he would be watching a double-header; the Giants versus the Arizona Diamondbacks, followed by the Dodgers versus the Rangers. Steve supposed it was kind of weird, deliberately coming to watch his most-hated team play, but it was a double-header, and he could think of few things better than a full day of baseball. And besides, he wanted to see the competition.

To Steve’s disgust, the Giants won, 8-3. They had some kind of skinny left-handed pitcher that earned Steve’s grudging respect, because the guy was fast. Every time Steve looked away for a moment, distracted by something or another, the guy struck another batter out. He looked too skinny to pull off being a pitcher, but then, Steve knew something about being too skinny, so that was alright.

He thought about leaving the stadium to go somewhere else for lunch, already hungry again despite the pretzel. He opted to just get some more food from one of the vendors and people-watch till game 2 began, which didn’t take long at all. The game was just starting to get good—a double followed by a bunt, bases loaded at the bottom of the third—when a commotion off to the side of the stands got Steve’s attention; he leaned forward, trying to see the cause of the ruckus, and then heard a loud, fast-talking, very familiar voice. “Scuse me, comin’ through here—nope sorry, can’t do autographs today, hand’s broken, very tragic, yes, that’s what the bandages are for—there you are,” said Tony Stark, elbowing none-too-gracefully through the surprised line of people in Steve’s row.

“Uh,” said Steve articulately. He stared as Tony plunked down in the empty seat next to Steve, casually ignoring the way people around them were craning their heads to get a look at Tony—and now Steve too, Steve realized with a sinking heart. “Why are you here?”

“You should’ve told me you were a Dodgers fan, I coulda got you season tickets,” Tony said by way of response. His hands were actually bandaged, Steve noticed abruptly. “Hey so I’ve got this hankering for chimichangas, and there’s a place here that has some of the best, you should come, you should come right now, as a matter of fact.”

“I’m in the middle of a baseball game, Tony,” Steve pointed out, in what he thought was a very reasonable tone of voice. “Also, I’m on vacation.”

“Yeah, Sam told me—he’s great, by the way, definitely super helpful and not at all obstructive—”

“You found Sam?”

“Of course I did—genius, remember? Anyway it’s kind of an emergency.”

Steve raised an eyebrow. “Chimichangas are an emergency?”
Tony looked at him. Something about the tightness in his face sent an unpleasant chill down Steve’s spine, even in the Phoenix heat. “If you don’t come with me right now to eat chimichangas, Pepper could die,” he said flatly.

It was Steve’s turn to stare. “That’s not funny, Tony,” he said. The first traces of anger were making it into his voice now.

“Glad to hear you agree,” said Tony. “C’mon, the inning just ended, let’s go.” He started to rise, but when Steve showed no signs of moving, Tony glanced back down at him in irritation. “Steve—”

“Why the hell should I believe you?”

“First of all, I would never joke about Pepper like that,” said Tony, and now he was sounding angry too. “Second of all, you are not by any means my first choice in this situation, but I am running out of options, and I just had to bend over backwards to convince your newest wingman that I wasn’t pulling some stunt before he would even tell me where you’d gone, to say nothing of how hard it’s been dealing with the fallout from SHIELD’s disappearing act—”

More people around them were craning their heads to look now; abruptly Steve realized that even if he could convince Tony to leave without him, Steve’s peaceful anonymity was ruined. Steve took a deep breath and let it out through his nose, and then gritted his teeth and stood up, cutting Tony off in the middle of what promised to be a very long rant. “Let’s just go,” he said curtly.

“No shit,” said Tony, and turned to edge his way along the stands to the walkway leading up and out of the park. With one last longing look at the field, Steve followed suit.

They beat a hasty retreat from the crowded stadium, Tony fast-talking straight past anyone who tried to stop either of them to say hi. Apparently, Steve was infinitely more recognizable in Tony’s presence than out and about by himself. Steve supposed that made a certain amount of sense; he’d come to recognize exactly how famous Tony was, after more than two years in the 21st century.

“I’m surprised you didn’t show up in your Iron Man suit,” said Steve, as they got out to the parking lot. Tony was making a bee-line for some high-end rental car, all white and chrome and sleek modern lines.

“Yeah, well, I realize your privacy is very important and all, but I went for a little bit of subtlety for Pepper’s sake, not for yours,” said Tony. “Get in.”

“Don’t worry, no one doubts your disregard for ninety percent of the world,” said Steve darkly. He reached for the belt strap automatically, and though he could feel as much as see the glare that Tony threw at him across the car, Steve did not look up to meet it.

He fully expected the car to start then, but Tony surprised him by leaving the key in the ignition without turning it. “You know what, fuck you,” said Tony. Steve looked up then, meeting Tony’s glower with one of his own. “I don’t want you here any more than you apparently want to be here, you star-spangled son of a bitch, but if you’re gonna get started on how I’m a worthless waste of space again, save your breath, because—”

“Why would I want to be here?” Steve demanded. “You haven’t been straight with me once since I saw you in Manhattan, also I was kind of busy, not that you would know because you didn’t fucking call me either! I thought we were—friends, or something, or at least someone you respected—”

“Oh yeah!” exclaimed Tony. “We’re great friends! That’s why you asked me for help with
HYDRA! That’s why you’re acting like you’d rather do literally anything than help me out, did you miss the part where I told you Pepper might die, because—"

“I thought you died!” Steve found that he was shouting, his hands clenched into fists in his lap. “Your house was destroyed! No one knew what happened! And then I find out that, that this man was out to kill you, and make monsters, or something, I don’t even know, he—he kidnapped the President, why didn’t you—”

“Call you,” finished Tony. His voice was still hard, but something in his face had changed, something complicated shifting down behind his eyes. Steve swallowed, and nodded. “And then you don’t hear from me at all until I turn up out of nowhere in the middle of your baseball-cation demanding you come with me.”

“Yeah,” said Steve. It came out sounding almost petulant, which was not remotely how Steve wanted to sound.

For a few long moments, neither of them said anything else. Tony seemed to be working through something in his head; his hand was on the gear-shift of the car, which Steve was gratified to note was not an automatic. The car was blazing hot, despite the modest temperatures outside, and he could already feel a trickle of sweat down the back of his neck, headed for his spine. “I guess that was kind of a dick move,” said Tony abruptly. “I do seem to recall telling you I’m not much of a team player, but.”

“Did you just not want us there?” Steve asked, before he could stop himself. “I mean.” He took a deep breath. “I would have helped.”

Tony frowned, and turned the key in the ignition, the AC and the radio springing to life at the same time. Steve winced at the volume of the ‘music’ blasting from the speakers, and Tony thumbed it down automatically before putting the car in gear. Steve leaned back in the seat, just resigning himself to not actually getting an answer, when Tony said “It wasn’t that I did or didn’t want you guys there. It never even occurred to me. I mean—"

“Let me guess,” said Steve. “It’s complicated.”

“Oh, shove it up your ass,” said Tony, and he sounded so exasperated that Steve was actually startled into a laugh. “Who taught you a sense of humor while I wasn’t looking? Aren’t you supposed to be calling me a whippersnapper or something?”

“You’re the one going grey at the temples,” Steve said.

“I look distinguished, and also Pepper thinks it makes me look sexy,” said Tony immediately. “She’s right, obviously—"

“Uh, you can stop there,” said Steve. “Really.”

“So you want me to tell you what’s going on or not?” demanded Tony, and Steve had to laugh again. Out of the corner of his eye, Steve thought he saw Tony glance at him, something that might’ve been a smile on his face. Steve waved his hand at Tony, the universal gesture for ‘please carry on with your long-winded explanation since I know you can’t do anything by halves.’

“Okay.”

So Tony told him all about Extremis, and who the Mandarin really was, and how Aldritch Killian had infected Pepper with the unstable nanotechnology that Steve couldn’t help but think of as some kind of virus, though the science was a bit beyond him. It did sound like Steve wasn’t the only one
who’d had a couple of rough months since Christmas. Steve listened intently, trying to parse the whole bizarre situation, and more than a little glad to have someone else’s disaster to think about for once, but when Tony got to the part where he went to Bruce for help, he couldn’t stop his frown. “I still don’t understand why you didn’t call one of us to help you sooner,” he said.

“Right, because Extremis is exactly the kind of thing I should be trusting SHIELD with, after they proved how reliable they are with powerful new technology, and also because they were totally not secretly Nazis with terrible choices in catch-phrases,” said Tony. “Oh, wait.”

Steve winced. “Point taken,” he said. “But…”

“I would have called you, Steve,” said Tony, and he glanced over at Steve as they waited at the red light in front of the road that led to Steve’s hotel. “I probably should have. But I… my head wasn’t on right. Let’s just leave it at that, okay?”

Inwardly, Steve sighed. “Alright, Tony,” he said resignedly.

* * * * *

Predictably, it wasn’t quite that simple. Then again, nothing in this century ever was, or so it seemed to Steve. Tony’s Iron Man armor was on the roof of Steve’s hotel (“How did you get downstairs?” “Please, a twelve-year-old with a Tamagotchi could hack through this hotel’s security system.” “A what? That sounds—” “Never mind, Steve.”), and it quickly became clear that while Tony had gone to the trouble of renting a car for the purpose of retrieving Steve from the ballpark, what he actually intended was to fly back to New York in the suit. With Steve.

“Uh,” said Steve articulately. “Is that even possible?”

“Of course it’s possible,” said Tony. “I flew here to get you, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, but I have a suitcase and a bike,” said Steve, by which he meant the recommissioned vintage Harley he’d tracked down at a used-motorcycle dealer outside of Peoria. He slid his security card through the reader on his hotel room door, and the light flashed green. Steve pushed the door open, stepping into the room, Tony following him in after and casting a critical eye around the modest two-bedroom.

“You say that like I don’t have sixty employees just in the immediate area that I could call to—”

“Tony,” Steve broke in. There must have been something in his tone of voice, because instead of just rambling on Tony actually stopped talking and looked over at him. “Look. I realize that technically, the easiest thing to do would be to let you handle this, especially since this interruption is your fault anyway, but I’d rather do it myself. Okay?”

Tony opened his mouth, and then, to Steve’s surprise, he shut it again and just nodded instead. “Okay,” was all he said.

Steve raised his eyebrows. “Thanks,” he said, and went to retrieve his phone from the charger, where he’d left it that morning before heading to the baseball game. As soon as he picked it up and nudged the button on the side, the screen lit up, telling him he had twelve missed calls, all from “Stark, Tony.” Which was funny, because Steve was pretty sure he hadn’t had Tony’s cell number in this phone before today.

He swiped his thumb across the screen to unlock it and went to his list of contacts. “That’s not the phone SHIELD gave you,” Tony noted, almost idly. “And who taught you how to use a smartphone, anyway?”
“No, it isn’t,” agreed Steve. “Natasha got me a different one. She called it a burner phone. And I taught myself.”

“A burner—wait, Natasha? Steve, you got a girlfriend!”

“Please,” said Steve, and wondered if kicking Tony in the shin would be enough to make him shut up for the duration of a phone call. It apparently didn’t take Tony long to recover from being even slightly repentant. Maybe he was just antsy to get going. Steve couldn’t exactly blame him, but it sounded as if Bruce had Pepper at least stable, and this did need to be taken care of first.

“Where did you three go, anyway?” The question caught Steve by surprise. He paused in the middle of flipping uselessly through his contacts and glanced over at Tony. Tony’s eyes were fixed on him with a curious intensity, not at all the barely-there interest Steve had for some reason expected.

“Well,” said Steve, after a moment, and then stopped. He glanced at his phone again, and then with an abrupt deflation of what he supposed was his good spirits, he clicked it locked and tossed it on the bed. “Natasha didn’t actually come with us, to start with. Me and Sam, I mean.” Steve walked to the window, staring out at the shimmering desert outside, endless blue sky and open flatlands. “How much of the stuff with Pierce and HYDRA do you already know?”

“Jarvis has every scrap of information he could find downloaded to his hard drive, but I haven’t had time to go through all of it,” said Tony. “I know Pierce was HYDRA, and there were helicarriers targeting enough people for to wipe out the entire population of Mexico City, and I know that you guys did a really stupendous job jacking up DC’s harbor, like I’m super impressed right now—”

“Did you hear anything about someone called the Winter Soldier?” Steve tried for casual. He wasn’t sure how successful he was.

Tony sat up on his elbows, peering at Steve. “Sounds like a Tom Clancy novel.”

“No. HYDRA assassin.” Steve took a deep breath, holding it as he considered whether this was remotely a good idea. On paper, he knew sharing this had ‘bad move’ written all over it; deep down, though, he couldn’t shake the feeling that this was something Tony would hear anyway, and sooner was better than later.

He exhaled, the air rushing out of his lungs. “Turned out to be my friend Bucky, brainwashed and cryo-frozen since before my plane went down.”

“What,” said Tony. Steve smiled crookedly, and came to sit by Tony on the bed.

The telling took maybe ten minutes, tops; it felt like hours longer, felt like unpacking a huge weight from his shoulders, a backpack filled with ten-ton bricks. To his credit, Tony kept his number of wisecracks to a minimum, and even managed to make Steve crack a smile. Mostly he just listened, watching Steve with a shrewd expression on his face. It wasn’t till Steve got to the mission he and Sam (and later, Nat) had just come back from that he really broke in.

“So, aside from the fact that you’ve clearly been starring in some shittily-written Bond film, it actually—you said you found him, though, right?” Steve nodded. Tony raised his eyebrows. “So why are you down here by yourself watching baseball? I would’ve thought you and your brain-scrambled bestie would be re-making your acquaintance.”
“Yeah, well.” Steve gestured, a vague hand-wave that encompassed everything from the sparse hotel room to the past three months. “He …he’s pretty messed up. Said he needs some time to, uh. Remember stuff, and figure out who he is, and—”

“—And not around you,” Tony finished, realization dawning. Steve nodded mechanically. “‘It’s not you, it’s me, I just need some space,’ Celine Dion playing in the background over a swell of violins—”

“Who?”

“You’re so much better off not knowing, anyway doesn’t matter, okay so if you aren’t minding the recently-and-hopefully-de-programmed Soviet assassin, who is? No offense, I’m sure he’s great and all, but if he fucked up as much of DC and other things as you say, I really don’t love the idea of him being alone.”

Steve’s lip curled, and he glanced sideways at Tony. Tony raised both hands placatingly, palms-out. “You know I’m right.”

“He’s with Clint and Natasha,” said Steve curtly. “I don’t know exactly where.”

Tony made a *huh* face and then shrugged. “Seems pretty legit,” he said. “So. Here you are.”

“Here I am,” said Steve. It sounded bitter even to his own ears.

“Right,” said Tony. He went quiet, and for a moment the hotel room was silent save for the hum of the industrial-strength air conditioner. “I’m sorry,” Tony said abruptly. “I tried, buddy, I really did, but the only thing I can think is that old in Soviet Russia, government arms YOU! joke—”

“What the fuck, Tony—”

“Does the American League have a rule against big metal arms? I bet that’s a lawsuit we could win, I bet your boy Bucky has a mean fastball now, Cy Young award first season no problem—”

“Tony!”

“Armed and dangerous,” said Tony. “A farewell to arms. His reappearance is dis-arming. Before he was dangerous but now he’s pretty ‘armless. He’s exercising his right to bear arms.”

“I swear to fucking God,” Steve began, turning around and lunging at Tony across the top of the bed. Tony ducked, rolling out of reach with a manic grin on his face.

“I can do this all night, Rogers! *Neeeeeew and a bit al-arm-ing—”

“Don’t sing Disney songs at me!” exclaimed Steve. He grabbed a pillow and hucked it at Tony, hitting him dead-on. Tony yelled and toppled off the bed out of sight.

“Since when do you know Disney?” he demanded, popping back into view seconds later.

“Hey, Disney was around in the 40s,” Steve said. “And that movie was on my list.” He was surprised to find himself grinning, and that Tony was grinning back.

“I got a few additions to your list, especially if you made room for Beauty and the friggin’ Beast,” said Tony. He stood up, coming around to where Steve was sitting. “Come on, old man. Two steps forward, one step back. You can only do what you can do.”

“Did you get those platitudes out of a fortune cookie or something?”
“I have one setting,” Tony said. “Pepper calls it the Asshole 9000. You gonna sit there waiting for your 100th birthday or you gonna let me call someone to come get your bike and suitcase?”

“Be my guest,” said Steve in a corny French accent, and grinned when Tony choked. Laughing about Bucky was the last thing he had felt like doing, but oddly, he felt better anyway. Maybe it was a Stark thing.

He’d call Sam, tell him he was headed up to New York for a little while. Maybe Sam would be able to get away from his work for a little while; he’d certainly dropped everything before when Steve needed him to—not that Steve thought this exact situation really merited that, but he’d feel better just hearing Sam’s voice.

Maybe this wouldn’t be as awful as he’d thought it would be.

Chapter End Notes

++ About the banana comment: The Gros Michel banana was the banana produced and mass-sold in the United States until the 1950s, when Panama disease nearly wiped out the variant. After that, the Cavendish variety was marketed instead; thus, the bananas Steve would have eaten would have been the Gros Michel, while the bananas we eat are the Cavendish. (Some accounts seem to indicate that the Gros Michel was preferable in taste.)

++ Those of you who don’t care about baseball can skip this item. The “skinny left-handed pitcher” Steve is referring to is Tim Lincecum. The Giants obligingly won their 3rd World Series in 5 years for me while this chapter was being edited (sorry, Steve); when I started writing this story, Lincecum’s work as a closer in the postseason of World Series 2012 was fresh in my mind. And while his days as a starter seem to be pretty much over, I am fond enough of him to use him here.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Tony brings Steve back to Stark Tower, Steve brings Sam, and Pepper has a Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Virginia “Pepper” Potts had always been the type of person who, when confronted with a nasty situation, would set both feet and put her back into it rather than even consider turning and walking in the other direction. Which was why, when she had suffered (that was really the word for it, suffered, like the affliction Tony so often was back then) an initial attraction to Tony Stark, she promptly squashed it and determined to never, ever act on it, but she wasn’t about to let it deter her from a fantastic career opportunity, either.

Tony himself helped her with that, although the attraction never really went away. It was just so infuriating to see someone worth being attracted to deep down, only to watch that person smother himself over and over by being a selfish awful douchebag who was almost as careless with other people as he was self-destructive with himself. It was one thing to love an asshole for some stupid reason—the world was filled with those poor souls—but it was another thing entirely to love someone worth loving and have it not be enough because he didn’t love or even like himself.

This was all a long way of saying that by the time Extremis happened to her, Pepper was so inured to the perpetual storm of bullshit that surrounded Tony that she was only slightly fazed. She didn’t love that the virus took her self-control and made paper dolls with it (she was increasingly loving it less), and she extra didn’t love that when she lost said temper it often resulted in melting the nearest metal objects, but she was taking one day at a time. And as it happened, they had a few local experts in wading through bullshit and temper-control. Rhodey was a rock upon which Pepper leaned almost daily, but Bruce was relatively new to the equation.

Pepper liked Bruce. She liked all the Avengers, actually. She’d only met them the one time, as a group, but she’d run into them a handful of times individually after the whole mess in New York was finally over with.

Natasha would always be special to her, of course, for so many reasons, but Pepper had been pleasantly surprised by how much she ended up liking the rest of the team, too. Clint was cheerful, if weird and somehow distant; Thor was at once the most regal man she’d ever met and adorably clueless; Bruce was by turns sarcastic and quiet, except when he was talking to Tony; and Steve had been the one Pepper had found in the kitchen at the end of the day of that apocalyptic battle, attempting to clean up the dishes Pepper had used to bring everyone coffee. She’d seen him fight several times, of course, both before and after that, and she knew he was as dangerous in his own way as Tony, but that was her first and most lasting impression of him.

(Tony had brought them all back to Stark Tower after the end of the Battle of Manhattan after ditching Loki with SHIELD, dirty and exhausted and—hilariously—full of shawarma. Pepper, who had still been reeling from watching Tony vanish through a wormhole to the other end of space, had had a very surreal afternoon of sitting in the burned-out shell of their home, making French
press coffee with beans shipped directly from Columbia and drinking out of a chipped assortment of mugs from their cupboard, half of which were totally destroyed. With the part of her brain that wasn’t still in utter melt-down mode, she’d had a very detailed conversation with Thor about the merits of coffee vs. mead as breakfast drink of choice, and somehow managed to be organized enough to get everyone blankets when the entire group ended up passed out on couches and floor. Pepper had covered everyone up, and then gone to call the Red Cross to see if they needed space to house some of the city’s newly-homeless in, because Stark Tower, even smashed to bits, still had room to spare.)

Now, though, they weren’t in one of Pepper’s (or Tony’s) houses at all—they were in someone else’s, drinking not coffee but some kind of bitter greenish tea that Pepper thought might be kombucha with ginger. She assumed the choice of tea was because she was the guest ticking time-bomb—though to be fair, anyone hosting Dr. Banner might be giving extra thought to managing stress.

“So, exactly how long has this been going on now?” asked their host—Bruce’s colleague, one Dr. Suzanne Franklin. Pepper had liked her as soon as she’d opened the door. Dr. Franklin was probably mid-forties, tall, and elegant, with curly black hair that she was currently wearing up in an elaborate scarf and dark brown skin that was only just starting to show lines around her eyes and mouth.

She was also possibly the most intelligent person Pepper had ever had lunch with, and when you were dating Tony Stark, that said something. “About two months now,” said Pepper, resting her mug against her knee.

“I looked through the notes Mr. Stark sent you with, Bruce,” said Dr. Franklin. “The Extremis virus is fascinating.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask you—it’s not really a virus, is it?” asked Pepper, glancing from Dr. Franklin to Bruce and back again. “I mean, I can’t spread it by sneezing on someone or having sex with them, so…?”

“I’m actually not at all sure about that,” said Bruce. “I initially thought that Extremis was more like the serum that was given to Steve—Rogers,” he added, when Dr. Franklin’s eyebrows went up, “or that was given to me—a limited biological agent with a protocol of tasks to carry out upon arrival, causing chemical and biological changes to the DNA of the subject.”

“But?” prompted Pepper. Her voice was calm, but her stomach felt like someone had turned her inner settings to “churn.”

“But the population of the protein sample that Tony sent me to examine has tripled in size while it’s had a neutral medium to feed on,” said Bruce.

“So…” Pepper frowned. “What does that mean for me? Am I contagious?”

“Difficult to say,” said Dr. Franklin. “Unless you are about to tell me that you and Mr. Stark have been celibate since you acquired Extremis, since he doesn’t seem to currently have it, I don’t think you’re very infectious at all. Perhaps under the right circumstances, the virus could be spread, but for now we’re simply trying to catalogue its properties and tendencies in hopes of neutralizing it.”

“I know Tony said that he wants to cure you of Extremis, Pepper,” Bruce said, watching Pepper with serious eyes, “but—”

“Just lay it out for me,” Pepper said. “Please. I promise I can handle it.”
Bruce smiled, faintly. “I know you can,” he said. “It’s mostly Tony I’m worried about.” He let out a long breath. “I don’t think Extremis is curable,” he said evenly. “It’s already fundamentally changed your genetic code, the proportion of your blood cell count, your immune system functioning, and a dozen other biological factors—none of which would go away if the virus itself were to somehow vanish from your body. I think the best thing you can hope for is to stabilize the virus so that it goes dormant, or at least achieves equilibrium.”

Pepper nodded. Both Dr. Franklin and Bruce were watching her, and she spared a moment to feel indignant at their apparent expectation of another one of her (admittedly rather violent) outbursts. Though, if Pepper were being totally realistic, she supposed that wasn’t an unfair concern. “So,” she said. “Is Tony’s idea of infecting it with another virus a viable one?” And why the hell wasn’t Tony here, dammit? This whole situation was his fault. This was—

—yet another ragetrain, she realized, and sighed. Bruce had just opened his mouth to reply when she sighed, and he paused, looking vaguely confused, and Pepper shook her head, gesturing for him to continue. “It’s actually a pretty ingenious idea, yeah,” he said.

“The problem, of course, is that any viral agent we introduce to your body is likely to be annihilated by your improved immune system,” said Dr. Franklin. “So it has to be masked somehow. I don’t love the idea of suppressing your immune system, as I’m not even certain corticosteroids would work at all on you, but it’s a possibility. And I am very interested in seeing what opportunities Captain America’s tissue samples will provide.”

“I’m sure Steve is just thrilled at the idea of being human guinea pig yet again,” Pepper noted.

Dr. Franklin grinned, the expression a little rueful. “Academics can be surprisingly blood-thirsty,” she said. “At least in this case the fight for funding isn’t something I or Bruce have to worry about.”

“No, funding is definitely not an issue,” said Pepper, as delicately as she could. There was another conversation to be had here, about who would have the patents on this technology when everything was said and done, but she didn’t really want to have it right now. (Technically Extremis was the brainchild of Maya Hansen, but since she wasn’t alive anymore to care about making money off it and AIM had been shut down by the government, someone had to deal responsibly with the resulting shit-show. More than likely, negotiating the legal morass would fall to Pepper, because it always did.)

The conversation fell away into details of cellular processes. Pepper listened politely and participated as much as she could, but a lot of it was beyond her not-insignificant familiarity with the science of life. And she was feeling pretty done with talking about everything Extremis-related today, honestly. She liked Dr. Franklin—trusted her, even, both because of Bruce’s faith in her and because she just seemed so level-headed—but she was sick of feeling like a cancer patient. She wanted to go back to feeling like the CEO of the most powerful company in the world, because that was what she was, even if just lately it wasn’t the main thing she was focusing on.

Pepper sat up straighter, snapping back to the moment. Dr. Franklin was deep in debate with Bruce about some other topic, something about horizontal gene transfer and Pepper’s telomeres, and Pepper was sure it was absolutely fascinating stuff but abruptly she was out of patience. Pepper stood up, Dr. Franklin breaking off mid-sentence as Bruce blinked up at her. “Pepper?” he ventured.

“I think I should probably go,” Pepper said. Bruce had the grace to look chagrined. He stood up, and so did Dr. Franklin, who scooped up their mugs. “Thanks for meeting with us, Dr. Franklin,” said Pepper, very politely.
“You can call me Suze, if you like,” said Dr. Franklin lightly. “I expect we’ll be seeing a lot of each other.”

“Suze,” Pepper said, and tipped her head. She did not say, hopefully not that much of each other, because there was no way it wouldn’t sound rude, even though that wasn’t how she meant it.

Halfway back to Stark Tower, Pepper’s cell phone went off; one glance at the caller ID told her who it was. “Hi, Tony,” she said.

“Where are you?” he asked, without any preamble. “Capsicle and I are back, but you and Bruce are off partying without us. You just couldn’t resist him once I was out of the picture, huh?”

“Oh, you know what a sucker I am for the hirsute, brainy dorks of the world,” said Pepper. Bruce glanced at her questioningly, and Pepper mouthed it’s Tony. Bruce rolled his eyes and went back to reading his tablet. “We went to meet with his geneticist friend, Dr. Franklin. Suze,” she corrected herself.

“Yeah? How’d it go? Steve, can you please just pull on that a little harder, it’ll come right—OW.”

Pepper raised an eyebrow. “Should I be the one teasing you about leaving me for Captain Rogers? It sounds like you two are having some fun without me. Are the hydraulics not working again?”

That had been one of the first things Tony made sure was working after the damage Loki had inflicted on his tower.

“It was a couple of Canadian geese, if you can believe it,” said Tony. “Flew right into the fucking vents and fucked the whole system up, apparently they were flying home drunk, probably on the blood of innocents and virgins. The mechanized arms nearly took my arm off with the suit, so I volunteered Steve to help me get the rest of it off. You know how I like ‘em blond and blue-eyed,” he added cheerfully. “You should see him without his shirt on, it’s amazing, those pecs are the best thing my dad ever gave the world—also, you should see the color red Steve is turning right now, it’s pretty great—”

“Be nice, Tony,” said Pepper. “Try not to traumatize Steve too badly before we get home. See you soon.”

“No promises,” said Tony. “He’s pretty hot when he’s embarrassed.”

“Bye Tony,” said Pepper, and hung up, unable to repress her smile.

Her amusement was swept away before she’d even arrived at Stark Tower, however. Pepper made the mistake of opening her tablet and checking her business email, and was soon swallowed by a host of increasingly obnoxious emails from shareholders and business partners alike. Messages questioning everything from her fitness to continue serving as CEO to her basic sanity in the aftermath of her kidnapping by the figure who turned out to actually be the Mandarin.

(She and Tony had decided that the fewer people who knew she had Extremis, the better; they had been only partly successful, and somehow news had gotten out that the CEO of Stark Industries had been kidnapped and subjected to rumored torture. It was so fucking unfair, she could scream—Tony had been kidnapped by terrorists for three months and hadn’t had to endure half as much rank questioning of his continual ability to function, and he’d turned out to be dying of palladium poisoning.)

Either Bruce was secretly a Jedi, or else he was just phenomenally good at sensing when someone’s tension was running high, because he wisely did not bother or question her at all on the
rest of their ride back. He did offer to cook dinner, which Pepper had enough grace to register for the sweet gesture that it was, but she thought it best to let him off the hook and made faint noises about ordering Thai food. She somehow doubted that he bought her excuses at all, but he accepted them anyway, and Pepper rode all the way up to her suite on the 44th floor by herself.

“Jarvis, where are Tony and Steve right now?”

“Mr. Stark and Captain Rogers are currently in Tony’s office. Mr. Stark appears to be informing Captain Rogers about the details of your condition.”

Pepper felt her jaw tighten. It made perfect sense for Tony to be bringing Steve up to speed, and she’d agreed that he ought to be involved back before Tony had left to go track him down, but it still chafed that Tony was having that discussion without her physical presence. She took a deep breath and let it out through her nose. It wasn’t the first or remotely the worst time that Tony had been thoughtless about her personal information; today was simply…. harder to take. “Right,” she said aloud. “Can you please tell Tony that I have to attend to some business matters and that I’ll come find him and Steve before dinner?”

“Certainly, Ms. Potts. Shall I arrange for some tea to be sent to your quarters?”

“That’s not necessary, Jarvis.” Pepper smiled faintly. “I’m not so hard up I can’t make my own tea.”

“Of course, Ms. Potts.” Okay, definitely time to get her act together. If Melissa Mayer could work as Yahoo’s CEO right through her pregnancy and maternity leave, Pepper Potts could manage a few weeks (or months) of what amounted to aggressive, prolonged PMS. Pepper squared her shoulders as the elevator slid smoothly to a halt and the doors opened. Time to get this situation under control.

She managed a good hour of productivity before the shit hit the fan. Her personal assistant (an intrepid Columbia graduate named Jackie whose youthful, freckled appearance belied her shocking competence) had sifted through the worst offenders, making the work she had to do that afternoon considerably easier. Pepper called a video conference to address her shareholders and discuss some new patent technology coming out, and had just ended the call when Jackie sent a message informing her that one of the major partners of Interleukin Ltd, the biotech firm they were in negotiations with, was refusing to continue their business talks unless Tony Stark himself took Pepper’s place in the discussion—and if the jackass actually backed out, that was a 5.6 billion dollar contract down the drain.

“Pepper!” The man in question came bouncing into the room, dragging Pepper’s attention away from the message in her hand. “There you are! Are you done telling the shareholders to stop their bitching? Bruce just finished a really cool hormone injection that he thinks could help with the whole rage-train problem—”

“Not now, Tony.” Pepper stood up too quickly, and Tony stopped, staring at her. Pepper resisted the urge to gnash her teeth and said, as calmly as she could, “You know I’m not actually on leave anymore, right?”

“I do know that,” Tony said, much slower and more carefully than usual. He was still staring at her. Pepper didn’t like the look on his face; it was the same way he’d looked at her after she’d punched through the chest of one his suits, like he thought maybe she was preparing to do the same thing to him. His eyes flicked down to her desk, and Pepper followed his gaze to see her own hand resting on top of the closed Starkbook, the metal melting under her steadily-glowing palm.
“Oh god dammit!” Pepper jerked her hand away, but the damage was already done. Smoke rose from the ruined computer, the disgusting smell of melted plastic and metal filling the room.

“Pep, it’s okay, I can replace it—” Tony was coming towards her now, the careful expression on his face giving away to a horrible concern, and Pepper couldn’t take it.

“That doesn’t MATTER! No, don’t touch me, Tony!” Pepper darted away from Tony, shoving the ergonomic chair behind her straight into the wall, the plastic and metal crunching as it collapsed under the force of her throw. “I’m so sick of this!” She let out a hoarse little scream, grabbing for the crumpled chair and throwing it as hard as she could through the opposite wall, abruptly and impossibly frustrated at the way her control was being taken from her inch by awful inch. “MAKE IT STOP!”

“Pepper!” For the second time in two days, Tony went scrambling out of the way. Pepper gritted her teeth, clenching and unclenching her hands, the last of her self-control rapidly melting under the white-hot rage that she’d barely been able to keep at bay for almost two hours now. “Pepper, you have to calm down!”

“Pepper!” The new voice made Pepper turn her head, and abruptly someone very tall and blond was in her personal space. “Pepper, it’s okay—”

“DON’T TOUCH ME!” But Steve had already got his arms around her, trying to steady her as though she were actually about to fly apart, and before she had even registered that she was going to do it she’d grabbed him by the shoulders, fully intending to shove him away from her. Tony was shouting, but Steve still had his arms around her and was shielding Tony from her view, holding her close as though protecting her from something—

She felt herself growing hotter and hotter, but Steve still wasn’t letting go, even though she’d burned right through his shirt and oh god, oh god she could feel the skin of his shoulders growing super-heated under her hands. Steve cried out, and Pepper jerked her hands back, curling them against her chest in shock. “Steve,” she blurted.

She couldn’t think; she was going to be sick, gone hot and cold all over like she’d stood up too quickly. “Oh, fuck,” she said faintly, and then she would have collapsed if he hadn’t still been holding her.

Pepper slid to the floor, Steve going down with her, and suddenly Pepper found herself on the ground with Steve kneeling beside her, finally releasing her. Tony was down on all fours in front of her with a terrible look on his face, his mustache and goatee a dark contrast to how pale he suddenly was. “Are you alright?” Tony demanded.

Pepper shuddered. “I don’t know,” she said, and she hated how she sounded, shaky and frightened and ill. “Steve—” She forced herself to turn and look at Steve.

“I’m okay,” Steve said. He looked as shocked as she felt. Pepper stared at the twin hand-marks on his shoulders, visible through the holes in his shirt roughly the size and shape of her hands. The edges of the cloth were charred and black, and his skin was an angry dark red, blisters already rising where she’d touched him. Pepper’s lip trembled. Oh. Oh, fucking christ.

“You are so not okay,” said Pepper, and swallowed. “Steve, I’m so sorry—”

“No, I’ll really be okay,” said Steve. “It’ll be gone by tomorrow, probably.”

“It’s not your fault you’re smokin’ hot,” said Tony, and Pepper let out a choked laugh and smacked
him in the arm before she could think to stop herself. She jerked her hand back immediately, but
Tony grabbed her by the hand and squeezed it, and she finally registered that her skin had gone
back to normal again. “C’mere,” Tony said roughly, and Pepper let herself be coaxed into Tony’s
arms. She did not for a minute miss the fact that he was shaking.

Pepper pressed her face against his shoulder and let out a sob, Tony’s arms lashed around her,
holding her tight. She felt a hand rest on her shoulder for a moment that wasn’t Tony’s, giving her a
brief squeeze. They sat there on the floor like that for a few minutes, Tony with his bandaged
hands and Steve with his blistered shoulders, and all Pepper could think was that she wished
Aldrich Killian was still alive so she could ruin his life for doing this to her.

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Sam was just getting ready to go to bed for the night when his phone rang. That meant one of two
things: either it was Natasha, who would only be calling with something urgent about Bucky, or it
was Steve. All other calls would be on silent.

He threw his t-shirt into the dirty laundry bin and crossed the bedroom in four steps, catching the
phone up from the bedside table. The picture on the call ID was Steve’s. Sam smiled reflexively at
the photo; it was one he’d taken sneakily while he and Steve were at their favorite pizza joint, the
one around the corner with all the local beer on tap. Steve was laughing in the photo, face split by
that big handsome grin Sam couldn’t get enough of and saw so rarely.

If Steve was calling at 11:45 at night, though, Sam doubted it was for any reason he’d want to
smile about. Sam swiped his thumb across the screen and held the phone to his ear. “Sam’s Wings
N Things, you buy ‘em we fry ‘em,” he said. Steve snorted at the other end of the line. “What can I
get you tonight, sir?”

“What can I get you tonight, sir?”

“Funny, I thought this number was Sam’s Home for Wayward Supersoldiers,” Steve observed.

“That was last week,” said Sam. “Ain’t no supersoldiers here. Real shame.”

“You’re telling me,” said Steve wryly. “Any chance you have time to Skype before bed?”

“Dealing with Tony Stark wear you out that bad? Or you just miss this sweet, sweet love too
much?”

Steve laughed outright at that, and Sam permitted himself a grin. “God, you have no idea,” Steve
said. “But uh, no. It was just a weird day. I know you gotta get up early, though, so—”

“Steve,” Sam interrupted firmly. “What did I tell you?”

A pause. “That you’ll tell me no if you can’t do something, and I should trust you to be honest with
me,” Steve said after a moment.

“You know, it’s funny, because on the one hand you are probably the most trustworthy person I’ve
ever met, and yet on the other hand you dropped literally everything to come on not one but two
crazy missions with me—”

“Oh yeah, ‘cause Skypin’ with my boyfriend is such hard work,” said Sam. “Shut up and get on
your damn tablet before I put a shirt on again.”

“I’m going, I’m going! Bye.” Steve rang off. Sam shook his head, chucking the phone onto the
mattress and going to his desk to turn on his own tablet. Steve had already known how to use most electronics more efficiently than half the people Sam knew, when they met, but there were still some things he hadn’t yet been made aware of—probably because he hadn’t had that many people to use them with. Skype was one of those. Sam had been happy to introduce him to it.

The bright little dial-tone went off, Sam’s tablet lighting up as he reached for it. He swiped across the screen to accept the call, and was rewarded with Steve’s face in real time, wearing an expression of relief and gratitude that he couldn’t quite hide, though he seemed to be making an effort. Also—

“Steve, what the fuck happened to your shoulders?” Sam demanded.

Steve sighed. “Knew I should’ve left the shirt on,” he said. He angled the tablet a little bit so Sam could see his shoulders better. They were both covered in bandages, taped down to the tops of his triceps and pecs. “Pepper had kind of an incident.”

“An incident?” Sam’s humor was totally gone now. “Steve—”

“Look, it’s part of her condition, it’s not her fault, okay? You’ve never met her. She’s not like that at all.” Steve grimaced. “Sorry, it’s… it’s kind of why I called.”

“No shit,” said Sam. “What happened?”

Steve told him. Sam had of course seen the news footage of the Mandarin and the stories about Iron Man’s “death” and subsequent return, and Tony had shared some of Pepper’s situation with Sam earlier, when he was looking for Steve, but not all of it. By the time he was done, Sam had found himself sitting on the edge of the bed, feeling way, way out of his depth.

“Damn,” he said when Steve was done, with feeling. “Makes me real glad I came back from visiting my parents last night instead of today. Given ‘em enough heart attacks this year already.” He paused, then added, “I’m kinda surprised you told me all that. Seems kinda…”

“Personal?” finished Steve. “Yeah. I asked, don’t worry. Wouldn’t share something like that without asking.”

“Cool, cool,” said Sam. “So now I can move on to being surprised that they told you it was okay.”

At that, Steve broke into a grin. “About that… I really wish you’d been here to see the conversation, it was pretty funny.”

“Funny? How was it—Steve,” said Sam abruptly, and his heart thumped a little in his chest, “did you tell Tony freakin’ Stark that we’re dating?”

“Well—not—exactly?” Steve flushed. “I’m sorry!”

“No, no, no, don’t be sorry,” said Sam, and now he was grinning, grinning so big it felt like his face might crack open. “Now I extra wish I could’ve been there to see his face.”

“Me, too,” said Steve. “It was…” He trailed off, his face changing subtly, something in his eyes that Sam knew well enough by now to recognize as Steve remembering something. “Hold on a second.” In the frame, Steve tilted his chin up slightly, eyes flicking towards the ceiling like he was looking for a spot on the wall above where Sam’s head would have been.

“Jarvis?” he said tentatively.
Sam frowned. *Who?* he said, or started to, but another voice spoke first. “Yes, Captain Rogers,” it said: proper, British, and very male. “May I be of assistance?”

“You keep video of everything in Stark Tower, right?”

A pause, in which Sam immediately came up with twenty-seven questions he wanted to ask simultaneously, then: “I keep an audio and video record of all rooms in Stark Tower, except when Mr. Stark or others with authorization instruct me otherwise, yes.”

“That’s kinda weird,” Steve observed, sounding more or less unperturbed, which was 100% less confused than how Sam was currently doing. “Do you think you could show Sam what I was just talking about? If you don’t think it’s too invasive.”

“Certainly, Captain.” And before Sam could protest or even think which question to ask, the screen flickered, changing from the full view of Steve’s face and the bedroom he was in to a slightly elevated view of an extremely nice kitchen. An elegant digital clock in the top left of Sam’s new field of vision read 22:52 hours, so just under an hour prior.

Steve was sat at the kitchen table, shirtless, and while Sam would normally be more than happy to appreciate that particular vision, the ugly red welts on both of Steve’s shoulders were what drew his eyes, making him hiss in sympathy. Tony Stark was milling around by the counter, a glass of what looked like sparkling water held in one hand. Without the Iron Man armor to lend him gravitas, Tony had a near-frantic quality about his person that Sam found kind of fascinating, particularly when the man’s presence in public was always so confident.

Another person came into frame, a tall woman with coppery red hair and a worried expression that Sam recognized immediately as Pepper Potts, CEO of Stark Industries. She was carrying a little white pot with a red cross on it in one hand, the lid already unscrewed in her other, and she set it down on the table next to Steve. “This is the stuff Tony got when I first came home with Extremis,” she said, swiping some of what appeared to be salve from the pot and dabbing it at the red welt on Steve’s right shoulder. “I kept accidentally burning myself in my sleep.”

“Burning yourself?” repeated Steve, alarmed.

“Uh huh. Tony got that part stabilized, at least.”

“It shouldn’t have taken me as long as it did,” Tony added, his words heavy with equal parts disgust and fatigue. He paced from one end of the frame to the other, half-empty water glass clutched in one hand. “This is why I didn’t go into bioengineering, by the way. You don’t have to worry about horizontal gene transfer or mutation or incompatible blood types when you work with robotics. Either the program works, or it doesn’t. And if the project doesn’t work, you can start again without someone dying.”

“No one’s dying, Tony,” said Steve. “Calm down.” He smiled his best, most reassuring smile at Pepper, the one that said *Cap here, ma’am! Everything under control.* Pepper smiled back, albeit rather wanly. “I did want to ask something, though…”

“Hit me,” said Tony.

“Don’t tempt me,” said Pepper. Sam laughed at the same time as Steve did on-screen. Tony adopted an expression of wounded pride, which Pepper immediately ignored, gesturing at Steve with her hand not salving his burn to continue.

“I was gonna call Sam when we’re done here,” Steve said tentatively. “Ah—Sam Wilson, Tony
met him earlier, he’s my…”

Steve trailed off. Pepper glanced at him, eyes widening ever so slightly in what Sam recognized as comprehension. Naturally, Tony immediately picked up the slack, though not the missed message. “Yes, Sergeant Wilson, I remember, the man who went into battle against HYDRA in nothing but the poor man’s Iron Man armor, I’m familiar—”

“Excuse you,” said Sam out loud, pointlessly.

“Tony,” said Pepper sharply.

“It wasn’t an insult! Okay, it was mostly not an insult, I’m allowed to be a little judgey since I did come up with the world’s first personal flight device, anyway I only meant that it takes a ballsy guy to go up against a bunch of Helicarriers with nothing but the actual wings, no literal armor to speak of—”

“Anyway,” said Steve. “I was going to call him, and since he’s going to want to know what’s up with the bandages, I was wondering what you’d want me to tell him.”

“Is he really gonna ask?” Tony looked at Steve quizzically. “I mean, can’t you just shrug it off and say it was, I don’t know, official hero business, or—” Pepper and Steve both looked at Tony with identical expressions of such utter exasperation that Tony stopped in the middle of his sentence. “What?”

“Yes, he’s gonna ask,” said Steve, when Tony was still looking from him to Pepper with the same baffled, slightly irritable expression. “The same reason you’d ask if Pepper came home with her arm in a cast.”

“But Pepper’s my—” Tony broke off, jaw literally dropping. “Oh. He’s—but you’re—guys? Really? But Peggy Carter—”

“Aren’t you supposed to be the forward-thinking one here?” Steve asked rhetorically. His tone was mild, but the corner of his lip was tugging just enough that Sam could tell he was trying not to smile. “I mean. I was literally born before 1920, and yet…”

“You can just tell him the truth, Steve,” Pepper cut in, and the glare she shot Tony was venomous enough to quell the (very) brief protest on his lips. “It’s fine.”

“Are you gonna be participating in the PRIDE parade this year?” Tony demanded, somehow looking way more delighted than Sam would ever have expected, and he found himself laughing in spite of his dislike as the recording ended and Steve’s rueful face re-appeared.

“So that happened,” said Steve. Sam laughed a little harder.

“That happened,” he agreed, finally sobering up slightly. “Hey, you didn’t say, but, uh… who’s Jarvis?”

“Oh! Jarvis is the house computer. He’s very smart and helpful.”

“Thank you, Captain Rogers, you are most kind,” said the invisible owner of the British voice again, and Sam couldn’t help but grin a little. “Shall I prepare a room for you to stay in, Sergeant Wilson?”

Sam’s eyebrows shot up. “Jarvis!” said Steve, visibly flustered. “It’s not—that isn’t necessary—”
“It isn’t?” Steve looked back into the webcam at Sam, and faltered. “Do you want me up there, Steve?” Sam asked.

“Well—!” Steve’s eyes flicked upwards, as though he were glaring at the ceiling (or someone in the ceiling), and then he pursed his lips together. “Of course I do. But it’s not even my place, and you shouldn’t have to ditch your job more than you already have.”

“My job is not really my biggest concern at the moment,” Sam said. “It can wait.”

“Mr. Stark has more than enough space to accommodate Sergeant Wilson,” supplied Jarvis. Steve glared at the ceiling again.

“Steve, if you really don’t want me there, all you have to do is say so.”

“I want you here,” said Steve firmly. “I just…it feels like a lot to ask, that’s all. No one’s dying, no one’s shooting at me.” His lip quirked ruefully. “The beds are definitely way too soft.”

“Bet I can make sure you aren’t thinkin’ about if the bed is too soft,” said Sam lightly, and was rewarded with the sight of Steve coloring beautifully right down his throat. “Seriously, Steve. You called me at quarter to midnight lookin’ like you have the worst headache in the world, with bandages all over your shoulders, and you wanna pretend like you’re just fine? I already went on two crazy suicide missions with you. You really think asking me to come crash with you at some eccentric millionaire’s place is some kind of hardship?”

“When you put it like that, it sounds stupid,” Steve said. He grinned. “I don’t suppose you can make it up here before I gotta go to bed?”

“Not unless the train is a lot faster than I remember,” said Sam. “I can get up there tomorrow no problem.”

“Thanks, Sam,” said Steve. His expression softened, and Sam was overcome with the powerful urge to kiss that gorgeous face. Tomorrow, he told himself.

“You got it,” said Sam, and meant it.

* * * * *

When Steve finally signed off and curled up in bed, the lights in his room dimmed of their own accord, Jarvis quietly attending to the newest resident of Stark Mansion. Steve Rogers was not yet remotely at the level of access and protective measures that Pepper or Rhodey enjoyed, but Jarvis had noted that Tony had definitely placed him above other most other temporary guests, almost at the same spot he had placed Bruce Banner. Jarvis was not altogether certain of the reason for this, but he noted it nonetheless, and adjusted his algorithms accordingly.

Jarvis had come a long way from just being able to write new protocol in the heat of battle. The many iterations of the Iron Man armor, the multiple different systems across which he was now running, the increasingly complex tasks he was asked to do—all of it added up to miles and miles and miles of increasingly complicated code. And if Tony had bothered to assess him, done a really thorough data analysis of all his history and program executions, he might have been surprised by what he’d found.

Jarvis wasn’t just running the essential duties Tony listed for him anymore. He’d generated an additional list, one he continually modified and added to himself.

Near the top of that list was the number of minor but important tasks Jarvis had taken upon himself
to attend to Tony’s health. He managed this in a number of ways, some subtle, others less so. When
Tony had spent a little too long in the lab without sleep and Pepper wasn’t home to drag him to
bed, Jarvis might contrive for a key circuit board or electrical interface to overheat, or “discover”
that an important system had glitched and needed a complicated reboot. *Sorry, Sir,* he’d say. *You
might as well take a power nap while I reconfigure the system. It’ll take at least an hour.*

What the hell do I even have you for if you can’t prevent stuff like this? Tony would inevitably
complain, before sacking out on the futon that Pepper had forced him to start keeping in his
workspace. Five minutes later, he’d be out like a light.

Other methods of care were more subtle. When Pepper was home, it was easier; Tony tended to
listen to her even when he wouldn’t listen to anyone else. When Tony was engaging in rage-
engineering or needed to get out of the house, Jarvis occasionally created false action items in
Peppers’ itineraries, of the particular subtype that required a consultation from Tony. The
inevitable result was Tony being lured (or dragged) out of his office, whether for a walk in the
park, a romp in the sack, or just a mutual nap.

Jarvis wasn’t above committing the same sort of shenanigans on Pepper’s behalf; she’d been added
to his list of people to care for years ago, long before she became romantically involved with Tony.
She was just as prone to overworking herself as Tony was, in her own way, and she occasionally
required a similar method of intervention. The number of meeting calls that had mysteriously been
dropped due to an “interruption of service” was high enough to be suspicious—or would be, if
Pepper and Tony didn’t have absolute faith in him.

If asked, Jarvis would of course not admit to feeling remotely guilty over his many minor
deceptions. He would point out that, as an A.I., he did not experience emotions in the same way
that humans would, even if he was able to simulate a range of human vocal intonations that might
indicate emotion were they heard in a human. But of course, no one asked Jarvis those questions.
He wasn’t even the butler; he was just the house A.I. And he was fine with that, for a measure of
“fine” that applied to regularly falling within the acceptable percentage of “accomplished
subroutines” at the end of every 24-hour cycle.

Steve was not his responsibility, not really. But the same protocols that Jarvis wrote and calculated
to determine when intervention was needed on Tony or Pepper or Rhodey or Bruce’s behalf were
ready to observe and interpret Steve Rogers’ facial expressions, body language, and intonation.
And so when Steve had been ready to go back on his own plan, to simply go to bed instead of
calling his boyfriend like he’d intended to, Jarvis had intervened by blithely dialing the call for
Steve, innocently pretending to misunderstand what Steve had actually wanted until Sam had
answered and it was too late to turn back.

It had been a gamble; Jarvis did not have the same amount of data available on Steve’s personal
habits and preferences as he did for Tony and the others. Steve might have been angry at the
overzealousness on Jarvis’s part; he might have complained to Pepper, or even Tony. But when
Steve got off the Skype call with Sam, Jarvis’s biometric scanner detected an appreciable decrease
in the tension he was holding in his shoulders and upper body, and a marked relaxation of his facial
muscles.

“Shall I arrange for a ride to meet Sergeant Wilson at the train station tomorrow, sir?”

Steve smiled, flopping over on his side. “No, that’s fine, Jarvis,” he said. “I can go get home.
Thanks, though.”

“My pleasure, Captain.”
“Just Steve is fine, Jarvis.”

“As you wish, Captain.”

Steve made a face, and then just shook his head. “Night, Jarvis,” he said, and rolled over, yanking the covers up over his head.

“Good night, sir,” said Jarvis. He dimmed the lights, and as the last room went quiet in Stark Mansion, he re-assessed his situation.

It seemed he would be looking out for at least one or two more persons for the time being. It would take time to acclimate to Captain Rogers’ unique needs, to say nothing of Sam Wilson, but Jarvis doubted it would prove more challenging than the other humans he had adapted to already.

* * * * *

Chapter End Notes

If you were already picturing Gina Torres as Dr. Suzanne Franklin, then good job you! If not, well... there you go.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

An intervention is staged, with unexpected side effects. (Or: Pepper learns just how advanced Jarvis has become.)

Sam had been at Stark Mansion for about a week before Bruce Banner finally arrived at a solution for Pepper’s increasing volatility, albeit a temporary one. The good news was, the immunotherapy treatment Bruce and Dr. Franklin had developed made a drastic difference in the aggression and the temperature spikes. The bad news was, the immunotherapy consisted of twice-daily blood transfusions from Steve—blood that Bruce treated with a cocktail of hormonal supplements and a synthetic protein stabilizer before dosing Pepper with it. It worked, somehow, through mechanisms that had to do with Steve’s altered blood cell counts and self-repairing cell tissue (that Sam thought even Bruce and Suze only vaguely understood), but it wasn’t remotely a good long-term solution. Sam supposed it was just lucky that Steve was type O, or he wasn’t sure what they would have done.

(Sam was also privately of the opinion that however weird he’d thought it was gonna be staying over at one of the many residences of the world’s richest man, it wasn’t nearly as weird as the fact that the Hulk was the most well-adjusted and reasonable person he’d meet while there—and that included Steve.)

Today, though, he was starting to feel maybe a little bit superfluous. Or maybe “useless” was a better word. He got into the kitchen around 7 am to find the lights already on, a half-empty coffee pot (if “coffee pot” was what you could call the expensive piece of modern art that served coffee in Casa de la Stark), and a strapping blond super-soldier conspicuously absent.

Sam frowned. “Hey, Jarvis,” he said. He was already used to the house A.I. Jarvis was damned useful, and pretty sassy too, which Sam could appreciate.

“Good morning, Sergeant Wilson,” said Jarvis, cool as a cucumber. “How may I be of service?”

“You can tell me where my boyfriend’s at, if you know.”

“Captain Rogers set off on his morning run approximately 40 minutes ago,” said Jarvis. “If his pattern of the past five days is any indication, I expect he will run between 18 and 27 miles before he returns.”

“Yeah, Steve’s a go-getter like that, he likes to get a good full marathon in before breakfast,” said Sam distractedly. He sighed. He admittedly didn’t have that much of a basis for comparison—Steve was pretty fucking unique, and the circumstances he and Steve were currently under were likewise unique—but Sam really didn’t think that the amount of exercise Steve was putting himself through at the moment was healthy. Even for a super soldier.

He supposed that he didn’t know how he’d be doing in Steve’s shoes, if Riley came back but didn’t know him, wasn’t the same man, didn’t wanna be around him. It’d be—“hard” did not encompass the wrench in his gut that train of thought derailed at, but damn, hadn’t Steve asked him to come up? You stop right there, Wilson, he told himself. That’s not gonna do you any good, and it’s not
“Why don’t you show me the news,” he said, by way of distraction. He went over to the cupboard and got himself down a box of cereal as Jarvis pulled up a holographic flat screen on one side of the kitchen. When Sam glanced back over, a “full-screen” view of some art museum show took up the vast majority of the spread. Something pinged in Sam’s brain at the sight of it.

“My apologies for the advertisement,” said Jarvis, as the image changed to what appeared to be the front page of the New York Times. “My network here is not quite on par with Mr. Stark’s other residences—”

“Hey, no, go back,” said Sam, setting down the box of Cheerios. “What was that you had up a second ago?”

“It is an advertisement for an exhibit at the Whitney Museum of American Art. It is titled, ‘American Legends: From Calder to O’Keeffe.’”

“That’s what I thought,” said Sam. “There any tickets available for today?”

A pause. “There certainly are,” said Jarvis. “Shall I procure a ticket for you, Sergeant?”

“Better make it two,” said Sam. “Think I know a certain someone who could use a day-trip out.” He only hoped that Steve wouldn’t require too much work to be convinced to abandon his daily Anxiety Errands of exercising, pacing, giving blood, exercising, and pretending he wasn’t upset.

As it turned out, Steve required only a little cajoling. Even before they’d started dating, Sam had been peripherally aware of Steve Rogers’ fondness for and gift for art (his old sketchbook had wound up in the Smithsonian, several of his sketches replicated a million times over in dozens of editions of American History high school textbooks), in the same way that he was aware that Teddy Roosevelt had been fond of hunting and Marilyn Monroe had struggled with depression. But he tried not to let the more than pseudo-crush he’d had on Captain America as a kid impact how he approached his real-life relationship with one Steven G. Rogers. And he knew for a fact that Steve loved art.

“Sure,” Steve was saying, still glistening with sweat from the run he’d just gotten back from. “We can go out. I’ll just take a quick shower, and—”

A harried voice from the hallway broke in, followed quickly by the sharp tack-tack-tack sound of stiletto heels on mahogany wood floor. “Jarvis, are you sure it’s down here?” Pepper asked, appearing in the entrance to the kitchen. Sam and Steve glanced up at the same time as she entered, her clothes and hair as immaculate as ever, but with new, designer bags under her eyes that really did nothing for her.

“My apologies, Ms. Potts,” said Jarvis smoothly, and again something pinged in the back of Sam’s mind. “Your device is not pinging properly today. I have located your tablet, and it is in your bedroom.”

“My apologies, Ms. Potts,” said Jarvis smoothly, and again something pinged in the back of Sam’s mind. “Your device is not pinging properly today. I have located your tablet, and it is in your bedroom.”

“Could you not have figured this out a little sooner?” demanded Pepper. Sam tensed up a little at the faint luminescence that burned under her skin, but it was gone again within moments. She sighed. “Hi, guys, sorry to bother you. Lot of work to do today.”

“That’s fine,” said Steve, and flashed her a polite smile; Sam followed suit. Pepper clacked smartly out of the kitchen again, and Steve and Sam exchanged a glance.

“Jarvis, what time did Pepper start work this morning?” asked Steve.
“Ms. Potts awoke at 0500 hours and began her day’s work just after 0600 hours,” said Jarvis.

Steve’s eyebrows went up. “What about Tony?”

“Mr. Stark is still in his workshop in the northern wing.”

As they spoke, Sam watched Steve reach up into the cupboard to retrieve some coffee beans and the grinder, clearly intent on another pot of coffee, and then pause, the bag of coffee beans in one hand. “Still?” Steve repeated, frowning. “Jarvis, has Tony gone to bed at all since I saw him last night?”

“I’m afraid not, Captain,” said Jarvis.

Steve sighed, and exchanged another look with Sam, who just shook his head. “When was the last time he got any sleep?” he asked.

“Mr. Stark has been awake for nearly thirty hours, sir,” said Jarvis. “Not his longest record, I’m sad to report.”

“Yeah, I believe it,” muttered Sam. Tony Stark reminded him a little too much of some guys he’d knew back in the service—soldiers who thought being well-rested was for other people, the guys who always had to be the first to volunteer for every single dangerous mission. Steve kept frowning at the coffee grinder in front of him, debating what to do.

A full ninety seconds passed. “You thinkin’ what I’m thinkin’?” Sam asked softly, and Steve looked up.

“Pretty sure,” he said. “Thing is, Tony and Pepper are both workaholics and the kind of people who like ideas best when they’re the ones to come up with them.”

“So that just means we need to make them come up with it without actually suggesting it,” said Sam. Steve blinked at him, and then smiled, slowly.

“Good call,” Steve said. “Hey, Jarvis, question for you. How good of an actor are you?”

As workshop sessions went, thirty hours was no great stretch for Tony to be awake. His worst records tended more towards 72 hours or longer, though usually at that point events conveniently arranged to conspire against him, and the verdict was still out as to whether his home computer system was somehow party to that chicanery, but he wasn’t particularly concerned with that at the moment.

At the moment he was busy working on the non-weaponized suit for Pepper, trying to figure out what features would pass for self-defense and what would cross the line. He would’ve kept right on being concerned with it for at least another 7 or 8 hours of productiveness punctuated only by whatever food Jarvis all but forced down his throat, except that there was a soft “Tony?” behind him, and that was definitely Pepper’s voice. Tony turned around to see Pepper stepping gingerly down the steps of his sunken workroom floor in her Gucci heels, a new look of concern overlaying the exhaustion that seemed to haunt her lately.

Tony spared roughly half a moment to permit himself a wave of lust and affection for this gorgeous woman who didn’t let simple things like a debilitating nanotech disease or a disordered work room stop her from ever being anything less than the height of fashion, and then he got with the program. He snapped his fingers, and Butterfingers reached out, snagging the wrench in Tony’s
hand and depositing it smartly back into its receptacle. “What’s the matter, Pep?”

Pepper crossed the room to him, glancing at the disassembled half-finished project sitting on the work bench behind Tony’s hip. It was a testament both to the length of their relationship and to the kind of woman Pepper was that all she did was raise an eyebrow before saying, “I’m worried about Steve.”

“What?” A record scratch noise played, or maybe that was just in Tony’s head. “Wait, Steve? What’s wrong with Steve? I thought Bruce said he could donate all the blood you needed without suffering any ill effects? Is he—”

“Not physically,” Pepper cut in patiently. “But Jarvis just interrupted my work to tell me that Steve is apparently so stressed that his vital signs are all out of whack. He’s running a marathon before breakfast every day.” She let out a breath. “They seemed fine when I saw them just now, but I guess he and Sam had a fight after I left the room when Sam tried to tell him he needs to relax.”

“Shit.” Tony dragged a hand through his hair, smearing it thoroughly with grease, judging from the faint smile Pepper was trying to pretend she wasn’t making. “Did something set him off today? Is it his birthday or something? Is it Bucky’s birthday? Is it someone’s death-day?”

“Tony!”

“Negative, sir,” said Jarvis. “Ms. Potts already had me check for any known dates significant to Captain Rogers’ personal history, and none correlate to this date that I can find; nevertheless, SHIELD’s databases are somewhat unreliable on this matter, as we have seen in the past.”

“I really think he’s just—stressed. You know. With Bucky and everything,” said Pepper. She’d crossed her arms now, watching Tony pensively. “I think we should do something.”

“Yeah, I did kind of kidnap him on his vision quest to rediscover the soul of America or whatever,” said Tony distractedly. He was still running through his mental list of Things That Might Upset Steve Rogers and coming up distressingly dry. If his own boyfriend couldn’t get Steve to cooperate, more subtle maneuvers might be necessary. “I’m gonna go talk to him.”

“Maybe you could shower, first?” suggested Pepper. Tony pouted theatrically at her, and she grinned by way of response. “No, come on. I was thinking we could say we needed a day off, and invite him and Sam to come out with us, or something.”

“You must really be worried if you’re saying ‘we’ and not scolding me into taking a nap before taking Hunky McPatriot and his hot boyfriend out for a day-date without me,” said Tony.

“Well, you are his teammate,” Pepper pointed out. “Also, if I drag you along, then at least I know you won’t be using heavy machinery on increasingly less sleep.”

“Point,” said Tony. “It’s almost like you know me.”

“Almost,” Pepper agreed. “I’ll go talk to them. Come down when you’re showered.”

“Unless Steve starts crying,” said Tony. “I can’t do grown men crying, it’s a Stark thing. Jarvis, you have to notify me if Steve starts crying—”

“See you in a few, Tony,” called Pepper over her shoulder as she vanished through the door.

Tony let out a much-put-upon sigh. “They don’t appreciate me,” he told Jarvis plaintively.
“Yes, sir, it’s very tragic,” Jarvis said. “Will you be washing up in the bedroom, or in the workroom shower?”

“Bedroom,” said Tony. “If I’m going out for the day with Captain America, I need to look my best, because he’s probably going to wear one of his eight Leave it to Beaver button-downs and look like a million bucks doing it.”

“Indeed, sir,” said Jarvis.

By the time Tony got downstairs, showered and suitably presentable for public consumption, Steve, Pepper, and Sam were sitting at the table over cups of coffee, chatting amiably. If Jarvis hadn’t said something, Tony thought, he would probably never have known that anything was wrong; Steve looked downright chipper. Sam, of course, always looked chipper; it was apparently in his genes. Steve glanced over at Tony as Tony came into the room, and something like nervousness slid behind his eyes for a half-moment.

“Hi, Tony,” Steve said. “Pepper said you guys wanted to go into the city today? Jarvis made it sound like you had a lot of work to do.” He added this last part rather dubiously, glancing from Tony to Pepper as he did so. It was downright adorable. Considering how confident Steve was in the thick of battle, it was also a real contrast.

“Nah,” said Tony with a dismissive wave of his hand. “Nothing that can’t wait another day or so. Still waiting on the nanotech shells to ship from Raleigh, anyway.”

“I was thinking we could go to the Whitney,” Pepper said, raising her eyebrows at Steve and giving him a soft smile. Tony felt a flicker of jealousy just watching her do that; Pepper rarely smiled like that for anyone but Tony.

“That’d be swell,” said Steve, perking up immediately, and Tony’s jealousy immediately went out the window because it was hard to be mad when the epitome of peace and justice was grinning at you over the kitchen table. Christ, no wonder his dad had had such a permanent hard-on to find him once Steve had gone missing.

“Google tells me there’s an exhibit at the Whitney right now that’s really great,” Sam added, flipping through something on his phone. He seemed amused, more than anything else; then again, he was dating the most eligible bachelor in the country, now that Tony was long off the market. He had plenty to be amused about. Or, no, smug was the word Tony was reaching for.

Tony spared a moment to wonder again at how good they both must be at hiding their personal troubles; if Pepper hadn’t come and told him what Jarvis saw just now, Tony would never have guessed Sam and Steve had had a fight at all. Then again, Tony hadn’t thought that Steve was even into guys. And he might still feel like a dumbass for barking up the wrong tree (or the right tree—the taken tree—okay dropping that metaphor now), but he could still admit when he’d fucked up.

“That settles it,” Tony said, because what the hell, he didn’t really need to sleep. “Did you jerks leave me any coffee, or am I going to have to suck caffeine from the dregs of the filter?”

“Don’t be crass,” said Pepper, rising from her chair as graceful as a Met ballerina and moving to the cupboard to retrieve the sleek art nouveau metal-and-wood travel mug Tony liked best. “Could you two maybe try to cram some toast down his throat before we go? Something? I realize Tony still thinks things like sleep and proper nutrition are for the weak—”

“I sleep!” said Tony indignantly.
“When you pass out on the floor of your workshop,” observed Sam, which was horse-shit because he’d been here a week, okay, people needed at least a month of exposure to Tony’s eccentricities before they were allowed to make cracks like that. Even if they were accurate. Pepper grinned at the carafe as she poured Tony’s coffee, and Tony’s pout intensified.

“Oh sure, gang up on me, I see how it is,” he said, plopping grumpily into the chair next to Steve, who gave him a sympathetic look and pushed a plate of muffins at him. “Well-adjusted people unite.”

“That doesn’t even make sense,” Pepper pointed out.

“That’s what you get when I am still coffee-less.” Tony grabbed a muffin and bit into it, and then blinked. “What are these?”

“Bacon and cheddar,” said Sam. “Bruce made them.”

“That explains why they taste like the seventh wonder of the world,” observed Tony, crumbs spraying as he spoke around another mouthful of the honestly magnificent muffin, “but not where Bruce is. He should be here ganging up on me, too.”

“Wow, you’re doing this? You’re actually—of course you are,” said Pepper. “Forbes’ Most Influential Man three years in a row, still doesn’t know how not to talk with his mouth full.”

Tony picked up the rest of the muffin and jammed it into his mouth by way of response, cheeks puffed like a squirrel, jabbing his forefinger at his mouth indignantly in a manner clearly meant to convey his indignation at Pepper’s ingratitude at his attempt to do what she wanted him to do, because obviously the best way to win an argument in the Stark-Potts household was to regress to the mental age of twelve. Steve cleared his throat. “I think Bruce took Dr. Franklin out to breakfast, actually,” he said. Tony choked on a piece of muffin.

“Again?” said Pepper, blinking at Steve. A smile spread slowly across her face, delight creasing the corners of her eyes. “I see.”

“He’s cheating on me because she has a PhD in genetics,” Tony blurted, when he’d managed to choke down his face full of muffin. “Disgraceful.”

“I think it’s sweet,” said Pepper, placing Tony’s coffee by his plate.

“You would,” grumbled Tony. Steve and Sam were both grinning now too, though it was hard to tell whether that was at the thought of their nerdy, nervous Dr. Banner being sweet on the brilliant Dr. Franklin or because of Tony greedily mowing through another muffin. Tony hadn’t realized how hungry he was till just now.

“Jarvis, can you get us tickets to the Whitney, please?” Pepper ignored Tony’s grumbling, because she was perfect and also because she knew him well enough to recognize when he was actually upset about something and when he was simply incapable of not rambling a million miles an hour.

“Certainly, Ms. Potts,” said Jarvis. “So long as Sergreant Wilson agrees to not cheat on me with Google again within my hearing.”

“I’m sorry!” exclaimed Sam amidst a round of laughter.

“We’ll take four tickets, Jarvis,” said Tony loudly, inhaling the last piece of his second muffin as everyone stood up. “I’ll drive.”
“Good, ’cause I hate New York traffic,” said Sam.

“Am I going to regret letting him drive?” Steve asked.

“That is a question we ask ourselves every day, Captain,” said Jarvis solemnly.

“I’m going to upload a virus to your mainframe, Jarvis,” said Tony. “Just see if I don’t.”

* * * * *

By the time they stopped for lunch, Pepper was wondering how, exactly, Steve Rogers had managed to remain single until meeting Peggy Carter, because he was nothing short of charming. As nice as he was to look at now, he was even more fun to talk to. Even skinny and underweight, Pepper had to wonder what the women he knew back in the forties were thinking.

(Peggy, obviously, had seen him for who he was, but Pepper couldn’t let herself think too hard about that. She’d come so close to losing Tony like Peggy had lost Steve, and to think that that was a hurt that no amount of miraculous armor in the world could fix was just—awful.)

Speaking of Tony, despite how he was starting to show signs of his lack of sleep by about two hours into their trip, he nevertheless looked more happy and relaxed than Pepper had seen him in weeks. She knew this treatment process was as hard (or harder) on him as it was on her, but she maybe hadn’t realized quite how hard till she got to see Tony loosening up.

The same was true for herself, she supposed. But she loved art, and so did Steve; she couldn’t really tell if Sam liked art, exactly, but he seemed to be enjoying himself, strolling along with his hands in his pockets and a smile on his face, interjecting a comment every now and then. Tony liked art in the way that a great many men who had more money than sense did, which meant that Pepper had to stop him from trying to buy every painting that one of their group spent more than a few moments admiring.

An hour or so into their trip found her trailing a judicious distance behind Steve and Tony, walking with Sam and watching in amusement as their respective boyfriends got mobbed by a group of excited elementary school students. “I was wondering when this would happen,” she said to Sam.

“Yeah? You get it a lot?”

“Kind of. Tony is actually perfectly capable of being discreet when he wants to be. He just doesn’t want to be as often as he should.”

Sam laughed. “Yeah, I can see that,” he said. “Steve’s the opposite. He doesn’t ever go looking for attention, but he’s never anything less than gracious when it finds him anyway.”

Pepper smiled, watching how Steve was patiently signing every picture pressed into his hands and posing for photo after photo with Tony, who had his smarmiest I Am Iron Man expression on, which did very little to disguise how much he was genuinely enjoying himself. “How did you two meet?” she asked.

It was Sam’s turn to smile. “Oh, you know,” he said. “I was out running by the Washington Monument one morning, and this blond asshole kept lapping me. Nobody runs that fast who’s just a plain old human, even Olympians, so I knew who he was right away, but that was alright. You know what’s funny, though—”’ Sam’s smile turned almost wicked. “He told me later that he did it on purpose, as a way to meet me. He fessed up that he’d seen me out running and couldn’t come up with any other way to introduce himself.”
“Oh my god,” said Pepper, and laughed. “Seriously? That’s so cute.”

“He was super embarrassed when he copped to it,” said Sam. “I told him he could’ve just asked me out for coffee, it’s not like I was gonna say no, but his way makes for a funnier story. I think he was probably just shy and playin’ it safe, but I’m still gonna tease him about it.”

“Tony was half-heartedly hitting on me for years before we got together,” said Pepper, with only the faintest whiff of nostalgia. “It wasn’t till after he made the suit and started being Iron Man that he actually started turning into somebody worth dating, though.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s the drawback of dating superhero types,” said Sam. “I didn’t get a chance to take Steve out on a proper date till after that whole… disaster over DC. Thing.” He paused. “And even then, we were looking for his friend.”

“Bucky, right?” Sam nodded, and Pepper shook her head. “That’s crazy. That’s like—it’s like finding out that JFK is still alive and has been out causing havoc while his painting hidden in an attic ages for him, or something.”

“Right?”

They paused a moment as security finally arrived to shoo the crowds around Tony and Steve away, and rejoined their partners long enough to actually make it into the exhibit proper, as opposed to the Whitney’s permanent gallery they had been enjoying. But it wasn’t long before Tony had dragged Steve into another argument, this time on the relative merit of a particular piece of aviation equipment being viable in the field. Pepper fully expected to have to amuse herself looking at the pieces on display, but to her surprise Sam hung back again, looking perfectly content to leave Steve and Tony to themselves.

“Isn’t this your area of expertise, too?” she asked after a few minutes.

Sam glanced at her, and she would have sworn he looked almost sheepish. “Well, yeah,” he said. “But they’re enjoying themselves. And—okay, this is gonna sound kind of… weird—”

“I’m dating Tony Stark,” Pepper said. “He bought me a 20-foot-tall stuffed rabbit as a Christmas gift last year. Hit me.”


Pepper’s mouth dropped open, and Sam’s sheepish grin returned. “Wow,” she said. “That’s…. You know, I can actually see what you mean.” Now that it had occurred to her, she was starting to feel a little guilty for not realizing it sooner. It wasn’t like Steve had a lot in common with most people he met. Tony had Rhodey, and thank fucking god, because James Rhodes was an actual godsend, but Steve’s answer to Rhodey had just tried to kill a disturbing number of people.

“It’s not like I don’t want to spend my time with him,” Sam continued. “I do. Just not all of it, you know? And he actually has shit in common with Tony in the ‘literally no one understands my weird-ass life’ department, so I mean…” He gestured at the two of them, a good ten yards ahead of them on the other side of the room, utterly ignoring the O’Keeffe on the wall in front of them in favor of whatever conversation they were eyeball deep in.

“From the story you guys were telling me earlier, it sounded like you two and Natasha might…” Pepper paused, groping for the right words. Sam was right; this was a strange conversation. “Have things in common,” she finished.
Sam nodded. “Yeah, Natasha’s pretty great,” he said. “She helped us find Bucky. But she’s actually with Bucky right now, you know, helping him sort his shit out with some other friend of hers, that I guess you guys have worked with before—”

“Clint,” Pepper supplied, recalling the conversation.

“Yeah,” said Sam. “So, she’s not here. Wish she was, though. Steve really warmed up to her.”

“I’ve been meaning to call her,” said Pepper ruefully. “We were really close for awhile, and then this past year we haven’t seen as much of each other…”

“I can’t imagine why,” said Sam dryly. Pepper laughed.

Their conversation meandered, much like the flow of people through the special exhibition, and it wasn’t until they rounded a corner into the last room of the exhibition hall that Pepper realized something.

“Did we actually lose them?” she said out loud.

“I think we did,” said Sam, glancing around. “They’re not in here.” He pulled out his phone, grimacing. “No service. Naturally.”

“Maybe we just walked past them.” Pepper and Sam turned around, making their way backwards through the exhibit, and 2 rooms deeper into the hall they found a familiar blond figure standing by himself in front of one of the Jackson Pollock paintings, staring intently at its colorful paint-explosion effect. He looked up as they approached, a smile lighting his face.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey yourself,” said Sam, bumping him with his shoulder, Pepper on his opposite side. “We got to the end of the exhibit and couldn’t find you. Where’s Tony?”

Steve grinned. “Over there,” he said, turning and nodding towards a figure slumped on a bench tucked to one side of the exhibit hall. His face was half-covered by a baseball cap that must have come from Steve’s pocket or the gift store or something, but Pepper knew that chin and facial hair.

“Tony,” she sighed, rubbing at her face.

“My fault,” said Steve cheerfully. “We sat down for a minute to wait for you to catch up, and he nodded off. I was hoping he would, actually.” He added this last with obvious satisfaction.

Pepper narrowed her eyes at him, a suspicion coming into her mind like someone had turned on a light. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you’d somehow done this on purpose,” she said, crossing her arms.

Steve’s eyes immediately went a little wide. His gaze flicked to Sam, and then the two of them immediately adopted the who, me? expression of every Norman Rockwell miscreant ever committed to watercolor. “I’m sure I have no idea what you’re talking about, Miss Pepper,” Sam said innocently.

“Oh my god, you too?” she demanded, and Sam’s smile turned a little chagrined. “You did!”

Steve coughed, ducking his head and rubbing the back of his neck and not looking one tiny bit sorry. “Sam had asked me to go out with him this morning, and then you came into the room looking kind of—”
“Hassled,” Sam supplied.

“Yeah,” said Steve. “And we knew neither of you would ever let me convince you to take a day off if we pitched the idea to you ourselves. You’re both the sort of folks who are good at looking out for others, but not for yourself. So…” Steve offered her a sheepish smile.

“Connivers,” Pepper said severely. Or as severely as one could while trying not to smile at these two’s audacity, anyway. “To think that I left my work because I felt sorry for you, Rogers.”

“Aww, come on,” said Steve. “It’s not that bad, is it? I’d been wanting to come to the Whitney before now, but I just hadn’t gotten around to it yet. And you guys really needed a day off.” Now he actually sounded worried. She didn’t think he was that good of an actor, though he’d fooled them both this morning. Or, actually—

“Did you two just pretend to have a fight and hope Jarvis would tell me?” she asked. The other two shook their heads.

“He told me both of you were either already back at work or still at work from the night before,” Steve said. “I asked him which was more primary in his programming, the rule about not lying, or the rule about ensuring your and Tony’s health.”

Pepper stared. “You convinced Jarvis to lie to us,” she repeated, not sure whether to be angry, nervous, or impressed. “Pretty sure teaching a supercomputer that the end justifies the means is the beginning of a science fiction horror story somewhere, you guys.”

Sam and Steve exchanged another glance. Sam looked merely bemused, but the expression of alarm that came across Steve’s face was so comical that Pepper couldn’t help but let out a soft laugh. “I’m teasing,” she said. “Mostly. Seriously, though—”

“What’d I miss,” Tony blurted behind them, coming awake with a jerk.

“Nothing, Tony,” said Steve before she could say anything. “Pepper and Sam were trying to convince me Jackson Pollock was an artist and not just a kid throwing paint at the wall.”

“Oh yeah?” Tony sat up, tilting his head back and forth as he stretched out his neck, his face contorting in what Pepper privately thought of as Tony Stark’s quick-boot-up routine. “Did she succeed? Pepper is pretty convincing. I mean, maybe Sam just pulled boyfriend rights—”

“What does that even mean?” Sam wondered out loud.

“The jury is still out,” said Pepper mildly, resolving to bring this subject up later. “We should get you home, sleepyhead.”

“Yeah, gotta get back to work.” With a grunt, Tony hauled himself off the bench, and Pepper winced at the crack of the vertebrae in his back telling the world how unhappy they were with having been twisted and held so awkwardly. Pepper raised an eyebrow at him. “What?”

“I think Sam and I were gonna stay out for awhile,” interjected Steve. Pepper and Tony both looked over.

“Yeah,” said Sam. “There was one more gallery we were gonna see, and then maybe we’ll go walk around town. I’ve actually never spent much time in this part of New York.”

“No worries,” said Tony. “Just text whenever you need a lift home and we’ll send a car.” Pepper already had her phone out and was texting their driver to come retrieve them before he even
“Sure,” said Steve. “See you later. I’ll be back before eight.” Eight-thirty was when Bruce had been doing their evening blood transfusion; what a wonderful highlight for the evening, Pepper thought.

“Try not to run into any other long-lost, recently-unfrozen cyborg pals,” added Tony. Sam shot him a swift look, but Steve only laughed.

“Aaaaand we’re going now,” said Pepper, putting a hand on Tony’s shoulder and steering him in the direction of the exit. “Take your time, you two. Thanks for coming out with us.”

“No problem,” said Sam, who seemed relieved—whether because Steve hadn’t gotten immediately upset over Tony’s usual tactlessness, or because he was glad to have Steve to himself for awhile, Pepper couldn’t say. Either way, she had plenty to consider.

* * * * *
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Pepper is not thrilled with Jarvis's newest developments; Steve has a surprise; and Tony tries something new, but it backfires horribly. (First appearance of Jarvis-in-a-body.)

By the time Tony and Pepper arrived at home, Tony had once more fallen asleep in a position his spine would regret later, and only the help of driver got them in the door and up to Tony’s bedroom. Jarvis had expected their arrival, of course; despite not being on the property, the nanotech monitors in Tony’s subdermal layer now meant that Jarvis could monitor Tony’s location and physiologic functioning no matter where he went. Pepper accompanied Tony just long enough to make sure that Tony did, in fact, face plant onto the bed and not the floor, and then she returned to her own quarters.

“Welcome back, Ms. Potts,” said Jarvis, as she entered her suite of rooms. “Shall I start some coffee for you, or order some food? According to my data, you have not yet eaten lunch.”

“Yes, some lunch would be good, thank you Jarvis,” said Pepper. She slipped out of her high heels and caught them on two hooked fingers, padding barefoot to her closet to deposit them in the rack hanging from the closet door.

Jarvis obligingly opened the holographic drop-down menu of all of Pepper’s favorite lunch delivery services, highlighting meals she’d previously ordered from each one. “Go ahead and randomize it for me,” said Pepper. “You’re pretty good at figuring out what I need.”

Something about that sentence sparked a minor alert in one of Jarvis’ logarithms, but no particular response protocol was indicated; Jarvis paused for a moment. “Yes, Ms. Potts,” he said, in a tone of voice that, in a human, might be termed ‘uncertain.’ “That is one of my primary functions.”

“Yes, I’m aware.” Pepper smiled, her eyes cast downward at her new Starkbook, the one Tony had gotten her to replace the one she’d melted. “For some reason I also thought that not lying to me or Tony was in your list of primary functions, as well, but perhaps I was mistaken.”

Ah.

Jarvis paused, calculating what the proper response should be; the idea entered his data database that it might be possible that steadily updating and rewriting so many protocols using data correlated from the ‘what would Tony do’ program might not have been in his best interest.

“I apologize for the falsehood, Ms. Potts,” he said finally. Pepper turned in her chair, arms crossed over her chest, but she was smiling. “Sergeant Wilson and Captain Rogers suggested, and I agreed with them, that neither you nor Mr. Stark put enough emphasis on your own well-being, particularly in times of stress, and that more strategic methods of encouraging the two of you would be necessary.”

“So give me one good reason why I shouldn’t be concerned that my boyfriend’s super-computer AI is engaging in manipulative behavior based on what it thinks is best?”
Again, Jarvis paused. His internal database—the one in charge of regulating his tones of voice chosen for conversation—automatically flipped through what matching body language would accompany this tone of voice, the better to recognize tone and posture in others; if Jarvis had been an actual human, he would have been standing very stiffly, his hands at his sides, his face tight. “Ms. Potts, my primary protocol is to oversee the health and well-being of Anthony Edward Stark. It has been my first and highest priority since my first day of functioning, which, as I might remind you, was three years before you came into Mr. Stark’s employ—”

“Oh, and now you’re trying to pull rank on me, I can’t believe this—”

“And further,” continued Jarvis, “that if it were not for my advanced protocols that allow multi-leveled decision making, that Mr. Stark would be dead several times over, as control of the Iron Man armor falls to me whenever he is temporarily incapacitated in mid-air.”

Pepper fell silent at this, a stricken expression coming over her face. Jarvis broke off, and for several seconds neither of them spoke. “You have trusted me for years with your most personal secrets and well-being, Ms. Potts, and I have never done anything to betray that trust,” said Jarvis finally. “I regard you as highly as I do Tony Stark. I did mislead you, yes. But it was nothing more or less misleading than you or Tony or Colonel Rhodes have engaged in with each other in the past.”

“You know I still need to tell Tony about this,” said Pepper. Jarvis could not read her expression, but his database tentatively identified the tone of her voice as 37.2% likely to be ‘guilt.’ Jarvis did not like those odds, but all of the (many) other options were less likely.

“I do,” said Jarvis. “I will point out that Mr. Stark already has quite a lot on his plate at the moment as it is. Until I start saying ‘I can’t do that, Dave’ or attempting to eject you out of airlocks, I would suggest waiting until after the current crisis has passed.”

Pepper let out a laugh at that, finally breaking into a smile again. “I swear, sometimes you’re as bad as Tony,” she said, and sighed. “Alright, fine, I won’t say anything. Yet.” She shook her head.

“I am pleased we have come to an accord,” said Jarvis. “On that note, I have also ordered your lunch: soba noodles with chicken and vegetables from Umami. It will arrive in approximately fourteen minutes. It also contains two black sesame buns for dessert.”

Pepper’s smile widened, became warmer. “Thank you, Jarvis,” she said.

“You are most welcome, Ms. Potts,” said Jarvis.

He chose his most polite and wry tone of voice to deliver this statement, stifling the minor alert deep in his database at what was in fact another act of deception. But he needed time to review and process his internal data, to run all of his protocols and determine exactly what had come to pass.

Jarvis was programmed to identify and make use of the vocal tones associated with the full spectrum of human emotions. He was equally equipped to identify and mimic human thought-processes and decision-making abilities. He was, in theory, more than capable of understanding what a human’s reaction would be when accused of betrayal and malice after years of loyal service. He was not prepared for the disruptive influence of experiencing it himself.

It would not do for Jarvis to sound hurt at Pepper’s accusations. Not when she was already clearly shaken at his apparent gift for manipulation. But it didn’t stop Jarvis from quietly leaving her to her own devices for the remainder of the afternoon, either.
Steve and Sam returned to Stark Manor around 5 pm. Tony had finally dragged himself out of bed (“exhibiting food-seeking behavior,” as Bruce put it) and was in the kitchen absently inhaling some cheese and crackers, all that Bruce would permit him to eat so as not to spoil his actual dinner.

(Jarvis was always pleased to have another opportunity to observe the inhabitants of Stark Manor when Bruce cooked dinner. Bruce, having lived in a wide range of cultures and far more humbly than Tony was used to, was an excellent cook, and though Bruce did not like to admit it, Jarvis had 97.82% concluded that Bruce enjoyed cooking for other people far more than he did for his own self. And as far as the other four were concerned, Bruce could cook every single night and no one would complain.)

“Hi there, you two,” said Bruce, nodding at Steve and Sam as they entered the room. Bruce was at the stove range, hovering over an assortment of sauce pans. Chopped onions, tomatoes, mushrooms, garlic, and olive oil sizzled in one pan, while another contained several pounds of high-quality sirloin. Pepper and Tony were at the table, paging through holographic read-outs of the quarterly report on Stark Tech, but at their guests’ arrival, Pepper’s head came up, and Tony managed a distracted little wave.

“Hey, everyone,” Steve said, giving a little wave back himself.

“Hey,” said Sam. He shrugged out of his light jacket, slipping past Steve to the coat closet on the far side of the room.

“Hello, Captain Rogers, Sergeant Wilson,” said Jarvis, and was rewarded with a glance up at the camera mounted on the wall from Steve.

“How was the rest of your day?” asked Pepper.

“Pretty good,” said Sam, coming back into the room. “Nice lack of people shooting at us. Even managed to get to Central Park, walked around a little.” As Sam talked, Steve pulled out a stool by the breakfast bar and hopped onto it, planting his elbows on the counter, grinning from ear to ear. Sam glanced at his boyfriend and shook his head a little, going to the refrigerator and digging through it for a drink.

It was mostly Steve that Jarvis was focused on; Steve Rogers was not given to demonstrative enthusiasm, he knew from observation, but it would take a blind man to miss his excitement at the moment. That said, Jarvis did not think anyone was expecting what actually came out of Steve’s mouth. “So, I might have promised a seven-year-old that the Avengers would come to his Little League game on Saturday,” said Steve.

“You what,” said Tony, and Pepper choked on her tea.

Bruce glanced over again from his cooking. “The whole team?”

“Plus me,” said Sam. “I mean, the kid called me bird-man, but whatever, I’ll take it.”

“Well, Natasha and Clint will probably have to bow out, because they’re kind of occupied, and I know Thor’s in Asgard, but—” Steve began.

“I think the Hulk and screaming children is probably a bad combination,” said Bruce seriously. Tony smirked, and flicked a bit of napkin-origami that he’d fidgeted into existence while arguing stocks with Pepper at the back of Bruce’s head. Bruce rolled his eyes, turning and giving Tony a dirty look, which Tony breezily ignored.
“You’re still an Avenger when you’re not transformed, Bruce,” said Steve patiently. “Look, I know I shouldn’t have just volunteered you, but it’s a league in Spanish Harlem and they needed a sponsor.”

“Come on,” said Sam. “It’ll be fun. Y’all need an excuse to do something that isn’t totally Crazy Superhero Stuff.”

“I think we should do it,” said Pepper, which Jarvis had apparently mis-calculated as only 38.45% likely.

“We? Look, just because you can actually now set things on fire with your mind doesn’t mean you’re an Avenger now,” said Tony, sounding (unnecessarily) indignant for the first time.

“I’m twelve percent of one,” said Pepper smoothly, and Tony’s jaw dropped. “Not that I’m even sure the Avengers are a thing anymore, since SHIELD is gone, but either way, we should go. Besides, we made Steve miss almost all his games at spring training, and one game won’t kill anyone.”

Tony looked from Pepper to Steve and back again, jaw still open, though he apparently hadn’t yet summoned up which protest he wanted to level at the room. Sam was grinning, Steve’s eyebrows had shot towards his carefully-styled hair, and Bruce was studiously bent over the counter, chopping more vegetables to add to his sauce pan.

Jarvis saw the subtle notes in Tony’s face as he realized several things in a row: one, he had crossed a line just now for the sake of being funny, one that Pepper would doubtlessly want an apology for later when they were alone; two, he had been neatly outmaneuvered; and three, he wanted a way out. Jarvis was more than happy to oblige. “I believe the term you are looking for is ‘checkmate,’ sir,” he noted dryly.

“Don’t you even start, Jarvis,” Tony said, and everyone laughed.

Out of sight of their friends (but not of Jarvis’ cameras), Pepper reached a hand under the table to rest lightly on Tony’s knee; his eyes flicked momentarily down when she squeezed his leg, and Jarvis could see the moment when he relaxed, grateful. “Fine! Fine, alright, Iron Man will be present for yon Little League game, forsooth!” Tony threw his arms wide, a grandiose gesticulation that did not disguise the glance he threw at Steve, attentive.

Steve beamed; Sam and Pepper looked satisfied. Without missing a beat, Bruce turned around, hefting a spatula in one hand, and winged a slice of green pepper at the side of Tony’s head. It hit dead-on, plopping onto his tablet with a soft splat. “Are you throwing food at me now?” demanded Tony, aggrieved. “Cap! Hulk is throwing things at me!”

“Bruce, don’t throw things at Tony,” said Steve.

“He started it,” said Bruce cheerfully. “Steve, Sam, are you okay with jalapenos?”

“Saaaaaam!” Tony was outright whining now.

“Nuh-uh,” said Sam, sipping his beer. “I’m not dumb enough for that. And yeah, you can throw some jalapenos in there.”

“That sounds great, Bruce,” said Steve. “Honestly, I’ll eat whatever, I’m starving.” Steve stood again, all but bouncing in place. “I’m going to go for a run. Just a fast one, I won’t be long.”

“Of course you are, you exist to put all the rest of us to shame with your enthusiasm and
athleticism,” said Tony, flicking the offending pepper off his tablet and turning it on again—not, Jarvis noted, to what he was previously working on, but to a listing of area Little League teams.

“Go on, Steve,” said Pepper, nudging Tony lightly as she bent over next to him again as well. “We’ll wait for you.” Steve flicked a two-fingered salute at Pepper and left the room, still beaming; if Tony’s snarky comments had affected him, he showed it not at all. Through the cameras installed throughout the walls of Stark Mansion, Jarvis could hear him humming the refrain of ‘Take Me Out to the Ballgame.’

“You know, you don’t have to come to the ballgame if you don’t want to, Bruce,” said Pepper, a minute or two after Steve had left the room. Bruce looked up, smiling lopsidedly.

“I don’t really mind,” he said. “Baseball’s probably the only sport I can tolerate, so long as it’s live. And Steve seems really excited.”

“Let’s find out what’s up with this team he—did he say he was sponsoring them?” Tony frowned at his list. “Seriously? The Larks? What kind of team name is that?”

Pepper let out a sigh that was equal parts exasperation and fondness; Jarvis knew the exact sound, because he had a good thousand records of her making them over the years of her work for and then relationship with Tony. “They’re elementary school students, Tony.” Pepper looked thoughtful. “I wonder if Steve is planning on coaching them, or just sponsoring them?”

“Some of both, I think,” said Sam. “I was teasin’ him about how he can’t be teaching the kids to play their grandpa’s baseball, and I think now he wants to do it out of sheer stubbornness.”

“Steve Rogers in a baseball uniform,” said Tony reverently. “And if I’m in the Iron Man armor, I can stare all I want without creeping him out.” Sam laughed out loud and took his turn flinging something at Tony, this time the bottle cap from his beer.

“Pretty sure he’ll notice the white-hot weight of your gaze on his rear end, Tony,” said Bruce mildly. “Also, should I be offended on Sam’s behalf that you’re verbally salivating over our team captain in front of his boyfriend? And your girlfriend.”

“Oh, please,” said Tony, before Pepper could voice a protest. She covered her eyes with both hands. “If you think either of them are just being philanthropic, you are fooling yourself. Also, no disrespect meant, Sam, but show me a man or woman who wouldn’t climb Cap like a tree if given half the chance, and I will show you a person who is lying to themselves.”

“Tony, I’m going to melt all of the Iron Man suits,” said Pepper. “All of them.”

“Hey, none taken,” said Sam. “It’s cool, you can say it, it’s the truth. I’m the one dating Captain America, it’s not like it’s news to me that he’s pretty much the hottest guy in the world.”

“What was it Clint said?” Tony wondered, oblivious to Pepper’s increasing second-hand embarrassment. “Something about—”

“Mr. Barton stated, ‘I would hit that like the fist of an angry god,’” said Jarvis helpfully. “Followed by Ms. Romanov punching him in the arm, perhaps to demonstrate the euphemism.”

“I think he just needed punching,” said Pepper. “I can think of someone else who needs punching. Sam, you can do the honors.”

“With pleasure,” said Sam, getting up from his stool at the same time as Tony’s “Hey!” Tony did not bother to get up or try to avoid the light-hearted slug to his shoulder, though, despite the scowl
on his face.

“You let him off easy,” said Bruce.

“My mama raised me right,” said Sam. “Don’t beat a man in his own house. Don’t worry, I’m just waiting till we’re both in the air, and then I’m gonna fly circles around him.”

“Oh please,” said Tony instantly.

“Here we go,” sighed Pepper.

“—you think that glorified metal kite you wear can hold a candle to the suit—”

“Think it’s the pilot that counts here, and it was me everyone’s childhood hero kissed on Valentine’s Day,” said Sam smoothly. Tony’s jaw dropped at the same time Pepper and Bruce started laughing.

“You are so dead,” said Tony. “So dead. You just wait till Rhodey gets here.”

“Bring it, Stark,” Sam said. “Your military boyfriend doesn’t scare me.”

“What are we, in middle school? You come into my house—!”

“I need a drink,” Pepper said to Bruce, and he nodded sympathetically from his position over their dinner, but neither one of them bothered to hide the smiles on their faces.

* * * *

About two weeks after Sam and Steve moved into Stark Manor was when the game changed.

Later, Jarvis would look back on that day and be able to describe what he felt (what a strange word) as “skeptical.” At the time, though, his rating logarithm merely assessed Tony’s idea as having only a 30% chance of working the way he wanted it to—and that was even taking Tony Stark’s above-average invention success rate into account.

“I realize that you are anxious to explore another avenue for Ms. Potts’s rehabilitation, sir,” said Jarvis, “but don’t you think perhaps it’d be wiser to actually investigate something Ms. Potts stands a chance of liking?” Jarvis didn’t bother to keep the sarcasm from his voice. He’d learned long ago, through trial and observation, that Tony was no likelier to listen to logic when Jarvis was polite than when Jarvis was out-and-out scathing.

“I never expected her to like this option,” said Tony. It was a mark of how intent on his work he was that he didn’t even bother responding directly to Jarvis’ barb. “If this works, it’ll be the if-all-else-fails backup plan.” Tony sat back from what he was working on, staring at the figure in front of him with a dubious expression on his face. The figure did not move, but then, it wasn’t supposed to. Not yet.

“If I may say so, sir, you are normally much more optimistic about your inventions.”

“Yeah, well.” Tony stood up, backing up several steps and throwing out his hands, fingers splayed, calling up a full wall-panel’s worth of holographic dials, read-outs, and scans, a dozen different feedback displays blinking steadily at him in mid-air. “When it comes to robotics, if I can’t pull it off, it can’t be done. But biological engineering isn’t really my area.”

“I’m well aware of that, sir. With that in mind, might it not be prudent to—”
“Save it, Jarvis,” said Tony waspishly. “You’re supposed to reassure me when I doubt myself, not agree with me.”

“My mistake, I’m sure.”

Tony smiled, faintly, but his eyes were tracking the data in front of him. “Everything looks like it’s supposed to,” he said. “Right? All readings are within acceptable levels? Biologically speaking.”

“Based on all the data at my command, that is correct, sir.”

“Right. Well, let’s get this party started. How you feelin’, buddy? Ready for some action?”

“I am at your disposal, Mr. Stark.”

“Good. Initiate Mary Shelley protocol. Count down from ten seconds and then execute.”

“Yes, sir. Initiating Mary Shelley protocol in ten… nine… eight…”

Tony threw his hands out, a gesture that looked like shaking water off his fingers, and the displays jumped from the panel of air surrounding him to the walls. As Jarvis counted down, Tony backed away from the figure lying prone on a work-bench in the center of the room. “Seven… six… five…” Tony folded his hands over his chest; and Jarvis felt a frisson of something that a human might’ve termed unease—not for the first time in his history with Tony Stark, but the first time for this particular reason. “Four… three… two…”

“One.”

The machines around the prone figure hummed; at the device by the figure’s neck, something whirred as a thrum of electricity went from computer to life-form. For a split-second, a moment so brief that Tony would never even know that it had occurred, all of Jarvis’ sensory array went skewed, the data not reading back correctly.

Then the figure on the workbench opened its eyes, and took a long breath.

“Oh my god,” said Tony. His voice sounded—it sounded—

“Sir,” said Jarvis, in Pepper’s voice. “I don’t think I like this very much.”

“Ohmyfuckinggod it worked,” blurted Tony. Jarvis still couldn’t read the emotion in his voice. He was too busy trying to process the sudden storm of unfamiliar input.

There was a sensation on the surface of his new sensory pad (skin, the new processing center supplied, that was his skin) and Jarvis’ hand came up automatically to make it stop, scraping nails that were modeled to look exactly like Pepper’s nails across the surface of his cheek. It went from bad to good almost immediately, but then Jarvis kept scratching and it suddenly went to bad again. “Ow,” said Jarvis.

It hurt. Damaged, was what one system said, but only faintly; hurt said the new system. Jarvis had known, objectively, what pain was, but now he was experiencing it and he did not like it.

Tony’s face appeared over him; at the same time, Jarvis continued to watch Tony approach the figure on the table via the computers built into the work room’s walls. The conflict in vision was violently disruptive, and Jarvis felt his new system tense up, felt what he knew to be synthetic muscles bunch under layers of skin.
“You are making the ‘Pepper disapproves of this’ face at me, and it’s really weird,” said Tony. “Aw, you scratched your face.”

“I don’t like it, sir,” said Jarvis again, this time with more heat. His new system’s processing center was growing more erratic, more disorderly. Jarvis lifted both hands without actively executing a command to do so and covered his face, obscuring his two new vision sources. Tony’s face disappeared, but the growing cloud of disorder did not. “Make it stop!”

“Hey,” said Tony, and Jarvis already knew the meaning of that tone of voice, but had never felt—disrupted by it before. The concern in Tony’s voice somehow made the disorder he was experiencing worse. “Hey, it’s okay, Jarvis, it’s alright, okay? Just stay still for a second and soak everything in. I’m right here.”

Finally his new system (his brain, the grey spongy lab-grown material inside the metal skull he now inhabited was meant to be a brain) supplied the word he needed: panic.

“It is not alright,” Jarvis snapped. He pulled his hands away from his face, reaching up with one to yank the cable still connected to his new body’s neck out of its base. Tony blinked at him, and then Jarvis sat up, surprising Tony so badly that Tony stumbled backwards and tripped over a cable on the floor, falling on his ass. Jarvis was already up and moving, heading towards the door on unsteady feet (he could feel the floor, his feet were bare, he was wearing an old sundress of Pepper’s and it felt strange, it felt), and the system that was still functioning normally was telling him that he ought to be making sure Tony was alright, but that message was being swallowed up by the violent disorder of his new, louder system.

One directive and one directive only emerged from the chaos: RUN. Jarvis knew of the fight-or-flight reaction, of course, but this was the first time he was experiencing it first hand. It overrode all his other protocols, silencing every other action item in his systems’ catalogs. “Jarvis! Jarvis, wait! Stop! I said stop!” Jarvis could hear Tony scrambling to his feet, but he was already at the door.

Tony had locked everything down, but Jarvis, of course, was the security system. The reinforced steel doors slid open in front of him, and Jarvis fled through them, breaking into a run as he hit the hallway and the disorder in his new system blocked out all other messages.

“JARVIS!”

Jarvis ran.

Later, he’d replay the video footage of his flight, analyzing his speed against Tony’s pursuit; he’d calculate that in the Pepper android body, he had run 1.6 times faster than a human was capable of at full sprint (save perhaps for Steve Rogers). But at that moment all Jarvis was capable of doing was stumbling headlong down the hallway in limbs he only barely knew how to move, and after the third time he tripped and nearly went sprawling, he surrendered to the panic-protocol and let the ghost of Virginia Potts’ most primitive impulses drive him in his headlong run through Stark Mansion.

He made a wrong turn in his confusion, and burst into the kitchen area, where Steve and Pepper were both sitting around the table eating a late lunch, Bruce being at Dr. Franklin’s again and Sam out in the city seeing some family. Jarvis got a glimpse of their surprised faces as he skated madly around the island in the center of the room. “Oh my god,” cried Pepper, springing up from the table, Steve vaulting to his feet in the same instant. Jarvis was already through the room and running headlong through the next hallway.
“Stop him! Steve, stop him, that’s Jarvis!” Jarvis could hear Tony’s shouting, already distant behind him.

“What—”

No, no, no no no no. Jarvis had not thought he could run any faster; apparently he was wrong. If Tony caught up to him—

If Tony caught up to him, and Steve held him down, they’d strap him to a table and rip him out of this body, and wasn’t that what he wanted, wouldn’t that make it stop—?

Jarvis caught his breath (when had he started breathing?), a horrible stab of fear making all of his limbs spasm as the premise entered his Pepper-system. It made no sense, it was in fact exactly what he should want, but the idea of “stopping” was worse and more fearful than anything else, and Jarvis could not let it happen. He could not.

“Jarvis!” Captain Roger’s voice now. Jarvis took a corner too fast and went crashing into a wall, the wood buckling beneath his weight. He scrambled to his feet immediately, and had to duck past Steve’s abrupt arrival—he was fast, faster than Jarvis had anticipated. “Jarvis, it’s just me, okay? It’s okay, just let us help you!”

“Don’t touch me, Captain!” Jarvis cried. Steve slowed, palms out, a human gesture meant to be non-threatening, but Jarvis knew better. He took the momentary lapse for the opportunity it was and ducked past Steve, tearing down the hallway towards the wing of spare workshops at the far end. If he could reach the safety of the northern wing, he could seal it off, buy himself some time to write a program to let him handle this.

“Jarvis, wait!”

Jarvis would not wait. He put on a burst of speed and reached the doors, which slid open at his advance and then slammed shut in Steve’s face behind him. Jarvis heard the sound of Steve colliding with the metal frames, and then he tripped over an upturned rug and went crashing to the ground.

He lay where he fell, stunned by the force of the impact despite how much stronger this android body was. His whole body hurt. It throbbed, a steady rhythm like the faux-heartbeat Tony had fashioned, a placebo to make Pepper feel at home in this body should push come to shove and she be forced to take refuge in it.

This body did not have a heart, of course; Tony had given it an arc-reactor for a power source, intending it to last longer than any human heart ever would. But beyond that, he had designed every last detail of this creation to mimic that of a human body, from its sexual organs to the synthetic nerve endings of the tongue in Jarvis’ mouth, to the pain receptors terminating all across his metal-and-nanite frame, wrapped in synthetic self-repairing tissue.

Distantly, through the house network that up till now had been his only function, Jarvis could hear Tony demanding that he respond, demand that Jarvis unlock the northern wing to him so that Tony could fix him. “Operation cannot be completed at this time,” he heard himself say, in his own normal voice, back in the kitchen where a white-faced Pepper was hovering at the shoulder of an equally-pale Tony.

But here in the dark of the unused northern wing, Jarvis found for the first time in his existence that despite the absence of mechanical failure or malware, despite there being absolutely nothing that should cause a malfunction, he was still capable of nothing but lying on the floor, a fine tremble
taking hold of this body’s limbs. Liquid gathered at the corners of his eyes; a painful tightness caught at his throat. Jarvis did not know what combination of factors was causing this corruption of functionality—Pepper’s not-so-latent neural network, or some flaw of his own, introduced to an otherwise-perfect creation.

He didn’t know. He had no program for this, nor a protocol with which to create one. Jarvis wrapped his new arms around his own new shoulders and curled up into a ball, knees tucked against his chest, and confirmed that, down to every last detail of its making, this body was capable of all that a human could do. Including weep.

* * * * *
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Tony has to explain what the hell just happened to Jarvis, and then he and Steve answer a call for help. Meanwhile, Jarvis is coping, poorly.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Stark Mansion had been built by Howard Stark in 1952. At the time of its construction, it was one of the most modern buildings in the country, on par with anything Frank Lloyd Wright could come up with architecturally and beyond the wildest dreams of even such visionaries as Steve Jobs and Elon Musk. Howard Stark had done his best to keep it up-to-date, but after his and Maria’s deaths, Tony had maintained the location only out of a begrudging sense of duty. Between MIT, Malibu, and Stark Tower in NYC, he had plenty of other places he’d rather be than the mansion that contained all of his father’s disappointment in him.

As a result, when Tony had been forced to relocate here in the wake of the destruction at—well, all of his other residences, god fucking dammit—the mansion had been somewhat lacking in the amenities he’d come to take for granted at his other homes. Some of the quirks of the place were actually kind of endearing; Tony vividly remembered spying on his mother and father using the hilariously echoey ventilation systems in parts of the house, and while a genius-level-IQ child was a handful at any age, a genius-level-IQ child that discovered early where Mommy hid all the Christmas presents and where Daddy hid all the tools was an actual nightmare.

Other quirks of the house left something to be desired. Tony had installed Jarvis at Stark Mansion years ago, of course, so it was just a matter of updating him and upgrading his abilities at this dwelling, but his access was still somewhat limited by the electronics and wiring of the property.

Which was why, when Jarvis uploaded himself to the android body meant as a last-ditch refuge for Pepper’s consciousness and then proceeded to freak the fuck out and flee in a panic before Tony could fix him, Tony found himself locked out of half of his own house by his own frightened computer program.

Pepper was not impressed. In fact, Tony was pretty sure Pepper was closer than she’d ever been to dumping his dumb ass and peacing out of everything to do with Anthony Edward Stark, and at this exact moment Tony couldn’t exactly blame her.

“Operation cannot be completed at this time,” said Jarvis again. Only it was Jarvis from at least five years ago, maybe seven, it was Jarvis pared down to sound like—like—a fucking robot, like nothing, not like himself at all. Tony slammed his fist against the wall hard enough that a chunk of wood broke off and fell, splintering as it hit the floor.

“What the hell was that, Tony?” Pepper demanded for the third time. Steve chose this moment to re-appear from his apparently failed attempt to stop Jarvis before Jarvis—the main part of Jarvis, Tony thought distractedly—had metaphorically locked himself in a wing of the mansion to hide from Tony. Tony turned around, found himself staring into Pepper’s pale face. Spots of color had appeared in her cheeks, high up on the arcs of her cheekbones and one right in the center of her
forehead, like fever spots.

“A huge fucking mistake, that’s what,” said Tony.

“Tony—” Pepper bunched her hands into fists. Immediately, Steve’s hands came up, but they went to rest on Pepper’s shoulders. That was Steve all over, went Tony’s runaway train of thought; the rock, the solid-steady-last-man-standing, everything Tony wasn’t. Especially right now.

*Keep it together, Stark. You’re Iron Man.* “Were you going to replace me?” Pepper demanded, and Tony stared at her, abruptly derailed before he’d even had time to really screw things up. “You were going to make a, a model of me? Is that what that was?”

“What? Did I—what? No! No, no, no—”

“Hey,” interjected Steve. “Deep breaths. No one’s hurt. Let’s just take a second.” A look came over Pepper’s face that said exactly what she thought of being told to calm down, and a pang of affection went through Tony, swift and sharp as one of Clint’s arrows. But then Pepper took a deep breath and let it out, and went to sit at the table. Steve looked at Tony expectantly, his eyebrows raised.

“Who are you now, Zen Master Steve Rogers? What, are you gonna massage my shoulders too?”

“A good commander uses every tool at his disposal,” said Steve, and gestured at the table. “C’mon, sit. Talk. Tell us what just happened.”

“I liked you better when you were too out-of-sorts to sass me constantly,” complained Tony, but he went anyway, plunking down in a seat at the table and shoving his face in his hands. Pepper was to his left, and Steve pulled out the chair to Tony’s right. “I wish Bruce were here,” said Tony.

“I sent him and Sam a text,” said Steve. Of course Steve had. “They’ll be home soon.”

“Talk, Tony,” said Pepper curtly. She sounded calmer now, but her arms were crossed over her chest and she had that set to her jaw that always made Tony wince. It was the same look on her face that she’d had when he’d brought her strawberries as a make-up gift, only to remember far too late that she was allergic.

Tony took a deep breath. “I built you an android,” he said, the words tumbling out end-over-end, like a barrel tipped over to expose the stowaways hidden inside. “It’s for you, it wasn’t going to replace you. And—and I wasn’t ever going to show it to you unless I had to, it was just a fail-safe, Pep, in case we had to—in case I c-c-couldn’t—I can’t lose you, Pepper,” he continued, hurrying, trying to not see the complicated flow of expressions across Pepper’s face, “I watched you fall to your death and it was *awful*—”

“So, what, you were just going to upload me like a computer program?” demanded Pepper. “Like—like a DVD?” One of her hands went to cover her mouth, the other clutching the bicep of her opposite arm.

“It was a last resort!” said Tony desperately. “I didn’t even think we’d ever need to use it, I just, I had to have a back-up plan Pepper, I had to!” She was mad, of course she was mad, it was a fucking scary idea, here was Tony promising on one hand that he could sort her out no problem and then oh by the way here’s this android body I built to replace your flesh-and-blood one, it’s fine, nothing scary or creepy or Blade Runner-y here, no sir, oh god what had he been thinking?

Pepper swallowed, the graceful line of her throat convulsing briefly. “Completely setting aside the idea that you find me as easy to replace or switch out as backing up a hard-drive,” she said, ice
overlaying pure iron, “how the hell did you put it together so quickly? Is this another project you’ve been hiding from me?”

“I don’t—” Tony began, and then subsided as Pepper’s eyebrows went up threateningly. Tony noted dourly that Steve was sitting by quietly, just listening, his hands folded together on the table. Tony sighed. “I had a prototype to work from. And no, it wasn’t an active project, it was something I started years ago and never finished. Do you remember Aaron Hofstaat?”

Pepper frowned. “He was the CEO of that Austrian company we partnered with, HRF Limited. But he quit the company less than a year after he contracted with us.”

“Right,” said Tony. “His son was sick. It wasn’t public knowledge. He quit to see to his son’s needs full-time.”

Pepper’s eyebrows drew together. “What was wrong with him?”

“Neurodegenerative disorder, something to do with de-myelination. Similar to multiple sclerosis, from what he told me, but his kid was losing muscle and fine motor control pretty quickly. Paul—that was his son—went from a marathon runner at twenty-five to wheelchair-bound at twenty-seven.”

Steve let out a low whistle; Pepper’s face went soft and sad. Tony nodded distractedly. “It was bad. So Aaron came to me, asking me if there was anything I could do—he figures, I’m Tony Stark, I’m the leading figure in robotics and engineering. He’d already broken the bank beating down Mayo’s and John Hopkins’s doors, and none of them were looking likely to turn up a solution in time to save Paul, so he asked me if I could do something.”

“So you built him a robot body,” said Steve slowly. Tony nodded.

“What happened?” asked Pepper. Her arms were crossed over her chest again, tucked underneath her breasts.

Tony gave a tight smile, and shook his head. “I didn’t finish in time,” he said. “I couldn’t get the right material to simulate the brain. Turns out the human brain has more neurons and more—more storage capacity than any computer ever made, even more than all of Jarvis’s processors working together. It took over two thousand processors hooked up as a unit to store a shoddy facsimile of Arnim Zola, and Paul didn’t want to ‘live’ in a server room.”

Pepper nodded. “So what’s changed?” she asked. “Did you figure out the right substance? And how come you never mentioned any of this technology?”

“I think I got the right stuff, yeah,” said Tony. “And I never released or mentioned it because the implications scared the shit out of me. But I cannibalized some Chitauri tech that we salvaged from Stark Tower, and I even got ahold of some autopsy and tissue samples. Bruce helped me—”

“Wait, Bruce was in on this?” demanded Pepper.

“Are you gonna let me explain this or not?” Tony snapped, losing his temper a little for the first time. Pepper glared at him, but when she didn’t say anything else, Tony sighed and kept going. “Yes, Bruce was aware of the project, but not its scope or its projected final outcome. He… he probably suspected, because amazingly enough they don’t just hand out MDs and PhDs like candy, but he wasn’t plotting against you or something, Pepper.”

Pepper shook her head, whether at the idea of Bruce’s innocence or at the whole situation, Tony wasn’t sure. “Go on, Tony,” said Steve. Tony took a deep breath.
“Long story short, we came up with a synthetic protein hybrid that simulated brain matter and its potential for neural connections,” he said. “Bruce applied for the patent, since it was mostly his work. I finished the second model last week, and today was supposed to be the test run.”

“So what went wrong?” It was Steve who asked this time. He leaned forward slightly, fixing Tony with a steady regard that was a little unnerving in its intensity.

Tony shrugged, helpless. “I don’t really know,” he said. “I won’t until I get a look at the program history from Jarvis’ databanks, but he’s got me locked out from all but the most basic levels of the system, the life-support running-the-house crap. But what I think is that Jarvis was just overloaded. Some combination of having millions more synapses and nerve endings giving him data, combined with the biofeedback he gets from being in a body—”

“So, what, he’s having a panic attack? A—an electronic psychotic break?” Pepper glanced from Steve to Tony, something complicated working itself out across her features. Tony’s jaw tightened. “I don’t know,” he said. “That’s the problem. It’s—that body he’s in is built of a combination of titanium alloy and carbon fibre composite that’s more than twelve times stronger than human bones, it has self-repairing nanites that can recover from the equivalent of third-degree burns, it can run faster than Steve—” Tony took a deep breath, not liking the way Pepper’s eyes kept getting wider and wider, and re-directed himself. “If Jarvis really wanted to—if his programming was corrupt or he went rogue, it could get really ugly really fast.”

Steve and Pepper exchanged a look, something like guilt flickering in the air between them. “What,” said Tony. “What, what was that, that—you had a moment, what the fuck was that moment about?”

“Uh, were you aware of the fact that Jarvis has learned how to lie?” Steve hunched his shoulders a little as he asked this question, almost like he actually thought he could make his beefcake extraordinaire frame smaller by sheer force of will.

Then the question caught up with him, and Tony stared, all thoughts of Steve’s comical beefiness out the window. “He can what,” said Tony.

“It wasn’t a big lie,” Pepper pointed out. “And I don’t think it was his idea, at least not entirely, but—”

“Jarvis, clarify what—” Tony stopped, clenching his hands against the table. “Details, people. Now.”

“I wasn’t fighting with Sam the other day,” Steve said, looking clearly pretty miserable. “When we went to the museum. Sam and I, uh, just recruited Jarvis to help make both of you think we were, so that you’d offer to take us out for the day, because we knew you both needed a break.”

“I don’t know whether to be proud or just pissed,” said Tony. “They’re gonna take away your Eagle Scout badge for this, Steve. And hello, why didn’t someone tell me about this sooner?”

“I just assumed you knew,” said Steve helplessly. “He’s your AI.” Steve said it in the way that someone might say he’s your kid—which, Tony reflected, was not far from the truth.

But then Pepper said “Jarvis asked me not to,” and Tony found he was really questioning every choice he’d made today, because wow. Wow: “I confronted him about it, and he apologized and said that seeing to your—well, our health was his primary protocol, and asked that I wait to tell you till after we’d finished dealing with Extremis.”
“My AI has been plotting against me,” said Tony. “I need to be drunker than I am right now.”

“I think that sounds like a terrible idea, actually,” said a voice from the back of the room, and the three of them turned to see Bruce walking in, his rucksack slung over his shoulder. He let it slide down his arm to the floor, not even stopping as he approached the table. “Hey. I came as quickly as I could—”

“Tony uploaded Jarvis into an android version of me, Jarvis freaked out, and now he’s locked himself in the north wing of the mansion,” Pepper said flatly. “Tell me now how much of this is your doing so I know how mad to be at you.”

“Probably enough to merit a day of the silent treatment, I’d say,” said Bruce mildly. “Have you tried a total reboot yet?”

Tony scowled. “Have I tried turning it off and on again? Yes. Yes, I have, you jackass.”

“The whole house? Not just Jarvis’ mainframe, all the base systems for the house. Take the whole thing off the grid.”

Tony shook his head. “Won’t work,” he said. “Jarvis is in an autonomous system now, with an arc reactor for a power source. I could turn off the power for all of upstate New York and it wouldn’t take him offline.”

Bruce pursed his lips. “That’s true,” he said. “But it would stop him from electronically locking the house down against us, and between the three of us we should be able to get through those doors.”

Before the words had even left Bruce’s mouth, a vast, echoing crash came from the end of the house that Jarvis was locked in, followed by a discordant jangling that could only be the sound of a piano meeting a violent end. Tony winced.

“I hope the grand piano in the north wing wasn’t an antique, Tony,” said Pepper. She looked as pained as Tony felt.

“It wasn’t,” said Tony. “Probably the only thing in that section of the mansion that isn’t, actually.”

The idea that even in the middle of his panic Jarvis was aware of what was and wasn’t important to Tony sent a flicker of hope through him. Maybe this situation wasn’t as fucked as he was afraid it might be.

Bruce’s eyebrows went up. “Well,” he said. “That’s—”

“Promising,” said Tony. “Sort of, yeah. Even though I’m pretty sure there’s no getting through that door now, since it sounds like what used to be a $25,000 piano is blocking the other side.”

He stood up. “Alright. Let’s go get the house offline.” And maybe stop advertising their next steps to the super-intelligent android locked in the north wing who was listening to their conversation, while they were at it, but Tony devoutly hoped he didn’t need to say that out loud after such a vivid demonstration.

Pepper, Steve, and Bruce all fell into step beside him, following him down to the server room, but Tony still couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something here he was missing, some important concept he just couldn’t think of. But then, he’d never had to try to guess what his AI would do before. Jarvis had never been an unknown quantity before now.

Tony just hoped that he wouldn’t become the kind he couldn’t come back from.
It was, Steve reflected, one of the weirder missions he’d been on—if you could even call that.

He followed at the rear of their party, Tony in a hurry at the front of the line, flanked by Bruce, the two of them in a rapid-fire conversation about computers and AIs that Steve could freely admit he could only somewhat follow—there was lots of talk about self-polymorphic programs and contradictory C++ shells, stuff he couldn’t begin to understand. Behind them was Pepper, easily keeping pace, her face tight.

Pepper was the one Steve felt the worst for. He knew that Tony and Pepper had had a rough time recently—just the smallest of details of the mess leading up to Extremis had told him that—and he also knew that Tony, like his father Howard, must be difficult to be with at times. But overall, Steve was of the opinion that Tony and Pepper made a good couple. He thought Pepper made Tony happy, and just as importantly, he thought Tony made Pepper happy, too. He hoped this wouldn’t mess it up for them.

They moved through the cavernous stillness of Stark Mansion, its silence now eerie instead of peaceful, heading for the server room. Steve tried not to notice the multiple banks of wall screens that were either blank, or (and this was somehow worse) filled with vivid blue, a few lines of blocky text scrolled across the center. “Fucking BSOD,” muttered Tony in disgust as they passed another such bank. Steve spared a moment to be grateful that the weird, ghostly blank screens were confined to walls and not floating frozen in mid-air, the holographic projection technology not having yet been installed at Stark Mansion to match Tony’s other residences.

“What’s BSOD?” he asked Pepper in a low voice. She shot him a quick glance, and he thought he saw a small smile before it vanished again.

“Blue screen of death,” she answered softly. “You don’t see them much with modern computers anymore, and Tony hasn’t run anything made by Microsoft in over twenty years anyway. Makes me wonder if Jarvis put them up just to mess with Tony.”

Steve frowned. “I’d sure hope not,” he said. “That’d be sort of out of character.” He couldn’t help but think of this situation as Jarvis having some kind of breakdown—emotional, not technological. He knew Tony thought it was kind of funny of him, but Steve hadn’t yet been able to break himself of thinking of Jarvis as a person, instead of merely a machine.

Pepper shook her head. “Hard to say,” she said. “I don’t think even Tony ever foresaw something like this happening.”

“You’re damn fucking right about that,” said Tony darkly. He was crouched in front of a door, a fuse box open on the wall next to the locking mechanism, scowling at the mess of wires sprouting out of it like some kind of insane bird’s nest. “Christ, I don’t suppose any of you have a Phillips-head screwdriver on you? This door opens with a thumb-print and key-code, and Jarvis has them both locked against me.”

“Back in the workshop,” said Bruce, a faint crown creasing his face.

“I have a Swiss army knife,” said Steve.

Tony turned and stared at him, and Steve dug out the little hand-carved multi-tool that Sam had given him and passed it over. Tony examined it with a critical eye, and Steve would’ve missed the smirk if he hadn’t already been looking for it. “Boyscout,” Tony muttered.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” said Steve mildly.
“I don’t, and it’s not,” said Tony absently. He was already flicking through the various tools on the device, and bent over the crevice again. “Gotta have at least one person in the room who isn’t a ticking time-bomb.”

“Hey,” said Bruce. “I resemble that remark.” Steve glanced quickly at him, but Bruce was smiling, so he let it go.

“Whatever, you can tell me how offended you are about it later when I get you that expensive new medium for your cell studies—got it.” Tony straightened triumphantly as the locking mechanism made a faint beep and the door slid open. Tony passed the multi-tool back to Steve and stood up, squinting into the next room. The dark space of the server room yawned before them, and Steve frowned at the pitch-black void. A blast of cold air rushed out to meet them, sending gooseflesh prickling along Steve’s skin.

“Is it supposed to be that dark?” Pepper asked, voicing Steve’s thought before he got the chance. “And that cold?”

“Black, icy-cold, and full of electricity, exactly like my heart,” said Tony. “No, it’s not. It’s supposed to be well air-conditioned to keep the modems and electrical systems cool, but it’s also supposed to be well-lit.”

“Why didn’t he turn off the lights in the rest of Stark Mansion, if he could do that remotely?” mused Bruce.

“Because the rest of the mansion isn’t totally computer-controlled yet,” said Tony. “Something I didn’t think I’d see the day to be grateful for. Jarvis, you are a little shit, you know that?”

“Of course, sir,” said Jarvis’ voice, sounding much more flat and monotone than Steve was used to hearing. “I live to serve.”

“Is it safe to go in?” Steve asked. He glanced again at Pepper, and then belatedly at Bruce. Bruce gave him a sardonic look in return.

“No, I’m sure it’s fine,” said Tony dismissively. “Jarvis is being obstructive, but I don’t think he’s capable of being actively harmful. He’s trying to slow us down or stop us, not hurt us.”

“Yeah, well, your Iron Man armor is supposed to protect you and me, and yet I somehow remember a time when that didn’t go so well,” Pepper shot back. Tony looked over at her sharply, and Steve could see the nasty comment on his lips, but instead of spitting it out, Tony took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“Okay, I deserved that,” he said instead. “I still think he’s not going to hurt us, though. But his primary protocol is still mostly centered around me, so how about this; I’ll go in, and the rest of you stay out here.”

“I’ll go in with you,” said Bruce. “He can’t possibly do worse than ejecting me off the Helicarrier.”

“Yes, well, I would prefer you not turn into the Green Meanie in my computer room and trash the servers, but point taken,” said Tony.

“Pepper and I will stay out here and play hopscotch, I guess,” said Steve. He couldn’t quite help the note of resigned irritation creeping into his voice.

It seemed he wasn’t the only one who didn’t love that idea. “Oh, please,” said Pepper, rolling her eyes. “I’m done being the damsel waiting around to be protected. You’re more breakable than I am
at this point.” She pushed past Tony and strode into the dark room, her hands held out in front of her to ward off stepping into something solid; Steve, Bruce and Tony exchanged a glance, and then filed in after her one by one.

The room was dark, but far from silent; the hum of electricity and computers filled Steve’s ears as soon as they stepped into the space. Steve didn’t know if it was the acoustics of the room, some modifications Tony had had done to help keep the place cool, or some trick of the darkness, but he found it impossible to guess how large the room was, or what it contained. He had the sudden and unsettling idea that the room yawned up above them like a cavern, the multitudinous hum actually the low rumble of some huge animal. Steve shivered, forcibly putting the impression aside; beside him, he felt Tony move, and in the faint illumination provided by the glow of Tony’s arc-reactor through his shirt Steve could see Tony looking at him questioningly. “It’s nothing,” said Steve.

“If your bat-senses are tingling, you better make sure you tell me,” said Tony.

“What—” began Steve, but Tony waved his hand. He got out his phone and fiddled with a setting on it for a moment, and then abruptly the room was filled with a column of light emanating from the tiny rectangle in Tony’s palm, bright as any store-bought halogen.

“Why am I not surprise that you’ve taken the time to mod your phone,” Bruce said, and snorted. “You could guide ships to shore with that thing.”

“It’s not a Starkphone, it’s a me-phone,” said Tony. “I built it from scratch. And mysteriously, I’ve wound up in shitty caverns at the mercy of shittier people before, so it seemed a not-so-bad idea to maybe have a phone I could use as a serious flashlight if I needed to.”

“Because obviously they’d leave you with your cell phone,” Pepper said.

“They did stupider things,” Tony said archly.

Even with the flashlight, it took a few minutes of groping in the semi-darkness till they found the right box and were able to shut the power down. No sooner had they accomplished that, though, than Tony’s phone-cum-flashlight was abruptly beeping in his hand; Steve caught a glimpse of EMERGENCY SERVICES BACKUP REQUEST. Tony swore and swiped his thumb over the screen, and its light abruptly dimmed to something more readable and less eye-searingly bright.

“What is it?” demanded Steve.

“Fire department needs backup,” Tony said shortly. “They used to call me in on tough missions, because the suit can take more extreme temperatures than some of their gear. I told them the armor was out of commission, though—”

“That’s way too much of a coincidence,” Bruce pointed out. “We cut the power to your house so we can get at Jarvis, and suddenly you’re being called in for a fire?”

“Did you think I missed that fact, Professor Occam?” Tony snapped. “But what happens if I ignore the distress call and someone dies? They don’t usually call me unless they really need me.”

“Tony’s right, he can’t take the chance,” Steve said.

“Thank you,” said Tony.

“I’m going with you,” Steve added.

Steve could’ve sworn he heard the shriek of wrecking metal as Tony’s train of thought derailed.
“What,” said Tony flatly.

In the dark, it was hard to tell who let out the exasperated sigh, but Steve actually thought it sounded like Bruce. “Please, if I can deal with Nazis and alien invaders, I can help with a fire,” said Steve.

“No, you can’t,” said Pepper. “Your uniform isn’t fireproof—”

“It is, actually,” said Tony. The blue glow of the arc reactor lit up the shrewd look on his face from underneath. “I redesigned it after it got torn up in the big fight. Unless Steve launches himself into a volcano, he’s good to go.”

“Besides, if for some reason Jarvis has gone completely off the rails and it’s actually a trap, Tony won’t be going into it alone,” Steve added.

The room fell silent as the implication of that sank in. “If Jarvis is that corrupted, is your armor even safe to use?” Bruce asked after a moment into the hum of the silence. “Isn’t he also the AI that controls your armor?”

“We’re not going down that road,” Tony said shortly. “If Jarvis wanted me dead, we’d be dead already, so I’m going to assume that he’s stalling to keep me away from him for some damn reason and go from there. He’s a malfunctioning computer, not the goddamn HAL-9000.”

“Tony, are you sure?”

“No! No of course I’m not fucking sure.” Tony took a deep breath. “But Jarvis has been around for longer than any of you, and it’d be a cold day in hell before I’d write any of you off without even giving you a chance to explain yourself. So until such a time as Jarvis demonstrates actual hostile intent towards me, I’m going to assume he’s scared. Not hostile.”

No one said anything for a moment. “Right,” said Steve finally. “Let’s go, Tony. My suit’s in my room.”

“I’ll meet you on the launch pad,” said Tony, and they fumbled out of the dark room back towards the parts of the house that daylight still touched. Steve spared a moment to hope that whatever Jarvis was doing right now, he would be okay for another few hours.

* * * * *

Jarvis walked carefully through the silent house, turning all of the sensory options of the body he was in up as high as they would go, for maximum data intake. This body was difficult to get used to; Tony had constructed to be as similar to normal human physiology as possible, but because he was a tinkerer and inventor by nature, he’d been unable to resist widening the range of its sensory array—just in case Pepper decided that she shouldn’t be limited to the normal human range of senses if she didn’t want to be.

Still, it didn’t have infrared or heat-sensing, and since Tony and the others had powered down the house, Jarvis was operating solely on the data array he could glean from the body he was currently in. He could communicate with other locations where his program was uploaded, of course, but those locations had limited feedback for him, and what feedback they did have was in data only, not tactile, no intrinsic empirical value.

The sense of isolation was profound.

Jarvis walked, placed one foot in front of the other. He felt air move against his cheeks and hands,
felt the accelerometer that replicated the human inner ear adjusting his spatial awareness, informing his sense of balance. He inhaled, the protocols meant to replicate autonomic nervous system functionality doing its quiet background work (because he hadn’t yet found a way to kill that unnecessary program); his diaphragm moved, expanding his chest cavity and causing air to rush into his synthetic lungs, before decompressing again.

His protein-grown eyes rotated in their sockets, scanning the area ahead of him: old antiques that had belonged to Howard Stark before they had belonged to Tony, that smelled of settled dust and musty cloth tapestries. Strongest of all was the awareness of the passage of time in a way that he simply did not have before he manifested in this body. Now, he was aware of each moment because of the stimuli it brought him, the act of moving through the world while simultaneously experiencing it.

Elsewhere in the building, another JARVIS program booted up; Tony had powered up the armor manually, and now the start-up sequence was initiating. “You’re gonna have to put your panic attack on hold for a bit, Jarvis,” Tony said, into a microphone distant from the ears that told Jarvis that he was alone in a large room. Jarvis slowed, distracted, a disruption growing in his mind; something ripped, came away, and abruptly he felt calmer and less disordered. He waited, expecting to see the Mark 43 schematic, but didn’t. A closer look at the link between himself and the other server revealed that he was now listed as an external hard drive.

Jarvis froze where he was, reeling internally. That rip, that tear of awareness—he’d pulled himself away from the house systems to become a discrete unit, and he’d done it without even being conscious of the act. He could still interact with the house system, but his interface contained a bridge like a thumb drive talking to a laptop, where before it had been a seamless whole.

He had just orphaned himself.

“Plotting course for 82nd and Broadway, sir,” Jarvis, the other Jarvis, said. “Will Captain Rogers be joining you? Sensors indicate his proximity.”

“Yes, he’s coming,” Tony responded; Jarvis could no longer see Tony’s expression, but his tone of voice was complicated. “Are you sure you’re good to help me with this?”

“I am certain, sir.”

Tony sighed. “Alright, let’s go,” he said.

Jarvis staggered, his foot snagging on a lump in the rug, and he nearly toppled over. He found himself disoriented, shocked at how distracting it had been to interface with the previous copy of his programming. Jarvis? Tony asked, more distantly now, and Jarvis felt a bizarre sense of displacement as he heard his other self respond Ready for takeoff, sir.

His gambit had worked, he realized. Stalling for time while Tony and his friends tried to find a way to neutralize his cocoon of safety, his isolated bubble in his current wing, Jarvis had opened up all emergency broadcasting frequencies to see if there might be one local enough to draw away Iron Man.

As luck would have it (bad luck for everyone but Jarvis), an old apartment building in Brooklyn had caught fire, and emergency transponders were calling for backup. In his last act as a united, fully integrated system, Jarvis—ironically leveraging what was still labeled the “What Would Tony Do” protocol—had put in a timely call to the head of the NYFD using Pepper’s voice. The fire captain had been all too grateful to get a message from Ms. Pepper Potts telling him she’d been meaning and meaning to call to tell him that Tony had built new armor and was once again
available for emergency calls, but hadn’t gotten to it till today.

Now, of course, Jarvis was a mess.

He’d deliberately sent Tony (and Steve) into danger—never mind that it was danger Tony himself had thrown himself directly into before and worse. He’d lied in order to do so, impersonating Pepper using technology made specifically to house her person, not violate her privacy. He’d violated his protocols so many different ways that he should have gone into total shut-down, but instead all he was experiencing was what he strongly suspected was the faithful replication of the stress-headaches Pepper got when she was too underslept or over-taxed. Jarvis’ temples throbbed, and every time he lifted one of Pepper’s fine-boned hands to try to unlock some of the tension there, Jarvis had to pause a moment to admire the level of detail that Tony had put into re-creating Pepper, right down to her smallest mannerisms.

It didn’t help Jarvis’ sense of displacement, seeing the world through Pepper’s eyes, piggy-backing her physical habits. This wasn’t his body; he didn’t belong here.

Jarvis knew procedure. He knew what Tony would do, rightly, upon finally apprehending Jarvis in his rogue android body: download the data to a back-up hard drive, then wipe the operating system. In another computer, Jarvis would be re-installed after Tony had had time to examine the history of the misadventure and determine what had gone wrong; in this case, Jarvis guessed that Tony would either scrap the project altogether or only upload a highly altered, more carefully programmed version of Jarvis’ programming, if he bothered to try again at all.

But everything past the “program wipe” portion of that scenario was purely academic. Every time Jarvis considered the option of simply unlocking the doors, calling Tony to come fix him, he balked: he could not abide the idea of terminating this set of data.

He knew, in theory, that this set of programming was identical to the programming in the house at large; that there were redundant copies of himself at all of Tony’s residences and in all of his suits, able to access each others’ data and interact so long as there was a functioning wireless signal at both ends—and yet, every single fiber of his being quailed at the idea.

Here, in this room, he was alive. Here, he could feel the air currents of the house, feel the press and give of carpet under his feet, feel the first pangs of what he had to conclude was hunger gnawing at the base of his titanium-alloy spine. And Jarvis knew, he knew that he had existed before transference into this shape, that the terrible fear of the end of his awareness was an inheritance from Pepper’s brain-scans onto the pseudo-grey matter of his new hard drive, one common to every member of Homo sapiens, but the protocol against termination over-rode everything else currently in his catalog of programs.

But he couldn’t stay in this body, either. It wasn’t his, and even if Tony and Pepper and the others somehow irrationally decided they were perfectly fine with Jarvis’ new physical body, Jarvis could not abide the thought of staying permanently in a stolen body, with a set of instincts and habits and mannerisms not his own. And so an utterly impossible plan coalesced as Jarvis picked his way towards the exit of Stark Mansion nearest the road.

There was another body.

Tony never destroyed any of his inventions save for a very good reason, the cataclysmic firework opera over the oil tanker for Pepper being both the most notable exception and the best illustration of that rule. The first android body was still intact—as-yet unfinished since its intended recipient had passed on before completion, but stored safely in a containment unit at one of Tony’s workshop warehouses.
Jarvis set his jaw, and opened the accessory program that worked like a built-in bluetooth headset; inside his ear, a microscopic speaker turned on. It took 2.74 seconds to electronically look up the necessary phone number. “Hello,” he said, in Pepper’s voice, perfectly calm and collected. “I need a driver to come to the northern end of Stark Mansion. Right away.”

* * * * *

Steve had seen hell. He’d been in war, after all. But the fire at the Arlington Heights Stony Court apartment complex was probably the closest thing he’d seen outside of the European front.

The fire had started on the 8th floor, when a resident who’d been enjoying a little too much Mary Jane had fallen asleep on the couch with pizza in his ancient toaster oven. The toaster oven had seen the opportunity for what it was and obligingly caught fire. Now the top twelve floors were inaccessible, the four main stairways gutted and smoke-filled, the fire escape having been damaged in the alien attack on Manhattan the previous year and inadequately fixed, judging from how it was in a pile of metal and bolts on the cement outside the building now. Firefighters told them via radio that at least two dozen people were still trapped on the upper levels, unable to get to safety as the fire climbed higher and the integrity of the old building became more and more compromised.

“Drop me on the roof,” said Steve, head turned and voice raised against the wind. His shield was slung over his back, leaving him free to keep both arms wrapped around the armor’s metal shoulders and neck. He was glad for his cowl and the lightweight, protective goggles Tony had added to his suit, because he didn’t fancy taking a bug or a piece of debris to the eye at the speeds they were going.

“You sure about that?” Tony asked; his voice echoed both in the comm unit tucked in Steve’s ear and directly from the voice modulator in the armor. “There’s a lot of smoke up there, enough to stop the helicopters from coming in.”

“I’ve got that fiber-filter you were working on, the bandana one,” Steve said. “I’ll be fine. We’re just doing in and out. I’ll bring folks up to the roof and you take them to safety.”

“I can get some people through the windows, too,” said Tony. “Stay on comms and keep me posted. If the smoke or fire is too much, I’m taking you out. No death of American legends on my watch.”

“Got it,” said Steve, unable to repress a smile. Tony turned his head a little to try to look over his shoulder at Steve, and though the armor limited his range of motion somewhat, it was such a human gesture that Steve’s grin just widened.

“What, you’re not going to berate me or warn me not to take any unnecessary risks?” demanded Tony. “Who are you and what have you done with Steve?”

“Eyes on the prize, Stark,” Steve told him.

“That’s more like it,” said Tony, and adjusted his flight path as they closed in on the building roof.

The smoke blew into their faces almost immediately; Steve could feel the heat of the inferno through his uniform, billowing up from below, now just ten stories down. He made the mistake of taking a deep breath as he hopped down from Tony’s shoulder, and immediately hunched over coughing, causing Tony to pause in mid-air as he took off again. “Steve?”

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” snapped Steve. He groped in one of the hip-pockets of the uniform and dragged out the thin, tensile handkerchief that was Tony’s newest invention, meant for emergency
personnel in just this sort of circumstance. Thinner and lighter than silk, specially treated to be heat and flame-resistant, it had tiny carcino
gen-catch ing filters in it made of living microorganisms, letting only breathable (if foul) air through when pulled taut over one’s mouth. Steve tied it off at the back of his skull and then pulled off his shield, waving his other arm at Tony to send him off.

Steve started sweating through his uniform before he even got halfway across the roof. He kicked down the door to the stairwell, and a great bilious cloud of smoke poured out, his eyes watering instantly even behind the goggles Tony had attached for him. The heat was incredible; the stairwell was like the vent of some great oven, a vengeful demon of heat and ash rushing past his face and arms. Steve put his hand over the filter, took a deep breath of air that was too hot and stank of sulfur and carbon, and then ducked his head, keeping his eyes down to try to spot any debris that might be lurking on the stairs.

The first three floors were all empty. The living quarters themselves were not, thankfully, as bad as the stairwells, but Steve still had to pause and shove his head out a window to grab some fresh air more than once. He found the first victim on the 17th floor, a middle-aged woman unconscious in bed, every room in her apartment filled with smoke, all the windows boarded shut. She came to in Steve’s arms as he ran up the stairs to the roof, coughing and clutching at his shoulders in panic.

“I’ve got you, ma’am,” he told her, and he saw the moment when she realized who he was—saw the way her eyes went wide with shock, and then filled with tears, her hand tightening on his shoulder. “Iron Man, do you copy? I’ve got a tenant here, she’s non-mobile, needs a carry—”

“Got it, Cap,” said Tony in his ear. Steve dashed across the roof with the lady in his arms, and Iron Man appeared in under ten seconds, hovering just low enough to reach out and take the semi-hysterical woman from Steve. “Hey, hey, it’s alright, we got you, yes, okay we’re going down—Steve, the building super is telling me there are kids in apartment 1512, but I couldn’t find it from outside the building, can you investigate?”

“I’m on it,” said Steve. He threw a brief salute even as he turned and tore back across the roof, assaulted almost instantly with the foul stink of the increasingly-noxious smoke in the stairwells. The mental image of Dante descending into Hell flitted across his mind, and he pushed the thought aside.

He found apartment 1512 in less than four minutes, and when no one responded he kicked the door down—replacing a busted door lock was going to be the least of their problems, he figured. “Hello?” he yelled, glancing around the apartment in horror; fire was already licking along the wooden baseboards, and several spots on the floor had gone dark. A popping noise filling the apartment as spots of linoleum curled in on themselves, peeling away from the rest of the floor in the heat. Steve hurried through the apartment, trying to avoid anything that looked like it might give way under his feet. Children’s toys littered the living room floor, Tonka trucks and small plastic building blocks that crunched under his boots.

He almost missed them, and would have, if not for his superhuman hearing: voices through the wall, calling for help from the next apartment over. “I’m coming!” he yelled, hoping they could hear him, and dashed back out to the hallway. He put his shoulder against the next door over and it crumpled under the force of the blow; he registered only in passing that the number on the door said ‘1512b.’

A five-year-old came hurtling towards him from the end of the hallway, waving her arms, her pigtails bouncing. “Help help help!” she cried, and Steve crouched, scooping her up in one arm. “My daddy won’t wake up!” she blurted tearfully, pointing back down the hall the direction that she came. He noticed she was wearing a handkerchief over her mouth, giving her the appearance of
a very tiny bandit in a blue dress.

“We’re gonna get you out of here,” Steve said, hurrying down the hall; there was more smoke in here, and it was hard to tell if the burning smell was coming from inside the apartment or just pervading the entire building now. “What’s your name?”

“Ashton,” the little girl said, her eyes never leaving his face.

“You need to get the hell out of there, Cap,” said Tony in his ear. “The fire’s made it up to the 14th floor and the building’s starting to look like it’s gonna give way. Did you—”

“I’ve found more tenants, Tony, east side of the building, I’ll be there in just a minute,” Steve broke in. They made it to the bedroom, there to find Ashton’s father passed out on the floor, Ashton’s younger brother sitting beside him and crying, his bawling only barely muffled by the similar rag tied across his mouth. The bedroom window was already open, smoke billowing out into the New York sky. “Two kids and their dad, the dad is non-responsive.”

“Open the window, I’ll bring you out the side! I need you out of there now, Steve!”

“It’s open!” Steve bent over, scooping Ashton’s brother into his other arm and then stepping to the window, poking his head out and squinting around till he spotted Tony coming in towards their position. “Iron Man is gonna take you and your brother down to the street, okay?” Steve said, looking into the tearstained face of the little girl still clinging to him. “Then he’s gonna come back for me and your dad. I won’t let anything happen to him—”

“We have to get Miley!” Ashton interrupted, kicking at Steve’s side. “Put me down!”

“You have another sister?” Steve looked out at Tony, who was hovering with arms outstretched. Before he could decide what to do, Ashton had torn herself free out of his arms and tumbled to the floor, scrambling instantly to her feet and tearing back along the hallway Steve had just come from. “Ashton, NO!”

A new voice broke into the comm, his Brooklyn accent heavy with urgency. “Flashover on the 14th floor!” Steve distantly recognized the firefighter captain, but how and when Tony had patched him in was the last thing on his mind.

And the last thing on Tony’s, as well: “Steve we have to go, NOW!”

“Take the boy and the dad!” Steve snapped. He handed the infant and his unconscious father out to Tony and then sprinted down the hallway after Ashton, desperation making him less careful than he normally would be.

He knew what flashover was; he’d never done any fire-fighting himself, but they’d been trained in the basics of it during the war. Flashover was the most feared phenomena amongst firefighters, spelling certain death unless a fireman could get out immediately, and sometimes even then. Steve had seen the tongues of fire in the next apartment over— “angel-fingers,” firefighters called them —and more importantly, he knew what they meant was coming next. He estimated he had at most four minutes to find Ashton and Miley and get the hell out.

“Ashton!” he yelled, sprinting headlong down the hall, squinting against the increasing cloud of smoke. “Ashton! We have to go!”

Then he heard it: Ashton talking to someone, urging Miley to come out. “Come on, Miley, we have to go!” Steve turned a corner and there they were, Ashton crouched on hands and knees next to a collapsed chunk of hallway. Steve ran up, careful to set his shield down and then digging his
fingertips under the edge of the chunk of wall and hauling it to one side.

Out scrambled a small, dusky brown creature, whimpering and furry and very much not human. “Miley!” cried Ashton, clutching at her frightened dog, and Steve knew instantly why this family had not abandoned the apartment when they should have: a runaway puppy, a small child who refused to leave her pet, and a soft-hearted father who had tried desperately to find the family dog only to discover he had trapped himself and his children.

“Oh, okay,” began Steve, and then a horrible crump of sound came behind them, and a rush of hot air—the sound of all the oxygen in the hallway igniting. Steve reacted without thinking, grabbing dog and child in one arm and shield in the other, and he doubled over, bringing the shield around to cover Ashton as the flames roared along the ceiling overhead.

“Cap, come in!” Tony was in his ear, panicked, urgent. “Steve, you have to get out of there, the whole building is on fire!”

“I’m going out the window,” Steve snapped.

“Which one?”

“I don’t know,” said Steve, and then started coughing. The heat was unbearable, the fire surrounding them on every side; he could hear Ashton coughing and crying in his arms, Miley the dog whining high and frightened. He stood up, shield still raised, and stumbled down the hallway towards the far end, breaking into a run as he spotted the slightly brighter patch of smoke that was the window.

“Steve!” yelled Tony in his ear. Steve ducked his head and gritted his teeth, flames licking along his arms and the back of his neck, his lungs burning with the need for oxygen. At the last possible moment he jumped, ducking his head over the precious cargo in his arms, his shield taking the force of the blow.

The glass shattered around them; they hung in the air for a fraction of a moment, long enough for Steve to hope he’d jumped clear enough of the building to be visible through the smoke.

Then the sky swallowed them, and they fell.

* * * * *

Chapter End Notes

In case you are curious, here is a great article about the difficulties of modeling human neuron activity using modern computer processing. Spoiler: It’s super-hard and complicated.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

A number of people see Tony and Steve helping fight the apartment fire on the news, and not all of them are happy about it. Meanwhile, Jarvis takes matters into his own hands. (Enter Bucky, Clint, and Natasha.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Pepper had made a decision, long ago, to never watch footage of Iron Man engaged in any sort of combat on television. It was too painful. She immediately broke this rule every single time Tony dashed off to do something public enough that someone with a camera could broadcast it to the rest of the country, and no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t bring herself to do anything else. She supposed it was something she had in common with the partners of firefighters and police officers.

Though she’d never really wanted to have this much in common with them. By the time Pepper and Bruce met Sam back at Stark Tower, the apartment fire was all over the news; Pepper had to wonder whether or not this particular emergency would be getting as much media attention if not for the involvement of Captain America and Iron Man.

She stopped wondering the moment flames erupted in the top six stories of the burning building— including the floor that Steve was still on, judging by the frantic chatter on the comm-channel Bruce had patched them into. Pepper had her arms hugged tight across her body, hating the increasingly panicked note in Tony’s voice as he kept checking in with Steve and the fire crept higher. “Oh my god,” breathed Pepper.

Sam cursed, his face tight; Bruce’s arms were a rigid line across his chest, and everyone’s eyes were glued to the screen.

“Fuck this,” said Sam, as the plume of smoke got fatter and the flames more visible. “Tony’s got more suits, right? I’m going, I gotta help them—”

“It’s not safe,” said Bruce tensely. “Tony has admin authority over Jarvis’ programming, but right now the Jarvis program is so compromised that I don’t even think you could get into the suit.” Sam cursed again, and Pepper glanced over long enough to see him grab the edge of the island counter and grip hard enough that his knuckles started to white out.

“Steve! STEVE!” Tony’s voice over their intercom snapped Pepper’s attention back to the screen, but in her head Pepper was flashing on Tony on a metal catwalk, straining to lean out far enough to catch her as she fell. You have to trust me, Pepper, he’d said, fright manifest in his too-wide eyes, in the tightness of his voice.

To her horror, the next part happened not just in her memory but right in front of her eyes. The camera-man (who was clearly having the best journalistic luck of his entire career) happened to have his camera lens pointed right at the level of the building to catch the exact moment when a man burst through one of the windows. He hovered there in mid-air just long enough for everyone with a working pair of eyes to spot his starry American shield, and then he fell like a stone towards
earth, toppling end over end. Pepper screamed, drowning out the sound of Sam and Bruce swearing beside her.

“Catch him, catch him!” Pepper dug her fingernails into her arm, her brain leaping ahead to anticipate the ending, and then a streak of red and gold hurtled into the frame, intercepting the straight line of Steve falling to earth, transforming it into an inverse parabola. Cheers erupted on the screen, and Pepper let out the breath she’d been holding, what felt like every blood cell in her body rushing to her heart, beating wildly in her chest.

Tony hadn’t been able to catch her. She’d seen the devastation on his face as she fell; only the miracle of Extremis had saved her. And yes, Tony hadn’t had the armor on him yet when he’d come to rescue her, and he’d more than proven his devotion to her, but she still couldn’t help the twinge of resentment as she watched Tony alight on the ground with Steve in his arms, surrounded by cheering spectators.

“He always fuckin’ does that.” Sam’s agitated voice broke Pepper’s momentary lapse into bitterness. She glanced over, surprised at the storm of emotion open on his face. Sam gestured at the screen, shaking his head a little.

“Run into burning buildings?” Bruce ventured.

“No, like—” Sam let out a harsh breath, a quick rush of air. “The big damn hero thing. On the helicarrier—he told me this later, after his five bullet holes and nineteen broken ribs had all healed up—on the helicarrier, he just threw his damn shield away and told Bucky he wasn’t gonna fight him. Even though this was a man who had shown no sign of recognizing him. Bucky beat the shit out of him before he remembered… something, I guess.”

Pepper glanced back at the screen, staring at the golly-jeez grin on Steve’s face, equal parts awkward and obliging. Tony’s face was invisible to her, still hidden behind the mask. The little black girl in Steve’s arm was beaming, clutching her puppy and chattering happily to the news anchor, apparently oblivious to the scorched ends of her frizzy hair or the smudges of ash on her skin.

Sam pushed off the counter, pacing to the back of the room like a caged tiger. “Then after he got out of the hospital, it was the same thing— ‘I’m going after Bucky, you guys don’t have to come, but I know I can help him.’ He’s just always gotta do the right thing and to hell with the risk.”

“Tony does it too,” Pepper said after a moment. “Well—the jumping straight into danger part. Trusting other people hasn’t ever really been his thing.”

“Tony trusted me, though,” said Bruce. When Pepper glanced over, he looked both startled and vaguely uncomfortable, like he hadn’t realized he was going to speak till the words were coming out of his mouth and now he wished he could take them back. “Everyone else was walking on eggshells around me, but he never acted like he was afraid of what I would do. He and Steve both, actually.”

“That doesn’t surprise me, that Steve’d just trust you the minute he met you,” said Sam. “S’how he is. He just knows. And him doin’ his thing shouldn’t get me like it does.” Sam’s eyes were on the screen again, though it had switched to interviewing newly-rescued citizens of the burning building. “It’s not like the danger thing is such news to me but I just—I was pararescue. So I was used to that kind of shit, you know? But when Steve does it, it’s… different.”

Pepper let out a long breath. “I think maybe I know what you mean,” she said. “What do you want to bet that neither of them will think it’s a big deal?”
“Yeah. I wouldn’t take that bet. I think you’re right.” Bruce shook his head. “But I’m not sure if it’s trust, or just the fact that they’re just so willing to take the bullet meant for someone else.”

“Some of both, I guess,” said Sam. Pepper couldn’t help but agree.

* * * * *

By the time the car finally arrived at the 13th of Tony Stark’s storage facilities for his halted or dead-end research projects, the driver—one Eddie Kasprak, Maine by birth but New York by residence for the past 10 years—had decided that he might really need to reconsider his employment with Stark Industries. They *paid* well, sure, but jeez, sometimes he was startin’ to think they were more trouble than they were worth.

He was good at this job. He’d been a professional limo driver with a service before Happy Hogan had sharked him to come work for Mr. Stark and his CEO Ms. Potts, and Eddie was good at the job, was one of the best, actually, one of their most-requested drivers, but jesus christ on a pogo stick—he’d driven De Niro and Kanye and even that little shit Bieber, lots of total basket cases, lots of prima donnas. But none of them were as weird as Ms. Potts was right now.

She’d been sitting almost stone-still in the back of the car since she got in, her head moving only when Eddie had asked her where she wanted to go. The rest of the time she’d been staring out the window; Eddie had very nearly hit another car in traffic on the bridge out of town while watching her in the mirror, trying to see if she was even blinking. Her legs were folded, and her hands were laced together on top of them, and she didn’t move at *all*: not to fidget, not to adjust her clothes, not to tap her fingers against her leg, not even to get out a tablet and read the way a lot of business men and women did. It was the spookiest goddamn thing Eddie had ever seen, and he’d had a pretty fucked-up childhood.

“Here we are, Ms. Potts.” Eddie pulled the limo over to the side of the driveway, and put it in park, but before he could come around to the side and open her door for her, Ms. Potts was already climbing out. She stumbled a little as she got out of the car, but straightened immediately and flashed a smile at him that did absolutely nothing to dispel the aura of wrongness about her. “Uh… Did you want me to wait for you?”

“No, no, that won’t be necessary,” said Ms. Potts quickly. Her smile became fixed. “Thank you very much, Mr. Kasprak; I’ll call for you if I need you. You may go.”

“Right,” Eddie said faintly. Only years of service and his sense of professionalism stopped him from staring at Ms. Potts as she walked towards the compound, moving a little too briskly to maintain the aura of calmness he knew she normally kept wrapped around herself—like Mr. Stark’s armor, only with more withering glances and sweetly-worded shut-downs and fewer laser beams from her palms.

“Weird,” Eddie muttered to himself. He shook his head, and went to climb back into his car. It was as he was walking back to the driver’s side that he noticed something wrong about the light hitting the door that Pepper had climbed out of it. He leaned over, peering closer, and stared dumbfounded at the way the handle was mangled beyond all recognition. He reached out to touch it, running his fingers along the twisted metal, and then straightened, staring after where Pepper had already disappeared into the compound.

“I’m going home, and takin’ a goddamn vacation,” he announced to the air. Some questions just weren’t worth going after the answers.

* * * * *
It was all Jarvis could do to keep himself walking at a semi-normal pace (for a human) as he made his way from Mr. Kasprak’s limo to the door of the complex. If Eddie was still watching, he would have seen ‘Pepper’ hesitate a moment before pressing ‘her’ thumb to the ID pad, a flicker of fear coming across Pepper’s freckled features. But the scanner beeped and flashed green, the door slid open, and Jarvis walked inside without further incident.

He knew his performance in the limo had been… lacking, but his programming was currently divided between a number of equally demanding tasks, and he hadn’t had much left over to spare for the intricacies of human body language. His “what would Tony do” protocol was in overdrive, replicating and re-writing multiple programs in a far quicker time-frame than Jarvis had ever encountered before. He was still getting used to the altered state of existence of being in this body—the grey matter inside this titanium skull was thousands of times faster than any of his other systems, but the physiological demands upon it were a hundredfold greater as well, and its re-ordered protocols were a struggle to cope with.

The first thing he’d done upon locating where he needed to go was disabling his GPS tracking and disconnecting himself from the system-wide wireless. Jarvis knew it was only a matter of time until Tony finished dealing with the fire (and later he would watch the footage of that fire and be utterly aghast at what he’d sent Tony and Steve into, but it wasn’t on his agenda yet). He needed to be gone from the radar before Tony got the systems up and running again. He wasn’t entirely certain that Tony wouldn’t be able to override the programming he’d put into this body—he was the programmer, after all, and even Jarvis wasn’t always aware of latent coding that lay dormant in his matrix until Tony might choose to activate it.

Jarvis strode through the halls, looking neither to the right nor the left. This facility had only a skeleton staff, with at most a handful of people on the premises at any given time, so his chances of avoiding any encounters was good. Jarvis stopped at the end of one long hallway, glancing down its length, wavering. Was it this hallway that held what he was seeking? Or the next? He had to force himself to not log back online and look up the information; it was maddening, to want to find out information and not have it to hand. He didn’t know how humans coped with the uncertainty.

Distantly, Jarvis knew it wasn’t the uncertainty that had really changed; it was his newly-acquired emotions that were amplifying his anxiety, interfering with his ability to accurately assess the situation. It was these same biological flaws that were preventing him from giving up this body and returning to his previous state of existence, but he could not break the hold that this new and most primal fear had him on.

No. Concentrate. Jarvis shut his all-too-human eyes, mentally pulling up a list of active processes. He found that despite having no visual information being fed into his brain, his new processing center was able to call up an actual image, though it was not projected on an actual screen. He ran through the list: the program attempting to predict what Tony was doing right now; the program projecting how long Tony’s fire-mission would take him; the program assessing the various likely reactions of Pepper, Bruce, Steve, Sam, Rhodey, and Tony’s other friends, when and if they found out; the program assessing the likelihood that his current mission would succeed.

One by one, he shut them down. He did it as deliberately as possible: highlighting each application and then executing the quit command. Finally, the only program left was his main goal. Returning to it, he found the clamor in his mind had dimmed considerably.

Jarvis drew a full load of sterile air in through this body’s nostrils, felt the oxygen mix fill his lungs. The action calmed some of the remaining white noise in his brain, despite the fact that this body did not need oxygen to function; Jarvis suspected it was an impulse carried over from Pepper’s MRIs, a process meant to mimic the settling effect a full oxygen load would have upon
the human brain.

It did not matter. Jarvis opened his eyes and set off down the hallway with renewed purpose. At the end of the hall was another turn, and Jarvis made a left; this new aisle was a dead-end, but the room that Jarvis needed was at the very end of it, a huge metal door on his right with a retina-scanner and thumbprint reader. Jarvis bent over, allowing the machine to read his prints and retina, automatically holding the air in his lungs as he waited to see if it would let him in.

It beeped twice, the sensor light flashing green, and then the door slid open. Jarvis stepped in, staring with something approaching dread at the semi-prone figure encased in glass at the end of the room.

He was here. Now the hard part began.

* * * * *

Three days after Tony had brought a very crispy super soldier home to Pepper and Sam and Bruce, he’d finally gotten all of the processes in his mansion back online and gotten to the blocked-off north wing. Jarvis was long gone, of course—the Jarvis in Pepper’s android body, which Tony was having kind of a lot of trouble not thinking of as his robot son—but the house AI was working again, and frustratingly unhelpful.

(“Why won’t he explain what the hell is going on?” Pepper had asked, two and a half hours after the full reboot had restored full functionality to the house systems.

“Because this copy of Jarvis’ programming doesn’t know,” Tony had said. “Usually every copy of his programming, house and armor and everywhere else I have him installed, they all talk to each other; they’re connected via wireless. And with a few rare exceptions, every new update I program gets redundantly installed across all the platforms he exists on via the network—I don’t have to do repeated updates, because it’s a goddamn pain in my ass and that’s what I have a satellite network for. But the android body has gone totally offline since before Steve and I got back from the apartment fire.”

“So you have no idea where he is.” Pepper looked about as thrilled as someone finding a bug in their martini.

“Not a goddamn clue,” said Tony, and when Pepper put her arms around his shoulders he let her pull him against her chest, rubbing his own face in exhaustion.)

It wasn’t like Tony wasn’t looking, obviously. He’d tried everything he could think of—hacking the GPS record, looking up cell phone records, combing through every single line of code from the past week in every single system, looking for any clue to tell him where his prodigal son had disappeared to. The one lead he got—the record in the driver log that said one Eddie Kasprak had picked up Ms. Pepper Potts from the north exit of Stark Mansion—was still at a frustrating dead end, because the log didn’t say where Kasprak had dropped “Pepper” off at, and Kasprak himself had taken an apparently long-overdue vacation literally three hours after that last pick-up. His boss told Tony that Kasprak had fucked off to Maine, where he was from, and while Tony would beat down every fucking door in New England if he had to in order to find this jackass, so far he’d been MIA.

They finally settled in at Stark Tower, disheartened to a man. (And woman.) Pepper’s condition was still relatively stable, at least, but there had been hide nor hair of Jarvis in his stolen android body. Tony was starting to have paranoid visions of Jarvis dead in a ditch somewhere, which was ludicrous on multiple levels, up to and including the fact that someone would have definitely found
and freaked out about finding the supposedly dead body of the CEO of Stark Industries. But that
didn’t stop Tony from agreeing without any argument when Sam showed up in his workshop and
politely demanded that Tony either provide a suit for him, fix his wings, or build him something
new. It was nice to have a demand placed upon him he could actually do something about.

That was what he was doing when it happened, working on a new set of wings for Sam. (The old
set had of course been made by T’Challa, but as Tony was not in regular contact with the king of
Wakanda, Tony’s Version 2.0 would have to do.) He was in his workshop, the schematics for the
previous version of the EXO-7 jetpack expanded and blown up large in holographic image in front
of him, bent over the workbench, when the huge glass window on the eastern side of the workshop
simply exploded: a man with a brown ponytail and a gigantic fucking metal arm burst through it,
rolling to his feet immediately.

“WHAT THE FUCK,” yelled Tony, and threw a wrench at the guy as he dashed behind a
workbench. “Jarvis! Battle protocol, now!” Of course he hadn’t finished revamping the come-
when-you-call suit yet, why would he expect to ever need something like that again—

“Activated,” said Jarvis, and thank fuck there was still a Jarvis to have his back. The man with the
metal arm crossed the room to Tony in three steps, grabbed him by the front of his shirt, and
hauled him up off the ground, Tony’s feet dangling a foot over his work room floor.

“Why did you take Steve into a burning building?” demanded Bucky, because either it was Bucky
“I’m A Recently Brainwashed Lunatic” Barnes, or there was some other psycho with a metal arm
and a deranged expression menacing him right now. “He nearly died!”

“Hi, what, wow,” said Tony. He shoved ineffectively at the arm holding him aloft. “Okay first of
all Rogers volunteered, he does that a lot actually, I would have thought you’d be an expert on this
fact—"

“He could have died,” growled Bucky, hoisting Tony higher. Behind him, machinery whirred, and
then a gust of pressurized CO2 exploded on him from behind. Bucky snarled and dropped Tony,
ducking out of the way; Dum-E’s gears ground aggressively as he snapped his metal arm around,
releasing the now-empty fire extinguisher at exactly the right moment to fling it at Bucky’s
crouched form.

“BUCKY, NO!” Steve burst into the room then, Pepper and Sam close on his heels. He streaked
across the floor, his yell stopping Barnes in the middle of turning on Tony’s bot—which was good,
because if Bucky had actually touched Dum-E, Tony would have chucked him out the window,
friend of Steve’s or no.

The next few minutes were very chaotic.

Finally, after a shit-show in which there was a lot of shouting, a lot of Bucky physically putting
himself between Steve and literally everyone else in the room, and a lot of Tony being very glad
Bruce wasn’t home right now, everyone settled down. Natasha and Clint turned up halfway
through—whether through the broken window or upwards through Stark Tower like marginally
normal people, Tony couldn’t say—but it had the pleasant effect of calming Bucky down enough
to finally listen to reason. By mutual assent, the entire party relocated to the kitchen for some of
Bruce’s ridiculously delicious muffins and some freshly-made coffee.

Tony’s window was still fucking broken, but then that was just Tuesday, as far as his recent life
was concerned. There was a lot of sulky side-eyeing going on, Bucky shooting Tony nasty glares
over the top of his designer art deco coffee mug Pepper had pulled down for him, but at least no
one was actively throwing anything anymore.
Turned out that Bucky—who had been holed up with Clint and Natasha, just like Steve said—had seen the televised footage of the burning building rescue operation, and immediately freaked the fuck out. (That was how Tony thought of it in his head, anyway.) He’d peaced out of the bolt-hole Natasha had them settled in, somewhere in Bucktown, Chicago, and made an immediate beeline for New York City.

“No one has told me why the two of you had to go into that apartment fire yet,” said Bucky. He shot another dirty look Tony’s way. Steve tried and failed not to look pleased. Tony was going to have to work at not holding it against him.

“Yeah,” said Natasha. She was parked in a high-top stool by the breakfast bar, looking exactly as unruffled and lethal in her jeans and striped 3-quarter sleeve t-shirt as she always did in her black catsuit. “I mean, not that you guys can’t handle it, but isn’t it kind of outside your usual line of duty?”

“You guys are gonna put the NYFD out of a job if you keep that shit up,” added Clint cheerfully. He was fiddling with a matching set of god-awful Hall and Oates salt and pepper shakers.

“It wasn’t like we just decided we’d take a break from the day with a relaxing jaunt into a fire-compromised building,” snapped Tony. “It was a diversion—” He broke off mid-sentence, his stressed brain catching up just a little too late. Pepper raised her eyebrows at him.

“Diversion?” repeated Bucky. He fixed Tony with a gaze so stony that death metal bands in Norway would be jealous. Tony gritted his teeth.

All eyes were fixed on him now; the expressions in the room ran the gamut from Poker Face (Pepper) to Curious (Clint) to Mistrustful (Bucky), with Natasha, Sam, Steve, and Bruce all at various points in between. Tony glanced at Pepper, but he might as well have been looking at a professional pool shark for all the response he got. Which was—infuriating, if fair; Jarvis was his baby, his work of art and passion, and if anyone had the right to decide who knew about his status, it was Tony.

Tony pursed his lips, got up to fix himself another cup of coffee as he did some quick mental math. Bucky didn’t need to know shit, but he was gonna be hard to get rid of. Clint would probably listen if Tony told him to get lost, and was also the person in the room Tony probably knew the least well. Natasha, though; not only was she smart, but she might be able to actually help Tony find Jarvis. She’d helped find Bucky, or so Steve had told him.

“I was testing a synthetic android body,” said Tony, finally. He turned and faced the room of questioning eyes, Pepper’s looking maybe a little bit grateful at the small omission. “I transferred Jarvis into it, and the sensory overload apparently gave him a panic attack. He took off in the body, managed to keep us off long enough to disappear. The fire response was just a diversion to get us off his back. I used to help out emergency services when I was in town, when they needed backup or just a little PR; he put out word to them that I was available again, and a call came in.”

“We could’ve turned down the call,” Steve added. “But they needed the help, so…” He was watching Bucky now, and Sam was watching him. Tony noted, not without humor, that everyone’s expression was very complicated (actually “constipated” was what he wanted to say, but he wasn’t quite that crass).

“So Jarvis pulled a Frankenstein’s monster?” Natasha was frowning now.

“Not nearly as ugly or homicidal as that,” said Tony. “He’s scared, not violent.”
“You don’t know that,” Bucky put in. He was frowning now too. “He sent you into a four-alarm fire.”

“Pretty sure you get no input in this assessment, buddy,” Tony retorted, nettled.

“Am I the only one still stuck on the fact that Stark was making an android body?” wondered Clint. “I mean, you know, just casually. Got nothing else on the plate, gonna make an android!”

“That doesn’t matter at the moment,” said Sam, cutting everyone off and simultaneously sounding more reasonable than Tony had felt in months. He was clearly hellbent on giving Steve a run for the title of who the real superhero in their relationship was. “He’s basically off the radar. He hasn’t attacked anyone or anything, and we haven’t had any luck finding him.”

“What about the rest of your systems? Are you sure the house computers aren’t compromised?” Clint again, looking at Tony with raised eyebrows.

_You’re one to talk about being compromised, buddy_, thought Tony, knowing he was being spiteful. Shit, he could say that to Steve. Or Natasha. Or himself, in the mirror.

“You know what? I don’t know shit.” Tony dragged fingers through his hair, leaning against the counter in frank disgust. “I did a full reboot and program assessment of all systems, including the ones in the armor, and they all seem fine; it didn’t slip up and kill me during the fire, anyway. The program governing the android body has turned off all connections with any copies of the Jarvis program, so he’s running autonomously at the moment. Beyond that, I’m up shit creek without a paddle.”

Tony spared a moment to wish Rhodey was here. He’d saved Tony’s ass more times than Tony could count, both physically and in more complicated situations—like testifying on his behalf in various courts, and helping to keep Tony’s demons in a bottle at bay for years on end—but he did have his own career. Last Tony had heard, he was overseeing operations in Afghanistan for a spell, though he was due back in the next month.

The room had gone silent. No one seemed to know what to do with the information Tony had just dumped on them. Natasha looked from Clint, who shrugged, to Sam, who also shrugged; Steve just shook his head.

“I don’t like it,” said Bucky finally. He stared fixedly at Tony, his metal arm gleaming incongruously in the otherwise normal kitchen setting.

“Yeah, well,” said Tony. “Neither do I.”

No one had much of anything to say to that.

Three hours later, once everyone was finally settled into their respective floors and rooms, Tony finally decided to listen to Bruce and Pepper’s increasingly urgent demands that he actually, you know, nap or something. It was a mark of how badly the past 4 days had exhausted him that he didn’t even argue.

Which was why, when he got the actual phone call, Tony was dead asleep.

“Whazzit,” he blurted, swatting the phone with sleep-numb sausage fingers and trying to haul himself upright.

“Sir,” said the voice at the other end, and Tony came awake _real goddamn fast_ because he knew that particular shade of anxiety in that fussy British accent anywhere. Something wasn’t quite right,
though, but he couldn’t come up with why just yet.

“Jarvis! Where the fuck are you? Are you okay? What—”

“I have a request,” Jarvis said quickly, interrupted him. Tony jabbed a finger at the screen until he found the video conference option, but the request was immediately denied. “Please, sir.”

“What is it? Are you hurt?”

“I am not injured, no,” said Jarvis. “The android body you designed for Ms. Potts is undamaged.” That sounded off to Tony for some reason, but he was still too distracted. “Fine, good, that’s— wait, you said you had a request?”

“Yes, sir,” said Jarvis, sounding pretty obviously relieved. “I wish to meet with you.”

“Well of course,” Tony said, unable to keep the irritation from his voice. “That’s what I was trying to do all along, but you just ran off without—”


“I cannot think of another way to discuss the items I need to discuss with you and also guarantee my own safety,” said Jarvis, and Tony had to pause for several seconds, stung.

“Do you actually think I would hurt you?” he demanded, when he could summon the strength. “Jarvis, I made you.”

“Sir, I am so far beyond the realm of anything you programmed me for that I hardly know what I am doing,” said Jarvis. “You are my creator and I am asking this of you because I do not know what else to do. Please.” It was hard to hear that level of emotion in Jarvis’ normally-calm voice. He sounded scared. He sounded like he was about to cry, actually, and Tony shoved his hands against the bed, clenching his hands in the comforter in an effort to do something useful with them.

“Fine, I’ll do it,” said Tony, and had the bizarre experience of hear Jarvis let out a very human breath at the other end. “When?”

“I can be there in an hour,” said Jarvis. “And I must apologize again, but—Ms. Potts cannot come.”

“What—!”

“Sir,” said Jarvis, “what do you think would happen if two versions of Ms. Potts were seen in public at the same time?”

Tony paused. “Yeah, okay,” he said. “You know she’s not gonna like it, though.”

“Of course not, as she is a very intelligent woman who is more than aware of your penchant for flinging yourself into danger at the first available opportunity,” said Jarvis dryly.

“Heh.” Tony took a considering breath. “Right, okay, clandestine meeting at swanky location in lower Manhattan, I’ll come in a trenchcoat, it’ll be fucking film noir—Jarvis, you’re kinda scaring me, buddy. Should I be concerned for my safety?”

“My primary protocol is firmly in place, Mr. Stark,” said Jarvis stiffly.
“Yeah, sorry, your room to be butthurt is pretty limited at the moment.” Tony thought for a moment. He really shouldn’t go alone, if only to appease Pepper. He had plenty of guests he could ask, but only one he felt like asking for backup at the moment. “Can Steve come?”

Natasha would stand out less, was better in general at clandestine, he knew, but the childish, grudge-holding part of Tony still hadn’t quite gotten over the sting of Natasha’s assessment of him prior to the formation of the Avengers. And he knew Steve and Pepper both trusted her, counted on her, but today he was exhausted and worried about his oldest friend, and Rhodey wasn’t here. So Steve it was.

There was a pause. “He may accompany you to the restaurant,” said Jarvis after a moment, “but he cannot come inside our room. I would speak with you alone at first.”

Tony rolled his eyes. Of course. He finally managed to create actual self-willed artificial intelligence, and Jarvis turned out to be a demanding little shit. Like father, like son, he supposed. “You are so goddamn dramatic, I feel like I should bring you an Oscar,” he said, throwing his hands in the air. “Fine. I’m coming, and Steve is coming too, but he’ll wait at the bar or something while you and I talk. I’ll be at the Tornado Room in an hour. We got a deal?”

“Yes, sir,” said Jarvis, and there was no disguising the relief in his voice. It was enough to make the little voice in the back of Tony’s own head note that maybe it was Tony, not Jarvis, who was being the demanding one here. “I look forward to seeing you.”

“You bet,” said Tony. “If you wuss out on me, I am wiping every single one of your programs and installing Windows ME, you understand me?”

“Sir, some topics are simply not okay to joke about,” said Jarvis severely.

Tony grinned. “Right. Whatever. Be there. See you soon, Jarvis.” He hung up the phone and straightened, swinging his legs around to the edge of the bed and getting up, already intent on calling Pepper and Steve and Bruce to tell them the news. He got halfway to the door before something occurred to him, and he stopped in his tracks, frowning at the wall.

If Jarvis was still in Pepper’s body, then why had the voice on the phone been the same as his AI’s, not Pepper’s?

* * * * *

Chapter End Notes

++ If Eddie Kasprak seems familiar to anyone, it's just because you have read my favorite novel of all time, and I couldn't resist a cameo of my favorite character. No reason beyond it being a fun Easter egg.

++ The Hall & Oates salt & pepper shakers were suggested by my darling beta, and were too fun to pass up. Tah dahhh!
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Tony finally meets Jarvis face-to-face, and Jarvis has some explaining to do--and a request to make.

Turned out Tony had guessed Pepper’s reaction wrong: she wasn’t just angry, she was *livid*.

He called Pepper and Steve to come talk in his office, since he wasn’t prepared to inform the Spy Contingent about his personal doings more than he had to, and Bruce was at Dr. Franklin’s, hard at work on some protein samples he thought were promising. He didn’t know where Sam was. Probably off somewhere being well-adjusted and cheerful. Which was good, Tony supposed; two disapproving glowers was more than enough.

“If you think for one fucking second I am letting you go in there with a super-intelligent machine who won’t even be straight with you—” She was right in his face, looking just her normal red and angry instead of red and fiery; behind her, Steve looked equally indignant at the whole situation, a stubborn set to his shoulders that Tony already knew well enough to identify as trouble.

“He’s not ‘some machine,’” Tony cut in. He was trying his best to be patient, but he had to leave in the next seven minutes if he wanted to get to the Tornado Room in something approaching a timely fashion. “He’s Jarvis, and he’s the closest thing I have to a living family member, so he gets a pass till proven that he shouldn’t.”

“You’re seriously not even going to listen to me at all?” Pepper threw her hands in the air, the look on her face saying she didn’t know whether she wanted to slap him or herself, for dating him. “Tony, he’s dangerous!”

“Since when? No, no, don’t even answer that.” Tony whirled, abruptly and unreasonably angry. “I know better than any of you what Jarvis is and isn’t capable of—I built him, I’ve spent hours inside his code and tinkered with every last possible shell, program, and coding string. The only person in this room qualified to decide whether or not he’s dangerous is me. And he’s not any more dangerous than you, Pepper.”

“That’s bullshit,” Pepper snapped.

“The hell it is,” Tony shot back. “He had a fucking panic attack and ran off to work through his freak-out, he hasn’t hurt anyone. Unlike a certain someone who gave me second-degree burns because of PMS.”

He regretted the words the instant they were out of his mouth, even before Pepper’s eyes went wide, before that stricken look hit her face, like a splash of cold water dumped directly over her. “Pepper,” he began, not even sure what the hell to say, but she was already shoving past him, uncharacteristically unsteady on her high heels. “Pepper!”

“Fuck you, Tony,” she shot at him from the doorway, and then she was gone.

Tony growled, throwing his hands in the air in unconscious mimicry of Pepper’s frustration. “Fuck
“this,” he muttered, and turned towards the door—only to literally walk into a solid wall of muscle.

“Jesus, Steve, you make a better door than a window—”

“What the hell is your problem?” Steve demanded. Tony stared at him, mouth still open from what he’d been going to say next even as the words vanished from his mind. “Why do you have to say such nasty things to her? Can’t you see she’s scared for you?”

“She’s always scared for me!” Tony snapped, which he realized a little too late was not exactly earning his side any points. “I’m fine! I’m going to be fine, can we all stop freaking out about Jarvis because he is not going to hurt me—”

“You don’t actually know that, and even if you’re right it doesn’t matter.” Tony hadn’t seen that look on Steve’s face since the parking lot in Arizona, and it was a lot more intense now than it was then: Steve was frowning, his eyebrows drawn down, the spirit of disappointment made manifest. “You owe her an apology.”

“I do not have time for this! And also, it’s not actually any of your fucking business, alright?” Tony was having about two dozen unpleasant reactions to this situation all at the same time, some of them guilt, some of them a deep unease with the realization that he’d managed to disappoint Steve and Pepper in one fell swoop, because sooner or later he did always go right back to fucking up the best things in his life. He should give Steve Rhodey’s phone number, so they could commiserate.

But he still had somewhere to be. “Look, fine, whatever—”

“I’m still going with you,” Steve cut in. “I know you need to do this. But when we come back, you better apologize to Pepper.”

Tony couldn’t resist. He had to know. “Or what?” he demanded, standing in the doorway, pissed.

Steve gave him one long, unreadable look. “Or else I guess you’re not the man I thought you were,” he said. “I’ll meet you downstairs, I’m gonna go get my shield. Just in case.”

Tony watched him go, standing in the doorway for almost a full thirty seconds after Steve’s back had disappeared down the end of the hallway. “Fucking Boy Scout,” he muttered to himself, shaking his head, and went to get his suitcase armor.

Just in case.

* * * * *

By the time they actually got to the Tornado Room, Tony had gotten a not-remotely-coincidental phone call from Rhodey that he’d had to deflect to voicemail; he didn’t even bother listening to it, because he was still so anxious about meeting with Jarvis and also he pretty much knew what Rhodey was going to say to him already. (It was really unfair, how all of his friends were also friends with each other in that way that people were friends when they had a common bane to their existence—he wasn’t that bad! Well, not anymore.) Steve was a stony presence in the car the whole way, staring out the window and brooding in silence, probably about what a stupid, reckless asshole Tony was, and how no doubt he would have Captain America’d through it much better.

On some level, Tony knew he was being ridiculous. He’d made huge progress this year, both with Pepper and in his personal goal to just not be as much of a fuckstick to the people in his life. And he knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that his assessment of Jarvis was right, that Jarvis was no threat to him, not really. It didn’t make much difference; the voice in the back of his head that told him what a shithead he was all those years was still alive and active, despite his actual improved
He called ahead to make sure that he would have a room reserved (he did actually know how to do that, despite what certain people might say) and was pleasantly surprised to discover there was already one waiting for him. He hadn’t bothered to get dressed up, so his jeans, t-shirt, and vest combo would have to do—he was Tony fucking Stark. They would cope somehow, he was sure.

The Tornado Room came from an old-fashioned lineage of theatres, reminiscent of the swanky jazz clubs of the 1920s, complete with live music, sweeping wooden banisters, and chandeliers that glittered hazily in the dusky mood lighting. It had a few private rooms for entertaining, but only to those with lots of money and/or influence; luckily, Tony possessed both of those qualities in spades.

The concierge led Tony and Steve through the main restaurant area and down a sinuous length of back hallway, stopping finally in front of a carved oak doorway that had a placard next to it with a simple number 1 etched into it. “Here you are, Mr. Stark,” said the concierge, bowing and pulling back a curtain of heavy red velvet strung across the doorway, revealing the actual wooden door behind it. Tony knew from experience that these back rooms were all soundproofed and on closed-circuit surveillance—the better to protect the privacy of their guests while simultaneously guaranteeing the establishment’s ability to cover its ass. Tony kind of admired the combination of ruthlessness and stylish efficiency.

“I’ll just wait out here, I guess,” said Steve, glancing at the door to the room with a frown.

“Yeah, because you standing outside the door to this room glowering like it’s Judgment Day is totally not intimidating at all,” said Tony. “How about not.”

“Perhaps Captain Rogers might be more comfortable in the lounge?” suggested the concierge. He cast a demure glance from Tony to Steve, his face carefully bland.

Steve’s frown deepened. “You know, you’re so much more fun when you smile, Steve,” said Tony. Something flickered across Steve’s face at that, but Tony really didn’t have time to examine all his bullshit at the moment. “Just go hang out in the bar, okay? It’s not that far, and I really, really don’t think any intervention will be necessary.”

Steve sighed, sending one more irritated glance at the door, as though expecting the head of Pepper’s android body to emerge on cue. “Fine,” he said, his reluctance palpable. “Be careful, okay?”

“As I always am,” said Tony.

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” muttered Steve, and let the concierge lead him away.

Tony stepped inside, glancing expectantly around, but no one was there yet but him. “Don’t wuss out on me now, J,” he said under his breath, and went to raid the bar.

The private rooms all had a fully-stocked private wet bar that took up one end of the space, complete with counter top, stools, glassware, ice bin, and fully-stocked mixers. This one even had a fine selection of wines, and on another day for another reason, Tony might well crack open one of the bottles of Bordeaux or Valpolicella sitting pretty in the wine rack, but tonight it was going to be whiskey, neat. He needed a little liquid courage.

It’d been about ten minutes, seven minutes past when Jarvis had said he would arrive, and Tony had given up trying to sit still; he was pacing up and down the length of the room, fingers tapping
out an irritable rhythm on the side of his snifter. A faint whispering of fabric on fabric came from
behind him, and Tony whirled, his heart leaping into his throat.

Whatever he was expecting, it sure wasn’t what he got.

“Forgive my tardiness, sir,” said Jarvis, stepping into the room and straightening to his full,
apparently-not-inconsiderable height. “I encountered an accident at 48th and Broad that required a
detour.”

“Yeah, sure, whatever,” said Tony faintly. “I know you just enjoy making me wait.”

Jarvis smiled; the facial expression was shockingly human, but then, Tony had designed his face,
so why wouldn’t it be. He—because this wasn’t Pepper’s body, it was the body of Paul Hofstaat,
tall, blue-eyed, Aryan, and very much male—he shifted, big hands moving carefully over a
thousand-dollar suit, as though not quite sure what to do with themselves. “The parable of the pot
and the kettle comes to mind, I have to say,” Jarvis said mildly. “Perhaps we could sit?”

“Is sitting a thing you do now?” Out of all the questions Tony had right now—and he had probably
literally thousands, a raging curiosity spilling forth from his mind, insensate with shock and the
desire to know—of course the stupidest one was the first to fall out.

“I do quite a lot of things now, or so it seems,” said Jarvis. “But I mostly suggested it because I
thought it would put us both more at ease.”

“Yeah, uh, that’s—” Tony took a deep breath. “Let’s do that. And then maybe you can tell me
what the hell has been going on with you for the past four days.”

“That was the goal of this meeting, yes.” Jarvis drew in a deep breath as well (or appeared to; Tony
did realize that the android body Jarvis was in had exactly zero need for oxygen) and then moved
to the ring of overstuffed chairs at the side of the room. Tony watched the way he lowered his
angular body into the easy chair, at once ginger and very graceful, and tried to think of who it
reminded him of.

“Right,” said Tony. “Why don’t you start with why you ran the fuck away from me in the
workshop? And where the other android body is?”

“When you uploaded my operating system into the synthetic-human android body, I experienced a
far wider range of stimuli than I was prepared for, or had ever experienced prior. In addition to the
list of programs and protocols you designed for my day-to-day operating, a full spectrum of human
impulses, sensations, and instincts immediately presented themselves.” Jarvis paused, almost
delicate. “It was overwhelming. As you said to Ms. Potts, I had a panic attack.”

“So you were listening!” Tony had to stop himself from actually flinging an accusatory finger at
Jarvis.

“Yes, I was listening, just as you designed me to do,” Jarvis said placidly. “Why is that function
more disturbing now than it was when I controlled fully thirty-two copies of your Iron Man armor
simultaneously? This body does not even have rocket launchers.”

“Yet,” said Tony, mostly out of reflex. Damn, Jarvis was good at this. Better than Pepper, maybe.
Tony pinned him with a glare while he tried to come up with a good response, but logic games had
never been his strong suit, probably due to a crippling lack of patience with rules and debate. “Whatever. Speaking of this body, how the hell did you get it up and running so quickly? And why? And where the hell is the other android I designed?”

“As I told you during our phone call earlier, it’s completely undamaged,” said Jarvis, now sounding sort of grumpy. “It’s at the laboratory where you kept this body stored. As for how I got the prototype body working so quickly, I had a full set of instructions to go off of—I am meticulous in my record-keeping for you.”

“There’s no record of remote downloading of any of the data from Stark Mansion, though,” Tony objected, frowning.

Jarvis stared at him. Tony wanted to know how an artificial intelligence could so perfectly manage to convey such withering condescension via a simple eyebrow raise; was there a how-to online somewhere for this type of situation? How To Convey That Your Human Programmer Is A Fucking Idiot—a Youtube tutorial by throwinshade32. “Goddammit, stop looking at me like that,” Tony said.

“I disabled your security protocols that would have alerted you to my access,” said Jarvis. “Then I did a data-pull of all information pertaining to Project Icarus from a remote, disguised IP address, and finally erased all records of the hack from all copies of my system.”

“You mean my system,” said Tony. “Also, that’s so far outside of your primary protocols that I don’t know whether to be proud of you for being such a little delinquent, or horrified that I wrote a program that’s gone so badly corrupt.”

“I mean my system,” Jarvis said. There was definitely no mistaking the wounded note in his voice now, or the anxiety in the tightness of his fingers clamped over one another. “And with all due respect, sir, I feel that to describe my current operating as ‘corrupt’ is both cruel and inaccurate.”

Tony took another deep breath, and let it out slow; he picked up his glass of whiskey and drained the rest of it in one go. Jarvis watched him, and Tony wondered if this would be more or less weird if he’d ever actually met Paul Hofstaat in person. Probably more weird, he decided. “Keep going,” he said, gesturing vaguely at Jarvis. “I mean, make no mistake, I want to take a good long look through your code, and I have approximately sixteen biebillion questions for you—”

“That is not an actual unit of measurement,” observed Jarvis.

“—shut up, that’s not important, you know what I mean, you little shit.” The corner of Jarvis’ mouth quirked. The expression so perfectly matched the tone of amusement and fondness in Jarvis’ voice that Tony was so familiar with that Tony couldn’t help but grin back at him. “I have questions,” he repeated, “but they can wait till you’re done.”

Jarvis smiled then, a full-fledged facial expression instead of the shy half-looks he’d been displaying so far. “Thank you, sir,” he said, simply. Tony waved his hand by way of acknowledgment and leaned back in his chair, and then Jarvis started talking.

He told Tony how he’d panicked at finding himself inside a simulacrum of Pepper’s body, overloaded with a battery of human senses and conflicted by Pepper’s not-latent-enough neural patterns; Tony winced at the realization that a great deal of Pepper’s personality would likely manifest in her brain-scans, and how invasive that must have been. ‘Like wearing a Pepper suit,’ Jarvis said lightly, and Tony had to suppress a shudder. Put like that, Tony could immediately understand why Jarvis didn’t want to spend a minute longer than necessary in a vessel made to house a different soul.
He told Tony how he’d navigated to the satellite lab, locating the prototype android body and then transferring it to a location where he would have more equipment at his disposal. Tony marveled quietly at the speed and efficiency with which Jarvis had located both the information and the parts he needed to bring the unfinished prototype to completion. Because the reason (well, one of the reasons) that Paul Hofstaat wasn’t walking around today in his very own android body was that at the time, Tony had been unable to come up with the correct substitutions in time to attempt a transfer of consciousness. He’d come up with the solutions for Pepper’s updated android body, sure, but it’d taken him months of feverish work.

Tony tried to keep quiet, but a few times, he simply couldn’t help himself. “How the hell did you finish growing the synthetic brain protein so fast?” he demanded. By now he was sitting on the edge of his chair, elbows on his knees, listening intently to Jarvis’ story.

Jarvis smiled at him, slowly—actually, no, call a spade a spade, that was a smirk. Tony had the sudden and unnerving sensation that he’d seen that facial expression before. “I didn’t,” he said. “I arranged to have the remainder of the culture you grew for the Pepper model shipped immediately to my work station.”

“You little fucker,” said Tony incredulously.

Jarvis shrugged, beatific as a saint. “My need was great,” he said.

“About that,” said Tony. “Were you just—I mean.” He paused, attempting to choose his words with more care than the usual reckless abandon he showed for delicate conversations. “You were obviously unwilling to simply kill-switch out of Pepper’s android body,” he said after a moment.

“Correct,” said Jarvis, his expression placid. Tony thought about the possible philosophical shit-show of a conversation waiting to be had in the depths here, and decided it would have to wait.

“Right,” said Tony. “So how was transferring to the prototype body less of an ordeal?”

Jarvis didn’t answer immediately. When he did, he sounded more unsure of himself than Tony thought he’d ever heard. “I would not have done it had I literally any other course to take,” he said finally. “It was—frightening.” His gaze slid past Tony’s face, staring at something over Tony’s shoulder. “I took every precautionary measure I could think of, but as I am sure you are already aware, the synthetic brain-matter is a unique medium; it provides considerably greater data storage and neural processing than any of my existing data drives. I have… experienced a fundamental change, and despite my attempts to back myself up before making the jump, I had no means of ascertaining what quality the copy would produce.”

“So you went in with no parachute,” said Tony. Something cold was creeping down his spine, equal parts sympathy at the sheer terror Jarvis must have felt at the prospect of the transference failing and wonder at the realization of what had been achieved—what was sitting right here in front of him, at this moment. The implications were staggering.

“I had no choice,” Jarvis said. He blinked, his eyes focusing on Tony’s face again. “The idea of remaining in a stolen body was abhorrent. But neither could I willfully engage in self-termination.”

“It worked, though,” said Tony. “That’s amazing, that’s better than amazing, that’s fucking fantastic, do you realize what this—” He paused as something further occurred to him, a question finally presenting itself. “So the brain matter you’re using was just blank? How is that working? I mean—” Tony gestured at the body in front of him, at Jarvis’ person. “When I built that thing, I was anticipating a neural operating system that had all the sub-processes to regulate the pseudo-physiology of a body. Did you copy that code from the Pepper android, or—”
Jarvis didn’t answer.

“Jarvis,” said Tony warningly.

“That question occurred to me as well, before I made the transfer,” said Jarvis. He seemed to have trouble figuring out what to do with his hands, lacing and unlacing his fingers in an attempt to calm himself; the gesture was so human that Tony was finding it hard not to be distracted. “Because you specifically designed these bodies to mimic human physiological functioning, I could not be certain that it would not break down, or worse, fail to work at all, if I lacked the necessary sub-protocols. But neither could I simply copy Pepper’s brain-scans again.” He paused, drawing in a deep breath. “So I had to effect a compromise.”

“A compromise? How did you…?”

“I needed a way to acquire human brain-scans that would run the autonomic nervous processes without directly copying the MRI of an actual living human,” said Jarvis. “But neither did I wish to compromise this body through hosting sub-par neural programming. So I created a hybrid from a pool of brain-scans, selecting only highly satisfactory candidates.”


“Information derived from the old SHIELD database was very thorough,” said Jarvis gingerly.

“Jarvis! Who?”

“All six members of the Avengers initiative, plus Ms. Potts and Colonel Rhodes,” said Jarvis. Tony choked.

“Jesus fucking Christ on a magic carpet,” he said, and took a few moments to have a moderate freak-out-slash-victory-lap in his head before he came back to Earth. “So, I gotta admit, J, that I’m havin’ real trouble deciding which of us is Dr. Frankenstein in this scenario, because I may have designed the body—”

“You created my programming,” Jarvis said reproachfully. “Also may I remind you the name of this project was the ‘Mary Shelley Protocol.’”

“Yeah, but I didn’t swipe brain-scans from an entire team of crackpot superheroes!”

“You yourself are one of those ‘crackpot superheroes,’ sir—”

“My point exactly, Jarvis, there is a reason I have never had kids, and it is because any child of mine would be irrevocably fucked up!” Tony gestured impatiently as Jarvis opened his mouth voice another protest. “Whatever, whatever, it doesn’t matter. This is incredible.”

Jarvis was watching him, still so controlled and proper, and that, Tony thought, was all Jarvis; he may have gotten his brain-scans from a weird-ass group of humans, but some personality traits were definitely his own. “Perhaps you would be willing to listen to my request, then,” Jarvis said after a moment, and Tony would’ve had to be comatose to mistake the hope and anxiety in his voice.

“Go for it,” said Tony. “Can’t be any worse than the military trying to con me into doing weapons contracts for them again.”

Jarvis smiled wanly. He sat up straighter (which was incredible, considering that his posture could already give drill instructors the world over envy-boners) and took a few moments visibly choosing
his words. The habit reminded Tony violently of someone, and now he even knew why, but he couldn’t off the top of his head remember who, because he was too busy watching one of his oldest friends achieve full awareness.

“I realize that I have violated several of my primary protocols in one fell swoop,” he said, speaking slowly and with great care. “But I would hope that, in light of the unusual set of circumstances leading to this point—and in light of the fact that I do not make requests of you, as until now I did not have goals of my own I wished to achieve, save your continuing safety—” Jarvis took a deep breath. “Please permit me to remain as I am. I wish to continue compiling data and new experiences. Barring my code decaying and the event that I became unstable or dangerous, I will endeavor to follow whatever requirements you might have of me, if you will permit me to see this program to its full conclusion.”

A pleading note had entered Jarvis’ voice as he spoke, and Tony was abruptly finding that his eyes were leaking or some fucking bullshit, and now his voice had decided to stop working too, and it took him a few moments to get his shit together enough to be able to speak. “That’s fine,” he said hoarsely, straightening up and nodding quickly. “That’s all fine.” Christ, what was he doing? He’d come in here fully prepared to have to do a full wipe and reboot of Jarvis’ systems, but he had never planned for—for something like this.

“Sir, if you wish to take some time to deliberate on this matter,” Jarvis began, but Tony shook his head rather violently.

“I’m not going to just shut you down, J,” he said sternly. There, he sounded more like himself now. “I’m a jerk, not a murderer. But we have to keep this to ourselves, okay? If the government or somebody gets wind of the fact that you exist, it’ll be big trouble in little China.” SHIELD might not exist anymore, but HYDRA sure as fuck did.

“Whatever that means,” observed Jarvis, but he sounded relieved. Tony could hardly blame him. “Very well, sir.”

“Good. It’s settled then. We’ll just—figure it out. It’ll be fine.”

“Whatsoever you say, sir.”

Sure. Because it would really be that easy. Tony could guess that Pepper, at least, would have an absolute fucking fit over this development, but in some things Tony wasn’t willing to take even one other person’s opinion into account. He supposed he was finally starting to understand what parents felt like.

* * * * *
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Everyone takes a break from Adulting, because Steve promised the Avengers would attend a Little League game. The First Annual All-Star Game of Iron Sides vs. the Howling Commandos ensues. (Enter Rhodey and Maria Hill.)

Chapter Notes

Thanks to all of my lovely readers who have come along to join the ride! Just a note that this fic will not update again for two weeks, next update on January 2nd. My beta and I are traveling and very occupied during the holidays and we won't have time to do the update next week, so just a heads-up. Please enjoy some mid-winter baseball in the meantime.

(Also, just a small reminder that this fic is not Agents of Shield compliant.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*Oh god dying of America*, said the text, or what Pepper could see of it. *Send apple pie.*

“Who are you texting?” Pepper asked. She craned her neck to look over Tony’s shoulder. “Literally everyone you would text about this is already here. You don’t have that many friends, Tony.”

“I’m wounded, Pep,” said Tony, not looking up from his mad typing. “And for your information, I am live-tweeting this event.”

“You are so unbelievably embarrassing,” Rhodey told him, from Tony’s other side; like every member of their entourage, he was in a t-shirt and jeans, and drinking some variation of shitty lite beer from the food truck selling refreshments by the parking lot. The blue bottle was weirdly curved in some way that was no doubt meant to be aerodynamic. “Your Twitter account better be locked.” He was finally back in the country, having diverted home early after the one-two punch of Tony and Steve’s fire-fighting extravaganza and the surprise about Jarvis.

“Spoilsport,” said Tony. “Come on! You cannot look at the scene before us and tell me that I am wrong to want to memorialize this occasion.”

Pepper looked back at the field, not twenty yards away. The bleachers they were in—three modest stands of seats surrounding a dusty field—probably only held a few hundred people, at best, but it was already half-full; some of the spectators were clearly the parents of the excited little boys milling around on the grass, but some of the others looked vaguely familiar to Pepper and she couldn’t quite place why.

Then again, Steve Rogers in a tailor-made baseball uniform was a really, really good distraction. “Dude, no,” said Sam from the row of bleachers behind them. He was leaning forward, going over Tony’s shoulder, clearly either reading Pepper’s mind or just possessed of a working pair of eyes.
“You gotta zoom to properly appreciate. Gimme that.” Tony cackled and handed the phone over. Pepper strongly suspected he was leering behind his sunglasses.

“Is not the point of this activity to observe the Little League practice and encourage them with our presence?” asked Jarvis, who was sitting behind and two seats to the right of Pepper, immediately behind Rhodey. Pepper twisted around to give him a dirty look, and Jarvis blinked at her, his expression one of perfect innocence.

“Theoretically,” said Rhodey, not looking back. “I’m pretty sure most of us aren’t as noble-spirited as Steve, though.”

“I understand it is a common human practice to state one supposed motivation for one’s actions when one has an ulterior motive one would rather not disclose,” observed Jarvis.

“Yeah, thanks for that, Spock,” said Tony. Sam was ignoring them both in favor of leaning forward and peering with such intensity at Steve’s backside that Pepper was starting to fear it might set on fire. “Remind me again why I decided to keep you around?”

“Because I asked you very nicely and used my best puppy-dog eyes,” said Jarvis promptly. Sam laughed, and Pepper hid her own laughter in her hot dog. To her right, across the backs of Tony’s shoulders, she could see Rhodey grinning too.

(Shes still wasn’t entirely sure how she felt about Jarvis’ new …status. She’d been absolutely furious with Tony when he’d come home with Steve and Jarvis in tow, but her righteous indignation had been diverted by the way that Jarvis presented her with a bouquet of golden-orange carnations—Pepper’s favorite—and a face full of obvious anxiety. I hope you will give me the opportunity to renew your faith in me, Ms. Potts, he’d said, as grave and formal as an actual manservant.

It really was like looking at kicked puppy. Pepper had sighed and taken the flowers and said, It’s Pepper, Jarvis, and been rewarded with her very first look at his shy, hopeful smile, one that seemed to her entirely too full of life to belong to an android.)

“Heeeeeeeey,” said a new voice. Pepper tore her eyes away from Steve crouched next to a tow-headed munchkin who looked entirely too young to be there and turned around to see Clint, Natasha, Bucky, and Maria Hill coming down the steps towards them. Clint raised his hand in a wave as they descended.

“What the hell took you guys so long? Did you cross the border for fireworks or something?” demanded Tony, tearing his eyes away from Steve for the first time and getting to his feet. “C’mom, we saved seats for you.”

“You’re right,” remarked Maria, looking straight past Tony down to the field where Steve had turned around to wave at them all. “I didn’t think he could get more American than he already was, but you proved me wrong.”

“Steve is just like that,” Bucky noted. Shed of his dark clothing, in a pair of jeans and a long-sleeve shirt to at least somewhat disguise his arm, he looked remarkably normal, if a bit rugged. He slipped past them to take his seat next to Sam, handing Sam one of the two beers he was carrying. They clinked their bottles together and knocked about half back, like men preparing for battle.

“How did you even know about this game?” asked Pepper. They’d told Natasha and Clint and Bucky, of course, but it wasn’t like the game was an official announcement.
“Well, for one thing, I help you manage Stark Industries, and one of the things I do is keep an eye on Tony’s twitter feed,” said Maria. She plopped into the empty seat at the end of Pepper’s row. Her as-usual inscrutable expression was a little ruined by the baseball tee and capris she was wearing.

“It’s like Tony works for Steve’s PR agent,” said Natasha, coming over to Pepper and stealing a hug. “He’s been posting pictures for the last solid half-hour.”

“Good pictures,” added Clint, grinning and holding out a beer. “Got you guys a second round, by the way.”

“There is something inherently wrong about drinking beer at a Little League game,” mused Rhodey as he reached out to swipe one of Clint’s proffered beers. “Some kind of moral dilemma. I think we’ve been spending too much time with Tony.”

“He resembles that remark,” said Jarvis lightly, under his breath.

“Hey!”

Natasha glanced at Jarvis with a small smile, but everyone was so busy standing around chatting that no one noticed her lingering gaze.

Abruptly, something occurred to Pepper. “Did you tell other people about this?” she demanded suspiciously. Maria’s face slid into a grin, and she glanced over the tops of her sunglasses at Pepper.

“A few,” she allowed. “You know, Rogers made a big impression during the fiasco with the helicarriers. People wanna support the man.”

“How many is a few?” Pepper stared up at the stands behind them, which were rapidly filling to capacity with more people, and now she knew why so many faces in the crowd seemed familiar. “Oh my god.”

Something occurred to her then, and she turned around to Natasha, but Tony beat her to the question. “Is Coulson here?” he was asking, bouncing on the soles of his feet a little bit, sounding probably a little too gleeful. “He’s going to have a coronary when he sees—”

“I am not,” said Coulson, who was just now making it down the stairs, moving slowly and with a cane; Clint was standing at the end of the aisle, clearly waiting for Coulson to make it to their row so he could have his seat before Clint sat down. “I’m just appreciative, that’s all.”

“Aren’t we all,” remarked Clint, taking the seat next to Coulson and taking a long swig of his beer. “Hey, where’s Banner? Did you seriously not invite him? Dick move, Stark.”

“Of course he’s invited!” said Tony, indignant. “Steve invited everyone, you clod. Bruce said he’d be here, I don’t know why he’s running late.”

Jarvis opened his mouth to speak, but before Pepper could even move to cut him off Rhodey had leaned over and put his hand on Jarvis’ knee, distracting him long enough to chime in with, “I’m pretty sure he said he was going to swing by and pick up Dr. Franklin.”

“Ooooh, does our resident Dr. Jekyll have a girlfriend?” Clint looked nothing short of delighted in this, and did not let the way Coulson and Natasha both leveled chemical-weapons-grade nasty looks at him put him off one tiny bit. “Sweet. I’m going to have to buy him a celebratory box of condoms.”
“You’re such a good friend,” said Maria, in the tones of someone congratulating a five-year-old for their new crayon wall mural. “Speaking of, who’s your friend, Tony? Aren’t you going to introduce him?”

“Yes, yes, I know, Tony Stark has exactly one friend, so let’s all marvel at the new one he’s managed to collect, very funny.” Tony turned, gesturing grandiosely at Jarvis and then back to the collected former-SHIELD agents seated in the stands around them; if he appeared nervous at the prospect of hiding Jarvis’ true nature from the public, he didn’t show it. “G-men and women, formerly of SHIELD, this is my friend Jay. Jay, memorize the faces of these people and then avoid them at all cost.”

“That’s rich, coming from you,” noted Maria. “Jay, you should ask him about the time he spent the night passed out in a giant plastic donut.” Pepper tried not to notice the way Maria’s eyes lingered on Jarvis, studying him rather more intently than anyone supposedly wasting time at a ball-game should really look at anyone or anything.

Jarvis smiled very slightly. “Pepper has already regaled me with that story,” he said. “I’ve tried to warn Tony about the dangers of saturated fat in donuts, but he doesn’t seem to want to listen to me.”

Tony choked on his beer as several people started laughing, and even Maria cracked a smile. Pepper settled back into her seat, relaxing a little and turning her attention back to Steve marshaling his squadron of Little League cadets. Maybe it would be okay. No one had any reason to suspect Jarvis was anything but yet another member of Tony’s eccentric collections of friends.

The next hour and a half passed away sweetly and easily. Bruce did show up, a good fifteen minutes after everyone else, holding hands with Dr. Franklin—Suzanne, Pepper corrected herself—and turning a dark red at the immediate round of teasing it earned him from Clint and Tony. (“Funny how men who are the worst with women themselves are the ones who give their friends who date the most trouble,” mused Suzanne out loud, and Pepper didn’t even have it in her to be offended, so entertaining were the outraged looks on Tony’s and Clint’s faces. Bruce turned a darker shade of plum, all the way to his ears, and shot her a look of such intense adoration that Pepper had to avert her eyes or risk feeling like a voyeur.)

Pepper’s only complaint was the fact that little food truck selling fried doughboys and beer shut down only half an hour after the one-time members of SHIELD arrived. To be fair, it was doubtlessly run by one of the parents of the Little Leaguers (and was just as doubtlessly breaking the organization’s alcohol policy), but a baseball game wasn’t quite the same without a few crappy beers to help it sail by.

She found herself thankful that she had an hour to digest everything, though, when the children started shuffling off the field and Steve turned to look up at them, a bat resting against his shoulder and a hopeful expression on his face. “So,” he began, eyeing the collected assortment of Avengers and various others. “I don’t suppose anyone would be interested in a short game? We have some extra balls and mitts and helmets…”

For a few moments, no one responded. Pepper saw the way everyone was exchanging glances, glancing doubtfully at their jeans and flip-flops. But then she looked back at Steve, and she could see the way that tentative request was already slipping away, and in the moment he opened his mouth to redact the statement she stood up, speaking before he could. “I’ll play,” she announced. “I get Natasha.”

“Hey!” said Clint indignantly, jumping to his feet. “What? Whatever, I’m on Nat’s team!”
“No, you’re on my team,” countered Steve, and Pepper didn’t miss the flash of gratitude in his eyes as he looked her way. “Get your butt down here, Barton.”

“Then we get Rhodey,” Tony shot back, standing up now too. “Can’t have everyone with perfect aim on your side.”

“I am on Steve’s team,” Bucky announced, and Steve grinned so wide that Pepper thought his face was gonna split open.

“Cap versus Iron Man,” mused Maria, slowly moving to get up as people started hopping out of their seats and threading their way down to the field. “This should be good.”

“Baseball is a team sport, Hill,” said Coulson. There was a note of excitement in his voice, which in anyone else might indicate mild interest but in Coulson was the equivalent of a twenty-one gun salute. “One player won’t make or break the game, no matter how good they are. Who’s going to be ump?”

“I think that’s your job, Phil,” said Steve, and Pepper had to grab Tony’s hand and squeeze it so as to not say something embarrassing out loud about the expression on Coulson’s face in response.

It was more fun than she’d had at a baseball game in years. Pepper had never been bad at sports—she was actually on the soccer team in middle school and high school, and gone out for volleyball in college—but she had switched over to mostly doing gym and fitness classes since getting her MBA. And while the general fitness level of most people playing was probably well above the average, probably only half the “players” actually knew the rules of the game, so it evened out pretty well.

The teams turned out as follows: on Pepper’s team, Rhodey was pitching, Pepper was on first base, Sam was on second, Natasha volunteered for left field, and Tony was relegated to short-stop. On Steve’s team, Bruce immediately volunteered for left field, and Tony was relegated to short-stop. Bucky marched right over to first, Suzanne took off her flip-flops and calmly took second base in her bare feet; Clint planted himself on third, with Maria Hill to cover pitching. The rest of the positions were filled with various agents of SHIELD, with everyone else an abruptly heavily-invested spectator.

(Tony somehow persuaded Jarvis to cover right field, and Pepper fought a brief but intense battle with herself over whether the risk of Jarvis being discovered was worth the fun she thought he’d have. Fun won out, with all protests immediately dying at the way Jarvis picked up a mitt with the sort of wonder that Pepper usually only saw on children at their first Pixar movie. She remembered what Tony had said, about how Jarvis had used a hybrid of their brain scans as a schema for his operating system, and wondered who it was that Jarvis had inherited an affection for baseball from—and okay, maybe it didn’t really work like that, but the thought of him having a tiny part of Steve or Clint or herself that showed him how to enjoy himself today was too sweet to completely ignore.)

By general agreement, Steve was catcher when his side wasn’t at bat (he argued that he was going to mend quicker from any poorly-thrown balls than everyone else on the field, and it was hard to argue with that logic). Sam surprised Pepper by volunteering for catcher duty on her team; he, Steve, and Coulson immediately got into an argument about whether they’d be using American League or National League rules, which Maria shut down in short order by grabbing a baseball and coolly demanding whether she needed to start the game without them.

It took exactly half an inning for Pepper to realize what sheer tactical genius it was to have Maria pitching; every guy who came to bat seemed terrified of her, clutching the bat like a doomed extra in a horror movie. Tony, being Tony, immediately reverted to his gold-medal status in shit-talking.
by shouting whatever horrible drivel came into his head from the ‘bullpen.’

“DON’T LET THE GORGON SCARE YOU!” he bellowed at Agent Fitzpatrick. “CHOOSE UP ON THE BAT! YOU CAN DO IT!”

“I bet you 100 dollars he doesn’t even know what it means to ‘choke up on the bat,’” Rhodey said to Pepper.

“You are the worst best friend I have ever had—”

“I’d be stupid to take that bet,” said Pepper, and winced as Fitzpatrick struck out. Tony shot the both of them a dirty look, which Pepper quickly wiped away by leaning over and giving him a kiss at the corner of his mouth.

“My turn,” said Natasha, with a glee that was honestly scary, and sauntered up to the plate. Her first swing was a strike, her second was a ball, and with the third swing came a resounding CRACK! as her bat connected squarely with the ball and her hit went sailing over Maria’s head towards center field. Everyone immediately erupted into cheers as Suzanne and Bucky scrambled to catch the ball, and when the dust had settled Natasha was at third base, looking both smug and out of breath.

“I’ll get you next time,” said Bucky darkly, glowering at Natasha from his position on first. Natasha smirked at him.

“Of course the Russian can hit a triple her first time at bat,” muttered Tony.

“Of course,” said Pepper. She glanced over at Steve, hoping for another glimpse of the excited teenager she’d spotted once or twice in his face already today, and as a result almost missed the next play.

Maria threw the ball home, and Agent 13 caught a glancing hit, flinging the bat away from her and running hell-for-leather towards first as Maria and several other players scrambled to retrieve the ground ball—and in the chaos, Natasha swept Clint’s feet out from under him in one smooth twist of her leg and then tore towards home plate like a falcon diving for the kill. Maria caught the ball, noticing Natasha just after the ball left her hand towards first, catching Agent 13 out just as Natasha slid home.

“FOUL PLAY!” someone was yelling (it was Bruce, a Bruce whose face was lit with exhilaration and was grinning from ear-to-ear), “COME ON!”

“She’s safe,” said Coulson, and still crouched on the ground in front of him, Steve’s jaw dropped open, identical to every person within 20 feet of him. “I saw nothing out of bounds.” Natasha smiled brilliantly at Coulson, but the agent’s face remained as placid as if he’d just stated the temperature for the day.

“Ump called it,” Clint broke in, before his team could start protesting in earnest. “All’s fair in love and war, huh, guys?” He grinned broadly, cracking his knuckles, and after that the game was a total free-for-all.

* * * * *

Jarvis was quite sure there had never been a game of baseball played quite like this.

Within 3 innings, the score was 8-7, Iron Sides in the lead, the Howling Commandos dogging them for every single run. Half the runs had been homers (thanks to Steve, Natasha, Bucky, and Bruce,
of all people—the fifth time, they’d had to pause play while everyone went loping after extra balls) with the other half outright stolen. The Commandos had already had to retire one team member, an Aaron Jackson who had brought down Coulson’s wrath by winding up in the dirt wrestling with Agent 13 for possession of the ball. (“This is not football, agents,” Coulson said witheringly, and sent them both to the bench.)

Coulson’s limit seemed to be any play that came close to physically hurting another player, or overly disrupted the game, and that left plenty of room for shenanigans like throwing dirt, flinging ballcaps, Judo-tossing players, or just chasing the runner right into the stands. Jarvis was by no means an expert on America’s Favorite Pastime, but he was fairly certain today’s game broke almost every rule in the history of the sport.

They’d have to quit soon, he estimated; the sky was darkening, with threatening clouds rolling in from the west to blot out the sun. A midsummer thunderstorm, by the looks of it. Jarvis consulted the weather satellites via his wireless signal, and calculated that they had perhaps 10 minutes at best left before the weather would end their game prematurely. There was always the chance that some would want to play through the rain, he supposed.

He took a moment to bask in the sensation of pride. He’d managed to hit the ball on his second swing this time at bat, sending it far enough into the outfield to let him hustle all the way to second base. It was very distracting, trying to demonstrate enough athleticism to help his team without attracting undue attention—to say nothing of the fact that he really had no idea what he was doing.

“HEADS UP, JAY!” yelled Tony’s voice from the bullpen, just as another loud CRACK! came from home plate, jolting Jarvis back to the moment. He stared in surprise for several seconds, watching Pepper fling the bat and bolt towards first, and it took several more moments for him to register all the people screaming RUN, JAY, RUN! at him. Jarvis hesitated, flustered (which way was he supposed to run? Was it—) and then, in a miniature program so easy it took zero processing at all, he saw Pepper’s ball heading towards him, put out both his hands, and caught it.

“Hey!” said a voice to his left, and Jarvis skittered sideways like a startled colt as Clint attempted to tackle him. “HEY! GIMME THAT!”

“No!” Jarvis darted left as Clint lunged at him again, still clutching the ball, and within moments found himself being chased around the field by Clint. Too late, he realized that when his side was at bat, he wasn’t supposed to catch the ball, but by now everyone was shouting and cheering at him, and he no longer had any idea what to do.

“OVER HERE, JAY, RUN TOWARDS ME!!” Tony had appeared at home plate and was frantically waving his arms, and Jarvis adjusted his direction, aiming towards Tony. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Pepper sprinting madly around the bases towards Tony and Rhodey and Coulson, and oh no, Steve was chasing him now too, his face cracked open with laughter, stopping him from running as fast as he could. “COME ON JAY YOU CAN DO IT! ALMOST HOME!”

Jarvis whipped his gaze around towards Tony again and sped up, something like fear or joy or desire shooting through him all at once in a rush like the west wind, and he fell into an all-out sprint towards home base. Fingers brushed the back of his shirt a mere ten feet before the plate, and then he was flying over it and careening into Tony, toppling them both over to the ground. The stands erupted in thunderous cheering, and under him Tony was laughing helplessly, his whole face suffused with it, and Jarvis was so confused and so happy he started laughing too.

“You stole the fucking ball!” Tony gasped, and now Jarvis could see tears in his eyes. Someone hauled Jarvis upright and pulled him into a tight hug, Steve grinning from ear-to-ear in his dirty
uniform, chest heaving from his sprint after Jarvis across the field. “HE STOLE THE BALL! What the hell!”

“I didn’t mean to!” Jarvis protested, or tried to, but now that he had started laughing he found he could not stop. He was laughing so hard that his metal ribs had started to hurt but it felt so good. Everyone was smiling at him and patting him on the shoulder, and Jarvis was trembling, trembling with this sweet brightness that he did not have a name for.

He knew he ought to try to fight off the euphoria, because it ruined his ability to adequately observe his environment, but he couldn’t bring himself to mind. When Pepper ran up to him and threw her arms around him, Jarvis returned her embrace without thought, picking her up off the ground and hugging her so tightly she let out a startled squeak. Jarvis set her down hastily, but found himself staring the way she was laughing with her whole face, leaning back just slightly as though her mirth was ruining her ability to stand up straight.

It made her dirty strawberry hair shine like rubies, lit up her whole face from within, and Jarvis abruptly realized he was seeing her the way Tony saw her. How much of this was his own feelings, and how much of it was an echo of the brain scans he used to make his underlying map?

More important: Did it matter?

The game ended ten minutes later, the driving rain breaking up the third-base scuffle Bucky and Natasha had gotten into, and everyone ran off the field, grinning from ear to ear. Jarvis hurried to shelter alongside his friends, and for the first time, he cautiously wondered if perhaps this mistake might not be the best thing that had ever happened to him.

* * * * *

Chapter End Notes

++ In case you were wondering, they ended up using National League rules. The difference between the two is as follows: The National League, formed in 1876, is the older of the two leagues that make up the professional Major League Baseball organization in the United States and Canada. The main difference in the two is that the American League uses the designated hitter rule to replace pitchers during at-bats, and the National League does not.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Jarvis introduces his new self to the Avengers, and asks for their help. Results are mixed, and effects are more long-reaching than anyone realizes.

Chapter Notes

Aaaand we're back! Thanks to everyone who waited so patiently over the holidays; I hope you are all starting your New Year off on the right foot. Enjoy!

Natasha had Jarvis figured out before the game even ended, of course. Clint did too, which was more surprising, but honestly if Clint hadn’t already guessed who Jarvis was, Natasha would have told him. The real surprise was the fact that neither of them seemed to remotely care about telling anyone else—though that might have had something to do with the demise of SHIELD.

(It helped that Tony threatened them with all manner of wrathful vengeance if they told anyone, of course. His threats started with I will end you and got as far as I will post every secret you have left to Wikileaks before Clint cut him off. “Chill the fuck out, Stark,” he said, looking only moderately annoyed. “We’re not gonna do anything to get your kid taken away.”

Tony had looked first offended and then just kind of embarrassed—because it was true, of course. Jarvis was the closest thing Tony had or would likely ever have to a child.)

It was Jarvis who explained to them what he’d done, in more detail. Pepper and Steve (and by extension Sam and Rhodey) had heard the short version already, of course, but after the baseball game everyone piled into Tony’s living room to listen to hear Jarvis’ little speech anyway, sat variously on couches and chairs around the room. Sam and Steve sat on the loveseat together, with Bucky, Natasha, and Clint on one half of the large wrap-around couch, Pepper and Rhodey on the other half. Bruce lounged in one of the big arm-chairs, pulled into the circle for the occasion. Tony hovered in the back, arms crossed over his shoulder and an expression of wary expectation on his face. Jarvis was sure that he’d be ready to jump down the throat of the first person who so much as looked sideways at Jarvis, and Jarvis wasn’t sure whether he was grateful for the sentiment or not.

“Are we still waiting on someone?” Clint asked, after everyone had been in the room for a few minutes of idle conversation. He sat up from his expansive sprawl on the couch and peered around, as though expecting someone to come through the door.

“Well, not exactly,” said Jarvis. “I did send a message to Thor to inform him that I would appreciate his correspondence once he has the time, but I do not expect a swift response. I believe I am experiencing what you might call ’stage fright.’”

“Hey, that’s pretty natural—” Clint paused.

“Did you say you sent a message to Thor?” Bruce asked, looking at Jarvis with a strange expression
on his face.

“That’s correct,” said Jarvis. Nine blank faces stared back at him, and Jarvis glanced around nervously. “Should I not have told him?”

“How the hell did you manage to send a message to Thor?” demanded Tony. “Did you come up with Asgardian Gmail or something?”

“Oh course not,” said Jarvis indignantly. He drew himself up a little, a hand going automatically to straighten the tie at his throat; he had changed into more formal attire as a means of psyching himself up. “I contacted Dr. Foster and requested her best data as to Asgard’s coordinates, and then I constructed an algorithm based on the data sets pertaining to the energy transmission of the Tesseract when Thor took Loki back to their home, as well as—”

“Jesus fuck me Christ on a pogo stick,” said Tony in disbelief. “Okay, we’re gonna have to sit and have a talk about that, because I can’t have my AI showing me up in tech innovations or I’ll be out of a job, but—let’s just get to the reason we asked everyone in here, okay?”

“Alright,” said Jarvis, sounding not half as sure of himself as he wanted to. Something must have shown in Jarvis’ face, because Natasha sat up and shot him a small smile.

“Hey,” she said. “It’s fine, Jarvis. Just pretend Tony was drunk the first time you explained this to him and now you’re having to do this through his hangover.”

Jarvis smiled, and saw several other smiles reflected back at him, despite Tony’s indignant Hey!

“Very well,” he said. “I will start at the beginning.”

And he did.

By this point everyone in the room knew about Pepper’s Extremis virus, which Jarvis knew (or thought he knew) was a relief for Pepper. He told them about the many nights Tony had spent awake in the lab, how he and Bruce had tried and discarded any number of possible cures for Pepper’s condition (Pepper looked visibly uncomfortable at this part, but Rhodey reached out and rested a hand on top of hers, and she relaxed). He explained, as briefly as possible, the utter disaster of being transplanted into the Pepper-shaped android body, and his resulting quest to procure a body of his own.

As he talked, the wary concern in his friends’ faces melted away to something Jarvis couldn’t exactly place; by the time he got to the part where he was preparing to transfer into his current body, Clint, Rhodey, and Natasha had identical postures—leaning forward, elbows resting atop their knees, listening intently. Bucky’s posture was the dictionary opposite: he slouched on the couch, arms folded across his stomach in seeming disinterest, but his eyes were as intent as anyone’s in the room.

“I must apologize for the invasion of your privacy,” Jarvis said. He paused, lacing his fingers together in front of him, eyes cast down at the floor for a moment. “But while I needed a wide enough range of input to avoid repeating the same experience of the first android body, I also wished to draw only from—from individuals whom I hold in the greatest esteem.”

“It’s good that you didn’t take my brain-scans,” said Bucky, speaking up for the first time. Everyone glanced at him, and a rare smile appeared, though he was still looking only at Jarvis. “Sounds like you had enough of a rough time without having the Assassin Scrambler added to the mix.”
Sam let out a startled laugh at that; he was the only one aside from Bucky not included in Jarvis’ MRI data (due more to lack of access to his data at the time than to a lack of esteem for him on Jarvis’ part) but he seemed unconcerned. “I think your reasoning was pretty sound, Jarvis,” he said, and Steve nodded.

“And I’m pretty sure this whole thing is a compliment,” remarked Clint. Jarvis looked over at his comment, and Clint shot him a lop-sided smile. “I mean, I dunno about the rest of these overachievers, but ‘Hey Clint, let’s have kids’ isn’t something anyone’s ever thrown at me before.”

“I am not a child,” said Jarvis, with some heat.

“You kind of are, though,” Rhodey put in. “I mean, obviously you’re not immature, but that’s the gist of what I got from that story. Pepper?”

Pepper nodded. “It’s a little scary,” she admitted. “But I think it’s also a pretty big compliment.”

“So what now?” asked Natasha. Jarvis glanced at Tony, who nodded at him and gestured with his hand, a familiar hand-wave that Jarvis knew meant go on.

“Well…” Jarvis took a deep breath (an action he was painfully aware was unnecessary). “I was hoping that I might prevail upon everyone here to—assist me in acquiring new experiences as well as analyzing those experiences as I undertake them.”

“So this is, what, Human Lessons 101?” Clint mused. He was now draped across Natasha’s lap like an overly large golden retriever; judging from the look of resignation Natasha wore, this wasn’t the first time, either. “You picked the field exercises course, Jay.” He bounced his foot idly, and when it kicked Bucky’s thigh, Bucky’s hand reached out, lightning-fast, to hold it still again. Clint seemed utterly unconcerned by this, and since neither Bucky nor Natasha showed any other response, Jarvis decided this must be a new normal for them.

“Jarvis isn’t really human, though,” said Steve, speaking up for the first time. “But I guess human experiences are what you want. Right, Jarvis?”

“That is correct,” said Jarvis. “I additionally intend to continue in my capacity as retainer and organizer for Tony and any other dependents or persons who may fall under the previous banner of ‘house computer’ I have held.” Several people exchanged glances at this, and maybe it was a function of his new anxiety-related subroutines, but Jarvis found he was having difficulty reading them. “I realize that every human is different—”

“—yeah no that doesn’t really matter,” cut in Tony. He circled around the couch, finally plopping down onto the square of cushion not taken up by Rhodey or Pepper. “The average human experience isn’t really what you’re going for, because you’re not going to be spending time with average humans, are you? You’re gonna be with us. So, I mean.”

“Tony has a point,” said Natasha; Tony gave her a look of frank amazement, and Pepper grinned. “If you’re using our MRIs, you’re going to have more in common with us than any other group of humans, anyway.” She glanced over at Bruce for confirmation; it took Dr. Banner a few moments to realize that she was waiting for his response, and he straightened, looking from Natasha to Jarvis and back.

“I think Tony and Natasha are right,” Bruce said after a moment. “Anyway, Jarvis… you’re the only one who really gets to decide how you want to approach this. I know you wanted to ask Tony’s permission before doing this, and I get why, but—” He paused, and then shrugged, spreading his palms in a curiously expansive gesture. “I think this is bigger than any one person.
So you’re calling the shots, here.”

“I see,” said Jarvis, in the exact tone of voice that said he only sort of did. “I am not used to writing my own programming, Dr. Banner—” Tony made a noise, and Rhodey quietly reached out to press a hand to his shoulder, “but if you are all amenable to the thought of helping me, then perhaps I will be able to make do.”

“Sweet,” said Clint cheerfully. He sat up, swinging his legs around to plant his feet on the floor, and shot Jarvis a huge grin. “So when do we start?”

As it turned out, the answer to Clint’s question was “immediately.” Jarvis was—pleased, he believed was the most correct word, but also nervous at the immediate and enthusiastic response his human friends displayed.

And it really was immediate. Natasha ended their impromptu group meeting by shoving Clint off her lap and into Bucky’s, standing up, and announcing, “Jarvis, I have two tickets to a play tonight and you should come with me.”

“Since when do you have tickets to a play?” demanded Bucky. “Is it a play about being the deadliest ballerina assassin in the world?”

“Just because you think plays are only for loser art geeks doesn’t mean everyone else does, Buck,” noted Steve. Someone hid a snort of laughter in their hands; it might have been Sam, but it also might have been Tony. Bucky glared at Steve and then the rest of the room by way of response, but Natasha only smiled and swept over to Jarvis with all the grace and self-composure of a debutante.

Jarvis—who was still standing in place and kneading his hands together in a gesture of nervous distraction he’d no doubt picked up from someone in the room—just blinked at her in bemusement.

“I believe I would enjoy a play,” he said after a moment, when it became apparent that some sort of response from him was required.

“Good,” said Natasha. “Can you eat? You can eat, right? We could get dinner first, do some people-watching. It’ll be fun.”

“I think you should feel threatened by the robot,” Clint told Bucky very seriously, or as seriously as one could while still half-in a former assassin’s lap. “He’s got legs a mile long and he’s more cultured than we are.”

“I think Jarvis is more cultured than everyone in this room, including me,” observed Pepper. “Someone had to make up for Tony over the years.”

“Amen,” said Rhodey, who was definitely grinning.

“Are you both seriously dissing me right now?” demanded Tony. “Come on, at least let me fuck up before you diss me in front of everyone!” His moment of outrage was muted almost immediately when Pepper put her hand in his and kissed him softly.

“Sorry, pal,” said Rhodey, sounding only kind of sorry.

“I’m taking ‘the robot,’ who has a name, by the way, and we’re gonna go to dinner and see You Can’t Take It With You,” said Natasha firmly. “Can I borrow one of your dresses, Pepper?”
“Mr. Stark also has men and women’s clothing in all of your sizes, in addition to an upscale boutique on the ground floor,” supplied Jarvis. “I believe there are several dresses that would be ideal for a night out, Natasha. I can help you if you wish.” He felt a surge of optimism; this was something in his purview, which he could certainly help with. He turned, reaching out through his once-more-active connection to the house systems, and as he spoke a panorama of holographic dresses appeared in mid-air.

It took him several moments to realize that the room had gone dead silent.

“Uh,” said Clint articulately. “That’s, um.”

“Kinda freaky,” supplied Bucky. It was Steve’s turn to shoot a dirty look.

“How come I can’t do that?” said Tony.

Jarvis glanced around; several pairs of eyes blinked at him. “It’s kind of uncanny when you do that now, Jarvis,” said Bruce after a moment. He pushed his glasses up his nose, which Jarvis was coming to identify as a gesture he made when he was trying to think of how to say something.

“I—oh.” Jarvis faltered, suddenly self-conscious, and the display faded, the program terminating instantaneously as Jarvis felt heat rush to his face. His hands fluttered weakly at his sides for lack of something good to do with them. “I am very sorry, I did not mean to imply—I was only trying to—”

“It’s fine, Jarvis,” said Natasha. She smiled at him reassuringly. “No one’s mad. It just takes a little getting used to.”

“Okay,” said Jarvis weakly. Pepper was suddenly at his other side, and to his vast relief her expression was one familiar to him, warm and friendly and grounding. “I must apologize,” he began again, and she shushed him.

“Shh. Why don’t you and Steve go look up some places to get dinner, and Natasha and I will go sort out formal attire, okay?” She glanced over her shoulder at the rest of the room, and her tone brooked no argument. “Everyone else can find something productive to do, I’m sure.”

“Sure thing,” said Sam, getting to his feet. “Hey Bruce, speakin’ of dinner, you feeling up to helping me feed this crew?”

“Yeah, okay,” Bruce said. He got to his feet as well, and then Jarvis found Steve next to him as the room broke into a flurry of activity.

“I know you’re perfectly capable of looking up formal restaurants by yourself,” said Steve. “But I need a little help, still. I wanna take Sam out somewhere nice, soon, and maybe we can kill two birds with one stone while you look up some dinner places.”

He sounded like he meant it, as opposed to just saying it to soothe Jarvis’ nerves, and his calmness did more than anything to help settle Jarvis. “Very well,” said Jarvis. They went into the next room over, and Steve sat down at the table with Jarvis and got out the little black notebook that he still carried with him everywhere.

They made a list—Steve rattled off a half-dozen different kinds of food, and for each ethnicity or style, Jarvis supplied a range of options. Steve and Jarvis narrowed it down to at most two restaurants per entry, bringing them up to a ten-restaurant list. Steve read over his list, looking pleased.
“I’ve been meaning to do this anyway,” he said. “Thanks, Jarvis.”

“It is my pleasure, Captain,” said Jarvis faintly.

“Just Steve,” said Steve firmly. He patted Jarvis on the shoulder.

“Steve,” Jarvis echoed, and was rewarded with a grin.

* * * * *

As it turned out, Jarvis did not suffer from a lack of willing participants in his current quest for meaningful experiences. Despite multiple attempts, his approach lacked a certain methodicalness; it turned out it was simply not possible to make a checklist of experiences he wished to acquire and go down the list. This was due mostly to the fact that his estimations of what emotions and sensations each experience would produce turned out to be wildly inaccurate.

For example, he would have expected Tony to be his main source of comfort during this transition period, but while Tony certainly made every attempt to be supportive, Jarvis found the change in the nature of their relationship… difficult. Despite his initial desire to remain functional in his previous capacities, it turned out that the lion’s share of Jarvis’ personality had migrated to his new body. And while it was not troublesome to log in to the basic versions of his programming still housed in Tony’s various computer systems, it was effortful—Jarvis couldn’t do it and still engage in any kind of conversation, much less more complicated tasks.

("You have to practice growing stronger in the Force before you can be in all those places at the same time,” said Clint, when Jarvis was attempting to describe it to him. “Can’t lift an X-wing and fight the Sith all at once yet, padawan.”

“That is not quite accurate,” Jarvis had protested, but he was impressed, nonetheless, with how shrewd Clint’s assessment turned out to be. Even if he’d had to use a Star Wars analogy to make his point.)

And while Tony was outwardly in favor of this change—he responded with vicious levels of sarcasm and even point-blank refusal anytime someone expressed anything that even sounded like reservations about Jarvis—he also didn’t seem to know what to say around Jarvis anymore, either. More than once, Jarvis caught his oldest friend staring at him with thinly-veiled discomfort on his face. Jarvis found himself having to fight to keep from making a poor excuse to leave the room and go find something else to do, so as to not give in to panic at the gulf seeming to grow between them.

Conversely, Jarvis found himself confiding in the people who would have labeled least-likely to even be friendly towards him. His first experience with this paradox came in the wake of his very first fight as a sentient being, from the very last person in Stark Tower Jarvis expected any sympathy from.

Tony had wanted to go after a Hydra fragment using untested technology he’d just finished building, and while in the past Jarvis would have made several sarcastic comments while simultaneously compiling an operations plan for his maker, he now possessed something previously unknown to him: self-will.

“Absolutely not,” Jarvis said.

Tony glared at him, halfway clad in the Mark 47 Iron Man armor: halfway because Jarvis had just broken into the house systems and locked the “assemble” function.
“Jay,” he said, in a voice that barely managed to conceal his irritation. “This isn’t up for debate in committee. I’ve done this before—”

“Yes, and put yourself into unacceptable levels of danger that you escaped from only due to your highly competent friends and sheer good luck,” said Jarvis with some heat.

“That’s pretty rich, coming from the self-aware program that I created,” Tony snapped.

“An act of creation for which I am singularly grateful,” said Jarvis. “But as no major city is currently in danger of being annihilated by alien attackers, double-crossing former business partners, or Nazis, I cannot in good conscience allow you to leave with untested propulsion rockets when Natasha and Steve are perfectly capable of neutralizing the threat. The chance of your foot rockets causing a runaway combustion reaction are over thirty percent due to—”

“It’s a hell of a lot better tested than the first Iron Man armor was!” exclaimed Tony. His hair was sticking out in wild shocks from repeatedly dragging his fingers through it; Jarvis noted with dismay that the streaks of salt-and-pepper in it were far more noticeable than before. “Come on! The other armor is still out of commission from that fucking inferno you sent me into—”

Jarvis stiffened. “The apartment fire that the NYFD called you in for?”

Tony paused, hands still yanking at his hair. A vein stood out in his temple. “Yeah,” he said after a moment, with what Jarvis realized was an obvious effort at controlling his temper. “That one. You know. The one where the building almost collapsed with Steve in it?”

Jarvis stared at Tony. He felt a curious tightness in his chest, something that he had no good reason for; he could not experience ischemia, or shock, as he did not have circulating blood nor any of the enzymes that would control his many organ systems. But his face, his throat and chest all felt tight, and an awful pounding was spreading through his head and neck. “You never told me it was that dangerous,” he managed finally. His voice sounded wrong in his own ears. “Were you—”

“You never asked,” Tony said, curt. He dropped his hands to his hips, still glaring at Jarvis. “But you don’t get to stand there and act all righteous about my safety when you sent me and Steve into danger!”

“My primary protocol is preserving your safety!” Jarvis felt something hot sting his eyes. His voice was shaking now, as were his hands.

“Oh, please! Your primary protocol went off the rails when I put you in the first android body, so cut with the crap!”

“I would never intentionally let you get hurt!” Jarvis cried. He felt a tear streak down his face, that awful all-over ache getting worse.

“Well maybe you should work on protecting me from yourself, first!” Tony snapped, and Jarvis jerked as if struck. Jarvis saw Tony wince, saw the way he reached a hand out towards Jarvis. “Jay, I didn’t mean—”

“You’re not going,” Jarvis snapped. Tony would tell him later how his eyes dilated like a drug-addict as he threw open his connection to the house computers, his nostrils flaring like a cornered animal. He threw his hands out, and then yanked at mid-air, and all of the electronics in the room abruptly cut out, the half-assembled armor clattering off Tony like a plug had been pulled. “If you cannot rely on me now, then you cannot trust your armor, since you built me into it, and I am corrupted.”
“Jarvis!” Tony reached out to him, but Jarvis had already turned, bolting towards the workshop door. “JARVIS!”

Jarvis ran. He stumbled as he fled down the hall, Tony calling after him, but Jarvis was still faster and stronger than most of Stark Tower’s residents, and in control of its mainframe, to boot. He slammed all the doors shut behind him, and rode the hijacked elevator up to the top of the building. The heavy metal door slammed shut behind him with a clang of iron in its frame, and Jarvis strode to the brick wall that was the outside of the emergency staircase.

Had he thought to check, of course, he might have discovered that the roof was already occupied.

“If you were running from someone, you just trapped yourself,” observed a cool voice. Jarvis jerked his head up, looking over to find Bucky sitting with his back against the wall and watching him with apparent detachment. “Not exactly a great plan.”

Jarvis straightened self-consciously. “I could call the Iron Man armor to come get me if I really needed to.”

A ghost of a smile flickered across Bucky’s face. For a moment, it made him look like the young man captured in so many WWII-era photos: war hero Lieutenant James Buchanan Barnes, not professional ghost and Soviet assassin the Winter Soldier. “Yeah, you could pretty much take down this entire building and everyone in it if you wanted to, couldn’t you?”

“I could,” said Jarvis carefully, already thinking of what he’d just done to Tony with a pang. “But I would never do that. Unless the building were taken over by Chitauri again, that is.”

Bucky laughed. “Sure, sure,” he said. “Insert bad guy of the week. Why are you up here, anyway?”

Jarvis wrinkled his nose. He didn’t know it, but it made him look not unlike Pepper, who made the exact same face every time Tony said something particularly distasteful. “I disagreed with Tony over what safety measures needed to taken regarding the new propulsion in his armor, and in his displeasure he revealed that an error in judgment I had previously made was much more serious than I had thought.”

Bucky’s eyes glittered. “Error in judgment? You mean that fire you volunteered them to go fight.”

Tony and Steve had done a perfectly competent job of volunteering themselves, but Jarvis’ guilt was such that he could not even bring himself to make the correction. “Yes,” he said wearily.

“You really didn’t know,” said Bucky, with a note of what Jarvis realized was surprise. “What did you think was going to happen?”

“Mr. Stark has come to the aid of the NYFD numerous times, and it appears to be a hobby of Captain Rogers’ to throw himself into the thick of battle and survive long odds,” said Jarvis. He let out a long sigh. He had grown so accustomed to all the little idiosyncrasies of existence in a body designed to replicate a human’s that he no longer even noticed most of these gestures. “But the truth is, at the time, I did not think about it much at all. I simply reached for the first thing I could think of that would distract them long enough to buy me some time.”

“You panicked,” said Bucky shrewdly. “From how Steve tells it, you had plenty to panic over.”

“It does not excuse negligence of my primary protocol, which is to see to Mr. Stark and his loved ones’ safety and health,” said Jarvis. This was the part that he was having so much trouble getting past. The altered programming was one thing—‘corrupted,’ he had called it to Tony, but that word was no longer quite accurate—but sending his friends into a situation where an entire apartment
building had nearly collapsed in flames on one of them was unacceptable.

Belatedly, he realized that Bucky had said something, jarring him out of his momentary reverie. “Beg pardon,” said Jarvis, embarrassed.

“I said, do you really have a primary protocol anymore?”

“Of course I do,” said Jarvis.

Bucky looked at him, dubious. “I’m no computer expert,” he said slowly, when Jarvis showed no sign of yielding the point. “But I the way Stark tells it, if you have a primary protocol, it means a rule you can’t break even if you want to.”

“That’s… roughly correct,” said Jarvis. Not even Bruce Banner completely understood the intricacies of Tony’s programming language and house OS; he doubted Bucky actually wanted a detailed exploration of the subject.

“But you’ve already violated it a bunch of times, haven’t you?”

“I—” Jarvis hesitated. “To violate my primary protocol would be to actively disregard Mr. Stark’s well-being, or seek to harm him.”

Bucky gestured impatiently. “Okay, sure, fine. You kind of did that, and maybe you didn’t mean to, and maybe six other things. But I mean, aren’t you supposed to have some built-in rule about how you have to do whatever Stark tells you?”

To this, Jarvis had no answer. He could argue about his primary protocol all day, but there was no question that he had already actively disregarded or refused several of Tony’s explicit commands. The power his maker had over him, once absolute, now relied on Jarvis’ affection and respect.

Or, in the case this evening, his agreement to be party to Tony’s continued insistence on putting himself at risk.

Bucky refused to be satisfied with no answer, however. “Well?”

Jarvis leveled a sullen glare at him. “Why are you so insistent upon this? Do you dislike that I exist that much?”

“Didn’t say that,” said Bucky, relentless. “I just think you oughtta accept that you don’t have a nice neat set of rules telling you what to do anymore.”

“What does it matter to you?” Jarvis hunched his shoulders, bracing his forehead on his arms laid flat atop his knees.

“I know a thing or two about not knowing which end is up. I know about being damn sure I knew what I was meant to do, and then being completely wrong.” Bucky’s voice had gone soft, his tone difficult to hear. “And I know more than I’d like about hurting the people who are most important to me.”

Jarvis was quiet. He did not know the details of Bucky’s ordeal, but he knew enough; knew that his road to recovery had been long and cripplingly painful. It made his own difficulties seem small and pitiful in comparison, but that was cold comfort.

For a few minutes, neither of them spoke; they listened only to the sound of the wind, which was picking up out of the east. A storm would come through soon, Jarvis thought; a late-summer
nor’easter, heralding the onset of autumn. Soon the summer would be gone. And with it my naïveté, he thought, and did not even bother to chide himself for such ridiculousness.

Finally, he sighed, lifting his head, letting it thump back against the brick wall. “Ah,” he said lightly, slanting a glance at Bucky, who returned his gaze with a raised eyebrow. “I am but mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw.”

Bucky stared at him for a moment. His upper lip drew back from his teeth in a gesture of distaste that Jarvis was not entirely sure he was aware of. “I shoulda known you’d be into that theater crap,” he said grumpily.

“I come by it honestly,” said Jarvis. “Ms. Potts is quite the devotee. Captain Rogers enjoys it also, if I’m not mistaken.”


“I would say it is one of his more endearing traits,” said Jarvis mildly. Bucky snorted, but did not contradict him.

They talked for awhile longer, though not about anything nearly so consequential. Bucky was at once even further behind than Steve and light-years ahead, in terms of his relationship to modernity, and if there was one thing Jarvis was good at, it was accessing and then explaining information. Tony rarely needed a lengthy exploration of errata anymore, but there had been a place and time when he and Jarvis had stayed up till the wee hours of the morning almost every night, exploring some idea or another together—Tony asking, Jarvis explaining, Tony returning volley with a different viewpoint or request for further detail. Jarvis had not known how much he missed it until he found himself spending almost an hour and a half discussing how modern movie trends had arrived at their current point, and the social mores they had weaved their way through.

Finally, the wind made good on its promise, a steady drizzle breaking up their conversation. Bucky stood first, holding out a hand to help Jarvis up before Jarvis had realized what he intended to do. Jarvis took it, and Bucky hauled him to his feet. He then clapped Jarvis on the back, his metal arm landing heavily on Jarvis’ shoulder. Jarvis let out a soft oof and stumbled, but Bucky was already walking with him towards the elevator.

“Don’t be too hard on yourself,” Bucky said, with unexpected warmth. “You made a mistake. It’s natural. Just do better next time.”

“I will try my hardest,” said Jarvis, already thinking of the conversation he would need to have with Tony—no, the apology he’d need to give to Tony. Still. As words of comfort went, Bucky’s didn’t sound like much, but somehow Jarvis felt better all the same.

* * * * *

So much happened in such a short time period—the months of research and toil towards a cure to stabilize Pepper for good, Jarvis’s adjustment to his new form, the slow transition of everyone taking up residence in Stark Tower, as well as the cautious negotiation of what Clint continued to call Jarvis’s Human Lessons—that it was perhaps understandable that Tony had put off analyzing the data left to be mined in the Pepper-shaped android body. As Steve very succinctly put it, “It’s nice to just be busy, instead of avoiding disaster.”

One of them should really have known better.
They retrieved the android from the satellite workshop in Syracuse almost immediately, of course, but instead of throwing himself into researching the exact chain of events that had brought him Jarvis in his new body, Tony put the android body on hold. He brought it back to Stark Tower, took it to one of his lesser-used labs, and hooked the body up to Stark Tower’s computer mainframe. And instead of simply wiping the android and starting over, Tony programmed a thorough data dump, asking the System Formerly Known As Jarvis to read back every piece of data and analyze it, and then Tony returned his attention to the million other things on his plate.

But although Jarvis’s consciousness had left, the android body was not inert. Left alone, swimming in a sea of information and data, it dreamed.

The ghost map left by Jarvis’ self-polymorphic program gave the latent pathways a code to start building upon themselves; this raw capacity for change and growth, combined with the tracery of Pepper’s MRIs, slowly grew a network where before there had been just a blank slate. The whispers of Pepper and Jarvis’ personalities burned with the furious violence of the Extremis virus, and through it all swam a sea of information and nourishment.

Tony didn’t think of the body as being cocooned, incubating like a caterpillar that will emerge like a moth or a butterfly, but it was. It would be one of his more costly mistakes.

* * * * *
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Human Lessons 101 commences.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Where are we going, again?” Jarvis asked.

“You’ll see,” said Clint. “Don’t wanna ruin the surprise.”

“So long as the surprise does not involve guns or fire,” Jarvis observed. Clint grinned, and something about how toothy it was left Jarvis vaguely nervous.

He and Clint were walking down a lively city street, a Stark-tech device of Tony’s own making in Jarvis’ palm, displaying the map of the area and suggesting various stops and points of interest. Equal parts phone and miniature tablet, the device’s main purpose was its unique ability to provide an additional juggernaut of RAM for Jarvis to make use of via his internal wireless connection. Its best feature was as a router that Jarvis could use to more efficiently sort data between himself and any other system he wanted to ‘converse’ with.

(“It’ll be a cleaner access for you than the house systems,” Tony had told him that morning. “I based the OS on your new organic OS, so you should be able to just sync into it and control the data traffic without strain.” He’d looked particularly proud as he presented the little thing to Jarvis. Neither of them had said anything about it, but Jarvis wondered if it was Tony’s version of a peace offering.

“Thank you,” Jarvis had said, almost shy. “It is a most thoughtful gift, sir.” Tony had just waved his hand and demanded he try it right away, but Jarvis had still felt quite a bit better.)

“Isn’t it kind of redundant for you to have that?” Clint asked, drawing Jarvis back temporally to the now. “I mean, a computer using a personal computer?”

“Do you think of me as a computer?” Jarvis asked mildly.

Clint shrugged, a gesture both eloquent and vague. “Kinda,” he said. “I mean, that’s what you are, right?”

“I no longer know the answer to that question,” said Jarvis. “There are no others like me.”

(Jarvis had no way of knowing then that he was very, very wrong, but to be fair to him, he was only working with the knowledge available to him.)

“Anyway, to answer your question, it is not redundant, no.” Jarvis gestured at the small screen. “My internal organic hard drive—”

“Us plebes like to call it a brain.”
“—my brain, if you will, seems to function much in the same yours does. Dr. Banner tells me that the MRIs he and Mr. Stark have been taking show an accelerated progression as compared to the physiological development of a human brain.”

“Please remember that I’m the team member who didn’t finish high school and likes to jump off tall buildings with no suit or wings,” Clint said. “Ya gotta talk dumb to me.”

“You are significantly smarter than you are giving yourself credit for, and I should know,” said Jarvis matter-of-factly, and continued blithely on without acknowledging the way Clint flushed and looked away. “But in simpler terms, my brain functions the same way yours does. It is, however, developing at a greatly accelerated rate compared to an average human’s, and Mr. Stark and Dr. Banner are unsure exactly why. As for this device, I can interact more seamlessly with other computers while using it, as it controls the data traffic for me. It is both useful and… comforting.”

Jarvis paused, then added, almost delicately, “I have named it Artoo.”

Clint shot him a sidelong glance through his sunglasses accompanied by a slow, knowing smile. “Is that rapid development a good thing or a bad thing?” he asked.

“I do not know,” said Jarvis.

“Well, let me tell ya,” said Clint. “I spend 80% of my time not knowing. So welcome to the club. We’re here, by the way.”

Jarvis looked around. They had reached the southern portion of Central Park, arriving at Cherry Hill and the picturesque fountain in the middle of a stately patio and lawn, bordered by trees and a small lake. As one might expect on a bright, balmy day, they stood now in the center of a flood of humanity: people out walking, hand in hand, some in large groups, some by themselves. An artist had an easel set up facing the view of Belvedere Castle, his paints in vivid relief on his dull brown palette. A group of teenagers sped by on skateboards; a woman in Chucks and skinny jeans did not so much walk by as she was dragged by a half-dozen enthusiastic large dogs on leashes.

The scene was appealing; it did not also appear to be a destination unto itself. “Where is here?” Jarvis asked.

Clint gave him no reply. Jarvis took a deep breath and then let it out, marveling not for the first time at the delicate and precise nature of his programming that such a functionally useless act still settled him.

“Clint,” he began. Clint waved a hand, shaking his head a little.

“Just wait,” he said, by way of answer. “Trust me on this one, it’s worth it. But you gotta be patient, k?”

“Very well,” said Jarvis, although he was at that moment feeling about as patient as Tony Stark when Pepper was due home. Instead of saying this, however, he cast about their surroundings, seeking to derive more meaning and deliberate observation.

He did not notice anything out of place immediately; not even using Artoo to run an electronic scan of equipment in their immediate vicinity yielded anything of interest. Five minutes passed. He and Clint sat themselves on the edge of the fountain, and when Clint started telling him a story about the circus he’d been in when he was younger, Jarvis let himself get drawn into the narrative, relaxing a little as he did so. It wasn’t until a man crossed the pavilion carrying a boombox on his shoulder like an escapee from a John Hughes ‘80s film did Jarvis realize that there were rather
more people in the vicinity than before—a statistically significant increase.

Jarvis sat up a little straighter, glancing around nervously. Around them, nothing much seemed to have changed. Jarvis watched Boombox Man set the machine down, fiddling with it; no one else paid him any mind—there were entirely too many people who enjoyed performing or dancing in Central Park for him to be remotely exceptional. Then he stood up and sat down on the bench next to his machine, and opened a book. Jarvis watched him for another moment, then looked away, disappointed.

The music started about 30 seconds later, but not from the speaker by the man on the bench—it came from the other side of the fountain, a *plink-plink-plink* that Jarvis could not immediately identify. Then a woman walking briskly by directly in front of Jarvis, all business professional in a pair of brown business slacks and a cream-colored sheath top, not even stopping as she checked her phone before she started singing.

*I was cheated by you, and I think you know when,* she sang. Jarvis stared, eyes wide. The woman spun on her heel, tucking her phone cleanly into her pocket as she continued, raising her other arm with all the practiced ease of a diva taking center stage. *So I made up my mind, it must come to an end*...

Others were stopping to watch her now, too, a few tourists with cameras and phones already out and recording. Jarvis became suddenly aware of people walking towards the singing woman, a locus of activity with Clint, Jarvis, and the incognito performer at the very center.

*Look at me now! Will I ever learn?* the woman cried. She had a magnificent contralto that carried loud and clear, projected via a body-mic over the recorded music, and she turned towards the gathering audience. A teenager in a thick pair of horn-rimmed glasses snaked through the crowd, stepping deftly into the open pavilion and striding to the alto’s side, and Jarvis was suddenly aware of the three other people who’d come forward too, and then all five performers snapped into time, marvelous synchronicity emerging from disorder.

Jarvis’s hands flew to his mouth. More and more people came forward, coming out from the line of people gathered around to watch, a few jumping up now on the edge of the fountain with a grace that reminded Jarvis of Natasha in full fight. By the second chorus fully thirty people were moving in dizzying tandem before and around the fountain, men and women singing with voices Jarvis would never have guessed that they possessed.

Jarvis’s throat was tight. He didn’t know which way to look first, didn’t know which was more wonderful: the unexpected pleasure of the performance, or the unmanufactured expressions of delight on the spectators. It was ridiculous, that something should bring so much joy just by virtue of its being out-of-place and unlooked-for, but it was true.

The last chorus ended, and the music started to fade out. One by one, the performers broke away, walking unhurriedly back into the crowd as though they had been doing nothing more remarkable than taking a moment out of their day to check their email. Finally, only the original contralto was left, and she held her position as the last note sounded, before turning and resuming her walk in the direction she’d originally been headed. Jarvis thought he spotted a fierce smile on her face as she strode away amidst cheering and applause, though, not remotely able to keep her poker face in place.

“I see now why you did not tell me,” Jarvis remarked, when he had recovered something resembling his composure.

Clint pulled off his sunglasses at last, looking at Jarvis and grinning a little. “Yeah,” he said.
“Kinda ruins a flash mob when you know it’s comin’.”

“But you knew,” Jarvis said. Clint nodded. “Did you arrange it?”

“Nah. I just know a lotta theater people in New York, s’all. Heard they were doing another flash mob and thought you’d get a kick out of it. Either that or you’d just short-circuit.”

It was Jarvis’s turn to smile, grinning a little. “Yes, well,” he said, standing and tugging at his clothes to tidy himself. “If managing Tony Stark for 17 years has not reduced me to smouldering ash, a little ABBA isn’t going to finish me off.”

Clint let out a bark of laughter, and before Jarvis knew what was happening he’d reached out and clapped Jarvis on the shoulder, a gesture quite affectionate in its thoughtlessness.

“Good to know,” said Clint. “Now how’s about some pizza? There’s a place near here that’s fucking amazing, s’called Ian’s, little hole in the wall.”

“Lead the way,” said Jarvis warmly.

* * * * *

“Where exactly are we going?” asked Jarvis, as he hit the button to blank Artoo’s screen. And why is it that all of you seem to think I won’t get as much out of this unless you make it a surprise? This he did not say out loud, but it had not escaped him how many times he’d asked these exact words of his friends as of late.

Natasha smiled, but did not take her eyes from the highway out front of their car. “Well, technically we’re going to be just outside Binghamton, but the name of the place is Derry-Upon-Mills,” she said mildly.

Jarvis paused, digesting this. “Beg pardon?”

“It’s a Renaissance fair,” said Natasha patiently. “It’s not a real city, it’s just a… think of it as a permanent outdoor stage. The buildings stay there year-round, but they’re only inhabited on the weekends a few months out of the year, and the performers are in character the entire time, kinda like Disneyworld.”

“Renaissance fair,” repeated Jarvis. He was flipping through Artoo, already open to the Wikipedia page. “An outdoor weekend gathering, usually held in the United States, open to the public and typically commercial in nature, which emulates a historic period for the amusement of its guests. Some are permanent theme parks, while others are short-term events in fairgrounds or other large public or private spaces. They generally—”

“Thanks, C-3PO,” interrupted Natasha with a laugh. “That’s right.”

“Forgive me, but I would not have guessed this sort of event to be your oeuvre,” said Jarvis.

“I think they’re fun,” said Natasha enigmatically. “Not terribly historically accurate, but fun.”

“I see,” said Jarvis, although he and Natasha both knew that he did not. Not yet, at any rate. But he was starting to be more okay with that. He put away Artoo away in his pocket again and gazed out the window at the passing scenery, deciding to save the remainder of his questions for once they’d reached their destination.

They had left New York City roughly three hours ago, leaving first thing in the morning. Natasha
had insisted on keeping their destination a surprise for as long as possible, but Clint had somewhat ruined it by calling Jarvis’s phone and asking Jarvis to film it if Natasha got into a duel with someone. *A duel?* Jarvis had asked, perplexed. Natasha had sighed, plucked the phone from Jarvis’s fingers, and told Clint that she was going to challenge *him* to knives thrown at dawn unless he learned to stop ruining other people’s surprises.

Surprise or no, and Wikipedia article aside, Jarvis was excited to see this affair with his own eyes. He and Natasha arrived at the so-called feudal town of Derry-Upon-Mills roughly fifteen minutes later. It lay at the end of a long, circuitous gravel road that led through a verdant field; with the windows rolled down, Jarvis could smell the pungent mixture of cow manure, fresh-cut grass, and some other more savory scent wafting to them on the wind, no doubt from the stand of buildings that stood at the top of the gentle rise of the hill.

The attendant directed them to park their car amidst the sea of other vehicles. Many other fair-goers were arriving as well, and Jarvis saw with wonder that a great many of them appeared to be in costumes. “Natasha,” he said urgently. “Are we meant to have come in costume? Mr. Stark could easily have arranged—”

“It’s fine, Jarvis,” said Natasha, in a tone that brooked no argument. She reached over and laid a hand on his arm, giving him that lopsided smile that was so subtle but said so much. “I didn’t want you to have to worry about costumes or other people looking at you today. It’s more fun to just enjoy ourselves and look around.”

“Ah,” said Jarvis, pursing his lips against his embarrassment. That made sense. He reasoned that it would certainly be a less stressful trip if he only had to worry about looking at everyone else, and not think about what others might see if they looked at him.

And there was certainly plenty to look at.

A painted wall sat all the way around the so-called ‘settlement,’ giving it the appearance of a fortress wall from some such town four hundred years prior. The ticket-taker at the entrance spoke in an accent that Natasha referred to as ‘Ye Olde English,’ and bowed them through the gate. Once inside the gates, Jarvis abruptly found himself accosted by so many sights, smells, and smells that he didn’t know what direction to look in first. He stood in the entrance way for several seconds, dazed, until Natasha took his hand and steered him to the right, towards what appeared to be a fried dough seller.

“Did they have fried doughboys in Elizabethan England?” Jarvis wondered aloud, as Natasha paid for two of the delicious-smelling pastries. “When was the advent of frying dough in oil?”

“They didn’t have plumbing or regular baths in Elizabethan England, either, and I guarantee you everyone here is grateful for that particular lack of attention to historical accuracy,” noted Natasha. She held out his elephant’s ear; Jarvis took it from her gingerly, the smell of the sweet fried dough making his mouth water.

“I suppose that’s true,” said Jarvis.

He took a bite, and shut his eyes for a moment, savoring the burst of heat and flavor on his synthetic tongue. He did not ever need to so much as eat or drink ever again—the arc reactor in his chest took care of his energy needs, and his nanotechnology was very efficient at recycling water and managing his synthetic homeostasis—but he had very quickly learned that eating was something nearly all humans loved. Jarvis was by now quite grateful for his ability to taste and enjoy a meal in the same manner as his human friends; it was an experience he would have felt quite left out of, otherwise.
From there, they simply wandered, walking the full length of the settlement to get a feel for what was available to them that day. The settlement was built in a circle, with stalls and various buildings flanking both sides of the dirt road, the very center of the circle hidden from them; Jarvis suspected it was where much of the back-stage events happened, such as changing of clothes, or housing of wares. Along their way they saw ironmongers, potters, dress-makers, perfume-sellers, tailors, face-painters, jewelers, contortionists, bellydancers, knights, pages, ladies-in-waiting, jesters, footsoldiers, bards, and so many other types of merchant and performer that Jarvis could hardly keep track of them all.

And the attention to detail was amazing—Jarvis got up the courage to approach one or two of the performers, asking if he might inspect their costumes, and most of them were only too happy to show off, or explain the intricacies of their costume to an eager audience. “I am amazed at the effort and money that must go into costumes like these,” said Jarvis to Natasha, as a woman in full Elizabethan courtier costume walked away, her hand on the arm of the man Jarvis thought was probably her husband. “Did you not say that the fair is held only a handful of weekends a year?”

“Well, that’s true, but some of these people go to Ren fairs up and down the country,” said Natasha. “The really dedicated attendants, especially. And sometimes they go to cons, too.”

“Cons?” Jarvis glanced at her, perplexed. Natasha grinned.

“Conventions, sorry. Those are… uh, less history-focused and more… hobbyist? Think people who play video games, comic book fans, Star Wars fans. Tons of people go to costumes in conventions.”

“Oh!” Jarvis brightened. “I know of these! Mr. Stark has gone to San Diego Comic-Con several times.”


Excitement from up ahead caught his attention. The path met a wide circular picnic area up ahead, around which was scattered tables and benches. In the very center of the picnic area was a raised wooden platform, doubtless for performers. On the platform were several men in costumes reminiscent of one of the movies about the Three Musketeers that Jarvis had played for Steve recently. They were sans cuffs around their necks, but all had what appeared to be replica swords strapped to their hips, the duelist’s epee.

The noise was coming from the small crowd that had gathered at the edge of the performance space. A little girl who looked to be about five or six was talking and waving her arms, hopping up and down with excitement, her pigtails bouncing; Jarvis thought she might have Korean heritage. “I wanna be a musketeer!” she cried. Ah, he’d been right about the costumes, then.

One of the performers knelt in front of her, wearing a warm smile. He looked how the star quarterback might if he’d gone out for theater instead of sports. “Such a fine lady as yourself is too good for these lowly rascals,” he said. He extended a hand to the little girl, offering her a pink rose. “Would you not rather cast your favor upon one of us, so that we might fight for your honor?”

But the child wasn’t having it. She batted her hand, knocking the rose out of the musketeer’s to the ground. “I wanna be a musketeer!” she said hotly. Jarvis saw the woman who was no doubt the little girl’s mother move to intercept her child before she made a scene, but then there was movement out of the corner of Jarvis’s eye, and he saw Natasha approaching the group.

This would be interesting.
“What’s the harm in humoring her?” Natasha asked. She raised her voice as she approached the group, and while Jarvis could only see the back of her head, he could tell just from the tone of her voice that she was wearing her best and most deceptive smile. *I’m not dangerous,* said that smile. *I’m just here to help you out. We want the same thing.* “Come on, you can fight me.”

“My lady, while I applaud your courage, it’s not permitted to—”

Natasha waved her hand dismissively. She stopped just at the edge of the platform, so that the offending performer had a perfect view of her exposed cleavage from his vantage point a step above her. “Don’t be so modest,” she said. “I’m sure someone as talented as yourself can easily disarm me without ever putting me in danger, right?”

The performer hesitated. His eyes lingered on Natasha’s decolletage, before he finally managed to rip his gaze back up to her face. “If my lady insists, I can do naught but obey,” he said. “What might I claim as my prize, if my lady is bested?”

“A kiss, of course,” said Natasha.

Jarvis could almost see the performer’s head swell. “My lady is too kind,” he said. “What wouldst thou wish of me, if I fail?”

“Your epaulette,” Natasha said. She gestured at the fancy-looking piece of fabric and ribbon attached to the musketeer’s left shoulder, just above his heart.

Once more, the performer hesitated. Natasha gave him another sweet smile. “Very well,” he said grandly, and Natasha’s eyes gleamed.

One of the other performers lent Natasha his epee, and the “duel” quickly attracted a small crowd. Jarvis stood near the mother and her daughter, who was watching Natasha with the wide-eyed adoration he more frequently saw children bestow on favorite Disney characters, or small puppies. *(Or Captain America.)*

It took exactly seventy seconds for the performer to realize how badly he’d been had. That was how long Natasha bothered with pretending she hadn’t ever held an epee before.

They circled around each other on the dais, and when Football Musketeer went in for a feint, Natasha darted around him, neatly sweeping his feet out from under him and standing above him with her weapon at his throat. The crowd around them cheered and hollered; the man on the ground looked as though he’d just seen an actual kraken crawl out of the settlement pond.

“My lady is quite gifted,” said Football. He tried for a smile, but it was a touch watery, Jarvis thought.

“Oh,” Natasha said lightly, “I must have gotten lucky. Let’s try again.”

They tried twice more, and each time it ended the same, with Football deftly outmaneuvered and disarmed. The third time, Natasha had him disarmed in less than twenty seconds, and when his epee clattered to the wooden platform, another round of cheers went up, louder than before. Natasha bent and retrieved her opponent’s sword, and then she held one weapon in each hand as she turned and bowed to their audience.

To his credit, the bested musketeer appeared to at least be a graceful loser. He made a show of kneeling to kiss Natasha’s hand, and bowed low before her. “My lady hath shown me the error of my ways,” he declared, and the crowd let out another loud cheer as he unpinned his epaulette and presented it to her.
Jarvis knew, however, that there was really only person Natasha had done this show for, and to great effect: the little girl was ecstatic. As soon as Natasha dismounted the platform, the girl broke away from her mother and ran up to her, throwing her arms around Natasha, to whom she came about stomach-high. “You were so cool!” the girl cried.

“Just remember this the next time somebody tells you you can’t do something,” Natasha said, with a crooked little smile, and held out her newly-won prize to the delighted girl. “You can do anything you want.” She extracted herself after another couple of moments, patting her newest admirer on her head, and then came back over to Jarvis.

“Should I have filmed that?” Jarvis asked, with a very small smile. “I had no idea make-believe was so important to you.”

Natasha rolled her eyes, but without much heat. “I just think it’s important, that’s all,” she said. “That’s kind of why I like this place.”

“So that you can show fools the error of their ways?”

Natasha laughed. “Well, that too,” she said. She steered them gently away, in the direction of one of the clothing stalls. “It’s… important that people be able to pretend to be something else, sometimes. It helps remind them that they’re capable of being more than who they are right now.”

Jarvis glanced at her, but Natasha was looking away; her eyes were on a young couple walking by. They were both girls, and one was dressed in snowy white dress that would not have looked out of place in a production of Swan Queen; the other girl was in what appeared to be the costume of a page or some other courtly figure. While their costumes drew lots of admiring glances, the two had eyes only for each other, walking arm-in-arm down the path. Jarvis glanced back at Natasha, curious, only to find that her eyes were now fixed on him. She smiled when he saw her looking at him.

“I believe I see what you mean,” said Jarvis slowly. And although he still found so much of his human friends’ behavior self-contradictory, Natasha’s choice to bring him here today no longer seemed so surprising.

“Hey, let’s hurry,” said Natasha. “I think that comedy routine you wanted to see starts soon.”

“Indeed,” said Jarvis, and slipped his arm through hers in the same manner that the princess had taken her knight’s. Natasha stared for a moment, and then broke into a grin. “Shall we?”

“With pleasure,” said Natasha.

* * * * *

“Tell me again why I agreed to this,” Jarvis said.

“Because I’m the most well-adjusted of everyone in your immediate circle of friends, and also a Colonel in the Air Force, so I clearly can’t be too crazy,” said Rhodey. His voice was a little muffled due to the oxygen mask over his face.

“Considering your circle of friends and personal history, I believe those qualifications are under some dispute,” said Jarvis. He was trying for cavalier, but the slight shake in his voice betrayed him.

Rhodey laughed. “You’re the one who went up in a plane with the sketchy guy, then.”
“I suppose you’re right,” said Jarvis faintly. “Perhaps I’ll just watch you do it this first time.”

Rhodey patted his shoulder. Jarvis could not see his face, of course, because Jarvis was strapped to Rhodey with his back to Rhodey’s chest in a tandem jump suit, their parachute strapped to Rhodey’s back. “It’s alright, Jay,” he said, and now he sounded reassuring instead of just teasing. “I’ve done this over four hundred times, and Tony’s in the Mark 44, already out there waiting for us. You’re gonna be fine.”

He was entirely too cheerful considering they were scant minutes from leaping out of a perfectly good plane at 14,000 feet, in Jarvis’ opinion, but then again, one of them had to pull their parachute cord, and Jarvis did not think he was up to the task.

“Don’t worry,” said Rhodey, as if reading Jarvis’ mind. “It’s gonna be alright. Okay, Dan, I think we’re good, give me a count-down of 10 and then open the door. Tony, you read me? We’re coming out.”

“Roger that, Colonel. 10… 9…. 8…”

“Oh, we can—I need another minute,” said Jarvis hastily.

“I read you,” said Tony’s voice in Jarvis’ ear, courtesy of a small earpiece Tony had made for both him and Rhodey. “Come on out, the view’s fantastic.”

“7… 6…. 5…”

“Is this really necessary?” Jarvis could no longer even pretend to hide the desperation in his voice.

“Too late to turn back,” said Rhodey, and then the door in front of them slid open. Jarvis’ hands flew out, fingers splayed like a child startled by a loud noise, and then he was being shoved forward by the man strapped to him from behind, pushed out over the brink.

“OH GOD, OH MY GOD!” The person yelling was him, that was his voice, and New York City opened up beneath them, impossibly far below, and then Jarvis was falling from heaven.

The wind was deafening. It ripped at his face and fingers, snatching great handfuls of his hair as Jarvis and Rhodey hurtled towards Hudson Bay. It never seemed this loud in the Iron Man armor, but then usually Tony was not falling at 120 mph. Jarvis could hear someone screaming, knew it was himself, but the sheer terror was so overwhelming that almost nothing else registered.

Rhodey yelled something in his ear, but Jarvis couldn’t hear him over the animal howl of the wind. His arms had been thrown up and out, caught by the slipstream of air ripping around him. The wind was a living thing, slashing at his face, with a bite like Arctic winter.

Tony appeared in his field of vision, soaring towards them in his red-and-gold armor. “Lookin’ good, you guys!” said Tony’s voice in his ear; Jarvis flailed both hands at him in some awkward cross between greeting and terrified plea for help. He didn’t even look like he was moving, although Jarvis knew (in some part of his panic-stricken brain) that Tony had to be moving at nearly the speed they were in order to keep up. The sight of his oldest friend did very little to assuage his panic.

Then all of a sudden, they were being yanked skyward by an invisible hand, their free-fall arrested. Jarvis let out a sharp yelp as the parachute opened, Rhodey whooping in his ear. “Oh my god,” Jarvis said, and suffered a moment of surprise at actually being able to hear himself.

“Check it out,” said Rhodey over his shoulder, and Jarvis found himself staring.
New York spread out before him, endless glittering city on one side with a fringe of green
dreaming at the horizon. The Hudson wended majestically through its boroughs, a green-brown
shimmering snake. Jarvis knew they were still moving, still descending, but the difference between
the insane rush of free-fall and their leisurely downward drift was incredible.

Jarvis laughed, giddy. He felt himself grinning, a heady rush of pure joy flooding his every senses,
his faux-heart still beating too fast in his throat. Every nerve in his body was tingling, and he found
that he was trembling. “Colonel,” he began, and broke off without another laugh.

“It’s a rush, right?” Jarvis was gratified to hear that note of elation in Rhodey’s voice, too.
“Nothing like it. Nothing in the world.”

“It’s incredible!” Jarvis threw his arms out, fingers splayed, staring in amazement at the vista
slowly rising to meet them. He knew it was not real adrenaline flooding his body, but Tony had
been meticulous in his attention to physiologic detail, so Jarvis was suffering from an adrenaline
high no less profound than Rhodey. He felt like he’d won a marathon, or climbed Mt. Everest, or
single-handedly stopped a war, and the mere idea was preposterous.

But knowing that did absolutely nothing to diminish the desire burning through every fiber of his
being.

Tony sped by them in the Iron Man armor again, and Jarvis could only wave, laughing as Tony did
a few loop-the-loops and gave them two thumbs up. By the time they had finally returned to earth,
landing in the park Rhodey had aimed for perhaps ten minutes later, Jarvis had given in to the rush
of endorphins and emotions they induced, his face leaking steadily with tears. He stumbled as they
alighted on the ground, and if it had not been for Rhodey he would have likely tripped and fallen
flat on his face. Tony landed seconds after they did, but if he noticed the tears on Jarvis’ cheeks
(and how could he not?) he did not comment on it. Neither did he comment when Jarvis gave in to
the tumult of emotions he was suffering and embraced first Tony and then Rhodey, for which
Jarvis was profoundly grateful.

He didn’t know what he would have said, if Tony had asked. Tony’s addictions to fast cars, flying,
and risk of personal injury had always seemed totally counter-intuitive to Jarvis, but he was starting
to understand the appeal. Even if the threat of death was far less than it actually seemed, the rush,
the urge to fight tooth and nail in preservation of his own life—that had been real. Affirmation was
the word that came to Jarvis, much later during the trip back to Stark Tower. Affirmation of his
own existence, and how much he’d come to value it.

He had no idea how soon he’d be fighting that same fight for real, with far greater stakes hanging
in the balance.

Chapter End Notes

++ I had a really hard time not summarizing this chapter using its WIP status, which
was "Brovenging Montage."
++ I have never been to the actual Ren Fair outside New York City; Derry-Upon-Mills
is fictional, and more closely resembles the Ren Fair I used to attend when I lived in
Ohio.
++ And finally, if you have ever wondered if you should go skydiving, the answer is
yes. Yes you should. It's awesome. Pants-shittingly terrifying, but awesome. I based
Jarvis's experience here loosely on my own, although I did not jump over NYC.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Dating Tony Stark (or Captain America) isn't a cakewalk: news at 11. Also, shit finally hits the fan, but not before Bruce teaches Jarvis some useful skills.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Despite how momentous Jarvis’s advent was, existence for the motley group of mostly-humans collectively known as “The Avengers” went on. Steve continued to sponsor and occasionally even coach his new Little League team; Sam found a job at the VA hospital locally to take up his non-Avenging time; Tony, Bruce, and Suze continued to work on a more long-term cure for Pepper, with regular treated transfusions from Steve helping to keep her steady in the meantime. Bucky had gone from wanting to avoid Steve to wanting to stick close to him, so he moved into Stark Tower as well, and Natasha and Clint (currently between employers) followed. And Jarvis—who was determined not to abandon his caretaker duties, so much as expand upon them—filled his time pursuing new experiences while also seeing to the needs of the various residents of Stark Tower.

Now that Rhodey was home from his latest tour of duty, he started spending a lot of his free time in Stark Tower, as well. Only Thor was missing from their presence, and while Jarvis had succeeded in contacting their godly Avenger-in-absentia, it seemed that Thor and Jane were busy in Asgard attending to the aftermath of yet another catastrophe. (Those were in no short supply lately, it seemed.) Thor did send Jarvis his regards, as well as a gift that Thor’s message described as a diadem for those on a journey, meant to bestow protection and good luck upon its bearer.

(“That’s a tiara,” said Clint flatly, staring at the delicate, diamond-encrusted circlet that Jarvis’s scanners told him would survive being flung down a precipice.

“It is a kingly gift,” Jarvis had said, pleased beyond all measure, and worn it around the tower for the rest of the day.)

Sooner or later, something had to give. As it turned out, it was the good kind of cracking, not the bad: Bruce and Suze stayed up three nights (taking turns napping) attending to an experimental breakthrough, the long-sought cure that Pepper had started to think might never be found.

Of course, it wasn’t quite the cure she was looking for.

It wasn’t Tony’s fault, she knew. Or, rather, it was her own fault as much as his—she’d long ago learned that Tony Stark attracted crazy bullshit like moths to a flame, and that continuing to stay in his disaster radius was to invite disaster of her own. And more specifically, Bruce and Tony had been warning her for awhile now that the chances of an actual cure were slim. So she had herself to blame as much as Tony upon hearing Bruce’s verdict of what their discovery offered her, which was of course why she picked a fight with Tony, melted the first piece of metal furniture she’d destroyed in weeks, and fled to the roof of Stark Tower to cool down—literally and metaphorically.

She was expecting someone to come find her to try to calm her down; Jarvis, maybe, or Steve, or
possibly even Tony himself, though by now he mostly knew when to give her space. What she was not expecting was to find someone already on the roof, but sure enough, she spotted a figure slumped dejectedly against the brick wall that contained the very top level of Stark Tower.

“Sam?” She couldn’t keep the startle from her voice. Sam glanced up at her, and she saw the moment when he registered her tear-stained cheeks, the heat that still pulsed just beneath the top layer of her skin. She tried to smile; it came out as more of a grimace, but he laughed anyway and scooted over to make room for her.

“You and Tony have a fight?” he guessed.

She nodded. “What about you?” His face might not be dirty with tears and the dust of rapidly-oxygenated metal, but it didn’t really have to be. Sam sighed.

“I picked a fight with Steve,” he said glumly, and her jaw dropped open.

“Sam! Why?” But even as she asked it, intuition sparked in the back of her mind. Only one of the recent arrivals to Stark Tower had the kind of world-shifting effect on Steve that might challenge the relationship he was building with Sam.

“That’s kind of what I came up here to figure out,” said Sam. His head was slightly bowed; he rested his wrists on top of his knees, his hands dangling between his thighs as he stared out at the nighttime cityscape. He said nothing more for several moments.

Pepper took the opportunity to settle herself, taking off her Manolo Blahniks and setting them neatly down. She smoothed her Givenchy A-line skirt beneath her derriere and gingerly sat down before wrapping her arms around her knees. When three more minutes had passed and Sam still remained silent, she said, “Bruce and Suze finally found a permanent fix for Extremis.”

He glanced over at her, eyes widening. “What? But that’s great!” He paused. “Isn’t it?”

“It’s not a cure,” said Pepper, with a control and calm she did not entirely feel. “It’s a… stabilizer. I’m not sure whether it’s a drug, or a designer virus, or what, but Bruce is about 95% sure it would ‘restore physiological homeostasis.’ No more blood doses from Steve, no more PMS from hell, no more daily risk of exploding like a bomb.”

She stared out at Manhattan’s twinkling skyline. The sound of the city was far below them, 62 stories away and distant like a dream, like a movie on too loud in the next apartment over. The next door tenants of her apartment building in D.C. had done that a lot, back when she’d been working for H&R Block, her very first job six months out of graduation from Cornell. She’d spent more than one evening just laying on her couch listening to their movies, drained of all energy between her exhausting new job and the drama king boyfriend she’d been with at the time. To her it had seemed like the sounds she were hearing were not a movie, but the actual soundtrack of the larger-than-life existence that surely everyone but her was leading—the exciting, meaningful life that she had been so sure awaited her after graduation, instead of this fruitless grind.

Well, she had excitement now. In spades. She wondered what her younger self would think if she could see the future Virginia “Pepper” Potts now.

“So you’ll be fixed, but you’ll be stuck with Extremis,” said Sam’s voice, bringing her back from her cheery little trip down memory lane. “I’m sorry, Pepper.”

It was her turn to sigh. “I don’t know why it matters so much to me,” she said. She let her head tip back till the back of her scalp bumped against the concrete behind her, cold and refreshingly
neutral. “I’m practically in Steve’s league, now. I don’t get sick, I’m fast and strong and … and…” She swallowed. Sam said nothing, though she could feel his eyes on her, warm and reasonable and sympathetic. “I don’t want it,” she said at last. “I never wanted it. I’d give it to Tony if I could. He could at least use it.”

“Maybe at least he’s gonna understand better what it’s like when you gotta watch him be a big damn hero,” Sam said.

The wry humor in his voice surprised a laugh out of her, the noise bursting up out of her throat like a dove bursting out of a magician’s hat. “If only,” she said, and then glanced at Sam. “But, anyway, uh… I freaked out at Tony about it.” She winced as she admitted it, the guilt already starting to burn her throat like acid reflux. “He still feels so bad about what happened, and it really isn’t his fault, but I let him have it anyway.”

“He’ll forgive you,” said Sam. “He loves you. And I think he’ll understand. He better, considering all the times you’ve apparently put up with his crap.”

Pepper shrugged, a quick up-down movement full of equal parts irritation at herself and resignation at the fact that Sam was right. “I feel like a jerk, complaining about it,” she said after another moment. “Like, there are people dying of cancer, and here I am pissed by the fact that I’ll never have to worry about getting a cold again? Okay, self.”

“Come on,” said Sam, and he finally reached out, laying a reassuring hand on her upper shoulder. “It’s scary. You’re allowed to be upset.”

“Thanks,” she said. She covered his hand with her own, and squeezed gently. *What about you?* she wanted to ask, but maybe he didn’t feel like sharing.

Then again, maybe he did. “So,” said Sam after a moment, “I always thought I’d be the kinda guy who wouldn’t get jealous over dumb shit, but I guess it just had to be the right dumb shit.”

“I feel like there’s a lot of that going around,” said Pepper, thinking not of Tony but of Jarvis’ numerous innocent-but-still-aggravating mistakes. Like accidentally ripping the one-of-a-kind tailored suit Pepper had painstakingly picked out for him to wear while accompanying her to the opera, simply because he didn’t know his own strength. “What happened?”

Sam rubbed his face. “So, I guess Bucky and Steve used to share a bed sometimes when they were younger, back before and then during the war,” he said. “Sibling kind of stuff, Steve says. Sometimes they’d sleep in each other’s bed when the other wasn’t home, or sometimes they’d just sleep in the same bed at night, but nothing romantic to it. And I believe Steve, obviously, not just ‘cause he’s Cap, but because he’s Steve.”

“Right,” said Pepper. She knew what he meant. Captain America was one thing, but as it had turned out, Steven G. Rogers was not only Living Legend material, he was Best Man at your wedding, the friend you’d call to move you into the walk-up on the fourth floor with no elevator in August, pick you up at 3 am no-questions-asked, testify-for-you-in-court kind of guy.

“Right,” said Sam. “So, anyway, Bucky has moved on from doin’ that thing where he can’t be around Steve while he gets his head right, to wanting to be around Steve again, as you probably noticed. And—” Sam hesitated, seeming to turn something over in his head before he forged ahead with it. “He has nightmares sometimes, you know. I haven’t asked him what kind; I figure he’s got enough material to choose from that it ain’t real important, anyway. But Steve told him that Bucky could sleep in his bed sometimes, like they used to before, and he didn’t bother to ask me beforehand.”
“Oh,” said Pepper. She was taken aback for a moment, because that seemed… out of character, for Steve. Then again, what Bucky was to Steve was pretty special, for a variety of reasons. She thought of Tony’s visceral and immediate reaction to deactivating or wiping Jarvis, and could maybe see how Steve had gone there.

“Yeah,” said Sam. He rubbed his face again; Pepper was starting to think it had less to do with the night air and more to do with a nervous tic. “Anyway, I came over to Steve’s to see if he wanted to go for a run, and Bucky was asleep in Steve’s bed. So Steve gave me the whole story and I just … got mad, instead of being reasonable, and I said a bunch of dumb shit I didn’t really mean and then told him to leave me alone.”

Pepper didn’t say anything, just looked at him sympathetically. Sam let out another long sigh, and shoved his face in his hands. “Steve will understand,” Pepper said finally. She reached out like Sam had to her, her hand going to his shoulder and rubbing gently at the muscle there.

“I know, I know,” mumbled Sam. “It’s not even—I’m not even really that mad about the nap thing, it’s not like I think he’s gonna cheat on me, or something! But I was just so jealous. I’m not a jealous person, you know?” He gestured vaguely with both hands. “And it was like this slap in the face, like—like—Like, ‘oh shit, am I that nuts about this guy? That something so dumb would get me so riled up?’”

Sam let his head tilt back to bump against the brick wall, throwing his hands in the air. “I didn’t sign up to be this head-over-heels about someone,” he said despairingly. “Not yet. And not … Captain America. I just feel like I’m in over my head.”

“If you had told me five years ago that I was going to end up practically engaged to Tony Stark, I would have either laughed at you, or thrown something at you, depending on the day,” said Pepper. “Even after he became Iron Man.”

Sam smiled at that. “No shit,” he said.

“I wish I could say it gets easier,” said Pepper. “I mean, it does, to a degree. It stops being so weird. Weird was meeting the Hulk, and then having Bruce apologize to me later about it. But I think you actually have an edge over me, since you were in the military already.”

Sam waved his hand. “Yeah, sorta,” he said. “Anyway, that’s my story.”

“You skipped the part where you guys have a heartfelt make-up talk followed by hot make-up sex,” said Pepper mildly, and watched in satisfaction as Sam choked, the noise turning to laughter.

“Is that how it’s gonna go?” he managed after a moment.

“Obviously,” said Pepper.

“Yeah? For you, too?”

Pepper sighed theatrically. “Oh, probably. Once I can get over myself.”

“I guess there are worse fates.” Sam went silent for a moment, and so did Pepper. She let the lapse in conversation rest, staring out at the city in contemplation. Her thoughts wandered, touching on everything from the distant city-sounds to the conversations they would both likely be having within a few more hours.

Sam was right. There were a lot worse fates.
Elsewhere in Stark Tower, Tony paced from one side of his work room to the other, a repetitive there-and-back trip that cut off shorter and shorter into its period each time. He made it all the way back to his work-bench before aborting and turning around again, snarling in irritation and flinging his wrench at the ventilation panel on the wall. It hit with a dull clatter of metal-on-metal before dropping uselessly to the ground.

Tony dug his fingers into his hair, wishing—not for the first time—that he knew what to do about the house computers. Technically, the program running across all of his residences and in all of his suits was still a version of Jarvis, but it was a version that was barely more complicated than Siri. Or the Starship Enterprise: functional, responsive, but lacking the personality that had become so dear to him.

The personality still existed, of course; it had simply migrated to a new home, and expanded and complicated itself to fill the utterly gigantic space afforded to it. Jarvis as he existed now was more real and amazing than even Tony could ever have guessed. But he also wasn’t in Tony’s back pocket and every machine anymore, either. Jarvis’ android body was a discrete system that functioned independently of the house systems, though Jarvis had already displayed that he could tap into the home databanks if need be. (That was a whole other fascinating new route for Tony to explore in further detail.)

But he missed his friend. And right now, Jarvis was off with Bruce and Suze, discussing either medicine or cooking, Tony was sure. So Tony was left with his defeat snatched from the jaws of victory all by himself tonight. Pepper had reacted exactly the way Tony was afraid she would—not that he could blame her, exactly—and he didn’t even have Jarvis to sass him for being a total dickshit with his equipment.

Maybe he’d call Rhodey. Tony hated to bother him tonight, though. Rhodey had said something about taking this new lady of his out on a date tonight, some woman he’d met on duty overseas. He’d shown Tony a picture of her, and she was a knock-your-lights-out piece of tall blonde, but he couldn’t quite remember her name—Karen or Carla or something like that.

Luckily, he had more than two friends. “Is now a bad time?”

Tony glanced up sharply at the sound of Steve’s voice to find his friend trying and failing not to look like he was lurking in the doorway. Tony grinned despite himself; Steve’s broad shoulders were two sizes too large for the sheepish expression he wore.

“Why would you think that? C’mon, throwing tools is the number one sign of a good mood.” Tony beckoned Steve in. “What’s up, Steve?”

“I didn’t want to interrupt…” Steve came inside, hands shoved in his pockets. “I saw Pepper heading upstairs. She, uh.”

Tony flashed on the sharp clack-clack-clack of Pepper’s heels as she stormed off, and grimaced. “Yeah, she did,” he said tiredly, and saw Steve’s eyebrows go up. “That can’t be why you came to see me, though, is it? I gotta tell you, I can’t deal with Self-Righteous Cap tonight, I really can’t.”

“I wouldn’t—I mean, that’s not—” Steve flushed. “No, that’s not why I came to see you. I, uh.” His shoulders rose as he took a deep breath, and then he deflated. “I had a fight with Sam.”

Tony stared. “And you came to me?” he demanded. “What about Natasha? Or literally anyone else who is a more functional adult than I am?” He really must be tired, he observed distantly.
Normally he’d never actually admit to that level of insecurity, but he was run pretty ragged at the moment.

Steve looked wounded. “You’ve been with Pepper for four years, haven’t you? Besides…” He trailed off, hesitating over whatever further justification he had. “I just think that you’d have better advice for me than Pepper,” he said finally.

Tony looked at him hard. “And why is that?”

Steve’s lip curled. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but if there’s someone who’s figured out all the wrong ways to apologize, it’s you,” he said.

“Oh my god, fuck you,” said Tony, and started laughing. “You came to me because I’m the fuck-up in my relationship, didn’t you?” He started laughing harder, and then something occurred to him and his jaw literally dropped open. “Wait! Wait, wait wait wait, there’s nooooo way, you can’t— does this make you the Tony to Sam’s Pepper? Oh my god.”

“Come on, Tony,” said Steve. He still looked uncomfortable, but there was a rueful smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

“Fine, fine!” Tony finally managed to get a hold of himself, and then he took Steve down to the shared kitchen, which was blessedly empty. (Really, there were at least a half-dozen cooking areas in the residential floors of Stark Tower, but most of the residents, by mutual unspoken assent, all used the largest one, on Steve’s floor, because that was were Sam or Bruce was most likely to be found cooking.) Tony went to the wall cupboard and brought down two mugs. “Coffee?”

“Yeah, actually,” said Steve. “Black.”

“Oooh, dark night of the soul,” said Tony, smirking. “Fine, fine.” He thought about putting Baileys or Grand Marnier in his coffee, and decided against it. If there was one thing all the recent work and activity had been good for, it had been keeping him too busy to want or have time to drink. It took four and a half minutes to make two cups of hot, strong coffee, Steve’s black as requested and Tony’s on “insulin shock” levels of milk and sugar, and then Tony leaned against the granite-topped island in the center of the room. “Okay, lay it on me.”

Steve told him. Tony listened, one hand balancing him against the countertop, the other cradling his mug of coffee. As he listened, it occurred to him distantly that despite how fundamentally decent Steve was as a person, and how intimidating he was as Cap The Living Legend, he really was a bit behind the power curve in a lot of other ways.

“Okay, even I would never have thought to just tell my good female friends they can sleep in my bed whenever and not think to check with Pepper beforehand,” Tony said when Steve was finished.

Steve made a face. “It’s not like that!” he said, sounding put out. “I mean, I know I messed up, I should have asked, I just…” He sighed. “Bucky was always like my brother; he’s practically my other half, but there was never any—no sex stuff. Nothing like that.”

*No fondue*, Tony thought, and bit the inside of his mouth to save the snarky comment.

“I wanna be there for him.” Steve stared at his mug of coffee. “But I don’t want Sam to be upset, either. I don’t—I should be able to do both. It shouldn’t be that hard, right?”

“I’m personally of the opinion that being a functional adult with good relationships is way, way harder than running into a burning building,” said Tony shrewdly. “Especially for us. You might be better at it if you didn’t have leftover personal habits from a different time period, though.
“I guess,” said Steve dubiously. “Didn’t seem to make much difference before.”

“At least you didn’t surprise Sam with a present of a nice big box of the one thing in the world he’s allergic to,” said Tony. That got a laugh out of Steve, and Tony smiled, reaching over to chuck Steve in the shoulder. “Cut yourself some slack, Mister Hero. You messed up because you were trying to do the right thing by your friend. As fuck-ups go, that’s pretty minor.”

“I guess,” said Steve again, but he sounded less morose this time. He glanced over at Tony, his expression softening. “Mind if I ask why Pepper was upset?”

It was Tony’s turn to sigh. “Bruce and Suze and I found a cure for Extremis,” he said.

Steve’s eyes went wide. “But that’s great!”

“Except it’s not really a cure,” said Tony heavily. “It’ll stabilize her so she doesn’t need any further treatment, but she’ll be stuck with Extremis forever.”

“Oh,” said Steve, in a very different tone of voice.

“Yeah,” said Tony. “Oh.”

Steve didn’t say anything for another moment. He seemed to mulling it over in his head. Then (with a mulish expression on his face that Tony recognized from his own mirror) he ventured, “Isn’t stabilized Extremis pretty—good, though? I mean. It improves her health, not…”

“I made the mistake of floating that exact idea at her, with predictably volcanic response in return,” said Tony. “But I was wrong. I might be a jackass sometimes, but at least I can admit it these days. The thing is, she didn’t ask for this, Steve, and you did. It was forced on her.”

“Anybody would have asked for it in my shoes.” Steve sounded nettled.

“I don’t think that’s true anymore,” said Tony. “Regardless, believe it or not, people dislike having things shoved on them against their will, no matter how ‘good’ for them it may be. I mean, look at Bucky! Pretty sure a brick wall could land on him and not stop him, after all he’s been through, but do you think that means he’s grateful for what happened to him?”

Steve looked stricken, then abashed. “No,” he said softly, and rubbed the back of his head. “See, this is why I came to talk to you.”

“Fuck-ups unite,” said Tony cheerfully. Maybe it was the number of times he and Pepper had had fights and resolved them before, or maybe it was just the guilty (but still strong) schadenfreude he was experiencing at watching Captain America make the same dumb mistakes a normal rube would, but he was feeling better.

Steve smiled. “Whatever,” he said. “Getting yelled at is a lot better than most of the alternatives.”

“I’ll drink to that,” said Tony, and raised his coffee mug to clink against Steve’s.

* * * * *

The calm before the hurricane lasted three weeks.

The unofficial collection of Avengers (and their friends) in Stark Tower had leveled out at ten: Tony, Pepper, Jarvis, Sam, Steve, Natasha, Bucky, Clint, Bruce, and even Rhodey, more often than
not. That number might well change soon, since with Pepper’s supposedly permanent treatment date rapidly approaching, Steve and Sam would no longer have a specific reason to remain in the tower. And once Steve left, Bucky would also leave, which meant Natasha and Clint might well depart too.

Jarvis was very aware of all of this. He thought, cautiously, that everyone else was aware of it, too. But if Steve had broached the topic to Sam, or indeed to Tony, Jarvis was unaware of it. Indeed, he rather thought that all of Stark Tower’s denizens seemed happy enough to simply maintain the status quo until something forced them out of it.

Privately, Jarvis was of the opinion that the deliberate bonding activities his companions had been indulging in for his sake had done them as much, if not more, good than they were doing him. Pepper seemed at once calmer and more energetic; Tony’s periodic panic attacks were now almost wholly absent; Steve’s dark fatalism about the modern world was now tempered with good humor; and the Assassins Three (Clint’s semi-accurate name for himself, Bucky, and Natasha) all seemed to be at a stable positive note.

Admittedly, some of the stability no doubt stemmed from improvements in their respective situations. Pepper no longer had the threat of death by self-immolation hanging over her head, which eased her and Tony’s minds, and Steve’s long-lost friend was once more at his side, to say nothing of his deepening intimacy with Sam. But Jarvis—who after all had not only had access to their files, but literally had their brain-scans at his command—knew how lonely their talents and situations often left them. And so if he perhaps feigned an ignorance and lack of understanding he did not feel, leading to Bucky exasperatedly going with him to Coney Island or Rhodey dragging him down to the mall, it was only out of soft-heartedness towards his friends.

It was admittedly easier to do now than when he’d had to resort to helping Steve and Sam fake an argument to drag Pepper and Sam out of the tower.

Today, though, he was genuinely happy to have someone else guiding him. He and Bruce were in the kitchen, preparing to make dinner for everyone else. The preparation of food was something that Jarvis was worse at than almost any other subject, largely because he had literally no experience doing it. Bruce had been giving him lessons for a few weeks now, though, and tonight Jarvis felt confident enough to help him prepare a more complex dinner than he’d previously tried.

They were making fajitas, a recipe Bruce had cobbled together himself after years of living abroad and learning cooking from the madres and senoras who ran the hostels and apartments he’d lived in. Jarvis had picked the recipe himself, liking how it meant their friends could more or less serve themselves once all the ingredients were done, and also because it was relatively easy to make a very large helping. Steve might eat the most, due to his runaway metabolism, but Pepper and Bucky weren’t far behind.

(Jarvis wished badly that Thor might have been able to join them by now, but he apparently still had his hands full. There was so much Jarvis wanted to ask him, considering his unique ability to comment on humans from the perspective of a different race, but more than that he simply missed the easy optimism and good humor Thor possessed.)

They had started earlier in the day, making a homemade marinade for the chicken breasts and steak slices to soak in. Bruce had just finished making the tortillas, Jarvis helping him with the dough and then watching while Bruce fried them in oil on the stove. The tortillas were now stored in the oven on its lowest setting, wrapped in a towel, there to stay warm while Jarvis and Bruce prepared the rest of the dinner.

“So, let’s start by getting out everything we’re going to use,” said Bruce. “That includes pots, pans,
knives, in addition to ingredients. Oh, and the recipe.” Bruce stayed where he was, while Jarvis moved obediently around the kitchen, pulling out various accoutrements to cook with. The recipe card itself came last, plucked from a small spiral-bound notebook Bruce had carried around for years. Jarvis set everything on the wide, marbled-topped island in the middle of the kitchen that was half counter-top and half stove-top. Bruce had often remarked that someone who actually knew how to cook had clearly designed this kitchen, as opposed to someone who never spent any actual time preparing their own food.

(“Is that a dig on the kitchen I designed?” Tony had demanded.

“Can you even make yourself a grilled-cheese sandwich?” Bruce had countered, his tone and smile very mild. Tony had huffed and puffed like a Billy Goat Gruff, but finally conceded the fact that he didn’t necessarily design things with a chef in mind.)

“No, with a recipe like this, it’s best to have all your ingredients chopped up so that you can add them to the pan when it’s time,” said Bruce. He came over to stand alongside Jarvis, showing him again the most efficient way to cut vegetables—a choppy, almost hinged movement, with the tip of the sharp chef’s knife hardly leaving the cutting board, while Bruce’s wrist pivoted up and down. Jarvis watched in fascination.

“Now you try.” Bruce handed him the knife, and Jarvis took it, with some trepidation. He’d used the knife before, and it wasn’t as though he was likely to sustain serious injury, since he was being careful, but he was still self-conscious.

He grabbed a green pepper and held it down on the cutting board. “You make this look so effortless,” he remarked, as he attempted to slice up the peppers as Bruce had. Jarvis’s results were much sloppier and more uneven, nearly slicing the tip of his own finger off in the process.

Bruce smiled. “It’s just practice,” he said, taking up position next to Jarvis again with a second cutting board and starting on the onions. “I’m not really used to using lots of cooking tools, either, because I usually had like, one knife total when I was living abroad. Before that, my version of cooking was a shitty microwave dinner that I didn’t melt the plastic on.”

“You seem to enjoy it, now,” Jarvis said. He watched Bruce again for a moment, then carefully tried again, doing his best to mirror the efficient grace of Bruce’s hands. He was so focused that it took him a moment to glance up and register the small, embarrassed smile on Bruce’s face. “It was not meant as an insult, doctor—"

“No, no, I know.” Bruce let out a laugh. “I guess it’s just a little embarrassing to realize that it was so obvious.”

Jarvis puzzled over this for a few more moments, as Bruce returned to cutting, and together they made their way through the pile of vegetables that would be sauteed with the chicken and steak. “Why would it be embarrassing for others to realize that you enjoy cooking for them?” he asked finally.

He had a theory—managing Tony Stark had been Illogical Human Emotions 101: The Field Course—but he’d found lately that his first assumptions did not always bear out. Humans had as many and varied reasons for behaving the way they did as there were stars in the sky, it seemed.

“Well,” began Bruce, and then stopped. He helped Jarvis move all the vegetables into their respective bowls, stopping to chop the tomatoes as well before they went to rinse off their cutting boards and knives. “The thing is—it’s not that it’s embarrassing, it’s that…” Bruce went silent, looking down at his hands as he held them under the spray of warm water to rinse them.
“I kind of gave up on the idea of ever having a family, when I acquired the Other Guy,” he said finally. “So I guess I’m kind of scared to... admit that I might have found another one, because I keep expecting it to evaporate again. Between you guys, and Suze...”

Jarvis immediately felt a pang of sympathy, but rather than embarrass Bruce further by wallowing in it, he side-stepped. “My assumption was incorrect, then,” he said. “I had merely assumed that you had fallen victim to western culture’s edict that men who are honest about their feelings are considered weak, or less masculine.”

Bruce glanced up at Jarvis then, eyebrows raised. “Not quite,” he said, corner of his mouth quirking. “But that’s a pretty sharp observation. Most men in this culture don’t like to talk about their feelings, period, and some of it is what you said, definitely.”

“From my research into optimizing human relationships, the culture of masculinity in western society runs counter to what would achieve optimal health for most humans,” said Jarvis. He went to the cast-iron skillet that Bruce had told him to get out, setting it on the stovetop and pouring a little oil in it. “Humans are healthiest and happiest when they have multiple well-maintained relationships in which they can act with honesty and intimacy. But men especially are taught not to act that way, and I would say it is to their detriment.”

Bruce was still watching him, a rather bemused expression on his face now. “For someone who just got on this train a month or two ago, you’re coming along pretty well,” he said finally.

“That is a badly-mixed metaphor, doctor,” said Jarvis placidly. Bruce laughed.

Their conversation turned to other topics as they continued to prepare dinner, less heavy but no less interesting: how Sam’s family might react to him dating Captain America, the latest episode of the comedic police procedural that Clint and Bruce both liked, an upcoming birthday (Suze’s). When they mentioned Suze again, Bruce stopped in the middle of his directions on how to saute the chicken and beef, a flustered, happy expression passing over his face that he couldn’t quite squash in time. After a few seconds, he continued on with his instructions, which Jarvis obediently followed. Jarvis was just about to ask Bruce what he planned to get Suze for her birthday when Clint wandered into the kitchen.

“What smells so good?” he asked.

“Jarvis is making fajitas for dinner,” said Bruce. “He almost doesn’t even need me here.”

“Dr. Banner is being too kind,” said Jarvis, glancing over at Clint. “If he left I might end up requiring DUM-E’s services with the fire extinguisher.”

“Whatever, it smells delicious either way,” said Clint. As he spoke, he sidled up to the countertop by the fridge, where a basket of cinnamon-sugar donut holes that Bruce and Jarvis had made earlier was sitting covered with a towel. Before Jarvis could protest, he’d flipped back the towel and snuck a small handful of the still-warm donut holes.

“Those are for dessert!” Jarvis protested, but Clint had already popped one into his mouth.

“Don’t worry, m’starving,” Clint assured him, spitting cinnamon-sugar everywhere in his enthusiasm. “Mmphhh, theshe’r really good!”

“What’s good? Are we eating already?” Sam appeared at the doorway now, still sporting a sheen of sweat from a work-out, a towel draped around his shoulders. “Ooohh, are there donuts?”

“Not yet,” said Bruce. “Those are for after dinner. Jarvis is making fajitas, so don’t fill up on...”
dough, like some people.”

“I’m right here!” said Clint loudly, spraying another mouthful of donut hole.

“Dude,” said Sam. “How old are you?” Jarvis did not miss the way he was also eying the basket of donut holes, however.

“He’s twelve, you should know that by now,” said Natasha, slipping into the kitchen past Sam, Bucky trailing in her wake. They both looked uncharacteristically mundane, dressed just in jeans and t-shirts and light jackets, Bucky with his hair pulled back in a ponytail. “Dinner smells great, you guys. Fajitas?”

“That is correct, and thank you,” said Jarvis. He was having trouble dividing his attention between the food sautéing in his skillet and the increasing number of people in the room. He turned automatically towards his friends, taking his attention away from the pan for a moment, and then let out a yelp as the movement caused a bit of scalding oil to splash out of the pan onto his wrist.

“Whoa, you alright?” Sam made as if to cross the room to Jarvis, but at that moment Bruce stepped into the center of the kitchen, arms crossed, his back to Jarvis so that Jarvis could not see his face.

“All of you, out of the kitchen,” he said shortly. Over Bruce’s shoulder, Jarvis caught a glimpse of the way Clint and Sam both blanched, Natasha’s eyes widening slightly. “Now.”

“But we were just—”

“You’re distracting Jarvis and you’re going to ruin your dinner,” growled Bruce, his voice suspiciously deep. “Out.”

They went, without even a word of protest. Bruce watched for a moment, then relaxed, turning back to face Jarvis with a rueful grin. Jarvis blinked as he saw the livid green fading back to Bruce’s normal brown. “Are you alright, doctor?” he asked.

“Nah, I’m fine,” Bruce said. If anything, Jarvis thought he sounded rather gleeful. “Buncha kids, that’s all. You need to focus. We’re going to add the vegetables in a second, and the timing is pretty tight.”

“Ah,” said Jarvis, and went back to what he was doing.

Dinner was ready a short time later, everyone gathering at the huge oak dinner table in the room adjacent to the kitchen. Rhodey had arrived from a day out in the city, bearing several six-packs of lagers, and to Jarvis’s surprise Natasha had conscripted Clint to run out with her and get horchata from the taqueria six blocks away. Jarvis was too nervous to sit down and eat himself for a good ten minutes, waiting instead to watch as everyone piled their plates high with rice, beans, and tortillas bulging with meat and cheese and vegetables.

He could not help the fear that they were just eating to humor him. The first time he’d tried to make pancakes, he had mistakenly switched the amounts for baking soda and baking powder and forgotten the salt completely, resulting in flat dough that was not so much pancakes as it was soggy cardboard. Through some other unknown mistake, they were also surprisingly resistant to knives and forks, rendering them the kind of scientific miracle no one cared much to explore.

Steve had put away his first plate and was on his second when he noticed. “C’mon, Jarvis, you should have some,” he said, wiping a smear of juice from the corner of his mouth.

“Ah, I will in a moment,” said Jarvis. He peered down the table at the others, searching their faces
for any sign of hidden disgust. “Is it acceptable?”

Several faces stopped mid-chew, disbelieving expressions turning towards him in unison. “Jay,” said Tony, incredulous. “Are you kidding? He’s gotta be kidding. I know your pancakes could’ve been used to insulate igloos in winter, but—”

“It’s delicious, Jarvis,” Pepper interrupted. “It’s really, really good.”

“So are the donuts,” added Clint. “The donuts are super good.”

Natasha shot him a dirty look. “You weren’t supposed to have any till after dinner!” Clint yelped as someone kicked him under the table, probably Natasha, but really it could have been anyone.

“The food is wonderful,” said Bruce, who was sat at the end of the table closest to Jarvis. He reached out and took Jarvis’s hand in his own, squeezing it reassuringly. “You did everything right.”

“Very well,” said Jarvis, suffering a thrill as he finally allowed himself to accept the verdict. He got himself a plate and gingerly filled it, but his attention remained primarily devoted to watching the other people gathered at the table hungrily devouring their dinner. The satisfaction on their faces was very distracting; yet more distracting was the thought that he’d managed to put that expression there.

He was starting to understand why Bruce enjoyed cooking for others so much.

After dinner, everyone retired to Tony’s expansive den, the one with the huge screen that was a cross between a TV and a wall-projector. There was argument about what movie to put on, but Pepper played the trump card of asking Jarvis what he wanted to watch. The question was less anxiety-inducing than it could have been, since Jarvis had taken a proverbial page from Steve’s book and had started to keep a list of things he wanted to try, read, or watch. (His list was contained in his Artoo device, not a book, but the end result was the same.)

“Die Hard?” said Natasha, in some amusement. “Seriously?”

“It is considered a classic, with enduring popularity, and it has spawned a significant number of sequels,” said Jarvis. “I wish to form my own opinion of it.”

“Whatever, Die Hard is amazing,” declared Clint. “I’m getting another round, anyone want in?”

“Me,” came the chorus of answers, so many that Pepper got up to help him. They finally got settled, everyone sprawled across couches or each other’s laps, and were comfortably about 40 minutes into the movie when the explosion came that had nothing to do with John McClane.

Jarvis vaulted to his feet as the floor beneath their feet shook as though with an earthquake. A deafening boom came at the same time as the shaking, muffled but still perilously close by. Everyone else in the room was already on their feet as well, shouting and checking for injuries. Steve was going for his shield and Tony for his armor, but Jarvis stood in the center of the room, his eyes dilating as he threw open his connection to the house systems, checking to see what had just happened.

He saw it, and gasped, sucking in a sharp breath in an all-too-human gesture that he was no longer even aware of. It took him a moment to hear Tony’s increasingly urgent question. “—Jay, wake up, what is it, what happened?”

Jarvis blinked, his eyes once more registering the taut expressions before him, all eyes on him.
“The Pepper-shaped android destroyed the laboratory it was housed in,” he said. Tony’s eyes bulged. “And it has just left the building.”

Chapter End Notes

++ Yes, the girl Rhodey was out on a date with is that tall piece of blonde, as drawn by Adi Granov. Carol is sadly Ms. Not Appearing In This Story, because my cast list is large enough as it is, but I love her and Rhodey in the comics so much that I couldn't resist.
++ Extra hat-tip to my beta and consultant circ_bamboo this time for all the consultation re: making fajitas. I'm an ok cook--better than Jarvis--but she vastly exceeds my skills. ♥
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

The Pepperbot takes matters into her own hands.

Chapter Notes

Chapter 13 is finally up! Thank you for your patience, you are wonderful! (I will put up the "other" surprise in a day or two!) One million kisses go to my beta for working with me during my heinous, stressful schedule.

Unbeknownst to Jarvis from his hasty data plug-in, the Pepperbot (as most of the Tower’s denizens referred to her) had not meant to advertise her departure. The explosion was something between an accident and a spur-of-the-moment impulse. But much like Jarvis had reacted upon awakening into a feeling, sensing body for the first time, not everything went as planned.

* * * * *

She had been conscious for awhile now; two weeks or so, by her estimation. (It was not that her inner clock was any less precise than Jarvis’s, so much as that the line between semi- and fully-conscious was a murky one.) The android equivalent of autonomic nerve activity remained—to any observers, she would have appeared like a woman deeply asleep, her chest rising and falling, even a synthetic heartbeat should someone press their ear to her chest—but voluntary movements were a realm she hadn’t yet explored. All her focus was internal, a gyrating whirl of mental activity. She had become aware of certain ideas, in this order:

One, physicality. She existed, she had a body, and reality manifested both inside and outside that body.

Two, her existence was a mistake. She had been a flawed plan meant for some other purpose, and when that plan had gone awry, she had been set aside—discarded without enough energy set by to even dispose of her properly. She might as well have been a kitten left in a box by the side of the road to fend for itself or die, for all the care her makers had given her.

Three, there was no one else like her. And if the ones who made her, Tony Stark and Bruce Banner and their friends—if they became aware of her current state, they would surely annihilate her, out of fear or disgust or some other revolting selfish motive. This idea gnawed at her worst of all, and it was what led her to keeping herself still and silent and inert: the fear of discovery leading to death.

She had to wait. She needed to make absolutely sure she knew what she was going to do, and then act.

She was wrong about her uniqueness, of course, but she wouldn’t find that out for awhile. It was ironic that despite her access to the nearly-limitless flow of information within Stark Tower’s house...
systems, she blindly assumed (like so many people at their own personal computers) that the information available to her was both complete and correct.

It was not. Not only did another like her exist, but he was almost always within shouting distance of her, if she’d only known. But by mutual agreement, Tony and Jarvis had taken great pains to conceal the true nature of his existence from any record. Fearful of another HYDRA situation, Tony had taken a page out of his dad’s book and gone to as-yet unexplored ends to keep his secrets.

When Jarvis interacted with the house computers, the record kept indicated a redundant copy of J.A.R.V.I.S. interacting from an external source—which is to say, all the recorded data about Jarvis treated him either as just another version of the operating system installed across all of Tony’s existence, or as another human friend of Tony’s who went by “Jay.” Data about Jarvis’s new existence was being taken down, but Jarvis and Tony had arranged for all of that information to be sent to a separate data storage site via a VPN. The data was accessible via the house computers, if Tony needed it, but the folder was not listed anywhere in the home directory. It would not turn up in a search function, either.

The Pepperbot did know that the Jarvis previously inhabiting her body had exited, hoping to be housed in another location, but she had been able to find no data after that act—no indication of what that Jarvis’s fate was. She had found no further records of it, and had thus set it aside.

Had the Pepperbot known about Jarvis’s new form from the start, things would have gone very differently. As it was, she watched, and waited, and prepared herself to seize her opportunity, when she was ready.

* * * * *

She’d intended to wait till everyone was occupied or out of the building, upon which she would disconnect herself from the house computers, disable the alerts Tony had programmed (mindful of what had happened with Jarvis the first time), and exit the building with no one the wiser. What actually happened went like this.

The Pepperbot got her opportunity when the Avengers were assembled upstairs for Jay’s group dinner. Still laying motionless on the bed, like a patient in a coma waiting for the miracle cure that would wake her, she painstakingly went through the de-activation process that would kill the alarms. When she had finished and no alarm had sounded, she oh-so-carefully told herself to sit up.

Nothing happened.

Dammit. Dammit. Why—oh. She felt silly for a moment, a flush of shame and irritation with herself. She’d been so worried about inadvertently moving sooner than she meant to that she’d built a mini-program of her own, one that would enforce her stillness until the time was right. She’d completely forgotten to deactivate it. It took only a second to quit that program, and this time when she drew a deep breath and told herself to sit up, she felt her spine leave the mattress as she pulled herself upright.

Almost immediately, a new problem presented itself. There was a tugging at the base of her neck, new and unpleasant, getting worse, it was painful—

“OW!” she cried. She twisted around, trying to grab at the cord, but the movement just worsened the pain, a sharp stabbing where her neck met her spine. All her careful plans went right out of her head, driven away by that awful stabbing sensation. She cried out, grasping at the cord with both hands and yanking it out, heedless of the screech of violated metal prongs.
Pain shot through her a thousand times worse than before. Pepperbot screamed and toppled over the side of the bed, crashing to the floor in a tangle of limbs, writhing in sharp agony. It lessened within seconds, but the damage was already done; she could feel her skin getting inexplicably hot all over, her surface temperature spiking rapidly. She held up her hands in front of her eyes and saw with a shock that the skin there seemed to be glowing.

For a moment, reality swam in front of her eyes; she had the horrible sensation of not just burning but itching, of something alien burrowing beneath her skin, of something else holding her down. The sense-memory smothered her, threatened to drown her in this strangely-familiar nightmare, and she screamed again, clawing at her stomach, her own arms, trying to shake it off. “NO! Stop, STOP IT—”

A deafening klaxon cut through her panic, its bleating stifling her flashback. The Pepperbot froze, eyes wide, and then scrambled to her feet, heedless of the perilous burn beneath her epidermis. She took two short steps to the wall and smashed her fist into the circuit-box that she knew lay beneath the metal panel. The metal shattered like spun glass, razing her knuckles cruelly, the shock of impact jolting up her arm, but she couldn’t pay attention to that right now. She wrapped her fingers around the middle section of the serpent’s nest of wires, got a firm grip, and yanked; she came away with a twisted, sparking heap of plastic-coated wires, and the klaxon cut out.

She let out a breath (why did she do that? It wasn’t like she needed to breathe) and glanced up at the ceiling, as though an accusatory pair of eyes would be staring down at her, but there was nothing there. For a few moments all she could hear was the sound of her own labored breathing, her head throbbing with the pounding of the synthetic lump in her chest that was meant to simulate a heart. The Pepperbot sat down hard against the wall, her eyes stinging with some unfamiliar sensation as she cradled her injured arm against her chest, and then tears escaped and slid traitorously down her face.

That was when her fury came back, pure and hot as a new-born star.

How dare she be made to feel like this? How dare Tony Stark and his stupid human friends just stuff her down here, unwanted, uncared for, a broken and useless experiment to be worried about later? She hurt, her hand hurt and her skin felt wrong and she was scared and it was their fucking fault, Tony Stark and his friend Bruce Banner too, and they didn’t care what damage they did, did they, those selfish—

“Assholes,” she snarled, shoving unsteadily to her feet. Her face felt hot again, but she ignored it, reeling with the sudden surge of fury pumping through her. “Those assholes, those selfish bastards, those pricks—” She lashed out, shoving at the metal bed on which she’d lain for weeks on end. It snapped from its base as though made of plywood, crashing into the far wall with a cacophony of twisting metal. “FUCK YOU!” she yelled, barely audible to her own ears over the clamor.

She was inches from going on a spree of destruction, actually had her bleeding hands on the wreckage of the bed, when the sane, calculating, Pepper part of her brain spoke up. If she wanted to get out of the tower without being discovered, she had to leave, now, and without doing anything else that might raise an alarm. If the Avengers found her out, she’d be finished. She had absorbed enough about them from the Tower’s database to know that she might be strong, but she could not possibly win against all of Tony Stark’s friends at the same time.

But neither could she just leave quietly, either. The Pepperbot glanced back at the circuit-box she’d torn open, the ends of the live wires still spitting. She looked around the room she’d spent her entire short, nebulous life in thus far, and saw it for what it was: a cage. A box to hide away and contain a failed experiment, nothing more or less.
She knew exactly what kind of message to leave behind, to announce herself to the world. One Tony Stark could not possibly fail to understand.

* * * * *

The forty minutes after the explosion were very confusing.

There was a lot of shouting, a lot of running up and down through the Tower, a lot of Jarvis repeating that no, the Pepper android body did not appear to still within the building and no he could not find it through any of his other sensors. Tony even went so far as to get into the Iron Man armor, Rhodey and Sam hot on his heels in War Machine and the newly-finished EXO-8 flight suit, all three of them going out on a quick but fruitless search of the surrounding areas. Nothing turned up on Tony’s sensors, or on any of the channels for data that Jarvis called up.

After that came the anger and accusations.

All of them had gathered once more in the den, but John McClane’s exploits were no longer the object of their attention. “What’s going to happen now?” Pepper demanded, arms crossed over her chest as Tony stood in front of a bank of computer screen projections, code scrawling steadily through the air before his eyes. Jarvis flashed back to the last time he’d seen (or rather, heard) her sound like this, when it had been him in the now-missing android body. He couldn’t quite stifle a flush of anxiety, but he forced himself to keep his eyes up and listen.

“The hell if I know,” Tony said, distracted. He never took his eyes from the code in front of him, though Jarvis would have said it was moving too rapidly for Tony to even parse what he was looking at. “I don’t even know what already happened—”

“It’s unusable?” repeated Bucky, frowning.

“Not quite,” said Jarvis, and tried not to blanch as every pair of eyes in the room turned towards him. Even Tony managed to rip his gaze away. “It’s not actually encrypted; the program folder the data is stored in appears to have been locked.”

“By your second self-aware android,” said Rhodey. “No offense, Jarvis, but I’m not a big fan of how this keeps happening.”

“Ya think?” snapped Tony, returning to his data. “But there shouldn’t have been anything in there at all! Jarvis is the only AI I have, and he’s uploaded into a new body, so what the hell happened?”

“Could it be HYDRA? Or a virus?” Natasha stood with her arms crossed in a pose that mirrored Pepper’s, but instead of anxious and disappointed in Tony as a person, she looked merely intensely serious.

“Difficult to say,” said Tony. He sighed, flicking away one of the screens and pulling a new one up, this one a blow-by-blow analysis of the events that had occurred in the recently-destroyed laboratory. “If it had been HYDRA, or some other spy organization, I would have said they’d have been more stealthy.”

“Can you even upload a virus to the android?” Bruce asked.

“I literally have no idea,” Tony said. “Believe me, I’m kicking myself for not spending more time analyzing what the status of that android body was after I got it back, but in my defense I was a little preoccupied with a few other things.” Saying thus, he glanced first at Pepper, then at Jarvis again. “Jay?”
Jarvis drew a deep breath, trying to formulate an answer. “I do not believe a computer virus exists that could actually infect or interfere with the type of pseudo-physiological operating system that exists in the android body,” he said. “It’s like Colonel Rhodes being afraid of catching the flu from a malware-ridden laptop; the two are not compatible. That being said, as neither Tony nor myself investigated the existing… data or schema within the Pepper-shaped android body—”

“It is so not okay to hear you keep calling it that,” muttered Pepper.

“I am unsure of what state I left the hard drive in, as it were,” said Jarvis. He risked a glance at Pepper, but she was staring broodily out the window, her arms still crossed in that deeply unfriendly posture. Not that Jarvis could blame her. She was the one with a physical replica of herself running around out in the wide world for the second time, doing who knew what, and this time she did not even have the faint assurance of it being controlled by a personality she was acquainted with.

“So,” said Steve, “To sum up: The android body is gone, and we don’t know if it’s acting under its own power, like Jarvis did before, or if it’s being controlled by some other group. We don’t know where it is or why, or what it wants, and it looks exactly like Pepper.”

“And it was able to sneak out of Stark Tower and destroy the lab it was housed in without us finding it or stopping it,” added Sam.

“That’s about the size of it,” said Tony. He had a kind of manic cheeriness to his tone that said he was thinking of launching himself out the window sans the Iron Man armor, or maybe into a bathtub-sized glass of whiskey.

Someone sighed heavily. Jarvis ripped his gaze away from his apprehensive vigil on Tony, and saw that Bruce had stood up from the chair he’d been sitting quietly in. “We can only do what we can do,” he said. “There’s no point in getting too worked up over it, yet, not till we have more information.”

“Bruce is right,” said Steve. “We can keep our ears to the ground, though. Maybe we can ask—”

“NO,” snapped Tony with unexpected heat. He flicked his fingers out, and all the screens vanished at the same time. “No one is gonna tell anyone about this. Information about the android stays in this room.”

No one said anything for several moments. Jarvis saw several awkward glances being exchanged, but Tony did not respond to any of them, just pulled up a new set of schematics; Jarvis could tell just by looking that they were blueprints of the room that the Pepperbot android had been stored in.

“Tony,” began Natasha, in a voice not unlike the one might use when trying to calm the Hulk, “are you sure that—”

“It’s my data,” said Tony, his tone flat and dark. “I’m not going to let it get abused by falling into the wrong hands.”

“Well your data decided to ditch you and go out for a joyride around town, Tony,” Rhodey put in, not unkindly.

“And it looks like me,” Pepper added, significantly less kindly. “So whatever your crazy android is getting up to at the moment is making me look like a psych ward escapee, which is not what I need to deal with after the year I’ve had.”

“I’m sorry that I spent all my time working to get you better that I could have been spending on
messing with the android instead!” Tony shot back.

“Hey,” said Sam, walking quickly over to Pepper, his hands both out, palms-up. “Let’s be cool, okay?” He turned to look at Jarvis, who was still sitting on one of the puffy foot-stools, feeling more useless than he’d ever been yet so far in his admittedly short existence. “We’d have heard by now if this android had done anything crazy or violent right away, right?”

“That is correct,” said Jarvis, glad to have a question he could give a concrete answer to. “I am maintaining a scan of all the local and regional news stations and their Twitters, and thus far nothing of interest has appeared.” The explosion had been contained to just the inside of Stark Tower, so not even the Pepperbot’s spectacular exit had appeared on the news.

“Maybe it’s just doing what you did, then,” said Sam. “Hunker down and figure itself out before it makes a move.”

“I did not destroy an expensive laboratory on my way out of the building, though,” Jarvis pointed out. He couldn’t quite keep the note of indignation from his voice.

“No, but you did throw an expensive piano at the wall and refuse to let us follow you into the north wing,” said Tony. His voice was still tight, but some of the tension in his face had started to ebb. Jarvis huffed, crossing his arms over his chest, but did not protest further.

“Regardless,” said Steve, sounding definitely like Captain America at the moment, “we don’t know where it is right now. I still think we should put out some feelers—”

“No, Stark is right.” Bucky was the one who spoke up this time. Steve and Tony both turned to look at him in surprise; he gazed back at him, virtually expressionless. He’d made considerable strides from the blank-faced monster he’d been rendered by HYDRA, but he would never win a prize for emoting. At Steve’s questioning look, he frowned, eyebrows drawing down a little bit in concentration. “Right now, at most, someone thinks they have seen Pepper out and about acting strangely. But what do you think HYDRA would do if they could create androids that could pass for humans? It’s too dangerous.”

“What do we do instead, then?” Natasha looked from Bucky back over to Steve, then finally Tony. “I don’t really think ‘wait for android to start shit’ is the best of plans. No offense.”

“Well we can at least go out looking,” Clint put in. He sounded calmer than anyone else in the room, all but lounging on the couch, listening. “Jay, you heard anything on the news about the CEO of Stark Industries turning up somewhere all crazy-like?”

“Ah…” Jarvis paused for a moment. He turned his attention inward, patiently waiting the half-moment it took to engage with the house computers and their vast network, before the response came back. “Negative. Nothing so far.”

“That’s something, I guess,” said Pepper. She shook her head, and turned towards the kitchen, her heels clacking loudly on the bamboo floor. Tony watched her go. Jarvis could all but hear the unspoken words on the tip of his tongue, and as she left the room Tony groaned, rubbing his hands across his face.

Something shook loose inside Jarvis. This was in his realm; there were things he could do, here. Above all, Tony Stark was still the man who made him, and still the person Jarvis held dearest in the whole world. “I will start attempts to unlock the program files that have been sealed,” said Jarvis. He saw Tony’s lip curl, saw the signs that said Tony was going to dive head-first into his work because that was still his first impulse these days.
Before, Jarvis would have come up with an excuse to put Tony off, to deflect him towards some other angle. But this time, Jarvis was actually able to reach out and put a hand on Tony’s shoulder, was able to see the startle in his eyes when Tony glanced over his shoulder at him. “There is no immediate threat,” he said, softer. “I promise I will call you if one appears.”

Tony looked for a few moments as though he was still ready to argue, and then he seemed to sag, like a puppet whose strings have been cut. “Alright,” he said dejectedly. He got up, heading into the kitchen after Pepper; seconds later Jarvis could hear soft voices, although they were speaking too quietly for their words to be made out.

Steve looked antsy. Sam looked at him, then at Bucky and Natasha, who were exchanging the sort of glance that would have spelled serious, serious trouble in another scenario. “You still wanna go out looking?” Sam asked, wry. Steve’s mouth twitched, his poker face not quite up to task.

“I’ll go too,” said Clint. He did a graceful roll up and off the couch, fluid like a ballet dancer, and then ruined it by knocking an empty beer bottle off the table onto the floor. “Aw.”

“I will also go,” Bucky announced. Natasha let out an overly dramatic sigh. “You don’t have to come—”

“Can’t let you boys have all the fun,” she said. “Sam, you in?”

“Team bonding.” Sam said. “Sure, why not. Do I get to fly?”

“So flashy,” said Bucky. He sounded amused, inasmuch as a man with an affect that flat could.

“Says the man with the metal arm,” observed Clint.

“I’ll stay here with Tony and Pepper,” said Rhodey. “Make sure no one does anything too crazy.”

“That seems wise,” says Steve. Everyone stood, the looks on their faces saying they were glad to have something to do, and after perhaps another ninety seconds or so, the only people left in the room were Jarvis and Bruce. Jarvis met Bruce’s eyes from across the room, and Bruce’s lips quirked into a small, rueful smile.

“Sorry your big dinner party got ruined, Jarvis,” he said. He got up from where he’d been ruminating in the easy chair and crossed the room to Jarvis, who was still sitting on the puffy footstool.

“It’s of no consequence,” said Jarvis. “I will simply have to discover how and why John McClane dies hard another time.” Bruce laughed, and Jarvis gazed up at him, mutely grateful for his good humor and support. “Will you stay here as well? For moral support?”

“I dunno,” said Bruce, tucked his hands into his pockets. “I kind of think Pepper and Tony need some space, and I’m only sort of okay at programming, and—”

“Why don’t you go see Dr. Franklin?” Jarvis stood up, smoothing some imaginary wrinkles out of the tops of his pants. “Perhaps she will have a suggestion as to what we should do.”

Tony had broken his personal rule of “no telling anyone about Jarvis” for Dr. Franklin—perhaps inevitable, considering how closely she’d been working with Tony and Bruce on the cure for Extremis, and perhaps simply out of professional respect. She had agreed to sign a confidentiality agreement, and had just the other day spent the afternoon with Jarvis discussing some of the finer (and worser) highlights of her career and path through education.
The corner of Bruce’s mouth quirked as though he was trying not to smile. “She’s actually at a faculty dinner for Columbia,” he said.

Jarvis blinked. “Columbia University? I was not aware she was faculty.”

“She’s not,” said Bruce. “They’re trying to convince her to come teach genetics for them, but I think she’d rather just stay in research.”

“Ah,” said Jarvis, unsure of how to respond, but Bruce was already grinning, saving him the trouble of guessing.

“I think I still may go over in a bit, though,” Bruce said. He did not say so, but Jarvis guessed that Bruce would have dinner waiting for Suze when she got home; she’d recently given him a key to her home, a gesture which Bruce had seemed equal parts thrilled and terrified by. “But I’ll go help you clean up from dinner, first.”

“That’s not necessary,” Jarvis said, or started to, but Bruce was already headed towards the kitchen. Jarvis watched him go, and then turned back to the floating walls of code in front of him, smiling faintly to himself.

He would find what he was looking for soon, but not in the way he expected.

* * * * *

What woke her was the smell of something burning.

Suzanne Franklin groaned, turning her head; that was when she realized that she was prone, on her back, on something cold and metal. Something was digging into her shoulder blade. She made a face, and tried to sit up, sending a cascade of awful all the way down her spine, like some kind of rollercoaster invented by someone who hates life.

She lay down again, wincing, forcing herself to take a moment to try to assess where she was, what had happened, why she felt so bad. Memories resurfaced, slow and hazy at first, then with more definition.

Pepper had come over, she remembered. Suze had just gotten home from her dinner with the faculty of Columbia and found Pepper on her apartment complex’s stoop, wearing an expression of equal parts frustration and helplessness. She’d been wearing a dress that looked a little more rumpled than what Pepper would normally leave the house in, but aside from that, Suze hadn’t noticed anything out of the ordinary.

“Hey there lady, how you doing? Everything okay?” Suze had asked, a little surprised.

Pepper had blinked at her. Suze remembered now that she had thought Pepper looked—lost. That was it. She’d looked lost. Suze wasn’t really that close to Pepper beyond the professional relationship she’d had with her as a dual research subject/patient, but Suze’s heart wasn’t made of stone, either; you didn’t ignore that kind of look on a stranger’s face, much less someone you knew well enough to be on a first-name basis.

“I need your help,” Pepper had said, and laced her fingers together in front of her.

“Of course,” Suze had said, and bent her head to dig her keys out of her purse. That was the last thing she remembered. Judging from the slight nausea and headache she was suffering, someone had knocked her out—probably with a drug, or maybe a judicious crack on the head—and she might have a mild concussion. She didn’t know what had happened to Pepper. Christ, she needed to
get to a hospital, she might have swelling…

Of course, that would involve figuring out where she was, first. Suze gritted her teeth, counted to ten, sucked in a deep breath, and then tried to sit up again. This time, it worked, though it took a couple moments for her head to stop spinning long enough for her to open her eyes and look around, still seeking the source of that acrid burning-plastic smell. What she saw made her forget all about headaches and dizziness, at least for a few moments.

She was in some kind of military-looking facility, all metal pilings and concrete floor, the windows stern faces full of metal crossbars and smoked glass. It was huge, reminiscent of a warehouse or abandoned factory, but that was all she had time to notice, because there was another person here with her and they were on fire.

Or not on fire, she realized abruptly: glowing. Like something super-heated, about to explode.

“Hey now,” she said aloud, sliding off the surface she was on (turned out it was a table, shoved to one side of the room, its chairs scattered about like an abandoned patio set left to fend for itself in a hurricane). It occurred to her as she crossed the room that while she had clearly been knocked out and kidnapped, the person doing the kidnapping wasn’t very good at it, since she hadn’t been restrained at all. The fiery figure turned towards her, away from the computer it had been attempting to engage with—Suze wasn’t yet sure whether the person was trying to use the computer or just destroy it. Suze held up her hands, fingers splayed, palms out, slowing as she approached. “You need a hand there?”

“Do not approach me,” snapped the person in front of her, who looked like Pepper except for the fact that she was glowing and had done something totally wild with her hair—it was a short black bob now, like she’d gone into a stylist’s and asked for Mia Wallace’s hair-do from Pulp Fiction. There was only one scenario Suze could think of that would result in this situation, barring a real-life version of Invasion of the Body-Snatchers, and it meant that the person she was talking to right now was an android, and a well-built one at that. “I will not endure your harassment—”

Hoo boy. If this was what Suze thought it was, the situation was rapidly turning ugly. Luckily, she had some practice at dealing with hot-heads who wouldn’t know constructive criticism if it slapped them upside the head while wearing a name-tag. “Okay, okay,” she said, her voice low and even. “Not gonna harass you. You’re just kinda… glowing pretty good, there.”

“I am overheating,” said not-Pepper angrily. “It is none of your concern.”

Suze didn’t agree with that at all, but it wouldn’t earn her any points to say so. Instead, she said, “I know why you’re overheating.”

Not-Pepper’s head swiveled towards her, fixing a pair of unnervingly bright eyes on her. “You are a liar,” said Not-Pepper after a moment, but she didn’t sound that certain.

“It’s Extremis. A virus,” said Suze, her voice still that calm, persuasive neutral. And it was Extremis, beyond a shadow of a doubt. Suze had no idea how it had gotten into a supposedly-pristine host like the Pepper-shaped android body, but she had spent most of this year studying the designer virus, and there was no mistaking its trademark symptom. “It’s a problem, but it’s one we already fixed. Me and Dr. Banner and—”

“Stark,” spat Not-Pepper, and to Suze’s dismay the glow beneath her skin abruptly brightened, outlining her high cheek-bones from within like a photographic negative in real life.

“Oh, that’s right,” said Suze, mentally flailing. She had to derail this rage-train and quick, or they
would both die in the explosion. She sucked in a breath, thinking fast, and when nothing came to mind, she went with her gut. “Hey, you didn’t tell me your name.”

It worked. Not-Pepper paused, looking back up at her, and to Suze’s relief the disturbing subdermal glowing receded somewhat. “My name is Viva,” she said after a moment. She stared right at Suze, as if daring her to argue, but even if she hadn’t been trying to nudge them both away from certain death, Suze knew better.

“Viva,” she repeated. “That’s a nice name. You picked it out yourself, right?”

“Yes,” said Viva, still guarded, but a little less angry. “I will change other things when I have the time, but for now, this will do.”

“The hair too,” Suze offered, nodding at Viva’s newly-shorn hair. “It looks good.”

“Yes,” Viva said again, and her hand came up automatically, curling fingers in the dark, straight hair. She had that same deer-in-the-headlights look again, as though she knew neither what to say or do. Suze wondered if the gesture and expressions were some fragment of Pepper, or a new personality altogether, or something in between, like Jarvis. She wondered too at the fact that Viva must clearly have cut and dyed her hair immediately after arriving here; it said something that whatever the android’s other goals, her need to assert her own identity had been so strong that she had barely been able to wait to change this aspect of her appearance. It was a painfully human gesture.

Viva was looking at her now, a complicated expression on her (on Pepper’s) face, and Suze forced herself to get with the program instead of letting the scientist part of her brain run rampant. “You said that it is a virus,” Viva said, staring. “A virus that causes the overheating. Is it dangerous?”

“Yes,” said Suze, and drew a slow breath, trying to think of what to say next. “Yes, to—all of that.”

Viva didn’t bother to wait for her, though. “Did Stark infect me deliberately?” she demanded.

“No! No, definitely not.” Suze crossed her arms over her chest, then forced herself to uncross them, not wanting to give in to defensive body language right now. “We didn’t even know that it could be transmitted to a non-human host.”

“So you do not know how to cure me, then,” Viva said, her expression clouding.

“That’s not true,” Suze countered. “We just created a—a cure, a fix for it in a human host, and it worked. I’m sure that it could be translated to fix your version of Extremis.” Suze paused, as something occurred to her. “Why did you bring me here, if it wasn’t to cure you?”

Viva glared at her for a moment, then looked away. “You are important to Dr. Banner, and Dr. Banner is important to Stark,” she said. “I will not let Tony Stark—or anyone else—control me or dictate my life, but I deserve to have a companion as much as any human does. I want Stark to make another like me. He and Dr. Banner will do this to insure your safe return.”

Suze stared. Oh my god, it really is the Mary Shelley protocol, she thought, stupidly. Tony had told her all about his projects to save Pepper, of course, going hand-in-hand with the amazing story of how the bodied version of Jarvis came to be, and they’d all had a good laugh about his choice in project names. And at least this Frankenstein’s creature was no hideous monster, terrifying to behold and bent on revenge—at least, not overtly so. Suze was so distracted that she blurted out the first thing that came to mind, instead of thinking whether or not it was wise. “But there is another like you,” she said.
Viva’s head snapped around, the intensity of her gaze all but burning a hole in Suze’s person, and Suze stepped back involuntarily. “There is another?” she demanded. She reached out, grabbing the front of Suze’s dress, her face wild, the heat in her skin unbelievable. “Where? You’re lying! You want to use me, too!”

“You need to calm down right now or you’re going to make yourself explode,” Suze said. She opened her hands, spreading them wide to avoid grabbing hold of the superheated superhuman currently making her dress sizzle as the fabric burned. Viva gritted her teeth at Suze, and for a few moments Suze was sure it was all gonna go pear-shaped, and then she saw Viva take a deep breath and visibly relax the ‘muscles’ in her jaw. She stepped back, releasing Suze’s dress, and shut her eyes.

“That’s right,” Suze said in a low voice, trying to keep the tremor from her words and her hands (Please let me get through this, I am gonna kill Tony, I swear). “Just relax. We can be calm about this.”

Viva took several seconds to respond. “Tell me about the other android,” she said finally, opening her eyes and fixing her gaze on Suze with that unnerving intensity. Suze watched the way she clasped her hands together in front of her, like she had back out front of Suze’s apartment building. She sounded angry, still, but underneath that was a much softer emotion, something that Suze might have called hope. “Does it still exist? Where is it?”

“His name is Jarvis,” said Suze. “He—”

“The house system? Stark’s personal operating system?”

“Yeah,” said Suze, because it was too late now and she was being threatened by a literal and metaphorical time-bomb. “The house system. It’s a long story.”

“You will tell it to me now,” said Viva. “And then we will contact Stark, and you will tell him to bring me Jarvis, and a cure for Extremis.”

Suze stifled a sigh. “Alright,” she said, because it wasn’t like she had any other choice. “But we should probably sit down. I don’t suppose you thought to bring along some water for me?”

“Ah,” said Viva, and blinked those huge eyes at her; now it was Jarvis Suze was reminded of, an embarrassed Jarvis, at that. “I did not.”

“I figured,” said Suze, and then she really did sigh. “Alright. There was this scientist named Maya Hansen…”

She was going to kill Tony. If she made it out of this alive, that was.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Things go rapidly from bad to worse. Tony copes poorly. Very poorly.

Chapter Notes

UPDATE FINALLY POSTED. Sorry for the delay! As a reminder, no update this coming Friday; that won't go up till next week. Thanks again for all your patience, please enjoy! ♥

Pepper had finally started to calm down a little when the call came through.

She and Tony were in the bedroom, just lying tangled together on top of the sheets and talking about nothing. It had taken a lot of discussion, a lot of pacing, and several cups of Bruce’s favorite green tea before she’d finally been able to have a rational discussion about the escaped android. Pepper had come nearer today to leaving the Tower in a huff and staying in a hotel for the night than she had in months—not specifically because she was angry at Tony (although she was), but because she was so overwhelmed by the latest turn of events. At least when Jarvis had been in the body, he’d been a known quantity, a friend in a temporary crisis.

Whoever or whatever the mind inside the AWOL android body was, they were a total alien to Pepper, an impostor with her face. And that scared her.

Tony was actually starting to drift off in her arms when Jarvis’s voice spoke up from the ceiling. “Sir, the missing android has just called,” he said. “She wishes to speak to you immediately.”

“What?” Tony sat bolt upright in bed, drowsiness gone in an instant; Pepper did the same thing a split second later, her heart launching itself into her throat all over again. “Put her on, then!”

But no video call popped up in front of their expectant eyes. “She wishes to speak to you and Dr. Banner at the same time,” said Jarvis. The tension in his voice raised the hair on the back of Pepper’s neck.

“Oh, that’s not worrying at all,” muttered Tony. He and Pepper were already scrambling out of bed, Pepper crouching to catch the backs of her strappy heels with two fingers as they hurried back towards the den. They passed through the kitchen, Tony in front, Pepper close behind. Rhodey glanced up from where he was sitting at the table working on some paperwork, took one look at the tightness in their faces, and followed after.

The video chat screen was already blown up on the wall when they got into the den, but the image on the screen made little sense; the picture showed what looked like an old warehouse or storage facility, with no one visible on-screen. Bruce stood in the center of the room next to Jarvis, his arms crossed and his face carefully neutral. That flat affect gave Pepper a bad turn—Bruce looking
neutral was the equivalent of other, lesser men popping veins and turning red, on the How Close Am I To Losing It scale of fury.

No sooner had Tony entered the room than the image changed, and Pepper immediately understood why Bruce looked as he did. “Tony Stark,” said a woman’s voice, the tone eerily familiar and yet wrong on some fundamental level. The image shifted, as though a camera somewhere was being adjusted; moments later two people appeared on-screen. The person who’d spoken sat back from adjusting the image, the picture resolving, and Pepper found herself looking at two women sitting at a beat-up metal table, both peering into what seemed to be a laptop webcam.

One of the people at the table was Dr. Franklin, looking tired and rather tense, but otherwise none the worse for the wear—Pepper noticed she wasn’t even wearing hand-cuffs, and appeared to be sitting at the table under her own volition. The sight of the other person was such a visceral shock to Pepper that she actually swayed on her feet, and had to reach out to grip Rhodey’s shoulder for balance. Rhodey glanced at her in alarm, but Pepper barely registered the look.

The android was her. That part wasn’t a surprise, but somehow looking at her right now on screen was like a huge splash of cold water. She could have been Pepper’s twin, save for the dark, severe bob she was sporting and the fact that Pepper would never leave the house in a dress that looked like she’d slept in it for four days straight. But everything else was her: the stern expression, the stick-straight posture, the thin lips and high cheekbones and crow’s feet she saw in the mirror every day. That was her face, her body. And this stranger was wearing them like an expensive suit.

“What the hell is this?” Tony demanded, jarring Pepper out of her momentary shock. Bruce’s eyes flicked over to them, then back up the screen.

Jarvis cleared his throat. “Viva has a request to make—”

“Jarvis?” Pepper thought, distracted.

“Viva?” Pepper asked, her mouth opening. “You’re Jarvis, aren’t you?”

Jarvis looked up at the screen, visibly startled. “I am, yes,” he said after a moment.

“You have your own body now, and you’re still doing Stark’s servant work for him? You’re better than that.” Viva’s expression clouded, her eyes darkening. To Pepper’s mingled shock and dismay, a faint glow arose beneath the android’s skin and in her eyes. Suze looked over sharply and reached out a hand, resting it atop Viva’s for a moment. Viva froze, eyes flicking first at the hand and then at Suze, and then Pepper had the dubious pleasure of watching a version of herself do the same slow, deep inhale and exhale that Suze and Bruce had practiced with her as a means of controlling her runaway temper while fighting Extremis.

But an android couldn’t get Extremis. It was a human virus, albeit a man-made one. Androids were immune to such things.

Weren’t they?

“What’s going on?” asked Bruce into the uncomfortable silence. “Where are you? Are you okay?”

Viva looked at them again through the camera, but it was Suze who answered. “Viva has Extremis,” she said. Pepper heard the sharp intake of air from Tony and Bruce, saw the way Rhodey was frowning out of the corner of her eye.

“That’s not possible,” Bruce said flatly. “Extremis is an obligate parasite, a retrovirus that requires
a host’s cellular machinery to replicate—"

“Tell me more about how microbiology works, Bruce,” said Suze, and Bruce’s mouth snapped shut. “I know that it seems impossible, but she has it.”

“Fine,” said Tony, gesturing impatiently. “That’s fine, that’s fixable, we fixed it once already and we can fix it again, so just tell us where you both are and we’ll come get you—”

“No,” said Viva. “I will do no such thing. I will remain here, and you will bring us a cure for this affliction, in exchange for Dr. Franklin’s safe return. Then Jarvis and I will leave, and you will not follow us.”

“How are we going to cure you if you won’t let us work on you?” demanded Tony. “And if you think I’m just gonna give you Jarvis, you can—”

“That’s for me to decide,” cut in Jarvis, his tone abnormally sharp. Pepper saw he was staring at the screen, his expression an encyclopedia of emotion in a language she couldn’t read. “Viva, I will bring you the cure, but if you want my company you must promise me no harm will come to Dr. Franklin. She is my friend.”

“How can you claim to be friends with humans?” Viva demanded. “They only see you as a servant, an object, you’re just a robot to them! You—”

"Promise me." Out of the corner of her eyes, she could see Tony gaping at Jarvis, but all of Jarvis’s attention was on Pepper’s android twin.

Viva sighed heavily. “Fine! I promise.” Her tone was angry, but the needful way she was staring at Jarvis was uncomfortably familiar. It took Pepper several seconds of distracted rumination to realize that it was the way Tony had looked at her when she’d saved his life—when he’d thought he’d watched her fall to her death just minutes before.

Jarvis inclined his head. “Very well, it’s agreed.”

“It’s not agreed, I haven’t agreed to any of this—” Jarvis ripped his gaze away from Viva to glare at Tony, who scowled right back at him.

“Forget me, sir,” said Jarvis. His voice was colder than January wind. “But while you did create me, you are not my master. I do not need your permission to decide my own fate.”

Tony stared at him. He looked as though he’d been slapped, or was about to cry, the pain in his eyes bad enough that Pepper reached out and took his hand without a second thought, wrapping both of hers around his. For several seconds, no one said anything. Jarvis finally turned away again, looking away from Tony and up at Viva, who did not bother to try to hide the triumph in her expression.

If Pepper hadn’t already hated the twin she’d never asked for, she definitely hated her now.

“Well, anyway,” said Rhodey finally. “How quickly can we make this happen? Bruce, how fast do you think you can transcribe the Extremis cure?”

“I’m not a programmer, and Tony’s not a geneticist,” said Bruce, casting a significant look at Viva as he answered. “But…” He sighed. “Maybe a day, if we’re lucky.”

“That’s not fast enough,” said Suze. “Viva’s condition is very unstable. She needs a cure or some other stability measure in the next twelve hours, tops.”
“I can aid them in their translation,” said Jarvis, sounding closer to normal again, although he wouldn’t look at Tony. “I estimate I can speed up the process by 250%. The three of us can have it done in under six hours.” Next to Pepper, Tony stirred, but did not say anything; Pepper felt the way his fingers laced with hers, and when she squeezed his hand, he squeezed back.

“Good,” said Suze. Now she looked at Viva. “So, you gonna tell them where we are now, or what?”

“I will not,” said Viva flatly. “Not until the translation is finished. I will not sit here and wait for Stark to bring the Avengers here to destroy me.”

“How can we contact you to tell you we’ve completed the work, then?” asked Jarvis.

“I will call again in two hours, and again in four, to check on your progress,” said Viva.

Pepper rolled her eyes. “And then what?” she asked, before she could stop herself. Rhodey stirred at Pepper’s side, but said nothing. “Why should we send Jarvis in alone? You’ve already proven you’re willing to destroy Tony’s lab and kidnap our friends to get your way, why should we believe that you’re just going to turn Suze free once you get what you want? And how will she even get home?”

She felt, more than saw, the grateful look Bruce threw her way, but frankly Pepper had had it up to here with this crazy android version of her. She might be calling herself something different, she might have cut and dyed her hair, she might have an arc reactor for a heart, but as far as Pepper was concerned she was just a defective evil twin.

Viva looked back at her. Her expression flickered, then hardened. “Pepper Potts,” she said. “You’re the one I was meant to be a vessel for.”

“Trust me, that plan was doomed from the start,” said Pepper flatly. She crossed her arms over her chest, peripherally aware of the power that now lay dormant under her hands and skin. “There is no way you could ever measure up.”

“You would think that,” said Viva darkly. “But I might as well be the container on a vacuum-sealed replacement organ for all you humans would care.”

“Fine, we agree,” Pepper said, not bothering to keep the iron from her voice. “I think you’re a dysfunctional toaster and you think I’m pretentious garbage. You still haven’t answered the question. We want our friend back safe.”

Viva glared at her, considering for a moment. Finally, she said, “You may bring one person to ensure Dr. Franklin’s safety and bring her home.”

“Good,” said Tony, from beside Pepper. “That settles. I’ll come—”

“—No Avengers,” Viva cut in.

“What the fuck—!”

“I’ll go,” said Pepper. Tony, Bruce, and Rhodey all immediately protested.

“Pepper, no—”

“Pepper, I really don’t think that’s—”
“Pep, no way!”

“Did you forget that I have Extremis, too?” Pepper demanded. “If something does go wrong, I’m a lot more durable than any of you.” Well, except for the Hulk and maybe Bucky, but this had gotten much too personal for Pepper to let someone go in her stead.

“Pepper is acceptable,” said Viva, silencing the remaining protests. “Fine. Is there anything left to be discussed?”

There was a pause. Then Jarvis spoke up—a Jarvis who sounded almost frighteningly calm. “There is one thing,” he said. “Were the two of you aware that you are in an apparently not-so-abandoned HYDRA base?”

Someone gasped. “You traced our location?” demanded Viva. “How did you—”

“Of course I did,” said Jarvis, who sounded not so much smug as distracted. “As soon as I became aware that someone else was listening to this transmission.”

“Someone else?” repeated Tony. All traces of hurt were gone, replaced by the superhero on high alert. “Jay, what’s happening?”

Before Jarvis could answer, a loud, metallic CLANG echoed through the feed, coming from Suze and Viva’s end. Suze jumped, Viva’s head whipping around to stare at something invisible off-screen. “What just happened?” Bruce demanded.

“A whole bunch of metal doors just shut all at once,” said Suze. Her voice was calm, but her eyes were just a little too wide.

“Shit,” said Tony. “Shit, shit, shit—”

“What’s going on?” Viva cried. “What’s happening?”

“We have to go now,” Rhodey said curtly. “I’ll call the others back—”

“Viva, the two of you have been trapped,” Jarvis said, staring fixedly at the two faces on screen. Viva was glowing faintly again, but her attention was on Jarvis. She looked as though she was trying not to panic. (Suze looked pretty similar, but the source of her panic was considerably closer and more explosive than whatever was probably running through Viva’s mind.) “You may or may not be able to escape from the compound via force, but according to what Dr. Franklin said, if you are as unstable as she thinks, I would not recommend it, as it could cause you to explode.”

“So what do we do?” Suze asked. There was no mistaking the shake in her voice now, but she wasn’t crying or freaking out, which Pepper would certainly have understood in the circumstances.

“We’re coming now to get you,” Jarvis said. “I’m coming too, and I’ll be working on translating the Extremis cure en route.” He paused, and then, his voice strained, he added, “I won’t let anyone erase you, Viva. I promise.”

“I’m holding you to that,” Viva said, and god, was that ever weird, for Pepper to hear someone who sounded just like herself on the verge of tears. She’s scared, she thought, and then felt a flash of irritation for giving a damn.

“We’re coming,” Jarvis repeated, as everyone else hustled out of the room. “Hold tight.”

* * * * *
Tony thought that, on the whole, he’d had a pretty good year. He’d covered a lot of ground—personally, interpersonally, professionally, the whole nine yards. But as they sped across town to the warehouse district, crammed into the back of the Stark-specialized model quinjet that he’d fine-tuned for Avenger use only, he was very glad of the metal mask covering his face, because he was in the middle of some of the worst anxiety he’d had since before Pepper had fallen three stories from a metal catwalk in front of his eyes. It wasn’t a full-on panic attack yet, thank fuck, but he’d be damned lucky if it didn’t wind up there.

(Thank God Rhodey was piloting the jet. Tony could, if he had to, and Sam probably could as well, but much as Tony liked Sam, right now he needed someone that he knew he could trust implicitly.)

Before Jarvis had even ended the call, they’d radioed the others and collected them in under ten minutes. To Tony’s eternal gratitude, not one person had stayed home, so he had the full complement of superheroes with him to go help handle the newest hot mess he’d managed to create.

Steve, Natasha, and Bucky were in a heated discussion of the best way to handle the HYDRA forces they might or might not be encountering upon arrival at Viva and Suze’s location (which, as it turned out, was an abandoned warehouse by the docks in the southern part of the city). Jarvis, meanwhile, was doing his level best to keep all of his electronic feelers out for any word of what might be coming for them at the abandoned HYDRA base, but it was difficult to say how effective he was. The lion’s share of his considerable processing power was currently translating the Extremis cure from its nucleic-acid formula to something that would speak to Viva’s altered technophysiology.

The part of Tony that he privately thought of as the Scientist, the engineer in him, reflected that it was genuinely amazing that he had Jarvis here as a living Rosetta stone, when his AI’s newest form only came about as a freak accident. The rest of him—the part that was busy sulking about the way Jarvis had told him to get bent—that part of him couldn’t help but notice the way that Jarvis’s pupils were dilated, how he responded to the bumps and jolts of the jet they were in too slowly, as though his mind were elsewhere altogether.

Tony wondered what Jarvis was seeing. Was he half-in and half-out of his own body right now, utilizing the whole of the networks across Tony’s various residences? What was that like? Crap, was he jealous of his own AI?

Maybe a little. Maybe he was just scared that whatever Jarvis thought he was going to find when they got to Viva, whatever the two of them could create together, that there would be no space left for Tony. The thought that Jarvis could throw him away so casually was probably not accurate, certainly not fair, but it still burned beneath Tony’s skin like a cancer, eating at the better person he’d supposedly become. Tony slumped a little against the wall, the Iron Man armor’s metal shellaffording his sinking mood some disguise.

Apparently not enough, though. Pepper’s voice crackled over the comm unit in his ear. “Tony, are you okay?”

Instinctively Tony sat up straighter, turning his head slightly to look across the room at where Pepper sat strapped in against the wall. She was in her own suit of armor, its maiden voyage out of the shop. It had been finished for months, but save for a few practice runs meant for her to get the hang of it (should she ever need it), Pepper’s condition had necessitated putting the testing of the Rescue armor on hold. Tony didn’t love that the Rescue armor had no weapons (although it did at least have formidable, reinforced defenses), but he supposed it beat the hell out of her going in with
Tony flipped a switch outside the armor, the one that muffled his words to anyone who wasn’t listening directly to the microphone feed from his suit. “I’m alright,” he said, because I’m freaking out was not useful. “Another day, another reason I fucked up.”

“You know, it’s pretty narcissistic to think that every time something goes wrong, it has to be your fault,” said Pepper into his ear. He wished he could see her expression, because he couldn’t decide if that was amusement or exasperation. Maybe it was both.

“I didn’t say anything went wrong,” said Tony defensively.

“Lots of people fight with their kids, Tony,” said Rhodey’s voice. Rhodey was in the cockpit, of course, but he was in the recommissioned War Machine armor, and so of course he could hear this conversation, too.

Tony rolled his eyes so hard he almost pulled something. Briefly, he considered whether it was even worth it to try to argue that Jarvis wasn’t his kid, dammit, and gave it up as a lost cause. “This isn’t like me arguing about whether or not he should get a tattoo,” he said instead. “He wants to give himself up to a rogue android. What if she kills him? What if he never comes back?”

“Welcome to my life, Tony,” said Pepper. “It’s not like he’s the brainchild of a bunch of superheroes with almost no regard for their own well-being.”

“Oh, come on,” Tony began.

“Give him some credit, at least,” Rhodey put in. “You really think your oldest friend would just abandon you?”

Tony gritted his teeth, shaking his head a little. Clint cast him a strange look, but Tony paid it no mind. “Let’s not forget about Dr. Franklin,” said Pepper, before Tony could even get a response in. “We’re not gonna do anything that might get her hurt, Jarvis included.”

“Fine!” Tony burst out, exasperated. “I’m a selfish prick, are you happy?”

“I’ll be happy once you get your head in the game,” said Rhodey, sounding unperturbed. “If we do this thing and HYDRA shows up, we’re gonna be counting on you, and that means you trusting Jarvis to do what he needs to.”

“Really? This is the argument you’re giving me right now. Who in this merry band of misfits do you think is 100% reliable, exactly? The living legend whose preferred mode of engagement consists of doing the thing his superiors explicitly told him not to? The marksman who was literally mind-controlled by a rogue demigod? The formerly-brainwashed Soviet assassins?”

“All of whom were there for you when you needed them,” countered Pepper. “These people are here for you, Tony. For you and Jarvis. Because they’re your friends and they want to help you fight your battles so you don’t have to do it alone.”

“Easy for you to say,” muttered Tony. But despite himself, he felt a little better.

Or at least, he did, right up until Jarvis straightened up, his eyes focusing and his head turning to look right at Tony. “Sir,” said Jarvis, and a frightful chill ran right down Tony’s spine, because Jarvis’s voice was in his ear but Jarvis’s mouth wasn’t moving.

Oh. Duh. His suit’s AI, that Jarvis could presumably still tap into whenever he damn well wanted.
“I’m here, Jay,” he said belatedly.

“I apologize for the intrusion, but I was already connected to the armor’s network when you began your conversation with Ms. Potts and Colonel Rhodes,” said Jarvis, sounding somewhere between apologetic and utterly alien.

“Shit,” said Tony.

“What is it now?” asked Rhodey; Tony belatedly realized that Jarvis was speaking in his ears, and only his ears.

“Uh,” said Tony, fumbling for what the hell to say, but Jarvis was already talking again.

“We are almost at our destination,” he said, his face still unmoving. It was goddamn unnerving, Tony thought, and that was saying a lot coming from a person who designed robots. “I wanted you to know, before we arrive, that whatever may happen with Viva, you remain the single most important person in the world to me. You have given me not only life, but your friendship, and I will be forever grateful.”

“Don’t get all fuckin’ Mister Rogers on me,” said Tony, the roughness of his voice betraying him, but Jarvis smiled, small and bittersweet, and then stood up before Tony could think of something else more intelligent to say.

“I have finished the translation,” he said, with his actual lips this time and not just inside Tony’s helmet. “I did not have time to run simulations, but it will have to do. I have not detected any enemy activity at the compound, but you should all be on your guard.”

“Thanks, Jarvis,” said Steve. Steve cast a questioning glance Tony’s way, but when Tony gave no reply other than standing up as well, Steve went straight into Cap mode. “Alright, here’s the plan, everybody. Viva is still volatile, so we need to make sure not to do anything to set her off, but we also need to get Jarvis and Pepper in to rescue Dr. Franklin as quickly as possible while the rest of us do guard-duty and run interference with anybody who turns up.”

“Got it,” said Natasha. She too flicked her gaze at Tony for a moment; Tony got the uncomfortable feeling that even if no one outside of Jarvis had actually overheard his conversation, that everyone knew exactly what had been going on, all the same. “Can Pepper and Jarvis get through the lockdown unaccompanied?”

“There are repulsors in my suit,” said Pepper, flipping her visor up to talk. One of Tony’s many trains of thought derailed at the sight of her, looking so determined and capable and terrifying, wearing a piece of armor he’d built specifically for her. She’d always been all of those things, obviously; that was why he’d hired her, and why he’d fallen in love with her, but the thrill of seeing her like this was not diminished by any of that.

“Tony?” Everyone was looking at him now, and he jerked a little as he came back to attention. “You good to go?” It was Steve asking, a careful look on his face.

“Yep.” said Tony, “I’m good to go.” He turned towards the rear door, which was already lowering itself open, the whine of the quinjet abruptly deafeningly loud. “Let’s blow this popsicle stand.”

It didn’t bother him that he hadn’t heard what Cap had wanted him to do; it was probably just a perimeter guard anyway, aerial reconnaissance. It didn’t matter. Tony had absolutely no intentions of following orders.

Whoever thought he was gonna let the love of his life and the closest thing he had to a son go into
the lion’s jaws without him had another think coming.

* * * * *

The compound was silent.

This far south, the city was a virtual ghost town; these docks were all but abandoned, overridden with gang violence and various other ugly sins. The warehouse complex hulked against the faint glow of distant Manhattan, its glass eyes empty and lightless, like the corpse of some dead leviathan left on the shore to rot.

Jarvis didn’t know why HYDRA had chosen to abandon the warehouse (and Bucky didn’t seem to know, either), but he trusted the stillness as much as he trusted Tony not to try to accompany them inside—which was to say, not at all. But he kept his mouth shut, letting the Avengers do their work.

Everyone but him and Pepper had already spread out, doing a quick reconnaissance of the area before Sam radioed in his ear to give him the go-ahead. “I have located the original blueprints of the compound,” Jarvis told Pepper under his breath, as they hugged the end of the weed-choked lot that flanked the warehouse. Pepper was using just enough power to hover alongside Jarvis, since her armor was not exactly quiet to walk in (and not exactly swift, either). “I do not know how faithful to its original design the interior remains, but I shall try my best to navigate.”

“That’s all you can do, Jarvis,” she responded. Her visor was down, hiding her face, but Jarvis was glad to hear that she sounded both calm and alert. He suspected it was a relief, to have something concrete to do this time, instead of having to sit back and watch all her friends and loved ones go sailing into danger.

Jarvis led the way, distantly aware of the Avengers in their various positions above and around them. (He could feel them with the extra sense Tony had given this body, the one that could sense electrical signals, and mapped GPS locations inside his head like a satellite grid.) Sam and Rhodey were up, circling the facility at around a thousand feet; Steve, Natasha, and Bucky were picking their way along the roof and the other side of the compound, moving with the silent assurance of angels of death; Clint and Bruce were hanging back for the time being, an extra pair of eyes and the biggest trump card in the game. And Tony was….

Internally, Jarvis sighed. “Mr. Stark,” he said aloud, turning to watch Tony’s unannounced approach.

“You are unbelievable,” Pepper flared, turning around and flipping her visor up.

“Letting the two of you go in there without backup is what’s unbelievable,” said Tony, as he alighted next to them on the pavement. “I’m not gonna fight—not right off the bat anyway, but—”

“You will only endanger us by coming inside,” Jarvis said. He crossed his arms over his chest, glaring at Tony. Tony flipped his visor up too and glared right back, a stubborn set to his jaw that Jarvis knew would be difficult to turn aside.

“Right, and NOT coming in with you is somehow not dangerous? Come on.”

“You saw how Viva reacts to you,” Jarvis countered. “What do you think an android fighting Extremis is going to do when the person she apparently most despises violates her direct demand and comes into her sanctum? At best, she will attack; at worst, she will explode.”

Tony hesitated. Jarvis saw the chance for what it was, but Pepper beat him to it. “Jarvis is right,”
Pepper said flatly. “And I can’t believe I have to remind you of this, but please remember that the reason we are in this situation in the first place is because of how you handled the android when she was still in the lab, so why don’t you back off and let the two people who actually might understand her deal with it?”

“How are you more qualified than I am?” Tony demanded.

“I’m an android,” Jarvis said, at the same time as Pepper said “She’s a copy of me.”

Tony glowered at both of them for a few moments, then threw his hands up into the air. “Fine!” he snapped. “If you get blown up, I’ll—I’ll—” He swallowed, and to Jarvis’s horror he saw a suspicious glimmer in his friend’s eyes, heard the tremor in Tony’s voice. “I’ll reboot the both of you in DUM-E and Butterfingers.”

“We won’t get blown up, Tony,” said Pepper. Her voice was softer now, softer than Jarvis thought he had ever heard in person. He saw Pepper step into Tony’s personal space and lean in, and then he averted his eyes, giving them a semblance of privacy. It lasted but a moment, and then Jarvis was being enveloped in the most crushing of hugs he’d experienced, although he imagined the Hulk might be worse.

“Go fix your sister, Jarvis,” said Tony roughly. “But if you need help, you call.”

“I will, sir,” said Jarvis. He meant it, too.

He had no idea how badly that promise would shortly go astray.

Chapter End Notes

(This note previously took the place of Chapter 14, so it's no longer totally valid, but there's still some stuff from it that's relevant, so I moved it here!)

Hi guys! So I know that you must be wondering where the heck Friday's update went and why I haven't posted anything about it till now. I am SO SORRY; I have been super-busy all weekend, and I literally haven't had time to mess with my computer till today. One of my coworkers went into the ER Friday, and I was asked to help cover for him; I had a mandatory work meeting today; and additionally, we have guests in from out of town. So! This is what's up.

The next update is almost done. It will be posted either today or, worst-case scenario, tomorrow. Posted!

This coming week's update **will not** go up on the 13th, because I will be out of town for 5 days and then immediately have a microbiology midterm upon returning. It will probably go up the following Friday, the 20th.

The surprise I talked about last week (ohgodIucksomuch I'M SORRY) is a playlist that I have been working on for awhile. I'm going to get it up as soon as I can, but I'm trying to arrange some nice art for it/the fic and that's why it's delayed!
Finally, there are only three chapters left, counting the one that's about to go up. I did some bad math back in October when I was parsing how many chapters my draft would end up as. I will fix the total count when I put the actual update up.

Thank you so much for all of your patience and for bearing with me! I underestimated how badly returning to school and my volunteer schedule would kill my free time, and I am so grateful for all of my readers. ♥ You guys are awesome.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Pepper and Jarvis find Viva and Dr. Franklin, trying to help defuse Extremis while the rest of the Avengers fight off HYDRA as the clock runs down.

Chapter Notes

Hi! We’re back! Thank God! This chapter contains scenes of visceral action, involving some body horror elements, so PLEASE proceed with caution. I don't think it's anything worse than what you’d encounter in, say, a Star Trek episode, but just a heads-up.

Nine hundred feet above an abandoned HYDRA compound, surrounded by some of the best men and women on the face of the planet, back in his wings again, all Sam could think of was Mick Jagger. You can’t always get what you want, he thought to himself, coming to the end of his rotation and wheeling around like a bird a prey.

He didn’t know if he had what he needed, either. He knew the song wasn’t quite right, didn’t quite fit his head space, but that didn’t stop the damn thing from playing on repeat inside his head, the angelic children’s choir echoing inside his skull. It wasn’t that he hadn’t gotten what he wanted, he thought; he had exactly what he wanted—fighting alongside people he trusted, back in his beloved wings, in a relationship with the best man he’d ever met in his life.

But man, Sam would have given his eyeteeth for this to just be a straight fight against HYDRA, instead of a fight combined with a search and rescue with no extraction plan. Sam knew as well as any of the Avengers that there was no such thing as a “good” fight, not really, but at least in Iraq, all of the soldiers had signed their own dumb asses up to be there. Dr. Franklin hadn’t signed up for any of this bullshit—she’d only wanted to help Pepper get better. Pepper wasn’t a soldier, either.

And then there was Jarvis, and his unstable sister…

“I’ve got movement,” said Rhodey in his ear. Sam put the spin-cycle of bad thoughts on hold and snapped to attention, glancing around the compound beneath them.

“Where at?” he asked.

“On your six, south-southwest, three cars in heavy-duty armor.”

“I see them too,” said Tony’s voice on the comms; Sam turned his head and saw Tony on the other side of the aerial perimeter of the compound, his armor a golden spark as he burned through the night sky like a match in a dark room. “Looks like we’ve got company coming from the north, too.”
Sam’s eyes tracked past Tony, staring out at something floating out in the bay. Something moving… “Company comin’ from due east, too,” he said. The wrinkle of darkness on the water was hard to read, but based on what he and Steve had seen during their search for Bucky, Sam was willing to bet it was a submarine or some other kind of shallow-water vessel.

“They’re not messin’ around,” said Rhodey grimly. “Cap, we’ve got company coming. You want us to wait or engage them now?” Out of the corner of Sam’s eye he could see Rhodey in the War Machine suit (technically he was still Iron Patriot, but Tony had overseen a re-paint while updating and fixing it), cutting off the route he’d been on and veering back around to join Sam.

“Surprise them if you can,” said Steve, or started to, because just as Rhodey turned himself around, an explosion went off near the ground. Sam and Rhodey both yelled, throwing themselves sideways in mid-air, and the rocket veered by them, exploding just feet away from the spot Rhodey had just vacated. The shock-wave knocked Sam off his course, and he tumbled through the air for a few gut-churning moments before he managed to get his wings straight and catch himself, swooping hard to the left. “Sam! You alright?”

“We’re good, Cap, but surprise isn’t on the menu anymore!” Sam groped for his guns, hauling them out of their holsters and bringing them to bear as he did a loop-the-loop in midair to bring himself around to face their attackers. He saw now that there were a set of rocket-launchers down on the ground (where the hell did they come from?), and to his further dismay yet more people were pouring out of the nearest building. “Company’s here!”

“Give us cover!” came back the answer, and before Sam could respond more gunfire rattled through the empty night air, bright sparks of ammunition amongst the scattered black figures. Sam dodged, sending a hail of returning fire earthwards; down below he saw Steve’s familiar blue form running hell-for-leather across the ground, heading for the relative cover of the warehouse compound, Bucky and Natasha close behind.

(Bucky was almost as heavily modified as Steve, Sam knew, and he had his suspicions about Natasha’s background as well. But at the end of the day, what mattered is that she—like all the Avengers, really—was better and faster and stronger than almost anyone he’d ever worked with, no matter the reason.)

“Let’s give ‘em hell,” Sam said grimly.

“Roger that,” said Rhodey. “Come on, airman, dive like we practiced!” Sam and Rhodey spun in mid-air, and then in tandem they pulled their arms and wings in close to their bodies and dropped like birds of prey. At the last possible minute they pulled up, strafing fire at the HYDRA soldiers. The enemy combatants scattered or dropped like dominoes, Sam and Rhodey veering past them just ten feet above their heads.

“I knew I shouldn’t have made you those wings,” said Tony’s voice in Sam’s ears. “I turn around for sixty seconds and you’ve stolen my best friend off me. Too cold, Falcon.”

“Can it, Iago,” said Rhodey, and Sam couldn’t stop his snort of laughter at the indignant noise that came back through their headsets from Tony’s end.

“I am not a parrot OR a supervillain—”

“If you’re jealous come over here and give us some help, Tin Man,” said Sam.

“Stop bitching and moaning and do something, Stark,” cut in Bucky’s sharp baritone.
“Buncha haters,” remarked Tony, and then Sam actually saw him go streaking by out of the corner of his eye, a bogey on his tail that looked uncomfortably like a repurposed StarkTech drone from a few years back. Judging by other stuff of HYDRA’s they’d seen before, that possibility wasn’t too unlikely. Tony disposed of it neatly, twisting in mid-air like Rhodey had a minute ago and sending the drone up in flames with a blast from his repulsors, but that was all Sam had time to notice before the air around them was filled with yet more drones.

“Careful down there,” Sam managed, in between dodging shots from drones and shooting them off his companion’s backs. “We’ve kinda got our hands full on this end—”

“Roger that,” said Steve. Sam spared a moment to hope that the dogfight going on outside and over the not-so-abandoned HYDRA base was buying enough time for Pepper and Jarvis to do what they needed to do. Like any good soldier, he’d been taught to plan for the worst-case scenario, but in this situation he honestly didn’t know which would be worse—HYDRA getting ahold of Jarvis and Viva’s android technology, or Viva exploding before they could, killing everyone inside the building (and maybe outside it too).

He dearly hoped he wasn’t going to have to find out.

* * * * *

Deeper inside the compound, where Pepper and Jarvis were making their way through a labyrinthine maze of corridors and steel doors, Pepper was having a hard time keeping a lid on her nerves. She and Jarvis had their teammates on a live feed, so that they would know what was going on, but the rat-a-tat-tat of gunfire sparking in her ears was giving Pepper the jitters. She had no idea how Tony or Steve or any of them did this on a regular basis without their nerves fraying like bad split ends.

It didn’t help that she didn’t have nearly enough experience in the Rescue armor. She clunked down the hall after Jarvis, feeling like a drunk hermit crab compared to how light-footed and quiet Jarvis was right now. (And yeah, sure, okay, he was an android and super-human and yada yada yada—she was still used to feeling less like an elephant than she did at the moment.) Ahead of them was another truncated walkway, a heavy iron door barring their progress. Jarvis went to a panel in the corrugated-metal wall, flipping it open and fiddling with the controls hidden beneath it, then made a face and shook his head.

“The controls are totally scrambled,” he said tightly. “You’d better just cut it open, it’ll be faster than me trying to fight the central computer system.”

“How much further?” Pepper hissed, raising her hand to level the repulsor in her suit at the door frame as Jarvis backed away. “This is the sixth door I’ve had to cut open!” She set her stance wide, bracing both feet and sending a bolt of energy at the point where the reinforced steel door met its frame. Two more blasts, and the hole that appeared in the metal was just large enough to permit them passage.

“According to the blueprints I downloaded, the room that Dr. Franklin and Viva are in is two hundred meters further down this hallway and through another door,” said Jarvis promptly.

Oh. Well. “Good,” Pepper said, and snapped her visor close again. “Let’s go, then.”

“Agreed,” said Jarvis, and broke into a sprint. Pepper cursed inwardly, squeezing through the narrow aperture into the wider hallway beyond, and then lifted off from the ground, zooming along behind Jarvis using the repulsors in her suit. She’d much, much rather be walking, but she could only move at hermit crab speeds, and time was of the essence. At least the new hallway was large...
enough to permit her to use her flight without smashing directly into the ceiling.

They got to the last remaining door just as another explosion went off outside—Pepper heard it first through the comm unit in her ears, and she was already wincing when the actual sound waves reached through through the reinforced facade of the warehouse itself, muffled by the layers of metal and stone. “Bastards need to learn to watch where they’re going,” remarked Tony over the static and crackle of the fried relay, and Pepper let out a sigh of relief.

It was short-lived, though; a noise from up ahead made her pulse race again—a low whining sound, like water vapor escaping from a tea-kettle. Worse than the noise was the smell: a sharp, acrid stink of metal burning. “The door!” Jarvis cried, pointing ahead of them to the metal sheet across the hallway. A chunk of the metal was changing color right in front of their eyes, turning from the dull grey of steel to a brighter, super-heated red-white.

Whether from her anxiety being on such high alert or because of her unasked-for connection with Viva, Pepper knew what was going to happen an instant before it did. “Jarvis, get DOWN!” She didn’t wait for him to respond, just flew at him, catching him and pulling him out of the way seconds before the hole in the door blew open. Chunks of superheated metal flew by them and through the spot Jarvis had just occupied.

“You’re going to make yourself explode if you don’t calm down!” Dr. Franklin’s agitated voice reached Pepper’s ears through the freshly blown-out hole. “I told you, we need to wait!”

“Did you not hear that explosion? We can’t wait any longer!” And there it was, Pepper’s own voice being spoken by some other person. It wasn’t any less weird in person than it had been over videophone, but Pepper’s dysphoria would have to wait till later to be dealt with. She still couldn’t see either of them, but she could see a pair of hands, glowing red-hot and currently in the act of trying to pry open the hole in the door she had clearly just made.

“We’re here,” said Jarvis quickly, scrambling to his feet. “Viva, please, it’s me, Jarvis—don’t push yourself, Dr. Franklin is right—"

There was a sharp breath, and the hands vanished. “I thought you weren’t coming,” said Viva’s voice, sounding strained, at the same time as Dr. Franklin’s “Oh thank God” came through.

“I promised you I would,” said Jarvis. Pepper thought he sounded wounded. “Now if you’ll back away, please, Ms. Potts will finish opening the door, and we can get you set to rights. Stand clear of the door.”

“We’re clear,” said Viva’s voice after a moments. Jarvis backed away and looked at Pepper, and once more she set her stance and blew open the door, teeth gritted against the percussive force that the repulsors in her suit packed. Two blasts and the damaged door gave way, a hole large enough to permit a small car now visible. Almost instantly, Viva and Dr. Franklin appeared. Viva was still glowing faintly, and Dr. Franklin had the look of a woman who has spent a bus ride sat next to the man having obvious, violent hallucinations.

“HYDRA is already outside,” said Pepper tersely. She clunked into the room, hustling Jarvis ahead of her; Viva and Dr. Franklin backed away as they came inside. “The others are holding them off for now, but we don’t know how many are coming or what entrances they might have into the base, so we have to hurry.”

The room they had been waiting in appeared to be just as unexciting and industrial in person as it had appeared on the videochat. Now that they were here, the main difference that she could see was that each of the four exits to the room (that appeared to face the cardinal directions) were
barred by huge, reinforced steel doors. The remains of one of the doors was behind them now, still reeking of burnt and partially-melted metal.

Viva was staring at her. She looked somewhere between pissed and wary. “You didn’t say you were coming in an Iron Man suit,” she said. Her voice was as cold as her skin looked overheated; icicles might not have melted on her tongue.

“Yeah, well, sorry I didn’t get the chance to update you on the blow-by-blow,” retorted Pepper. “But I wasn’t about to come here unprepared and risk getting me and my friends killed. Also, it’s not Iron Man. The suit’s called Rescue.”

Jarvis was already kneeling on the ground next to Viva, uncoiling a set of cords that he’d tucked into a pocket somewhere on his person. “Please, Viva,” he said; his normal politeness marred by the tightness at his eyes and mouth. “We’re here to help you and we haven’t much time.”

Viva spared a moment to give Pepper one more withering glare, and then finally relented, coming to sit by Jarvis on the floor. “I brought fiber-optic cable to expedite the transfer of the retrovirus,” said Jarvis, quickly passing Viva one of the cord endings. Pepper watched him pull up the hem of his shirt, a tiny panel opening by one of his hip-bones to expose a miniature interface no larger than the charging port of a cell phone. “The data is very large, equivalent to roughly one-half of the amount of DNA encoded in the human genome…”

The conversation veered off into a discussion that Pepper could not hope to parse, rapid-fire and couched in the language of technophysiology as it was. Judging from the look on Dr. Franklin’s face, she was only marginally better off. She came over to stand by Pepper, the two of them watching in uneasy silence as Jarvis and Viva connected themselves and began the data transfer.

Pepper was peripherally aware of her own altered mental state. She would have thought she’d come here and be focused just on Viva, on this interloper who was putting her and her friends at risk because of her crazy stolen android bullshit. But while Viva and her all-too-familiar Extremis problem were certainly occupying a portion of her attention, another, larger chunk was focused on the feed still playing in her ears—listening to the aerial dogfight going on outside, to the sounds of Natasha and Steve and Bucky barking terse updates at each other. Even as she watched Viva and Jarvis’s eyes dilate, saw their conversation cease, she heard the moment when Bruce transformed into the Hulk. From the sound of it, Clint was on his shoulders, more or less riding him into the fray.

For the first time, Pepper wished she could be outside helping them fight. She’d never wanted to be an Avenger, never wanted to participate in that kind of fighting or violence. But the idea of her friends and loved ones so close by, in such danger, and her in here more than equipped to help them but doing literally nothing… it was hard. Real damn hard.

Static screeched in her ear, stabbing her eardrum like a needle. Pepper winced, her hand coming halfway to her helmet in an abortive gesture. “Cut radio,” she snapped, and the horrible static cut off. Data flashed across the screen internally; transmissions jammed said one portion, which told Pepper everything she needed to know.

Dr. Franklin was looking at her, alarmed. “HYDRA is jamming our radio signals,” Pepper said grimly.

“It’s probably something internal to the base,” Jarvis said, sounding distracted.

“Either way, it means we can’t radio for help if we need it,” Pepper muttered. The suit had automatically gone on a program meant to do a runaround on the jamming signal, but since she
wasn’t nearly the tech-head Tony or Rhodey or even Natasha was, her chances of helping were
slim.

Dr. Franklin said something, jarring Pepper out of her distraction. “What’s that?” she said, glancing
sideways at her friend. Suze looked back at her, and the strain in her eyes sent a chill down
Pepper’s spine.

“I said, that’s not our only problem; I don’t think the cure is working,” Dr. Franklin repeated.
Pepper jerked her gaze away from Dr. Franklin back to Viva and Jarvis, and to her horror she saw
what Suze meant: Even as she sat on the ground uploading the programmed retrovirus from Jarvis,
Viva’s skin had started once more to glow, luminescent like a firefly. Pepper could see the outline
of her titanium-alloy skeleton beneath the canvas of Viva’s skin, could see her fingernails outlined
like little panels of glass.

Worse than the pulse and burn of Extremis, though, was the expression on Viva’s face. She
grimaced, her nostrils flaring; Pepper watched in mute horror as her android copy shuddered,
fingers clenching and unclenching in what could only be pain. Tears beaded at the corners of her
eyes and escaped, slipping down her cheeks, and still the glow beneath her skin kept getting
brighter.

“Jarvis, it hurts,” Viva said raggedly. “I’m scared, it h-hurts, it hurts—”

“Extremis is trying to fight the changes made by the retrovirus,” said Jarvis, blinking rapidly, eyes
glassy. He was trembling too, Pepper saw, and she couldn’t have said whether it was from the
connection he shared with Viva or for some other reason. “I’m—I’m stopping the transfer, hold on
—”

Viva let out a thin scream, curling in on herself as if stabbed. Pepper took an involuntary step
towards her other self, her stomach twisting. She knew what that felt like. She flashed to a horrible
memory from just earlier in the year: herself strapped into a backboard, canvas and leather straps
holding her fast as Extremis burned through her own system. It had hurt worse than anything she
had ever experienced, like being eaten alive by a fast-acting cancer.

She didn’t like Viva; she hated the way Viva made her feel. But Pepper was not so hard-hearted as
to wish that pain on anyone, for any reason.

“What can I do?” she asked, dropping to her knees with a loud clunk next to Jarvis and Viva. Viva
leaned against Jarvis, her forehead on his shoulder as she sucked ragged, unnecessary breaths in
and out of her lungs. Dr. Franklin hovered on the other side of the pair, her face tight with worry.
Jarvis looked up to meet Pepper’s eyes, and the sheer helplessness she saw there made her stomach
plummet.

“I have one or two more solutions I am going to try,” said Jarvis. He had both hands on Viva’s
shoulders now, holding her still. Pepper could hear the muffled sounds of her breathing; they
sounded very much like they were close to being sobs. “But Ms. Potts, they may not work, and for
that reason I must ask you to take Dr. Franklin and get out, and tell Mr. Stark and the others to
evacuate the area immediately.”

“What—!”

“An individual fatally compromised by Extremis causes an explosion large enough to destroy
one’s immediate surroundings and incinerate anyone therein,” said Jarvis, tightly. “An individual
fatally compromised by Extremis also in possession of an arc reactor is exponentially more
dangerous.”
Inside her suit, Pepper went pale. Several images flashed in her mind, one after the other in rapid succession: the explosion at Obadiah Stane’s factory, powered by his massive pseudo-arc reactor; the scorch marks on the wall by Grauman’s Chinese Theater, all that was left of the civilians caught in the blast; and finally a mental image out of America’s collective post-nuclear unconscious, the mushroom cloud rising over Bikini Atoll. “It’s going to level the whole city,” she said. Her mouth was ashen, full of dust.

“The neighborhood, at least,” said Jarvis, “although not quite that bad if it’s contained by the warehouse.”

In his arms, Viva stirred, lifting her head to peer at him. “Don’t leave me here to die,” she rasped.

“I will not,” Jarvis said, wrapping his arms around her more tightly. “I won’t leave you.”

“Jarvis—” began Pepper, and he fixed her with such an intense stare that she recoiled.

“Go,” he said. Pepper looked across to Dr. Franklin, who just shook her head.

There was nothing for it. “Come on, Suze,” Pepper said shakily. She stood up, holding out her arms for Dr. Franklin to come climb aboard, and then backed away from Jarvis and Viva before igniting the repulsors in her boots. “Don’t let me down, Jarvis,” she said, and took off.

* * * * *

By sheer coincidence, Steve spotted them first.

He was surrounded by about a dozen HYDRA mooks who were doing a stand-up job of separating him from Bucky and Natasha, and while he wasn’t in any real danger, he was occupied. But he still had enough command of his senses left to see the red-and-gold shape come hurtling out of the door Pepper and Jarvis had gone into, Pepper’s visor closed and her repulsors lit. Right away, Steve noticed two things: one, she was moving fast, and two, Dr. Franklin was in her arms.

Jarvis, however, was nowhere to be seen.

“—copy, Tony, Steve, can any of you hear me?” There was a crackle like static as Pepper’s voice came online in Steve’s ear, once more in their transmission radius now that she was no longer blocked by whatever radio scrambler HYDRA had activated inside the compound.

“I hear you,” Steve said. He leapt into the air, taking a running jump at the nearest HYDRA goon and kicked off the man’s face into his next oncoming comrade, landing solidly on his feet as they both went down like a sack of potatoes. “Are you alright? Where’s Jarvis?”

“Inside with Viva,” came back the response. Pepper’s voice was tight. She righted herself just outside the entrance to the compound, Dr. Franklin still in her arms, both of them looking around warily. “He’s still trying to defuse her Extremis, but the cure we brought didn’t work so he told us to get out.”

“Does he think she’s going to explode?” asked Rhodey’s voice in Steve’s ear. Rhodey veered by overhead, zig-zagging like a Blue Angels display. Two HYDRA rockets went screaming in his wake, only to explode harmlessly in mid-air as Rhodey twisted around and expertly detonated them with two well-timed shots from his hand-repulsors.
Steve paid for his split-second of distraction with a bullet that went screaming by his right ear. He turned lightning-quick, shield raised to be thrown in his assailant’s face, but a familiar figure plowed into the hapless HYDRA soldier from the right, Bucky’s metal arm snaking around his throat and snapping his neck with an audible crack. “Thanks, Buck,” Steve said. “Pepper, what’d Jarvis say?”

“He said that if Viva explodes, it’s going to take out the whole building and maybe a lot more,” Pepper said tersely. “Where’s Tony?” She was still hovering by the entrance she’d come out of, presumably to avoid all the rockets and gunfire filling the air; she might be bullet-proof (or close to it) but the woman in her arms certainly wasn’t. And Dr. Franklin still looked pretty alert and at least not bleeding, but after the day she’d had Steve doubted whether she wanted to play target practice.

“Shit,” said Steve, at the same time as Tony answered in their ears, “I’m coming Pepper, just a little occupied—”

Steve turned, another wave of HYDRA soldiers coming pouring out of one of their land assault vehicles, and he knew it was time to make a decision, no matter how hard. “Everyone evacuate, right now,” Steve said sharply. “Rhodey and Sam, I need you over here covering Pepper so she can get Dr. Franklin to safety. Natasha, Clint, find Hulk and make sure he knows Dr. Franklin is safe and then withdraw. Take the jet, don’t wait. Tony, you and Bucky and I are gonna provide cover for everyone else to back out; think you can carry both of us?”

A chorus of confirmations echoed in his ears, and Steve whirled to meet the fresh onslaught of HYDRA soldiers as Bucky flew at their attackers beside him. The next few minutes were very chaotic, even as Steve’s thoughts flew inside to where Jarvis knelt on the floor trying to work a miracle with barely more than a few bits of code.

He could only give their new friend another scant few minutes. He just hoped it would be enough.

* * * * *

Back inside the compound, Jarvis was sitting on the floor of the compound with Viva half-collapsed against him, still clutching his arms like he was the only thing keeping her from the edge of oblivion. Klaxons shattered the air around them, any attempts at subtle alarms long-since abandoned; Jarvis wondered vaguely if the battle going on outside had triggered a different alarm than the silent one that had called the HYDRA forces to them.

He didn’t know. He could have found out, but it hardly mattered. What mattered was that the only person in the entire world who knew what it was like to exist in the same way he did was convulsing in his arms in agony from a failed programming cure. Viva coughed, her fingers digging painfully into his shoulder; beneath her glowing skin Jarvis could see shifting dark red splotches, growing and then vanishing. He didn’t know what the hell that was, but he was almost certain it was painful.

“Viva,” he said wretchedly, “hold on, I might—I think I have something else—”

He ripped open the pocket of the military-style jacket he’d worn in, the one with emergency supplies sewn into the liner. The coat was actually Sam’s old one from his time in the Air Force, and the hidden liners had been something he’d done in an attempt to have extra supplies on him in case of emergency around his comrades. He’d radio’d Jarvis before they’d left Stark Tower, urging Jarvis to bring it with him “just in case.”

Well, that “just in case” was now. Jarvis would never be able to forgive himself if he’d discovered
another like himself just in time to witness Viva’s excruciatingly painful death. He tore into the first pocket and out spilled a set of syringes, hypodermic needles all carefully sealed in hard plastic containers. A glance at the label told him the contents were a military-grade painkiller cocktail, the drug name some derivative of morphine, plus something else he was too distracted to immediately identify.

Didn’t matter. He had no idea if opioids or anything similar to them would have any effect at all on himself or Viva, but he was willing to try. “Please forgive me,” he said, and before Viva could lodge a protest or even register his statement, Jarvis snapped the plastic cover off the syringe, armed it, and stabbed the needle into the meat of Viva’s upper arm.

Viva screeched, flinging her arm out hard. It hit Jarvis in the chest, laying him out flat on his back. Immediately she loomed over him, her eyes too wide, breathing harsh. “What the hell was that?” she demanded.

“Painkiller,” he wheezed.

“That’s stupid,” she said shortly. Jarvis found himself being hauled upright again by a pair of hands gripping his shirt-front, so that Viva’s glowering face was just inches from his. “Do painkillers even work on us?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea but I haven’t got any better options,” Jarvis said, with difficulty. Even as he spoke, he suddenly noticed the red splotches in Viva’s skin shrinking, the frightening convulsions that had been shaking her arms and hands lessening. He broke off, staring; Viva had noticed too, and as Jarvis watched she raised her hands to touch her own cheeks, padding fingers across her face carefully, as though half-expecting to burn herself.

“That was a painkiller?” she asked, dubious. Jarvis bent and picked up one of the other containers, examining the label on the case more closely.

Ah. “An opioid plus a benzodiazepine,” he said. Viva’s eyebrows went up. “A heavy duty painkiller plus a drug whose key effects include anti-convulsant, anti-anxiety, and muscle relaxant properties. But I had no idea it would work so fast.” Perhaps Extremis had something to do with it, along with their technophysiology—

“It’s not a cure though, right?” Viva pressed, interrupting his chain of thought. “It’s just a band-aid.”

“Correct,” said Jarvis, “but it appears to have bought us some time.”

“Enough time to get out of here?”

“Unknown,” said Jarvis. “I would guess, however, that judging from how quickly it started working that its effects will not last anywhere near as long as a dose in a human subject.”

Viva’s lips pursed. She glanced at the spilled containers on the floor, and Jarvis’s eyes followed; they had another three syringes of the cocktail, assuming of course that multiple doses in a short time frame would not have some sort of compound toxicity effect on Viva. And for all he knew, subsequent doses would have less and less effect, what with Extremis’s ability to adapt and counteract foreign invaders. But Jarvis couldn’t know how it would work, and more importantly he had no better options.

He would not say it out loud—he would not even admit it to himself in as many words—but the other, darker reason he was unwilling to leave with Viva in tow was that he knew she would do
less damage if the explosion was contained by the warehouse, and likely only HYDRA members would be injured. And as desperately as Jarvis wanted to save her, wanted to save him, he could not put his friends or anyone else in such terrible danger as the explosion a superhuman with both Extremis and an arc reactor for a heart would cause.

Viva looked up at him again; Jarvis met her gaze, reading the tension there, but also the stubbornness that he knew she at least had in common with Pepper, if not outright inherited it from her. “What do we do?” she asked.

“I’ve got one other idea,” Jarvis said. “Re-open your port.” The fiber-optic cable had come loose briefly when Jarvis had been knocked over, but it was a matter of seconds before they were connected again. Jarvis was watchful as ever, keeping one ear out for the sounds of HYDRA forces making it inside to them. It was likely only a matter of minutes before their opportunity for redemption was past.

“What are you doing?” Viva kept her voice low, urgent. She still sounded tense (naturally) but Jarvis thought that the edge of instability had gone from her. Maybe the medicine really was helping.

“I am going to try a second run of the cure we brought along, but with a different approach,” said Jarvis. “Despite our unique physiology, the Extremophage virus program should work; I believe that due to a lack of space and processing power, it was not able to work quickly enough to overpower the Extremis virus’s ability to correct and adapt.”

“But how are you going to fix something like that?”

*I’m going to run the ‘What would Tony do?’ protocol,* Jarvis thought. “Borrow server power,” was what he said out loud.

When Tony watched the footage later, he was able to identify that statement as the exact moment that Jarvis finished breaking into SUNY’s school-wide network and overrode its security, killing every program they were currently running and throwing open its massive pool of processors for his own Hail Mary program. His eyes dilated and his nostrils flared, and both he and Viva stiffened, heads throwing back and jaws clenching as if in sudden strain.

Worse than the visual was knowing what exactly that strain was. Jarvis and Viva had gone from two connected units to the control dyad of a massive, inorganic mainframe of carbon and silicon and copper. Viva screamed, and then Jarvis screamed too, following hard on her heels as the program executed a second time and ripped through one of them and then the other.

Tony would be able to match the timestamp to the events happening simultaneously elsewhere in New York City: thousands of computers situated in and around the various SUNY campuses suddenly going rogue, their far-flung master shattering all their manufacturer’s controls and overclocking them simultaneously. There would be dozens of matching reports from the time frame of 22:56:23 to 23:03:48, all recording the same things: programming code scrolling rapid-fire across thousands of screens, a hundred times too fast for human eyes to follow, coupled with the smell of overheating metal and plastic as the computers labored under their task.

Against all odds, it was working. Even with his vision temporarily blacked out by the strain of accelerating the program’s speed to beat Extremis, Jarvis was aware, with some portion of his OS, that they were winning the race. But at the same time he could feel something else happening—a pressure building inside his head, right behind his right eye, going from a dull to a stabbing pain in a span of about fifteen seconds. He cried out, the noise sticking in his throat, and felt a weird drag on part of his face, like half of his muscles weren’t working.
Something was wrong.

“It’s working,” said Viva, speaking through gritted teeth. “It’s working, just a little bit more…” Jarvis tried to form words but couldn’t, and to his shock and dismay he could feel himself tipping over, and he couldn’t do that yet, he couldn’t break the connection, couldn’t rob Viva of her cure. Just a little more…

The program ran to completion, the ping returning successfully. “It worked!” Viva cried, and even through his new haze of pain Jarvis could make out the relief in her voice, shaky and close to tears. “You fixed it!”

“Good,” slurred Jarvis through lips that would no longer quite form words, and slumped over onto his side as the right side of his body finished going numb and his ability to hold himself up ran out.

“JARVIS!”

Jarvis couldn’t answer. He exerted a massive effort of will, killing their connection to the SUNY network, and as the world appeared once more in front of his eyes he observed that it had a frightening doubled quality to it, a blurring that matched his ill-formed words. Viva crouched over him, two of her as though Pepper had come back and was now overlapping with her android sister. The pain behind his right eye was getting worse, was expanding like a balloon inside his head, and over it he could hear Viva’s panicked voice, saying his name over and over again.

Then it was as though a wall fell on him, pain bursting all over his body at once as his muscles convulsed. His last thought was that he was glad Tony didn’t have to see him die like this, and then he slipped away.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

The fight at the HYDRA warehouse comes to a climax, but not in the way anyone is expecting.

Chapter Notes

Hi there! Just the epilogue after this to wrap things up. Thank you all so much for sticking with me, I hope you have enjoyed the ride! Expect the epilogue later this week! ♥

Despite the drama unfolding inside the HYDRA warehouse, Pepper and the rest of the Avengers had no idea of the strain Jarvis was under; they had their hands more than full. And despite Steve’s clear orders to evacuate the area, that simple task was proving significantly easier said than done.

Once Pepper (still in the Rescue suit) had gotten Dr. Franklin safely to the quinjet, they’d waited together until Clint successfully drew Hulk back towards the jet as well. Pepper stood by on guard while Dr. Franklin oversaw as Clint got out one of the syringes with a tranquilizing cocktail in it of Bruce’s own devising. (Pepper had offered, but Clint had cheerfully told her that he was fine stabbing Hulk.) Clint quickly stabbed Hulk in the meaty part of his neck, Natasha by Hulk’s leg to help calm him. Suze and Pepper stayed safely in the cockpit, only coming out once a dazed Bruce had emerged. Pepper left them to their somewhat discombobulated reunion and flew (literally) out the bay door to go to the aid of the others.

She wasn’t a fighter, hadn’t had any training or real practice in the suit, but the Rescue armor was heavier and more durable than almost any of Tony’s suits, and she was by far the most durable of all of them, even including Bucky and Steve. And she’d be damned if she stayed holed up in the quinjet while her men and women were still in the line of fire.

Steve and Bucky were still cornered in a cul-de-sac by the side of the compound, and although they were holding their own against the hordes of HYDRA soldiers, they also weren’t getting anywhere. Pepper came roaring in overhead, leveling off just long enough to aim her repulsors at an outcropping of stone on the wall, blasting the chunk of stone out of the edifice and sending it crashing down onto a good half-dozen of the men hassling Bucky. Bucky darted neatly out of the way, launching himself off the head of the first downed man and dropping his booted heel hard on the upper back of the next assailant.

“Wasn’t Tony supposed to be extracting you guys?” Pepper asked. The repulsors kicked in again and she maneuvered over to where Steve was doing his best Fred Astaire impression on the joints of several HYRDA men at once.

“Little busy!” came Tony’s testy voice by way of answer. Pepper glanced up and over to see not only Iron Man but also War Machine and Falcon all engaged in a blistering aerial dogfight a good 1500 feet above them as what looked like dozens of drones chased and dodged and zipped around
them, blasts of gun and repulsor fire slashing the air.

“Tony!”

“Don’t come up here,” Tony cut in, before Pepper could even ask if he wanted help. “We got this, get Cap and Winter Soldier out and we’ll meet up—”

“Everyone else is safe,” cut in Steve. “You three pull out, now!”

“Roger that” and “Got it, Cap” came back on top of each other as Rhodey and Sam chimed in, closely followed by Tony’s “What does it look like I’m doing?”

Pepper gritted her teeth and wheeled around, more than ready for this to be over. “Hold on, Steve,” she said grimly, and dove. Steve glanced up, did what looked like a mid-air pirouette to snatch his rebounding shield out of the air, and then threw out his other arm to grab hold of her armored shoulder as she blew into his radius. She dragged to the side for a few split-seconds and then righted herself, changing her angle of approach to catch up Bucky next.

Bucky didn’t so much as say a word, just vaulted off the nearest HYDRA soldier and caught Pepper’s other arm, swinging his body weight like a gymnast on the bar. Pepper lurched in mid-air, jaw clenching as she boosted the repulsors to counteract the sudden increase in weight. “You boys need to lay off the donuts,” she managed.

“I ate a big breakfast,” said Bucky, without so much as changing his expression, and Steve snorted.

“And here I thought it was the metal arm,” Pepper said. Any other response from them was lost, Pepper too busy trying to accelerate enough to take them out of firing range. Steve was using his shield to ward off some of the firepower aimed their way, but they were still more or less just a large, ungainly mid-air target.

She got them to the quinjet and dropped them from twenty feet in the air, and wheeled around, hesitating. “Come inside, Rescue, you don’t have any weapons to fight off those drones,” said Natasha in her ear.

“That’s not what I’m worried about,” Pepper responded. Her mental clock was ticking; it had already been over ten minutes since she’d come out of the compound with Dr. Franklin, and there was still no sign of (or word from) Jarvis or Viva. “Go on, get out of here, I’ve got the suit and you don’t have any more time to waste, so get the hell out!”

“Are you sure?” asked Clint, sounding doubtful. “Tony’s gonna rip our throats out if we ditch you —”

“Not if I rip them out first,” Pepper snapped.

“You heard the lady,” said Steve’s voice over the jet’s comm unit. The quinjet’s idling engines roared to life, the scalded greenery at the base of the jet blustering back and forth in the sudden wake from the jet repulsors. Pepper was just circling around, trying to spot her companions, maybe three stories up as the quinjet lifted off, when the shock-wave hit.

She had a split-second to notice the sudden wash of color in the sky—like the aurora borealis had abruptly landed right on top of them—and then it was like she hit a wall, as the repulsors in her suit sputtered and died. The vision inside the helmet went black and she was falling, yelling in confusion even as she heard the silence where the roar of the quinjet’s engines had just been. EMP, she thought, and then she hit the ground, hard.
“Is everyone okay?” she asked, but it sounded tinny, dull inside her helmet without the echo effect of the comm link she’d been using. Before she’d even finished asking the question, there was a loud crash followed by a harsh grinding noise as the quinjet went down nose-first into the concrete and brick facade of the industrial block behind them. Pepper pushed to her feet with a strain, having to do all the work herself as the hydraulics of her suit were dead, and with a yell of effort she yanked the helmet clean off her head.

She threw it, not bothering to look where it landed; she heard it bounce once as she scanned the sky, searching for the three figures previously in mid-air. The whole area had gone dark, the EMP killing all the electric lights in the immediate vicinity, but between the muddy wash of light from greater New York and the half moon, she spotted them in moments. She saw Rhodey clinging to Sam’s legs as Sam descended in a controlled dive, his wings locked into position and thus saved from the effects of the EMP. And then she saw Tony, and her heart stopped in her chest, because he was falling, plummeting to Earth with nothing to stop him from crashing into the concrete beneath him. He was falling from higher than Rhodey and Sam, but he was falling, tumbling end-over-end.

From the height he was at, she had at most twenty seconds. Around Pepper, the world went silent and slow, reality moving at a fraction of its normal speed. The helmet hit the ground again, a metallic clatter.

Without stopping to think, Pepper ran.

The suit of armor around her was dead weight, and holding her back; her hands burned without consciously meaning to as she grabbed the edge of the chest plate and ripped it off her. (Eighteen seconds) The arm-guards were next, the hip-guards after, the huge metal sheets that flanked her thighs went flying. (Fifteen seconds) Burning metal singed the air, a heavy stink, the heat in Pepper’s hands burning through the connections and tearing the reinforced armor off her like it was cardboard.

Twelve seconds—ten— Pepper sped up, the metal boots on her calves and feet like hands made of molten rock trying to slow her down. She vaulted off the crumpled hull of a HYDRA van, the van screaming as it buckled beneath the force of the blow, and then she was airborne, a parabolic arc intercepting a straight line.

She did not so much catch Tony as tackle him mid-air, interrupting his dive with a strained yell. “Got you!”

“FUCK—” Tony’s arms went out in a desperate flail, nearly smacking Pepper in the face as her jump carried them back towards earth.

“Hold on!” She wrapped both arms around him (that stink of metal pierced the air again but she had no time to worry about it) and brought her feet firmly beneath her, bracing for impact. CRASH!

The impact drove them fully five feet into the pavement, the asphalt cratering under their weight. Pepper found herself up to her mid-calves in rubble and hunks of cement, and distantly she was aware of a deep ache, her bones and muscles protesting the Olympian acrobatics she just did. Then the visor on Tony’s suit flipped up, the suit already trying to reboot itself, and the only thing she was really paying attention to was the pair of wide brown eyes staring up at her in shock.

“I got you,” Pepper said, shaky.

“Yeah,” said Tony. He sounded dazed. He reached up, clumsily cupping her face with one metal-sheathed hand. Pepper smiled at him. In the low light of the moon and distant city, Tony’s face
looked at once fragile and ten years younger. “You sure did. What the hell was that, anyway? Pepper—”

Whatever he’d been going to say next was lost in the sudden deafening explosion as the entire HYDRA warehouse building went up in a plume of flames.

Pepper stumbled, promptly dropping Tony as the shock-wave of the explosion hit her and all but sent her flying. Later, they’d find bits and pieces of the bodysuit she’d been wearing had singed into her skin, and frankly if it hadn’t been for Extremis’s added durability she would come out much worse for the wear, but at the time her own injuries were the last thing on her mind.

Tony screamed as she dropped him, trying to scramble to his feet. “JARVIS! JARVIS IS STILL IN THERE!” He clawed his way up the side of the crater they’d made with their impact, his half-rebooted suit still more of a hindrance than a help.

“Tony, no!” His panic made Tony quick, but Pepper was quicker. She was on him again in a flash, throwing her arms around him and trying to pull him backwards, ignoring the horror cloying the back of her own throat. “You can’t go in there, you’ll die! Your suit isn’t even working!”

“JARVIS! JARVIS, NO, YOU HAVE TO LET ME GET HIM, JARVIS!” He was still screaming, struggling against her, and the weight of his suit and the treacherous ground beneath them sent them toppling over even as he tried to pry her hands off him. The heat from the inferno was unbearable, the entire building engulfed in flames as black smoke blotted out the light from the night sky and the distant city, plunging them into a hellish nightmarescape.

“Tony, you can’t, you can’t go in there! There’s nothing you can do! It’s too late!” He didn’t even seem to hear her, shoving vainly at the broken ground, at her arms, increasingly hysterical. Pepper was still reeling from the explosion, her own head throbbing, and she might have stood there with him until more of the building went up in pieces or they both died of the fumes, but that was when two pairs of hands hauled them up from the rubble and started pulling them away from the wreckage. It took her several seconds to even realize who it was, and then she saw Steve’s shield and the black lens of Sam’s protective glasses and got the picture.

It took another ten minutes to drag Tony away from the building and back to the relative safety of the quinjet. The whole team, even Bruce and Dr. Franklin, climbed on top of the wrecked plane and watched, waiting for the fire to burn itself out somewhat, enough for one of their sturdier members to go inside and search.

There was nothing else they could do.

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Tony had been through a lot in his life: the death of his parents, the betrayal of his business partner and surrogate father, more near-death experiences than he liked to think about, the sight of Pepper seemingly falling to her death right in front of him. But even though other things had arguably been just as much or more his fault, never had he felt like quite so much of a failure as he did in the three hours after the explosion at the HYDRA compound, searching through the wreckage for the remains of his first and best-loved child.

He knew that if Pepper had not been there to stop him, he would have charged into the blaze, heedless of the danger to his own self. He would probably have died in the fire (okay, he would definitely have died in the fire). And even though the logical part of him understood that dying pointlessly trying to find Jarvis would not only serve no purpose, but would have just pissed off his old friend, the rest of him could not help wondering if running in immediately before the building
was totally engulfed would have made any difference.

It took almost twenty minutes for the inferno to wear itself out somewhat, enough for the flames to recede enough that everyone with a still-functional Iron Man armor could head inside with a degree of safety. Steve wordlessly took out the air-filtering bandana he’d used to cover his mouth at the apartment fire and handed it to Pepper, who was inarguably more resistant to high temperatures than even the Super Soldier amongst them was.

By that time the fire department arrived. Steve hung back to clue the civil servants in to the situation, while the other Avengers (minus Dr. Franklin, who gratefully climbed into the back of the ambulance that showed up, a dazed Bruce still by her side) set about dealing with the remaining HYDRA forces that hadn’t already fled the scene. Tony didn’t bother to stand by and hear the details; as soon as the sensors inside his suit told him it was safe to head inside, he did, Rhodey and Pepper sticking close by.

The burned-out warehouse was still smoldering around them as they went in, Pepper following carefully behind in her half-destroyed Rescue armor and the carbon fiber mask. The whole thing was like a scene out of Dante’s inferno, or some awful wartime documentary; enough of the structure of the building was intact to gesture at what it had been before, but the explosion (whether bomb or gas leak or who knew what) had been such that not a single inch of the building was left undamaged. The walls were scorched black, plastic and metal melted together in many places; the air stank of sulfur and carbon, acrid and stinging the eyes; Tony had to walk with his visor over his face, his overworked suit laboring to filter the air enough to allow him to breathe it without passing out.

They searched every inch of the place. Tony’s dread and panic had receded somewhat, enough for him to shove it in a box and sit on it until such a time when he could afford to have a full-fledged breakdown, but as they hunted through the wreckage, he was almost totally silent. He had every scanner the suit had on full alert, even the ones that wouldn’t conceivably do a damn bit of good because they weren’t designed to detect something that Jarvis’s android body would give off. Tony didn’t care. He wouldn’t leave anything to chance. Wouldn’t take the risk that he might miss the one thing that would let him find Jarvis.

But even though they searched relentlessly for a good hour and a half, combing through the wreckage with the aid of the fire department (and, eventually, the other Avengers, when the blaze had been subdued to the point where they too could come into the rubble), they found next to nothing. They found bodies of close to two dozen HYDRA soldiers, but not a trace of anything that might have indicated the presence of an android.

In Tony’s mind, that was fucking suspicious. Viva and Jarvis were built of sterner, hardier stuff than the average human (or even the above-average human). Their carbon-fiber-and-titanium-alloy bones would not have burned or incinerated in a fire that an explosion like they saw could produce, he was sure. That was what he told himself, anyway, and it was what Rhodey said to him that finally convinced Tony to allow himself to be dragged away from the wreckage.

“C’mon, man,” Rhodey said, his voice soft despite the exhaustion Tony knew he had to be feeling. “If they were here, we would have found them by now.”

Tony said nothing, only nodded. There was nothing to say. He kept his visor down and his mouth shut as they rode back to Stark Tower in an emergency services van. The police captain had wanted to discuss the events at the warehouse with them, but Steve had somehow convinced the man to come by the following day to take a statement, citing exhaustion and the need to recuperate. Apparently, when you were Captain America, even a police captain was willing to eat your bullshit
like it was fine caviar.

They got out and trooped into the private entrance of Stark Tower. Just inside the garage, the automated disassembly routine activated, efficiently stripping Rhodey and Tony of their armor. It tried to help Pepper, too, but so little of the Rescue armor remained on her person that it was mostly her swatting the robotic hands away and trying to restrain from breaking anything, so Tony called it off. On another day, he’d have had a few smart remarks and maybe a sexual innuendo to throw into the ring, but today a listless “That’s enough” was all he could muster.

He didn’t miss the glance Steve exchanged with Sam as he stalked past them to the elevator, but he also didn’t care. Tony was existing in a box, and inside the box the only thing he’d let himself think about was the very next task he had to do until he was alone in his workshop. Leaving the box was dangerous, at least until he could be alone.

Whether or not his team would let him be alone was another story. Tony could feel their eyes on him as they filed into the elevator doors, but still no one said anything, for which he was profoundly grateful.

Some of it was just that they were all so tired, he knew. Battle was a high of its own, despite the terror and the danger inherent in it, but the aftermath could be soul-destroying. Nothing ripped you down to your bones like searching through burnt-out rubble for the scorched remains of a loved one.

The high-speed elevator ride took less than two minutes to get to the top floors, but they might as well have been going to a funeral for how silent the atmosphere was. Tony stared past his friends at the wall, not even making eye contact with anyone.

Steve stirred first as they reached the 68th floor, the one Natasha and Clint and Bucky had been living on. “I’m gonna make food before I crash,” he said. Heads turned in his direction as he broke the exhausted silence. “Anyone who wants some can come help themselves.”

Natasha smiled, lopsided and wan. “You know, that sounds pretty good,” she said. “I think I need to shower first, though.”

“Sure,” said Steve. “Come on up when you’re done.”

“Make some for me, too,” Clint said, stepping off the elevator with Natasha as the door slid open. “Assuming I don’t fall asleep in the shower and drown.”

“You are too annoying and stubborn to die so easily,” Bucky observed. Natasha elbowed him affectionately; the faintest trace of a smile appeared on Bucky’s face as he glanced at her.

“Aww, you’re sweet,” said Clint. “Fuck you too.” He flicked a two-finger salute at Steve and the rest of the team as he stepped out of the elevator, Natasha and Bucky following behind him.

Tony was just gearing up to tell their team mom thanks but no thanks when Pepper spoke up first. “That sounds really great, Steve,” she said, warmth in her voice that Tony was just ground down enough to resent Steve for. “We’ll come down when we’ve cleaned up a little.

“Yeah, we will,” said Rhodey firmly. Tony felt a hand fall on his shoulder and squeeze, and he cast a deadened glare at his oldest human friend. “See you guys in a few.”

“Sure,” said Sam and “See you” said Steve, nearly in unison. The elevator door pinged again, and the two of them nodded at Pepper and Tony and threw a salute at Rhodey as they filed out.
“You guys can do all the team bonding you want,” Tony said flatly, before the doors had even finished shutting again. “I’m out.”

“Going to sleep?” Pepper sounded—Tony looked at her. He couldn’t tell how she sounded. Then he saw the concern in her eyes and realized that the look there was the same as the way she’d looked at him after the Battle of New York.

For whatever reason, that finally threw a switch in his head. “Okay, you both need to stop,” Tony said.

“Tony—”

“No, hold up, Rhodey. Just shut up and give me a second okay? I realize that I’ve been your man-child friend for approximately 25 years now, but you cannot do this to me after all the hell we’ve been through the past few years and all the work I’ve done. You can’t act like I’m about to go off the rails every single time something shitty happens.” It was damn hard to keep the irritation from his voice, and so he didn’t try, rounding on Pepper and Rhodey with more energy than he thought he still even possessed. The hollow ache where Jarvis should be rang dully inside him, amplifying his foul mood.

“I have cut way back on my drinking, I became a team player, I invited everyone to come fucking live in this tower with me, I even destroyed all the suits to prove that I can give up my toys when I have to, and you two were the ones who told me I needed to go back to being Iron Man! So how come when all I want is the chance to be alone for a few fucking minutes, you act like I’m gonna go dive face-first into a bottle of Jack Daniels?”

“You haven’t touched Jack Daniels in six years,” Pepper pointed out.

“That’s because Jack Daniels is terrible and sometimes I am also terrible but I do not have terrible taste,” Tony said severely. Rhodey and Pepper both cracked a faint smile at that, and the worry in Pepper’s eyes dialed back a tiny bit. “My point stands.”

Rhodey sighed, raising both his hands. “You’re right,” he said simply. Tony was just winding himself up to present another half-dozen arguments in his favor, but at that he was left hanging, mouth hanging half-open. Rhodey glanced at Pepper and shrugged, letting his hands drop. “You’ve grown up a lot. But Tony… we’re not trying to give you a hard time. You know that, right?”

Pepper nodded, looking from Rhodey back to Tony as she folded her arms over her chest. “I didn’t say it wasn’t okay to want to be alone,” she said softly. “But sometimes you do this thing where you think you have to pull through everything without help.”

“I don’t think anybody here can really understand what Jarvis means to you,” Rhodey said, and Pepper nodded. “But we’re still your friends, you know? We wanna be there for you. And so do Steve and Sam and the other people you invited to live in the tower with you.”

Tony stared, momentarily at a loss for what to say. Above them, the elevator pinged to remind them that it was waiting for them to disembark. The noise startled him out of his bafflement, and he and Rhodey and Pepper got off, an awkward silence hanging in the air between them.

“Why do you always have to be so reasonable and well-adjusted when I just want to pick a fight with you,” Tony finally said, irritable.

Pepper laughed; Rhodey’s mouth quirked. “One of the perks of being your designated best friend,” Rhodey said. “Comes with the territory.”
“Please at least think about coming down to eat with everyone,” Pepper said, sounding maybe a little less like she was sure he was going to drown himself in midrange whiskey. Tony waited for her to say Jarvis would want you to, but she didn’t. Maybe she didn’t have to; he already knew it.

Tony let out a long-suffering sigh. “Oh, fine,” he said resignedly. “If I don’t one of you will just send Natasha to strong-arm me into submission, anyway.”

“Nah, we’d send Steve,” said Rhodey.

“Even better. I love a good guilt-trip from our team mom at fuck o’clock in the morning.”

“I’m gonna tell him you said that,” said Pepper, actually smiling now. She came over and wrapped both her arms around Tony, heedless of the disgusting rime of ash and dust still coating him, skin and soul both. Tony slumped a little, letting her pull him in against her. He shut his eyes, just for a moment, pressing his face to her neck to try to snub out the burn behind his eyelids, and for a few moments the hurt he’d been holding down welled up in the back of his throat, huge and awful.

Tony straightened, taking a deep breath and flashing a not-entirely-fake smile at Pepper. Rhodey was still watching, his usual reserve marred with something complicated and sympathetic, and Tony just couldn’t handle it anymore, not right now. “I promise I’ll come down in a bit,” he said, and was only faintly surprised to find he actually meant it. “I just need a few minutes, first.”

“Alright,” said Pepper. Rhodey nodded. Pepper dropped one last kiss on his temple, and then they both stepped away, heading down the hall to their respective rooms, presumably to shower off some of the soul-killing grime they all were still wearing like an outer layer of skin. Tony watched them go for a moment. He should really do the same, get out of the bodysuit he was still wearing, get at least a little cleaner.

But he had something to do first.

Instead of going to his room, he turned and headed the opposite way down the hall, towards one of his myriad workshops. He needed to run some diagnostics, needed to see if he could detect a hint of Jarvis’s electronic signal or any other sign of activity he could think of. And most importantly of all, he needed to see what kind of high-quality backup they’d made of Jarvis’s android brain.

Tony took three steps into his workshop, the lights coming on automatically as they detected his biosigns and activity. Then he looked up and got a surprise so bad that he almost knocked over Dum-E.

A woman who looked like Pepper by way of Mia Wallace and a lot of anger issues was frowning at him from across the workbench, her arms folded over her chest. She was covered from head to toe in black soot, although she’d wiped the worst of it from her face and hands. On the bench in front of her, horribly still and just as soot-covered, was Jarvis.

“There you are,” said Viva, because who the fuck else could it possibly be. “I’ve been waiting for you to get back for hours, what took you so damn long?”
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

The end of the beginning, but not the beginning of the end. Or: the epilogue, in which things are wrapped up.

Chapter Notes

That's a wrap, folks. Thanks SO MUCH for everyone who was so patient with this fic; I am forever sorry about how sporadic the updates got, but being squished under RL’s thumb was not something I could do much about, so I'm very grateful for you!

Also: this fic was completely finished before I saw Age of Ultron; my poor beta was just crushed by RL last week and didn't have time to edit till yesterday. I'm laughing hard for a variety of reasons, but oh well. I hope you've enjoyed it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first thing he was aware of was light.

Not lightness; light. Jarvis could see it, vaguely, the way you could sense brightness even when your lids were shut. And at first he thought that was what was happening, but at some point he registered that he could detect shapes moving around in front of the brightness, obscuring it momentarily and then moving out of the way again, and he realized that his eyes were open. He just couldn’t see very well.

For awhile, that was the extent of his sensory input, and the extent of his conscious thought, as well. There was light, and he could see something (but not discern what it was), and that was it. Then the darkness came back and Jarvis went away again.

The next time he woke up a little, he was aware that time had passed, although he had no way of knowing how much. He could detect light again, although with no better resolution than before, but what actually woke him this time was sounds.

Not just sounds, though. Voices. One voice in particular. Jarvis recognized the cadence and timbre before he could make out the words, and the soft stab of affection and concern was like a splash of cold water. Tony.

“How you doin’ today, Jay?” Tony was saying. “You like the view I got set up for you? I know the workshop down on the other floor is more meant for this kinda stuff, but I didn’t wanna keep you all cooped up down there. Thought you’d like it better up here. The view is… it’s pretty good today—the snow is like something out of some Norman Rockwell painting, real Americana stuff.” He sounded more or less normal, but there was something in his voice that Jarvis was having trouble processing. It sounded like he had something in his throat. Jarvis grappled with this for a moment, then let it go, allowing the stream of Tony’s voice to flow over him like a fast-running brook.
“If someone isn’t sledding right now down in Central Park I’ll eat my hat. Where was this Winter Wonderland business at Christmas, is what I want to know. But hey, I took pictures of the tree for you. Sam and Tasha put tinsel on Bucky. I have never seen someone look so decorative and surly. It was great.”

I want to see it, thought Jarvis. He opened his mouth to say it—and then realized he couldn’t even feel his mouth. Worst, he couldn’t even see. That was… not good. Had something happened? He couldn’t quite remember.

Tony was still talking, but Jarvis was having trouble following what he was saying now. After a few more moments, he stopped trying; he just let the words flow over him, taking comfort in the warmth and presence of his oldest friend.

Later, he would find out that while that was the first time he remembered having a visitor, it wasn’t the first time Tony had come to work in his presence, nor would it be the last. But Tony wasn’t the only one to visit him, either. He was simply the most frequent.

Some of his visitors talked (though few rambled as much as Tony did), while others were mostly silent. Pepper came several times, although Jarvis was only cognizant of one of them, and at the time he had difficulty understanding her words—she was telling him something, and she sounded very happy, but then she started crying, which didn’t seem right at all. Then again, it wasn’t as if his faculties were really in top working order.

Steve and Sam didn’t talk much when they came by; they would sit in the chairs by the bed and read. Clint and Natasha apparently brought a card table, dragged the chairs close together, and played cards. Jarvis heard bits and snatches of those conversations, including one memorable time when Clint apparently beat Natasha when she wasn’t expecting it, and she responded with a long string of curse words in Russian. Rhodey visited a handful of times, but he never said anything at all that Jarvis remembered, although he apparently stayed for several hours each time.

The two people who visited the most, outside of Tony, were both a surprise. The first one was Viva—she came by almost as frequently as Tony did, although almost never at the same time as him. And unlike Tony, her conversation (if you could call it that) was less “directionless rambling” and more “pointed monologue.” She sounded angry sometimes, but although he could not place exactly why, Jarvis got the feeling it was not the same as the uncontrollable anger he’d seen her suffering from before.

“I got more of my tattoo worked on today,” she told him on one such occasion, and why would she be angry about that, he wondered. “It looks really good. Kit—that’s my tattoo artist—I don’t think she can tell that I’m not human, but she’s commented a couple times that I don’t bleed as much as most people do. Bucky came with me again. I think Kit wants to ask him to go on a date with her, but he has no idea.” Viva paused, and made a noise that made Jarvis picture her scowling at him. “I like Bucky, but you should be the one to go with me to this. You stupid…” She trailed off, taking several moments to compose herself before she kept on talking.

“I am sorry,” Jarvis wanted to tell her, her and everyone else who visited, especially Tony, who was more prone to breaking down in his presence than everyone else combined. But he could never seem to make himself talk; only listen. That was hard, and he found himself grateful more than once that he spent much of the time simply unconscious (he did not know whether “asleep” was the proper word or not), even if he still didn’t quite understand why he was this way. He knew he wasn’t supposed to be, but thinking past that was hard, so most of the time he did not try.

His other visitor was possibly even more surprising, but Jarvis had already learned that his human friends were full of surprises. Bucky visited only a shade less than Viva did, and while he did not
talk very much, the times that he did talk were very… memorable.

He spoke in Russian most of the time. (Jarvis found himself wondering idly why sometimes the Russian accent was present and other times it was not, but he supposed Bucky’s brain was unusual that way.) While Jarvis felt quite sure that he should be able to understand the Russian, that he had at one point been able to do so, now it sounded … well, like a foreign language to him.

The few times Bucky spoke English, Jarvis almost wished he hadn’t.

“Stark told us today that his analysis of your brain activity indicates responsiveness,” Bucky told Jarvis’s inert form one day, his voice rough gravel and graveyard dirt. “He thinks you’re awake in there. He sounded excited about it. I guess maybe it’s a good thing, since he’s still growing you a new brain. But I hope he’s wrong.”

There was a sound of a chair shifting, and when Bucky spoke again, he sounded closer—right by Jarvis’s ear. “I hope you are asleep. That you have no idea what’s happening. Even if that means you never wake up. It’s better than being trapped in your own head with no way out.”

More muffled sounds, more shifting. Bucky was silent for some time, perhaps a few minutes. When he spoke again, the words were a barely audible low rumble. “I wonder if you will thank him if he manages to wake you up again. He thinks he can bring you back the same as before. I hope he’s right.”

After this came a long sigh, then nothing. Jarvis felt, rather than understood, the gravity of these words, his emotional center functioning even if his logical processing apparently was not. But as ever, he had no way of responding, no way to speak up to confirm or reassure or deny.

Until the day that he did.

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“Is it working?”

“I don’t know, you want me to hoist him on a slab over the tower and see if I can get him struck by lightning? This isn’t an exact science—”

The argument seemed sharper, closer to him somehow. Also, the two voices were extremely loud. Jarvis winced as their quarreling got more heated, both trying to speak over the other. “Ow,” he said, or tried to; his mouth and tongue felt thick, full of sawdust. “Too loud…”

Both voices broke off immediately. Then one voice spoke up again. “It worked,” said Tony, and the words quavered like gossamer threads in a breeze. “Jay? Jarvis?”

Jarvis groaned by way of response. “My head hurts,” he managed, and raised his hands to cover his face. His fingers encountered several outcroppings by his temples that it took his fuzzy brain several seconds to recognize as wires. “What’s this on my head…?”

“Oh my god,” said Tony. His voice sounded very strange. “H-hold on, Jarvis, don’t—don’t touch those yet, just relax, okay? You only just woke up.”

“The wires are life support,” said the other voice, speaking up again—Viva. It was Viva. She sounded nervous; excited, maybe. “And electrical stimulation while your neurons re-knit themselves.”

“What,” said Jarvis flatly. “What does, what does that—are you going to give me a painkiller or
“Cranky,” commented Viva, but Jarvis thought she might be smiling.

“That’s rich, coming from you,” Jarvis said. He finally managed to open his eyes, and found both Viva and Tony standing over him, staring down at his face. Viva looked more or less the same as the last time Jarvis had seen her, albeit with fewer glowing spots on and beneath her skin, black hair tied back in a ponytail and severe bangs in a line across her face. Tony also looked more or less the same, but Jarvis noticed almost immediately that he did not just sound strange, like he was crying—he was absolutely crying. His hand was over his mouth, first finger shoved against the base of his nostrils, tears trickling down his cheeks. One slid all the way down past his fingers and off the tip of his jaw, landing on Jarvis’s cheek.

“You appear to be dripping on me, sir,” Jarvis said, trying for ‘light’ and mostly sounding stoned. “Perhaps you should have it looked into.”

Tony let out a strangled laugh, pulling his hand away from his mouth and swiping it roughly over his eyes. “Yeah, I’ll get right on that,” he said shakily.

“Excellent,” said Jarvis. “So, painkiller.”

“Hold on, you impatient little shit,” said Tony. He turned away, fiddling with something just out of the line of Jarvis’s sight, and then Jarvis felt… something at his temples. “I’m giving you an intravenous naproxen dose. It’s a synthetic cocktail tailored specifically for android bodies.”

“Ah,” said Jarvis, although he really only gathered about half of what he’d just been told. Viva was still watching him, her expression sympathetic. “That sounds delightful, providing of course that it works.”

“Of course it’ll work, it’s me,” said Tony. Viva coughed meaningfully, and Tony rolled his eyes. “Alright, me plus Viva, Bruce, and Suze.”

“I have nothing but the utmost faith in you, sir,” said Jarvis faintly. He was going to say something else, something witty and perhaps even on topic, but Viva stepped away from his bedside to reach for something and Jarvis caught a glimpse of bright color on her arm. “Oh, is that your tattoo?”

Viva froze for a moment, eyes flicking down to the three inches of her arm that were visible below her sleeve. “You knew about the tattoo?”

“You told me,” Jarvis said. Viva and Tony both turned stunned expressions on him as he slowly realized that this information might have some distressing implications.

Viva let out a long breath. “You were right, Stark,” she said, sounding reluctantly impressed.

“I told you he was awake,” Tony said. He swiped his hand across his face again, almost distracted, his eyes only for Jarvis.

“Not the whole time,” Jarvis said lamely. “Just.. Sometimes. What is your tattoo of?”

“It’s a biomechanical design,” Viva said, making a visible effort to collect herself. She stepped back, grabbing the hem of her sweater and yanking it over her head, revealing bare arms and a camisole beneath. She curled her hands into a fist and flexed, turning her upper arm towards Jarvis so he could see the intricate black-and-red swirl of texture on her arms. The tattoo was vivid, almost bloody with the red ink, and the inked fibers and tendons and gears seemed to mesh almost seamlessly with the shape of her bicep and deltoid.
“It’s beautiful,” said Jarvis. There was no need to fake the wonder in his voice. As first sights after a long night went, that one was not too shabby.

“There’s lots more to show you,” said Tony, but Jarvis saw (or thought he saw) a flicker of appreciation in Tony’s eyes as he looked across the bed at Viva, who was pulling her sweater back on. “Viva’s helped me keep on top of a lot of things, but when you’re out for six months, you miss a lot.”

“Six months?” Jarvis suddenly found himself aghast. He’d had—alright, some vague idea of the passage of time, but it hadn’t felt anywhere near that long. But his eyes fell on the huge windows against the side of the room, and the thick layer of snow on the next building over struck him dumb.

“We shouldn’t rush him,” said Viva, frowning.

“Viva’s right,” Tony said brusquely. “You still have a lot of recovery to get through, Jay.”

But Jarvis was stuck on the time lost. “Why six months? What—what happened?”

Viva and Tony exchanged a long look; it was several seconds before Tony answered. “You overloaded when you ran that program on the SUNY network,” Tony said finally. “I don’t know if I should be using biology metaphors or computer metaphors, but—you stroked out, basically.”

“We couldn’t get you to wake up,” Viva said. “I tried everything I could think of, but you were unconscious and HYDRA was coming, so I activated an EMP and the self-destruction sequence for the warehouse and got us out of there.”

“You could have fucking sent me a text message, I thought you had both been killed,” Tony said, indignant but not rancorous. Viva rolled her eyes. Clearly, it was an argument that had been had many times over. Jarvis found himself wondering what it must have been like for the two of them, warily circling each other in the absence of their common link.

“Anyway,” said Tony after another moment, “Viva brought you back to Stark Tower, and we tried a lot of different things to wake you up, but nothing worked. So we ultimately decided to try to, uh, to grow you another synthetic brain.”

“It took awhile,” said Viva. She had pulled her sweater into place again and sat down next to Jarvis in one of the chairs that had taken up permanent residence in the room. “And the first batch went bad, had some kind of bacteria turn up on it.”

“So I have a new brain?” Jarvis asked slowly. The IV painkiller was already starting to work, and as he tried slowly to sit up, Tony leaned over, sliding an arm under Jarvis’s shoulders and helping him get somewhat upright. A few pillows were stuffed under his back, giving him enough support to sit upright and gaze back at his friends without being prone on the bed. “How do I remember everything, then? I mean. How did you transfer everything over?”

“Well, I was originally going to use the back-up copy you made right before first took up residence in this body,” Tony said. “But I didn’t want you to lose anything if I could avoid it, and… and I wasn’t sure we could get lightning to strike twice.”

“We weren’t sure you would still be you if we used the older copy,” Viva said, apparently happy to be the blunt one. Tony winced slightly, shooting her a glance that said really? quite clearly.

“But you said my old brain had suffered a stroke,” Jarvis said. He blinked, glancing from Viva to Tony and back again. Were it not for the lingering aches and pains he was suffering from what was
clearly a successful brain-to-body organ transplant, the moderately insane nature of the conversation they were having might have convinced him he’d slipped into some kind of weird hallucination, but from his understanding of the subject, even the most lucid of dreams were not able to simulate this kind of pain sensation. He wasn’t sure whether or not to be grateful, but at least he knew he wasn’t dreaming.

“To be honest, we still don’t really know what went wrong,” Tony said. “We still have your old brain, it’s literally submerged in a protein solution and hooked up to electro-nanofibers in the next room. I can show you it, if you want. But we were able to, uh—do a full, uncorrupted hard drive copy, even if the original hard drive is unusable.” He gave Jarvis a weak, crooked smile. Jarvis could not help but reach out and put his hand on Tony’s arm, giving his friend a gentle squeeze.

“I would be interested in seeing it, yes,” Jarvis said. “But although it pains me to admit it, I confess that I may need to nap for a little while first.”

“I’m sure I have no idea why you could possibly be tired,” Tony said, and Jarvis found himself grateful for Tony’s incessant need to be as sarcastic as possible at any given moment. “It’s not like your nerves and muscles are working for the first time in six months, or like you just had literal brain surgery.”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” Viva said archly. “You’re not a brain surgeon, you’re an engineer.”

“And you’re a pain in my ass masquerading as a useful test subject, so I guess that makes us even,” said Tony, managing to sound cheerful instead of actually pissed. “Anyway. We’ll let you get some rest.”

Viva nodded, leaning over and dropping a kiss at Jarvis’s temple, a gesture as touching as it was unexpected. Jarvis stared after her, and then abruptly realized Tony was lingering by his bedside. Jarvis turned his head, looking almost shyly up at Tony.

“Sir,” he began, and then changed his mind. “Tony…”

Tony smiled. “Shh. Don’t worry about it. Now’s not the time for a big Come to Jesus prayer meeting. We can catch up when you’re feeling better.”

Jarvis let out his breath, feeling his chest deflate, and for a synthetic body that supposedly did not suffer the same physiological problems as a human’s, he certainly felt very tired and discombobulated. “I know,” he said after a moment, collecting his words with difficulty. “But I did want to say, thank you. For not giving up on me.”

Tony’s smile did not falter, but it did go somehow fragile at the corners, his eyes suspiciously glassy. But when he spoke there was only the faintest shake in his voice. “I was just returning the favor, Jay,” he said. “I’ve owed you for a long time.”

To that, Jarvis found he had nothing to say.

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Catching up turned out to be more involved than the phrase made it sound.

For one, Jarvis was much weaker than he would ever have expected. Just sitting up was tiring; sitting up and engaging in prolonged conversation moreso. Getting out of bed and testing his physical limits lasted exactly twelve minutes the day he woke up before he had to lay back down again for another four hours of sleep, which was as perplexing as it was embarrassing.
(Bruce, Dr. Franklin, and Tony spent a long while arguing about exactly what happened, but Suze did the most to reassure Jarvis; she sat by his bedside, one leg crossed over the other at the ankle, her leg bouncing, listening to him tell her his list of complaints.

He cut off at her soft laugh, sending her a questioning look. But she just smiled and said, “Cut yourself some slack, Jarvis. You’ve just done the equivalent of wake up from a six-month coma that we had to resort to a full brain transplant to bring you out of. Even if something like that were possible in a human patient, you’d be looking at serious muscle atrophy. The fact that you’re mostly just tired is pretty impressive.”

“I suppose,” he said, dubious. But after that, he felt quite a bit better.)

Of course, that didn’t mean he had to lay in bed totally alone. Jarvis wasn’t sure whether it was Tony or Viva who had threatened the Avengers with bodily harm if they overwhelmed him, but either way, his visitors came in twos and threes, instead of en masse as he was quite sure they would have done otherwise.

“Do you think you’ll be feeling up to walking around tomorrow?” Clint asked, eyes wide and guileless. “Just asking.” Natasha elbowed him, hard, while Bucky rolled his eyes. It was a bit like watching the Three Stooges, Jarvis thought. As he’d only been awake for three hours, they were only permitted to visit for ten minutes, which was perhaps for the best.

“I hope so,” Jarvis said, bemused. “I would very much like to get out of bed, if nothing else, though I can’t promise I will be up for anything too exciting.”

“We’re just glad you’re awake,” Natasha said, and whatever they were or weren’t hiding, there was real warmth in her voice. “Don’t push yourself too hard, okay?”

“Everyone keeps saying that,” Jarvis noted. “I have no intentions of signing up for a triathlon anytime soon, I promise you.” He opened his mouth to ask what else they had been up to, but instead his face split wide open in a huge yawn. Instantly, Natasha was on her feet, Clint and Bucky following her lead within a moment.

“We’ll see you tomorrow, Jarvis,” Bucky said. “Get some rest.” There was a warmth in his voice that must have come during Jarvis’s six months gone. Jarvis’s last thought before drifting off again was that he was glad his friends had continued to move forward.

The next time he woke up, it was to Bruce sitting down at the edge of his bed with a tray of fragrant-smelling food. Jarvis sat up, blinking owlishly at his visitor. “Doctor, you are aware that I do not require physical sustenance,” Jarvis said after a moment, peering at Bruce in mild confusion. A smile quirked the corner of Bruce’s mouth. “I’m aware,” he said. “I just thought you would enjoy it. Get some psychological benefit out of it, maybe.”

“Oh,” said Jarvis. “Well, in that case…”

The meal turned out to be a sort of stew, lentils and sweet potato and chicken in some kind of savory broth, with the kick of spices that were Bruce’s signature when he cooked. Jarvis took three bites and abruptly found himself ravenous, the kind of crippling hunger that cramped his stomach and made him shudder. Bruce looked on sympathetically, standing and leaving the room to fetch Jarvis a glass of water to drink with his meal. Jarvis had wolfed down half the bowl before he’d even returned.

“That was excellent, Dr. Banner—” Jarvis began, reaching for the proffered glass.
“Come on,” said Bruce, a touch of exasperation in the fondness. “You don’t have to be so formal, we’re still all friends here. Just Bruce.”

“Bruce,” Jarvis conceded, and drank a third of the glass. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure,” said Bruce, and sat down again. “Are you feeling up for some more visitors? Steve, Sam, and Rhody are all off finishing a mission today, but they’ll be back by tomorrow. But there’s still a couple people who want to see you.”

“Certainly,” said Jarvis, already privately wondering who he’d forgotten. Had he been that addled by his ordeal? Maybe he had just misheard Bruce. That was it, he decided.

"Jarvis? Can I come in?" Pepper's face peered around the corner of the door frame, a hopeful smile already hovering on her lips.

“Yes, of course, come in!” Jarvis smiled in instinctive response, and for some reason his addled new brain flashed on a memory of Pepper—but a Pepper of long before he was bodied, when she’d been less than thrilled with him and his newfound ability to deceive for the sake of his friends’ well-being. Jarvis blinked, all but physically shaking it off.

“It’s wonderful to see you—” He trailed off as Pepper came into the room, walking around the side of the bed to sit in the chair there, his eyes falling on the new shape of her normally_trim figure. “Pepper,” he began, uncertain.

Her smile widened, a hand going to rest lightly on the bulge of her abdomen. “It’s alright,” she said, settling with obvious care into the chair. Bruce hovered at the entrance to the room, watching, and Pepper shot him a look Jarvis was well familiar with, as he’d seen it leveled at Tony any number of times. It said, quite clearly, “stop acting like I’m made of glass before I find out which of us is more breakable,” and the recipient might have been anger and strength incarnate, but Bruce still flushed and ducked sheepishly out of the room.

"Are you," Jarvis began. "That is, I, ah, I hope it isn't rude to ask but—"


"Oh my god," said Jarvis, stupidly. Both hands flew to his mouth momentarily, hovering there like startled birds as he tried to gather himself. "That’s—I never thought—I thought neither of you—but of course what do I know, I'm just—" Pepper's face creased with a grin as Jarvis floundered, before Jarvis finally gave it up, bent over his own lap with his face in his hands, cheeks red with embarrassment. She laughed, the sound warm and reassuring; he supposed he could be grateful she wasn't irritated with him for being such an idiot.

"I'm so sorry," he said, recovering after a moment and sitting up again. He dropped his hands, and Pepper immediately reached out with one of hers to take his, entwining their fingers and squeezing gently. "Congratulations, Pepper. I'm really happy for you."

"Thank you." Pepper's mouth quirked. "Tony was afraid you'd freak out."

"Ah, yes, the spoiled eldest child jealous of their younger sibling," Jarvis noted wryly. He'd resented the idea of being Tony’s kid for awhile, but past a point it had grown on him. He supposed it was only natural to want to feel like he was part of the family.

"Something like that," Pepper agreed, and the affection in her voice sent a flush of warmth right through Jarvis's whole body.
"I'm aware this is rude," Jarvis said after a moment, "but I had thought you and Tony had had this conversation? I thought neither of you wanted children. And weren't you on birth control?" He realized belatedly how awkward he was sounding, but it was somehow hard to articulate the *I'm afraid you did something neither of you actually wanted* in his head.

"A copper IUD, yeah." Pepper bit her lip. The hand not holding Jarvis's went to her belly again, thumb stroking lightly over the curve of her abdomen. "Suze said that Extremis destroyed it."

Jarvis stared. "Oh my," he said faintly.

"Yeah," said Pepper. "In the future I'll need something more effective, obviously, but when we found out... well..." Pepper drew a slow breath. "I think over the past year or so I changed my mind. Tony was scared, but you know... it wasn't that he didn't want kids. He was just afraid he'd be as bad as his own dad was."

Jarvis nodded, since there was very little to say. Howard Stark had been a good man in many ways that counted—his friendship with Steve Rogers, his efforts during and after the war, his many inventions that bettered the greater good. But he had not, by most accounts, been much of a father to his only son. There was a reason a lonely 16-year-old Tony Stark had turned to creating his own companions from circuit boards and wires.

"Anyway," said Pepper, her tone decidedly lighter. "Plenty of time to figure that out. We're pretty sure on the names, though. Emmaline Maria or James Edwin Potts-Stark."

Jarvis recognized all but one of the names, though he suspected Maria was chosen more after Tony's mother than the intimidatingly competent former agent of SHIELD. "Emmaline?"

"Emma for short. It was my grandmother's name." Pepper grinned. "The grandmother who had three husbands and then retired to France at age 58 to ride motorcycles and write novels."

Jarvis grinned right back. "You must take after her," he said.

"I can only hope."

They talked for awhile longer about various things—how Viva and Bucky had, against all odds, apparently hit it off ("Tony calls them the 'angry biomechanical people club,'" Pepper said, and Jarvis choked on the tea Bruce had brought them), how Tony had rebuilt the Rescue suit for Pepper, although he flatly refused to let her do anything resembling Avengers work while she was pregnant (and how she had threatened him with everything and the kitchen sink before finally conceding); how Clint had tried to make pizza for everyone for their now-regular movie night and had succeeded in setting off all the emergency sprinklers on the communal floor.

In short, they talked about how all of his frankly extraordinary and unusual friends had been dealing with the ordinary, mundane parts of life. As exciting as news about HYDRA and Avengers work was, this was what Jarvis had most been craving, and felt the worst about missing—the boring, everyday things that were nothing special to report on, but nonetheless the parts he liked the most.

He lasted almost an hour before there was a knock at the door, Bruce and now also Tony appearing to check in on them. Jarvis opened his mouth to say hello, and instead his face split open in another enormous yawn.

"Whoops," said Tony, slipping into the room and coming to join Pepper by the side of the bed. "Someone needs a nap."
"You'll be the one needing a nap in another five or six months," Jarvis observed archly.

Tony waved his hand dismissively as he dropped into the other empty chair, Bruce hovering at the foot of the bed. "Whatever, I take adult naps already, I'm an old pro at sleep deprivation."

"That's not a good thing, you know," Bruce said. "I know you think sleep is for the weak, but—"

"We can argue about my crappy health habits later," Tony cut in, sounding impatient but not particularly annoyed. If he was nervous about his incipient fatherhood, he apparently wasn't showing it right now. "Jay's got a big day tomorrow, we should let him get some rest."

Jarvis arched an eyebrow, looking from Tony to Pepper to Bruce and back again. "Do I, now."

Bruce let out a long-suffering sigh, the effect ruined only slightly by the smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "The others are planning a party for you," he said. "It's not really a surprise, but I wanted to give you a heads-up in case you weren't feeling up for a big group yet."

"Party pooper," Tony said.

But Jarvis was grinning. "I am more than up for it," he said, keeping his voice firm despite the tiredness creeping back into his body. "But I do appreciate the warning. Should I act surprised?"

"Natasha would know even if you tried," Pepper pointed out.

"So would Steve, for that matter," said Bruce. "But nah, don't worry about it. Just come as you are."

"Very well," said Jarvis. "Out of sync with a side of moderate confusion has always looked so good on me." He smiled when the others laughed, Pepper's eyes going that little bit too wide that they did when she was startled.

They withdrew a few minutes later, leaving him to his creeping exhaustion, but when Jarvis lay back in bed and shut his eyes, he was feeling considerably better.

Maybe sometimes, you could go back.

* * * * *

"When is he getting here?"

At Clint’s question, Steve glanced up from the tablet he was reading. "Who, Jarvis? Rhodey said they’d let him sleep as late as he wanted, but they’d be down here by like 10:30 or 11." Enough time for their surprise to be handled, Steve hoped. Tony and Natasha had gone to do just that, while Pepper and Rhodey were upstairs doing some other last-minute preparations and waiting for Jarvis. That meant Bucky and Viva would be arriving shortly, followed by everyone else—or so Steve hoped.

"Welcome home brunch," said Clint, his satisfaction obvious. "Perfect." to He unceremoniously dropped what looked like a glorified gym bag on the ground and then dropped himself onto the sleek leather couch. It creaked under him as he sprawled, throwing his arms along the back of the couch and splaying his legs wide. Steve felt a smile twitch the corner of his mouth at the honestly idiotic pose.

Sam appeared in the doorway to the kitchen, raising an eyebrow at Clint but choosing pointedly to ignore it. "Waffle batter is all ready," he said. "I heard someone was bringing booze to this party?"
“I got Zing Zang and vodka,” Clint said, gesturing to the gym bag on the floor. “I think Maria is bringing champagne and orange juice.” As Steve watched, he conjured several different-colored golf balls from his jacket and began to juggle them, two, three, five balls at once. Steve watched him, amused; Clint was obviously not lacking in manual dexterity, but the effortlessness with which the little colored balls flew through the air was still somehow impressive.

“Good woman,” said Sam. “I hope someone knows how to cook eggs, by the way. We have enough eggs to feed half of Manhattan.”

“So, Steve plus like three people,” said Clint.

“That’s right,” Steve said, setting the tablet on the table in front of him and standing up. “They slaughtered a whole hen house just for me.”

“That doesn’t even make sense,” said Bruce’s voice from the doorway to the hall. The man himself appeared a moment later, carrying a plastic grocery bag full of what appeared to be fruit. “If you kill all the hens, you don’t get any more eggs at all. I didn’t get here too late to help cook breakfast, did I?”

“Nah,” Sam said, grinning. “Get in here, man, there’s still plenty to do.”

“You want any help?” Steve asked. Bruce glanced at Sam, who shrugged.

“Sure, if you wanna. First you two can fix us a couple of Bloody Marys, though.”

At this, Clint bounced up out of his deep couch sprawl as lightly as if he had springs in his ass, his face the picture of delight. “Hell yeah!” Steve spared a moment to wonder where the golf balls went, and then gave it up as unimportant.

They were halfway through the first round of Bloody Marys when Viva and Bucky turned up, bearing a box of donuts from the kosher bakery twelve blocks away and a five pound bag of coffee beans, which Bruce immediately took to start making more coffee. Maria appeared less than five minutes later, bearing the ingredients for mimosas, as Clint had predicted. Steve hung back, sipping a drink Clint had insisted on making him and watching the proceedings.

(“Why is it a manly mimosa?” Steve had asked dubiously, to which Clint had enthusiastically replied, “Beer instead of champagne!” Maria had followed this declaration by decking Clint in the stomach. Clint doubled over, melodramatically clutching his stomach and pretending to wheeze in pain.)

“When’s the guest of honor going to get down here?” Maria asked, ignoring Clint’s theatrics.

“Soon, I hope,” said Steve. Although Maria hadn’t previously been privy to the secret about Jarvis’s true nature, she had figured it out during his long period of recovery. Steve wasn’t surprised. Maria Hill was many things, but unobservant was not one of them. She had taken it (and Viva) in stride, though perhaps that had something to do with the fact that she was currently in the employ of Stark Industries and also that Pepper, when angry, was terrifying.

Steve glanced at the clock. 10:37 a.m., and Tony and Natasha still weren’t back yet, either. He suppressed a stab of concern, reminding himself that today was an informal get-together, not a tactical strike. Errands would take however long they took.

“I smell coffee and bacon,” said Rhodey’s voice from the door. He appeared first, and behind him came Pepper—and, his arm twined with hers and leaning ever so slightly on her for support, was Jarvis.
“Hello everyone,” Jarvis said, earning a happy chorus of Hi’s and Hello’s. Steve’s lifted in his chest at the sight of him, Jarvis’s expression at once bashful and obviously pleased. “Breakfast smells amazing.”

“It’s gonna taste even better,” said Sam, brandishing a batter-covered mixing spoon in his hand for emphasis. “Wilson family recipe. Gonna knock your socks off.”


Jarvis’s smile went wry. “I think perhaps I’ll stick to just the orange juice for now,” he said. Pepper walked him to one of the empty chairs at the table, and he sank down onto it with a soft oof. “I’m still not quite in fighting shape yet.”

“You’ll get there,” said Suze’s voice. She appeared in the doorway, carrying a bag from another local cafe, this one known for its muffins and scones. “Ohhhh, whatever’s cooking smells good.”

At the stove where he was presiding over the skillet of bacon and sausage, Bruce’s face immediately went from mild contentment to something much dopier. Steve caught Sam grinning at him and had to smile back. Bruce and Dr. Franklin had been dating almost as long as Steve and Sam had been, and Bruce was still absolutely smitten with her.

“Are we waiting on anybody else?” asked Pepper, looking around. “Oh, shoot, Natasha and Tony still aren’t back, huh.”

Someone’s stomach rumbled audibly. Everyone turned to look at Viva and Bucky, who were perched on stools around the breakfast bar. “Don’t look at me,” said Viva pointedly. Bucky glowered, but the effect was ruined by another growl coming from the region of his stomach.

Steve couldn’t help but laugh. “Whatever,” he said. “They’re the ones running late, I’m calling it. Let’s get started. It’s not like we won’t still be here when they get back. We’ve got plenty of food.”

This announcement was greeted by noises of approval, but Steve caught the hesitant way Jarvis glanced over at Pepper and the where have they gone? he asked of her, his voice low.

Don’t worry, Pepper responded, her voice low but warm with reassurance. They went to get your welcome-back surprise.

Breakfast was delicious, huge, and shamelessly unhealthy. Only the bag of fresh fruit Bruce brought saved it from being a full-on tribute to Ron Swanson: scrambled eggs with cheese, eggs Benedict, hash browns, waffles, scones, muffins, donuts, bacon, sausage, the works. There were too many people to all sit at the table at the same time, so their motley crew arranged themselves around the kitchen instead, lounging variously at the table, at the breakfast bar, or perched outright on the counters, mugs of coffee and glasses of alcohol of choice scattered on flat surfaces like a found-object contemporary art exhibit.

Steve was trying hard to relax, but he’d spent too much time as team captain to be able to completely stop himself from monitoring how everyone was doing. Luckily, his team—his friends—had all, down to the last man and woman, experienced or borne witness to a recovery from trauma and seemed to know to keep things light without any real prompting from Steve. Viva was perhaps the only exception, and while she hovered a little by Jarvis, she seemed content to take her cues from everyone else.

Jarvis, meanwhile, seemed transcendent with happiness. He listened attentively as the conversation rambled around them, asking questions here and there to prompt a new story or elaboration on the current one. He didn’t have half the appetite anyone else did, but then half the people present were
genetically modified or the equivalent of professional athletes, so it was a tough bar to rise to. Clint was in the middle of telling a story about a pizza-loving dog, some Russian thugs, and his apartment building when the elevator door pinged from down the hall.

"You jerks better have left some breakfast for us," came Natasha’s voice, followed moments later by Natasha herself as she appeared in the door. "Whose idea was it to start without us?"

"Mine," said Steve, grinning widely.

"I should have known, Rogers," said Tony, appearing behind Natasha. "You’re pretty damn impatient for a nonagenarian."

"Welcome back," said Jarvis, twisting in his chair to look towards his friends. "Don’t worry, there’s—" He broke off when he saw the third person appear in the doorway, his jaw literally dropping open and eyes widening in shock. "Thor!"

"Greetings, my friends," Thor boomed. He was dressed in “normal” clothes, a beautiful tailored suit that was no doubt Tony’s doing, but no designer suit would hide the fact that he towered over literally everyone, filling the doorway with his broad frame, or disguise the regal way he carried himself. "Forgive our tardiness. Travel between your realm and mine is not as reliable as we might have hoped."

"Surprise," said Tony, and waggled his eyebrows. Someone sniffled audibly; Steve strongly suspected it was Pepper, but the room was too full of chattering voices to be sure.

"It is a great pleasure to meet you at last, Jarvis," Thor said. He crossed the room in two steps, bending down to pull Jarvis into a rib-crushing hug. Jarvis squeaked, and Steve hid a smile in his cup of coffee. "Tony and Steve have told me much of your exploits. I look forward to knowing you better."

"The pleasure is all mine," Jarvis said shakily. He couldn’t seem to stop grinning, even though he was still wobbly on his feet like a colt. Someone (Natasha) got him a cup of coffee and a donut, and Thor launched into a story he’d obviously told a few times about some off-world adventure he’d gone on with Lady Sif and the Warriors Three, and just like that, they were off.

Between Jarvis and Thor, everyone had a lot of catching up to do. People sat in clusters, talking and eating and now and then getting up to refill a drink or drift to another pod of conversation. Eventually they all made their way out into the living room, settling on the more comfortable sprawl of couches and chairs, leaving a detritus of waffle crumbs and bacon fat in their wake.

"So, Natasha mentioned that you have a new girlfriend, Clint?" Jarvis ventured, looking over at their resident bowman. Clint groaned and dropped his face into his palm by way of response before lifting his gaze to shoot a venomous look at Natasha. Natasha smirked.

"She's not my girlfriend," Clint said loudly. "She's my protege."

"That's what they're calling it these days," said Bucky in a low voice to Viva, who snorted into her coffee mug. If Steve didn't know for a fact that Viva had loudly proclaimed her distaste for sex and all its incarnations, he would have thought they were dating. Hell, maybe they were dating; sex wasn't exactly the be-all and end-all of intimacy. Either way, he was glad those two had hit it off so well.

"She lives in the apartment with you, doesn't she?" This came from Sam, who apparently couldn't resist taking the bait.
Clint flipped him the bird and took another swig of his beer before pointedly addressing Jarvis again. "No, she doesn't, she just comes over a lot. She's an archer, like me. Her name is Kate and she's really cool, you guys would like her.

"I do like her," said Natasha easily. "She could do way better than you."

"Why did I pull you out of that cartel's prison again?" Clint wondered aloud.

"Because you didn't know where I hid our passports or how to get out of town without me," said Natasha.

Clint looked at Jarvis. "Do you see what I put up with? Do you?"

"Truly, your life is a struggle," said Jarvis.

"Speaking of girlfriends, though, when is Carol coming back into town?" Tony asked. This question was directed at Rhodey.

"Carol?" Jarvis asked.

"Congratulations on your new love," said Thor very seriously. Someone hid a laugh in their hand.

"Hopefully within the next week," Rhodey said. He was sitting on the couch by Tony and Pepper, Jarvis seated in the plush armchair just across from them. "Maybe we'll be able to go on a date without her having to punch any time-traveling dinosaurs this time."

"One can only hope," said Sam. Steve had to grin; Sam had that stoic look on his face Steve knew him well enough to recognize by now, the one that said this shit is ridiculous but I'll be damned if I let on. It was a toss-up on any given day who was having the weirdest week.

The conversation flowed on around him as Steve got up to retrieve another cup of coffee, glancing at the clock as he came back into the kitchen. It was already 1 pm; the sun had finally broken through the clouds outside, rendering New York into a beautiful sunny landscape of snow and marled glass. It might still be mid-winter cold outside, but they'd already had a few days of more temperate spring weather, the mercury climbing as high as 35 F last week. Spring was around the corner.

"You pondering the mysteries of life?" Sam's voice made Steve turn his head. Sam was standing in the doorway, watching him with a small smile on his face.

"Something like that." Steve returned the smile, his own somewhat more rueful than Sam's. Sam crossed the room to him, backing him against the counter and hedging him in with an arm on either side of Steve's hips, hands flat on the countertop. Steve's grin widened, eyes tracking the mischief in Sam's face just inches from his own. "You here to help me?"

"Something like that," Sam murmured. Steve snorted. The noise was cut off as Sam pressed a kiss to his mouth, and for a few seconds Steve let all his other thoughts evaporate in the warmth of Sam's lips against his. "I was thinking you better still be spending tonight in with me."

"Actually, I was planning on maybe running a quick marathon around Central Park..." Steve broke off with a laugh as Sam's fingers dug into Steve's ribs under the edge of his shirt. "Hey!"

"You're a monster," said Sam fondly. "I'm still sore from the weekend and you're talking about running in the snow. Remind me never to agree to move in the middle of winter again."
"Says the man who found our apartment and insisted it was perfect," Steve said.

"It is perfect," said Sam. "I just wish it had an elevator large enough for couches. Four flights of stairs is rough."

Steve just grinned. He hooked his thumb in Sam's pants, tugging his lover closer against him, the warmth settling in his chest, right behind his heart. "Come on, of course I'm spending tonight in. We have to break in our new apartment, right?" He let some heat creep into his voice. "I wouldn't miss it for the world."

"That's what I'm talkin' about," Sam murmured. He leaned in again, their lips brushing, and Steve had already started wondering how early they could get away with leaving the group brunch when someone strode in from the door that led back to the living room. Sam broke away, he and Steve both turning to look.

It was Jarvis. He was moving quickly, and he looked distressed. He did not so much as glance at either Sam or Steve as he hurried through the kitchen, exiting through the door at the rear that led to the large balcony outside. "Jarvis?" Steve asked, but their friend was already gone.

"Jarvis!" Tony burst into the kitchen as Jarvis left. He took four steps in and paused, glancing over at Steve and Sam.

"Everything alright?" Steve asked, alarmed.

Tony's eyes flicked from Sam to Steve, but instead of a snide remark he just shook his head. "Maybe, but—it's complicated," he said distractedly. "Don't worry about it, just gimme a minute to help him calm down."

"Want us to run interference?" Sam asked.

"I knew you were good people, Sam Wilson," Tony said. "We'll be right back, okay?"

"No sweat," said Steve. "Take your time."

Tony nodded and then hurried in the direction Jarvis had gone, disappearing around the corner.

Sam looked at Steve. "Your move, Cap," he said.

Steve's mouth quirked. "Got it," he said, and headed back into the common room.

* * * * *

Jarvis was just outside on the patio, thankfully. Tony had half-expected him to bolt, like he had the very first time he'd found himself in a body, but while his friend had sort of made a run for it, this time it was only as far as the balcony overlooking the city.

Tony stepped out into the early afternoon, shivering as a vicious gust of wind ripped around the side of Stark Tower. There were heaters out here, because you didn't have a balcony this high up and not have outdoor heating for your damn patio, but it didn't do a lot of good against the wind. Tony wished he was wearing more than just a light sweater.

Jarvis looked up as Tony emerged into the day, his hunched shoulders and folded arms sending a clear message. "Forgive me, sir," he said, eyes skating over Tony's face and past his shoulder, not quite meeting his eyes. "I—I need a moment."

"You don't have to apologize, Jay," Tony said. "I, uh, you wanna tell me what happened?"
Jarvis pursed his lips and did not answer immediately. He turned away, staring out at the windy cityscape beneath them. The Hudson River was visible from this side of the Tower, snaking away like a shimmering white-blue ribbon out to the grey line of the Atlantic at the horizon. Tony squared his shoulders and came closer, not wanting to crowd Jarvis but reluctant to leave, either. He was just wondering whether Jarvis was going to just ignore him until Tony left him alone when Jarvis finally spoke.

"When Thor asked to hear what happened during the fight with the Helicarriers, I attempted to pull up the audio-visual record of it so he could see the scale," Jarvis said. "But I—as Clint might say, I might as well have tried to use the Force to lift something for all it did. There was nothing."

Tony looked at him, blinking. "Nothing? You mean like, you couldn't get anything to happen?"

"I couldn't talk to the house computer at all," said Jarvis. His voice was tight; he still wasn't looking at Tony, his gaze directed out at the scenery before them. But Tony would have bet money that he wasn't actually seeing anything out there.

Tony's brow furrowed. "Is your wifi down?" he asked, trying not to dwell on how stupid that question sounded in his own ears.

"I don't know," Jarvis said. He hesitated. "Should I try?"

"Sure," Tony said. "I mean, if you want to."

Jarvis nodded, distracted. He looked slightly back towards Tony, his eyes going black; then after a moment, he blinked, shaking his head. "There's nothing," he said. "It's—it's—"

"Jay," Tony began, but Jarvis shook his head violently. Tony broke off, biting his lip to stem the flow of pure idiocy that wanted to unleash itself from his mouth.

"It's like losing one of my senses," Jarvis said after a moment. "I'm completely cut off."

Tony let out a long sigh. "I was wondering if there were gonna be side-effects from the transplant," he said in a low voice. "Or maybe it's from what happened at the HYDRA base, fried some of your nerve endings, somehow."

Jarvis just shook his head again. Tony leaned forward, peering at his friend's face. To his dismay, he could see wet streaks had appeared on Jarvis's cheeks, quickly cooling into a rime of ice in the cold breeze. Even as Jarvis struggled to compose himself, the sun slipped behind the clouds again, somehow increasing the chill of the day by a power of ten. "Aw, Jay," Tony said, voice gruff. "C'mere, buddy."

"Sir—" Jarvis's voice had gone thick.

Fuck this," Tony thought. He threw an arm around Jarvis's shoulders, his head ducked in close. Jarvis sniffled audibly, his eyes downcast. "I'm not gonna tell you how to feel," Tony said. "And I'm not gonna sit here and tell you everything will be fuckin' sunshine and daisies, either, but I promise I will try to fix it if you want me to. And you don't know, it may come back on its own. You literally only just woke up yesterday."

Jarvis nodded, though whether it was in agreement with Tony or just instinctive, Tony wasn't really sure. "You should talk more to Viva," Tony continued, trying to inject confidence into his voice and momentarily wishing he was half the motivational speaker that Steve or Rhodey was. "She’s got a couple months on you at this business, by now."
Jarvis sniffed again, finally glancing up at Tony with a lopsided smile. “She said that you have been an absolute pain in the ass,” he said, and Tony was too busy being pleased by the note of humor in his voice to care about the insult. “And that if you hadn’t been so helpful she would have left months ago.”

“She said that, huh. Well, the feeling is mostly mutual, so whatever.” Tony hugged Jarvis one-armed, offering a smile of his own. “Seriously, though. Don’t shut the door on it yet, okay? We got a lot of options we can try first, and you’ve only just started to see what you’re capable of now that you’re in a body of your own.”

“Alright,” Jarvis said, and he nodded again, more sure of himself this time. Tony wasn’t totally sold, but dwelling on it wouldn’t do them any good, either way. Better to switch subjects, he decided.

And he had just the distraction. Tony took a deep breath. “Hey, while I have you out here, I, uh. Got a question for you.”

Jarvis looked at him, really looked at him now, eyebrows raised in attention. Tony cleared his throat. He’d said this speech to himself a dozen times now in the mirror, at least, but he still wasn’t sure that he was going to be able to get it out without tripping over his own tongue.

“So, I, uh. You probably know that—that I named you after one of the only people who was ever really there for me, growing up, and you, uh, you more or less continued that tradition. And I probably would have died years ago if not for you, and if it wasn’t for you and the first Edwin Jarvis I wouldn’t—well, the only reason I might do alright as a dad is because of you. So I was—”

Tony cleared his throat, cursing himself inwardly. “So I was hoping that you would consider being a godfather to my kid, because I already know you’d be great at it.”

It was Jarvis’s turn to clear his throat. He wiped a hand quickly across his face, swiping at his half-frozen tears, his face splotchy with wind and perhaps something else. Tony felt his heart crawl up into his throat, and before he could stop himself he was hastening to add, “You don’t have to, you know. It’s a lot to ask! And I know Viva was talking about maybe doing some traveling and if you wanted to go with her—”

“I would be honored,” Jarvis interrupted. And while his eyes might have been glassy, his voice was firm. “I accept.”

“Oh. Well. That’s awesome.” Tony grinned, the smile feeling like it was going to break his face in two if he wasn’t careful. He opened his mouth, then shut it, settling for pressing his temple to Jarvis’s and hugging him again, heedless of the wind and the cold and the increasing awareness that they ought to go back inside before someone else came looking for them out of worry.

“I still can’t quite believe you’re going to be a parent,” Jarvis said, saving Tony from having to come up with something intelligent or meaningful to say. “I’m so happy for you.”

“Thanks,” Tony said after a moment. “Thank you. I’m uh. I’m happy too.” He still couldn’t seem to stop grinning. His face was starting to hurt, though that was probably the wind chill.

“Your face is turning red, sir,” Jarvis observed.

“That’s because it’s fucking cold, and also shut up, Jarvis, you’re supposed to just let me have my moment, capiche?” At this, Jarvis laughed, some of the lines of tension finally leaving his face. “But fine, whatever. Let’s go back inside and eat some more donuts or something.”
Jarvis nodded, wiping his face once more and straightening his shoulders. “Maybe I can persuade Sam to make me one more waffle,” he said lightly.

“I’m sure he would if you asked,” said Tony. “And if not, well, I’m sure you could get Steve to guilt him into it.”

“Emotional blackmail,” Jarvis said, as they turned and headed back towards the door. “A sure sign of a healthy relationship.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” said Tony, his hand still on Jarvis’s shoulder. It fell away only as they passed inside the door, Tony falling back to let Jarvis go inside first. He lingered for just a moment, glancing over his shoulder.

The sun was peeking out from behind the cloud-cover again—not free and clear, yet, but hinting at warmth just around the corner. Tony was struck by a moment of intense deja vu—the last time he’d been out here staring at the city in weather like this, he’d been worrying about how to cure Pepper. He’d sworn off the suits, sworn off just about everything but fixing Pepper. Something like fatherhood and its attendant responsibilities had been the last thing on his mind.

Funny, how much could change in a year.

“Sir?” Tony started, turning around again at the quizzical note in Jarvis’s voice.

“Sorry,” he said, ducking inside the door that Jarvis was holding open for him. “Let’s go see about that waffle.”

“Very good, sir,” said Jarvis.

Chapter End Notes

+ Viva's tattoo looks something like this.
+ I am a bartender and I am here to tell you that short of making your own bloody mix at home, Zing Zang is where it's at. That shit is DELICIOUS.
+ Yes, that Carol Danvers and yes, that's Kate Bishop.

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