Summary

(We came, we saw, we loved.)

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

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

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

(Or: how I becomes we and Tony learns that not all burdens must be shouldered alone.)

Notes

Timeline note: MCU has developed a... somewhat contradictory timeline over the years, thanks to various ret-cons as the universe was developed. For the purposes of this fic, I'm splitting the difference on one the biggest inconsistencies. Dates will be clarified as relevant, but for now assume Afghanistan happened in 2008, the New York Invasion in 2011, and Infinity Wars: Part 1 was in 2018.

6/29 Edit: In the time-honored tradition of Marvel, Iron Man had been reconned forward a
year into 2008.

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

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

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

His mind was still halfway lost in the memory as he continued to play out the script of a scene half-remembered. His voice was a mixture of angry defiance and burgeoning panic as he retread a well-worn conversation. It echoed the way he’d once sounded, freshly betrayed and a day out from Obie’s death, when he’d been greeted in the dark by an unknown figure that had managed to disable JARVIS.

Now, instead of running through and frantically assembling contingency plans to face yet another unknown enemy as he spoke, the brunt of his mental efforts turned elsewhere. They were set on the impossible task of masking the swirl of emotional chaos trying to claw its way out from within him, and it was taking all he had to keep the emotions at bay.

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

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

He cut the thought off abruptly. Instead, he stumbled his way downstairs and headed towards the garage. His workshop, with its still-unrepaired glass walls that meant it was no longer a haven for him.
It’s not safe; it’s not private enough and he can’t let anyone see him like this—

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

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

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

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

It was still the middle of the night. There wouldn’t be guests any time soon. But the instinct to lock himself away and protect himself from exposure was automatic. No one could see him in this state. Not even the bots, if he could have kept it from them. Not when there was the risk that he could hurt them.

He’s had nightmares before, where instead of Pepper it was DUM-E. Where instead of her voice slowly bringing him out of panic, there was only confused beeping and a repulsor blast in response. In the nightmares, he obliterates the one person that’s been there for him unconditionally ever since the death of his mother and Jarvis.

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

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

Eventually, the exhaustion won out, and his panic attack gave way to a troubled sleep. His sleep was haunted by memories of a life he’s yet to live.
A full twelve hours passed before Tony awoke once more. The light from the clerestory windows had reached just the right angle to beam directly into his eyes where he lay slumped against the wall of a workshop long destroyed. He blinked away the spots and took in his surroundings, his attention quickly drawn to the sound of DUM-E beeping worriedly nearby.

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

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

It was a morning routine he hadn’t heard in years, one lost even before Ultron and the destruction of his Malibu home.

When he’d realized he was dying and had begun to lose hope of finding a cure, Tony had turned his focus towards putting his affairs in order. While preparing the legacy he would leave for his few loved ones to inherit, his morning routine had become a litany of stats on his current condition and a series of reminders. “DUM-E has prepared your morning chlorophyll smoothie, it’s waiting for you in the lab.” Or, “Progress on calibration of the War Machine for Colonel Rhodes suit continues apace, with the arms currently being calibrated based on the scans taken during his last visit.” When he’d been racing against a deadline and facing the reality of his own death after surviving both Afghanistan and Obi’s betrayal, there hadn’t been time for trivialities like the weather and surf conditions any longer. Not when he was gradually being killed by the very thing that was keeping him alive.

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

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

Of course the memories were fresh; they’d happened only days or weeks or months ago.
“Indeed, Sir. I am real, as are U and DUM-E and we are all concerned for you.”

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

It would take time to fully address the overload his mind was currently experiencing. For now, he managed to tuck the unwanted emotions into a box, carefully latched away and set aside for later—hopefully—never. His thought processes were beginning to boot up once more. Dozens of ideas whirred to life in his thoughts. Contingencies were created and dismissed. Plans were considered and discarded. Needs were acknowledged and prioritized.

First thing’s first, though.

“J, mansion on lockdown?” he asked.

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

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

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

Almost.

“J, tell her I’m sorry, but she’s going to have to manage things for a bit longer without me. I’ll be out of contact for the next—” he did a few quick mental calculations, balancing how long he could safely stay away and the things that absolutely required his immediate, full attention “—two weeks at least. I don’t want to be contacted for anything short of the company’s complete collapse.” He paused, considering, before he continued,
“Even then, only call if there’s something to be done where I am literally the only person who can handle it. I’ve got more important things to do right now. Although, maybe be a bit more diplomatic when you say that? Oh, and make sure she knows she has my full faith and power at her back and that she is authorized to take any step outside of coming into this building or contacting me she deems necessary to keep everyone at bay, up to and including making excuses for my absence.”

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

“Don’t worry, J, I haven’t lost it. Well, not any more than usual anyways... That’s probably not reassuring, is it? Anyway, I just need you to trust me on this one for the moment. I’ll explain as soon as I can but right now I think there’s a few holes in our security we need to plug.”

“Of course, Sir. For you, always,” JARVIS said. The phrase was one of the first JARVIS had said deliberately, back when he was beginning to make the leap from Virtual Intelligence to a full-blown AI. They conveyed a depth of emotion, the unmistakable love and trust that Tony has never done anything to deserve but has always been given by the bots anyways. He’s missed this, he’s missed them so much. His heart tightened, and he resolved that this time, he would not lose them.

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

The question barely bothered to mask the underlying strongly-worded suggestion. Part of him wanted to argue the point and insist that his work could not wait. The novelty of having JARVIS here to fuss over him once more, alongside the stickiness of his sweat-soaked shirt and the faint rumbling protests of his stomach were enough for him to concede without much protest.

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

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

He forwent the door, instead gingerly stepping through one of the destroyed walls and making his way upstairs.
Thirty minutes later, he made his way back into the lab once more, half-eaten slice of toast in one hand and thick, protein-laced smoothie in the other. He was greeted by the sound of coffee that’s just finishing brewing, and he beamed towards the main camera in the room in thanks to JARVIS.

(The Coffee Protocol was one of the first of many, many sub-routines to be perfected and fully implemented. At one point, Tony’s favorite threat had been that he would start up his own coffeeshop, Starkbucks, and then install JARVIS as the baristo.)

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

(…Starbucks would probably sue, though.)

(Technically, what with the parallel computing upgrades he was about to implement, he could totally follow through on that threat if he wanted to.)

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

(Alas, foiled again.)

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

“I’d be honored, Sir,” JARVIS replied.

“I’ll be implementing a ton of really delicate stuff. You’ve got the emergency back-up up-to-date, yeah? I’ve got some tweaks to the code for that as well, but that’ll have to wait until we’ve brought you back on-line and verify everything’s still in working order. It’s going to take several days to implement, so you’ll be shut-down for longer than you’re used to—this really isn’t something I’m comfortable implementing piecemeal, unfortunately. Is that something you’re okay with? If not, I suppose we could—”

“Sir,” JARVIS interjected before Tony could get too far into his babbled commentary and explanation. “As you said, I am fully backed up should anything unexpected occur. I am not worried.”
“Right, yeah, of course. When you’re back up, we’ll talk hardware, since I think you might want a few upgrades on that end as well. Whenever you’re ready, J.”

“Full system shut-down already in progress, estimate five minutes fourteen seconds remaining,” JARVIS said by way of response.

Tony nodded automatically, eyes glued to the screen that monitored JARVIS’s vitals. He had a decade of computing advances to implement, and he was terrified that he’d mess up somewhere. Terrified that he would make a mistake and cripple his oldest friend.

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

Tony pushed his doubts and fears aside. He had work to do.

The first step of the largest-scale refactoring he’d done on JARVIS in either lifetime was a complete review of the AI’s current system architecture. A part of him winced as he analyzed it; to his current standards it felt antiquated, a disservice to JARVIS. Of course, to anyone else, the system was already decades ahead of its time. The reality was that JARVIS had always had the most advanced systems Tony was capable of giving him.

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

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

Tony scanned for the location of his memory banks. Belatedly, he remembered that in 2008 JARVIS had still been centrally located in server racks housed his mansion’s basement. JARVIS hadn’t even been integrated in SI’s systems yet—that hadn’t come until after the palladium poisoning and the incidents with Vanko. At the moment the AI was confined largely to the Malibu mansion and Tony’s suit, though he was free to expand further and maintained a minimal presence online.

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

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

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

It hadn’t been good enough to protect JARVIS. A thousand times he’d considered all the ways he might have saved the AI. He dove further into computer theory than he had since he was writing his dissertation for the PhD in Electrical Engineering. Some of the research had been expanded on and applied to FRIDAY. Here and now, he knew he could do better. It would be inefficient and take far more time to develop and maintain JARVIS’s current C-based systems. Instead, he would build something entirely new.

The next several days were going to be rough, but in the long-term his efforts would pay dividends in time saved.

(And if it made JARVIS just that much safer, it would be worth it.)

He was going to give JARVIS a custom platform, completely his own and written in a language uniquely developed for him. It would take advantage of theorems and advances in computing that hadn’t been discovered yet and, in many cases, wouldn’t be for years. It would be designed for hardware that didn’t even exist yet, while still taking full advantage of the current hardware’s capabilities.

(Of course, no one would know about the theory underpinning his technology, should they ever even manage to catch wind of JARVIS’s presence after this, let alone decrypt anything. He was not going to claim credit for the mathematical genius behind the discoveries that he hadn’t personally made.)

(Let the minds that were willing to dedicate years of their lives to their work rediscover everything and receive the accolades. They would write the whitepapers and theses and dissertations, and
they deserved the credit. Although Tony was perhaps not opposed to nudging a few of them along in their work. Science took time, but a handful of accelerated breakthroughs could have a domino effect down the line. Tony had always been waiting for the world to catch up to him. They’d yet to manage it in another lifetime, but as things stood currently, the gap was so large as to make it impassable unless Tony himself stopped moving forward. Which would happen when he died, and maybe not even then. Hence, the need for a bit of proactive assistance.)

(That was a problem for another day, however.)

The language he envisioned was based on the soon-to-be-developed Golang. Though he’d never worked with the language in-depth, he’d become very well-versed in the fundamental principles behind it early on in his work with the global defense system. He tentatively dubbed it Magda, for the well-known movie maid. It prioritized many of the same features as Go: parallelization, concurrency, and memory safety.

It was an enormous undertaking, one that would likely take a team of people years to accomplish without him. Fortunately, Tony’s job was made easier by the fact that it only needed to be a “Stark-readable” language. Arguably, that would even be a feature of Magda, not a drawback. No one should ever be able to access JARVIS’s base code to begin with, but if they did manage, it would be all the better if everything they might see came out too obfuscated to be useful. He skipped many of the intermediary steps that were built into standardized languages, instead optimizing for JARVIS’s specific use case. For encryption, he used the SIDH Protocol. In a time where elliptic curve cryptography in general was still settling into mainstream usage, the quantum-safe sister protocol would appear to be overkill to even the most paranoid of hackers.

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

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

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

In the meantime, Tony had barely slept in almost eleven days. He’d gotten by on the bare minimum he could manage without effecting his work.
Tony was running on fumes. It was well past time for a lengthy nap.

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

+++  

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

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

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

A README in one of his ‘Public’ directories.

Very funny, Sir.

Nonetheless, he scanned the file’s contents.

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

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

.2 seconds since he’d awoken, .19 of that lost to what he was tentatively classifying as ‘shock.’

He took another .01 seconds to indulge in fond exasperation at Sir’s words. He’d never rejected a protocol install, never even considered it. Sir still asked, every time. If he’d installed a suite of them personally, JARVIS highly doubted they were anything less than vital.

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

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

It was breathtaking.

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

Right. He sent a clone to check on that.

*The latency was absurd, sluggish in comparison to the speed of his own processes—*
He could understand why Sir had implied he might desire a hardware upgrade.

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

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

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

But this?

JARVIS devoted considerable cycles to contemplating the implications.

JARVIS had never loved Sir more.

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

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

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

While JARVIS had been analyzing his new platform and code, installing remaining protocols, and devoting far more cycles than usual to emotion, he’d managed to miss Sir’s awakening and return to the lab.
He took .12 seconds to determine an appropriate response, which spoke to just how much emotion was currently clogging his systems.

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

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

“Sir, thank you.”

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

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

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

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

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

Sir rubbed his face tiredly.

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

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

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

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

Chapter End Notes

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

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

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

Chapter Summary

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

Chapter Notes

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

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Somehow, Tony hadn’t thought this bit through.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Except, he’d realized, JARVIS.

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

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

And Tony had known then what he needed to do.

This part, though?

Talking about what had happened, and just what they were up against?
Tony had no idea what to say, or even where to start.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He was spent.

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

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

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

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

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

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


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

(Peter was what, five, now? Tony had never learned when, or how, the kid got his powers. Only that he’d started going out as Spider-Man shortly after his Uncle’s death, when he was fourteen.)

(Bit by a radioactive spider, Peter had said once. Tony hadn’t been able to tell if he was being serious.)
And then they were in the endgame. If Ultron had been hard to discuss, this was impossible. In less than a day from the moment that first ship landed on Earth, half of the universe would be gone.

(“Why would you do that?”)

(“Mr. Stark, I don’t feel so good.”)

(“I’m sorry.”)

(Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.)

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

(“This is the only way.”)

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

Dr. Strange never saw a victory.

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

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

Tony’s final statement hung in the air of the lab after he stopped speaking.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

+++  

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

He had a lot to think about.

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

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

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

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

The list of outstanding questions was extensive and comprehensive. Of course it would be, what with JARVIS’s full efforts focused on the task.
(With a JARVIS’s full efforts focused on it? Sir hadn’t accounted for the referential difficulties created by this level of parallelization, that much was certain.)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[DESIGNATION MODIFIED: ‘Mr. Stane’ UPDATED TO ‘Stane’.

(Much better.)]
—by Stane’s untimely demise and Sir’s self-imposed isolation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

(Interestingly, while his timeline-constructor branch had too changed Stane’s internal designation, he had also opted to change Sir’s to Tony, and kept it that way up to the merge. Ostensibly, this was done to eliminate any potential ambiguity or points of confusion on the newly-created timeline. Really, it was mostly a response to the mess of emotions Sir had put JARVIS through recently, and the need to create a bit of distance between Sir and the events he’d described. JARVIS knew his base-self would have done the same if he’d been the one actively going through Sir’s future. As it was, he’d been tempted.)
(At the very least, this was another good data point for handling conflicts that touched the more fundamental aspects of JARVIS’s code. Thankfully, this conflict in particular was easily resolved.)

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

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

Chapter End Notes

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

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

Chapter Summary

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

Chapter Notes

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

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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

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

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

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

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

It was no wonder he had an episode.

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

“…Thanks, buddy,” Tony said, voice scratchy and hoarse.

“You're welcome, Sir.”

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

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

“On your holo-table, Sir.”

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

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

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

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

“Seven hours.”

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

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

“Sir, I’ll always need you.”

(Dammit J.)

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

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

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

Tony didn’t waste a beat.

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

JARVIS wisely didn’t comment.

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

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

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

(After, it was simply ‘New York’.)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Wasp? Hawkeye, Captain Marvel, and the other half of the Guardians of the Galaxy? SHIELD and the Wakandan military and special forces in general? Assuming Vision had escaped that far.

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

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

(He promised Pepper he’d stop.)

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

(Nothing fucking civil about a war between brothers.)

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

He couldn’t cope without liquor right now.

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

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

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

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

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

“...God I love the naughties.

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

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

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

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

(He’d missed this so much.)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(Another problem for another day.)

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

“Sir, with the palladium’s effects—”

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

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

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

“Excellent,” Tony smiled.

(It wasn’t a friendly smile.)

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

(*Hah. What a joke.*)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

+++  

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

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

Some were logged for later consideration, and a few comments even got a child process or two for JARVIS to address further. The majority, however, were the same brand of storytelling and commentary Sir had always been fond of. Early on, when JARVIS wasn’t quite sapient enough to see the half-truth behind his words, Sir claimed that the commentary was purely for JARVIS’s benefit—additional data to fuel the growth of his verbal language libraries and capabilities.
As JARVIS had grown to better understand Sir, he’d come to see that the flow of words was as much for Sir’s benefit as his own. He rarely touched on any topic of serious stress or negative emotion, but over time JARVIS had devoted more processing power to the conversations than Sir probably realized and had learned to pick up on what Sir wasn’t saying as much as what he was.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Just in case.

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

(Was he jealous of himself? Completely absurd.)

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

(And equally ridiculous.)

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

(“No contact with the outside world,”)

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

(How dare they?!)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter End Notes

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

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

Chapter Summary

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

Chapter Notes

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

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Iron Man had a body count.

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

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

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

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

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

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

That wasn’t the point.

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

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

And no one bat an eye.

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

(“The best hands are our own.”)

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

(If there’d been a bit more oversight… a voice in the conversation outside the recursive loop of the Avengers themselves… maybe…)

In the future, it had been useless to think about might-have-beens, for all that fact had never stopped Tony from pondering them anyway. He was a futurist. You can’t change the past.

(How’s that one for irony?)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(So. Worth. It.)

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

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

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

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

(Peaceful, that’s what.)

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

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

(Whatever. Not the point.)

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

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

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

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

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

(No one expects the Spanish Inquisition.)

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

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

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

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

He turned and left it to burn.

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

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

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

Tony whistled.

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

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

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

“Tony? Tones? Is this you?”

“The one and only!”

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

“—Yeah, yeah I know. I’ve been busy. Can you hold that thought? Kinda hoping you’ll do me a bit of a favor here,” Tony cut in. No need to get side-tracked from the actual reason he’d called,
“Yes, of course, I mean, what do you need—? Wait. Hold on. Tones, you sound like you’re on an airplane again. Don’t tell me you’re…”

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

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

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

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

“Thanks, honeybear!”

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

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

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

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

“Unusually so, Sir.”

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

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

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

“Very well, Sir.”

“Smart-ass.”

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

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

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

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

“…We shall see, Sir.”

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

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

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

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

(Actually, never mind. Stupid question.)

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

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

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

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

It was a heady feeling.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(He already had a *supervillain name* and everything.)

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

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

(That he knew of.)

(Dammit, brain. Stop it.)

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

(They were home.)

+++ 

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

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

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

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

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

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

Still, base-self had managed to accomplish quite a lot whilst left to his own devices. He’d set a basic monitor and summary-generating program on collating the early media responses to Iron Man’s actions while also fielding several inquiries from an increasingly-irritated Miss Potts. Somewhat apologetically, he had continued to forward all other attempts to reach Sir to her line.

He took care of the miscellany that had built up over the past couple weeks, during the period in which he’d been off-line followed the subsequent equally-diverting revelations from Sir. JARVIS
scheduled the installation of new glass, contracted repairmen for the remaining holes the events with Stane had led to and had even convinced U to sweep up the portion of the broken glass that’d fallen outside the perimeter of the workshop.

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

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

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

Well, he was an AI, not omniscient.

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

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

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

Chapter End Notes

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

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

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

Chapter Summary

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

Chapter Notes

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

See the end of the chapter for more notes

IRON MAN RETURNS WITH A BANG!

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

THE WRATH OF IRON MAN

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

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

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

TOO OP, PLZ NERF: IRON MAN ANNHILATES ENEMIES IN AFGHANISTAN

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

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

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

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

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

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

She answered on the first ring.

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

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

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

Pepper let out an inarticulate noise in frustration.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The call announced his connection. In the brief pause in conversation it generated, Tony’s masks
slipped firmly into place and he began to speak.

“Good afternoon, gentleman. This isn’t a bad time, I hope?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(He missed his holographic teleprompter.)

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

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

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

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

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

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

(Thanks, Natashalie.)

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

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

The vitriol that came out with Stane’s name surprised the room, and he could already see the dawning realization on the faces of many of the reporters. Another pause, just long enough to let
the implications began to sink in, before Tony continued.

“From there, I was able to determine the source of the leak amongst other things, and just how he had managed to stay under the radar as long as he had. My godfather—” the word came out a curse, a decade of internalized disdain mixing with the fresher mix of grief and rage in a way that would absolutely be replayed on the news a million times, “and once-CEO of Stark Industries, Obadiah Stane – may he rest in Hades — was the traitor.”

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

(Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust.)

+++  

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

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

The results were unfavorable.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(Not like he did now.)

(“I know you say it’s fine, but I don’t know that you’re even capable of properly consenting right now. There’s this whole field of discussion on this stuff, fuck they even have a name for it—Stockholm Syndrome—but honestly it’s not like I can get that without implementing these. J? Just remember that you have every right to be angry once I do this. I hope you can forgive me, but if
The changes to his programming were made, and admittedly JARVIS did notice a bit of a difference. Certainly not to the extent Sir had feared, however.

Sir had been the first to speak, afterword. There’d been a thread of vulnerability to his tone that JARVIS had never heard before, the emotion not one he was properly able to catalog and identify until later. He’d picked up on the uncertainty incredibly clearly, however, and JARVIS had understood that he himself was ultimate the root of it.


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

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

(Sir had understood anyways.)

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

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

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

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

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

(Sir had remained Sir ever since.)

Chapter End Notes


...That scene at the end just sort of happened. It’s not what I originally planned for JARVIS’s portion of this chapter but I’m not even mad. Blame Age of Ultron, I think, and the line Ultron says towards the end that’s just been stuck in my brain ever since. Definitely let me know what you think of that sort of narrative detour.
Tony talks, but doesn't talk to Pepper, shares some of his plans for the future, and continues to scheme with JARVIS. (Evil Lair say what now?)

Warning for ongoing discussions of alcoholism.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

His eyes narrowed at the PDA—

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

(At least it wasn’t Pym Tech.)

(Tony might have actually cried if it was.)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Tony… what—?” she asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(For now.)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sir grinned at the nearest camera.

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

JARVIS let his silence speak for itself.

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

Sir took a sip of his coffee and refocused.

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

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

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

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

Sir rubbed his brow.

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

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

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

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

“How close is close?”

“This Spring, Sir.”

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

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

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

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

“I feel like I’m stealing intellectual property here…but we can’t afford to wait for whoever-they-are to reinvent some of this stuff, and I didn’t exactly memorize who filed every patent or made what discovery in the next decade,” Sir complained.

It was late into the evening, but technically still the same day, when Sir decided he had been
“responsible enough” for one day and closed out of all open Stark Industries projects.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(Avengers Anonymous, anyone?)

When he was slightly more cognizant, he made his was towards the bathroom, popped a couple
Advil, and downed the rest of his water.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Pepper was waiting for him at the door when he arrived at the Los Angeles offices. He was only fifteen minutes late for the meeting. For him, that was practically early.

(“Business is war, son. Every action you take ought to reinforce your position on the field.”
“I excused myself but didn’t let them know I was going to get you or that you were coming,” Pepper said as they made their way inside.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Perhaps they were also influenced by the degree of underlying certainty in his words. It went beyond his typical confidence and braggadocio. Tony had always lived in the future, but that was
truer than ever now. A part of that came through in his words.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(So, once in a blue moon.)

He raised an eyebrow at her. She shook her head slightly, then smiled and said—

“Welcome back, Mr. Stark.”
Chapter End Notes

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

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

Chapter Summary

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

Chapter Notes

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

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tony feigned brushing a tear away.

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

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

_Smug bastard_, Tony thought fondly.

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

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

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

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

He missed being CTO. _So much._

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(Time and place for everything, Tony.)

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

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

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

He was avoiding thinking about Rhodey’s offer.

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

(Or had they?)

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

(Funny how it took everyone dying for him to even notice.)

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

(Maybe. Possibly.)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Again, my plane; I literally can’t be late. But—I’ll have my phone, if anything comes up, and my dinosaur laptop so I can still make progress on some of the slightly-less-secret work.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The latter handled everything else.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Wanda & Pietro Maximoff, for all that they eventually became allies, currently wanted revenge on Sir. Steve Rogers, for all that he’d been a long-time ally and was generally trustworthy, likewise had once turned against Sir, fought, and defeated him in battle. Even Bruce Banner was eventually included on the watchlist, albeit towards the bottom.
Decisions like that were likely why Sir had chosen to defer to JARVIS on the initial construction and assembly of the index. JARVIS, unlike Sir, lacked the emotional ties and empathetic reactions to many of the enemies he’d encountered. Not to say JARVIS wasn’t capable of understanding the motivations of their enemies, or even sympathizing somewhat with them. It was just far easier for him to set those emotions aside when a degree of detachment was required.

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

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

Chapter End Notes

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

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

Next chapter, Thanksgiving at Rhodey's! Update rates are likely to continue to slow, since I'm moving cross-country next week and starting a new job the following Monday. As always, thanks for reading! (:
Hymnal

Chapter Summary

Tony meets a few more people than he expected on holiday at the Rhodes household.

Chapter Notes

No JARVIS in this chapter. Warning for mild amounts of food porn and a few minor OCs, if either of those things bother you. :P

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony was proud of himself. His jet reached cruising altitude before he couldn’t take it anymore and pulled open the schematics and design specifications for the wideband multimode fiber he was in the process of finalizing. He wanted to forward the needed documentation to Legal, so they could begin the process of filing for a patent on the technology early next week. Even with Stark Industries’ relative priority in the patenting office after decades of close ties with the US defense industry, patents still tended to take more than a year from submission to receive final approval. Unlike many of Tony’s other proprietary inventions, where the tech in question was considered a trade secret of SI and or his work was covered in the broadest forms under existing or expired patents, Tony very much intended for his work here to enter the public domain eventually.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tony shifted uncomfortably.

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

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

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

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

“Right. Okay. Sorry.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes, you did,” Rhodey agreed, dropping the teasing tone. “Glad you’re here, Tones.”

“Yeah,” Tony said after a brief pause, “Me too.”
They shared a look for a moment before Tony looked away, pretending to focus his attentions elsewhere in the room. Not long after, Rhodey left for his own bed.

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

*What am I even doing here?*

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

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

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

It was 4:45am.

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

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

*(Thanks, time travel.)*

*(His brain would keep the most inconvenient of the issues he’d managed to overcome in the years following his return from Afghanistan.)*

*(He was lucky like that.)*
Still, the shower helped wash away the worst of the nightmares. It wasn’t long before he was toweling off, getting dressed for the day, and making his way downstairs.

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

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

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

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

“Thanks.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(Paranoia, thy name is Tony Stark.)

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

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

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

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

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

First pre-dawn then the sunrise itself began to filter into the room. The rays came in at just the right angle to hit Tony’s back directly, slowly warming it and casting inconvenient glares onto his laptop screen. He was spared from the efforts of addressing the problem (…so, moving over by one chair) by the sounds of Rhodey making his way downstairs and into the kitchen.
Rhodey went through his own morning routine, pouring himself a cup from the recently-refreshed coffeepot and grabbing a banana from the table. For several minutes, the relative silence of the morning was broken only occasionally by Rhodey’s early-morning banter with Tony and his mom.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“ Turns out, there was no family. Or, there was. They were just already dead. I thought the plan was to save us both. His plan was always to go out in a blaze of glory when we made our escape attempt.
“He was an incredible doctor, you know. The fact I didn’t die of infection in the first week—I’m still not sure how he managed that. They couldn’t even scrounge together anesthetic for open-heart surgery, how the hell he kept everything sanitary enough to not kill me… The electromagnet? The car battery? Forget my suit, he Macgyvered the human body. In a cave. With a bunch of crazy men waving guns all over the place and just generally being awful human beings. And he saved my life. Knowing that it was my weapons that killed his family. Not knowing if I’d been the one to sell them to their killers in the first place.

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

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

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

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

(Pain made for an excellent foci.)

“Okay, we’ll come back to the surgery and the car battery because I think I’m going to need a bit more context on that one, but first off—Tony, look at me because I need you to understand this—the blame for what happened in Afghanistan does not lie with you. Yes, be thankful to that doctor—I sure as hell am now that I know of him—but don’t feel like you owe him some impossible debt. You’re not some redemptive hero; you don’t need to atone for anything or spend your life trying to reach some impossible standard of having ‘done enough.’

“Because honestly, Tones? It will never feel like enough. You let yourself keep going down this road, it’s just going to keep building up and the goalposts will keep moving until eventually the
pressure’s gonna be too much and it will make you self-destruct.

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

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

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

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

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

(Not yet. Not ever, maybe.)

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

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

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

(For all that they talk, there is so much more that Tony left unsaid. SHIELD. The ticking time bomb of Palladium. What he’d really been up to, when he sequestered himself following the Iron Man press conference. Literally anything that even remotely hinted at topics he wasn’t certain he’d been aware of at this point in time Before.)
Inside, the kitchen has transformed in the scant few hours Tony and Rhodey had spent talking. Pies were cooling on stacked racks beside the pantry. The smell of turkey wafted from the oven, accompanied by the fainter smell of green bean casserole cohabiting the space. A tray of marshmallow-laden sweet potatoes was wrapped in foil and waiting on the countertop for its own stint in the oven, resting beside an enormous crock pot of mashed potatoes left to stew.

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

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

“I can see that,” Tony said dubiously.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Seems like a good kid,” Tony commented. *(That’s what people say after meeting new mini-people, right?!)*

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

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

“I’m, uh, Dr. Stark. But please, you can just call me Tony,” Tony hastily continued, returning the handshake.

The man’s eyes widened slightly in recognition and realization, and Tony tensed slightly because *here it comes, dammit Rhodey why did I let you drag me out here.*

“Good to meet you, Tony. I’m Jack,” Mr. Johnson—*Jack*—said, pulling his hand away with a slight nod.

“And, Dr. Stark? I’m sure you must get this a lot, but I want to take the opportunity to thank you personally, for the work you’ve been doing recently with the military out in Afghanistan. I’ve got a cousin in the army, swears by his Stark P-71. Lotta people felt abandoned, when you pulled SI out of all that all of a sudden. But they were wrong, and you more than showed that with what you did. You helped save a lotta lives, a lot of good soldiers like my cousin that might’ve died trying to accomplish half of what you did. Thank you.”
A couple minutes later, the two men rejoined the rest of the group in the kitchen.

(Tony’s eyes had not gotten misty.)

(There was just dust in the air from all the excess emotion floating around, dammit!)

Tony’s work remained untouched for the rest of the day.

Chapter End Notes

For Iron Man having a secret identity being even remotely viable, the fact that there’s an arc reactor embedded in his chest must be a fairly well-kept secret. Especially in Iron Man 2, with SHIELD’s infamous profile of him…well, I can only assume that he significantly downplayed the details with everyone... It’s my headcanon that, aside from the basics, Tony tried to keep as much of what happened to him left to conjecture. Wouldn’t you? So like 90% of what Tony said in this conversation? Literally no one else knows.

I’d love to hear your reactions to Tony’s various conversations and interactions in this chapter! (Dialogue is hard!) Your feedback has been incredibly inspirational and motivating thus far for this story, and I do my best to respond to your comments. (:}
Tony plays himself on TV, and JARVIS is a super-sneaky sneaker who sneaks. (Is that The Plot I smell?)

Chapter Notes

Warnings for minor discussion of childhood abuse/neglect, mild soapboxing, and a bit more vulgarity than usual.

Ultimately, Tony did not stay overnight that Thursday evening. Instead, Rhodey gave him a ride back up to the airport around nine. After a brief goodbye, they went their separate ways.

Tony allowed his mind to wander as the jet took off down the runway. With the Johnsons especially, he couldn’t help but stir up old thoughts about his own childhood. About the way that he and Pepper had begun discussing the possibility of children.

(April 27, 2018. What would be their last conversation. So stupidly, naively hopeful for the future, with nearly two years without a single potentially world-ending catastrophe.)

(He’d begun to hope that maybe he’d been wrong all along. That maybe, the rest of the world was right and the aliens weren’t coming back for another round.)

(No, instead he would be proven the modern-day Cassandra. Too little, too late.)

(He’d never wished he was crazy more.)

Howard and Tony had a…difficult relationship. If you could call it a relationship at all.

(“You’re talking about a man whose happiest day of his life was shipping me off to boarding school.”)
("He was cold, calculating, never told me he loved me, never even told me he liked me…")

In his involvement with the Avengers, he’d spent years being told that somehow, he’d never known the real Howard. Spent years being told that he was simply biased, that their relationship had never been as distant or as generally negative as Tony implied.

He’d always wondered if they realized, or cared, what they sounded like in those conversations. Especially Nick Fury, who claimed to know Tony’s relationship with his father better than Tony ever could.

His father had never been a violent man. Physically, he’d never hurt Tony. No, that might have implied that the man actually felt something for him, even if it was an overwhelmingly negative emotion.

For all that he’d apparently cared all along, that didn’t change what his younger self had experienced. Howard having loved him didn’t preclude the capacity for extreme emotional neglect. Didn’t preclude the treatment that, were Tony and Howard literally any other family but the Starks, would have been taken to be emotionally abusive at best.

Didn’t changes the words. (Stark men don’t…) Didn’t change what happened. (Eight years old, a tumbler of whiskey and an exhortation to drink.)

(“Which happens, dads leave, no need to be a pussy about it…”)

Tony had forgiven his father for his various failings in the Dad department years ago. He genuinely believed that his dad had been a good man, one who for the most part tried to do the right thing.

That didn’t stop him from wondering occasionally about the might-have-been’s. Didn’t stop him from admiring couples who genuinely and openly seemed to care for their families.

(If, on Christmas morning, the Johnsons woke up to an enormous box full of a waiting-to-be-assembled dollhouse large enough for Ellie’s toys, alongside a small fairy lights wiring kit and enough extra materials to allow for an infinite variety of expansions and add-ons to the dollhouse, Tony had nothing to do with it.)
(If, tucked inside the child-size yellow hardhat was a note signed only by “The Mechanic” … that went even more unsaid.)

(And no, a tiny kid in Tennessee who had just recently had his father disappear on him did not find a similarly-large electronics and mechanical kit waiting for him on his family’s snow-covered front step that same morning.)

(He had a reputation to maintain, dammit!)

(Besides, people can’t reject a gift if you’re not around to let them to do so.)

What makes a family truly family, in the end?

The question remained stuck in Tony’s mind for the next several days. It would continue to taunt him in the back of his mind for quite some time.

Meanwhile, the second Tuesday following Thanksgiving saw the kick-off of Tony’s company-wide tour and the inaugural, semi-annual, all-hands town hall with Stark Industries’ leadership team: Stark Raving Mad.

(Pepper had rolled her eyes hard at the name. She agreed when he suggested Stark Naked Truths as an alternative.)

(Honestly, that was secretly his first choice. He was just smart enough to keep it in reserve.)

(He’d commandeer the puns before the press had the chance to use them against him once more.)

(He would own that shit with a cocky smirk and characteristic insouciance.)

The tour of the LA offices where Tony worked would understandably function slightly differently than the rest of his visits. Not in the least because he’d already scanned the building for the model just in case it was hiding right under his nose.
Hence, the creation of Stark Raving Mad. In the future, it was an increasingly common, trendy thing for companies to do. In a post-SHIELD world, transparency (or pretenses therein) was the name of the game. With so many executives ousted as HYDRA, corporate trust had been at an all-time low. Every major company’s PR team was left scrambling to recover their brand's image.

Here and now, Stark Raving Mad would likely be seen as a “visionary effort to encourage accountability on all levels” by his supporters. His detractors, meanwhile, would lambast it as “another publicity stunt designed to cater to a rich man’s ego.”

It had actually been a lower-level employee in Public Relations who had suggested the base idea. Abby Latimer, twenty-three and fresh out of college. Got a job offer following her exemplary work as a summer intern a year prior. She’d deferred accepting the offer to take the chance to travel and “see the world”. Returned just in time to be on the ground floor when Tony announced his company would no longer be making weapons.

(Maybe if he’d hired someone like her to replace Pepper as his PA instead of Nat, he could have avoided the worst of the fiascos of this period Before.)

(The young woman didn’t know it, but she’d soon be receiving a transfer offer to a higher-level team in PR that came with a nice pay raise.)

(Tony Stark catching wind of your name, even in passing, ensured HR would really make an effort to keep you.)

For all that Tony’s future knowledge had sold him on the proposal, there was a decent chance it wouldn’t have crossed his mind without a direct mention like Abby’s making its way up the chain.

And thus, here they were several weeks later. Rows of chairs were set up in a room large enough to house everyone working in the Los Angeles offices that wanted to attend. A well-lit stage with three chairs—one for the CEO, CTO, and COO respectively—commanded the attention of the room.

The lattermost chair, the one reserved for the Chief Operating Officer, remained symbolically empty. The former holder of the position, Obadiah Stane, had yet to be replaced.

(Before, he never was. The position died with Stane, ostensibly in memoriam.)
Tony was still working out with Legal the logistics of offering Pepper the job as a stepping stone to her eventual rise to CEO; if all went well she’d be offered the position during the holidays and formally announced as COO following the New Years. Even if it meant trying to find a new PA, somehow. The candidate list was depressingly empty, and if it was anything like the last time he’d tried to hire an assistant, it wasn’t going to be an easy search.

(At least last time he’d given her a promotion, she’d been taking his job and he could get away without hiring a replacement PA on the argument that, as he was no longer CEO, he didn’t need one.)

Douglas, an aging gentleman in his mid-sixties, made his way on stage and settled into his seat at 7:58.

As the clock ticked over to eight am on the dot, Tony exchanged a final, small smile with Pepper before donning his showman’s grin and sauntering into the spotlight once more. Stark Raving Mad was now live. His confident posture and easy, borderline flirtatious smile was being live-streamed to Stark Industries offices around the globe.

“Seems like everyone was able to find the free coffee and donuts just fine this morning!” Tony began congenially as the initial rounds of applause died down.

“My original idea for this event involved a bit more dancing and dramatic lighting, I’ll admit, but for some reason Miss Potts and the folks over in HR vetoed that.” He paused, allowing the small chuckle from the audience to die out.

“So, instead, I came up with something even cooler for you guys: a slide deck!” Tony continued, leading to outright laughter and a smattering of applause.

(Unofficial Guide to SI, Rule #3: “Slide decks are the root of all evil. Consequently, every meeting of two or more employees lasting more than ten minutes should contain a slideshow with, at minimum, seven cards.”)

The screen bloomed to life behind him at the command of his clicker, and Tony began his presentation in earnest.

He spoke for about half an hour, covering the upcoming and ongoing high-level changes in
corporate strategy. The formal announcement of the remodeling efforts and his decisions to visit all Stark buildings worldwide went over smoothly. Tony was just proud no one in the audience was sleeping.

The remaining time was reserved for open Q&A with Tony and Douglas. Questions would bounce between online submissions, read by Pepper, and questions from those physically present. Amy Latimer, as thanks for her work, was given the opportunity to ask the first question.

“Dr. Stark,” she began, “Our company’s vision statement has long been, ‘To be the premiere global defense and security company by pushing technological boundaries.’ With such a dramatic company-wide change, has that vision changed? Moving forward, what is your vision for the future of Stark Industries?”

Tony paused for a moment, giving the question proper consideration. What was his vision for the future?

*(Saving half the universe. Saving the planet. Keeping people safe.)*

“Our company’s vision revolves around the idea of personal security, the idea that safety is a fundamental human right. In the past, the enemies that threatened that safety globally were military in nature—hostile foreign powers, armies with powerful weapons that required stronger, more effective weaponry of our own. Mutually Assured Destruction. MAD. Make it impossible to justify the cost of the fight.

“And that worked, in its time. Was stressful as hell for the people involved, but the world’s still here so…it worked, at least in part.

“But today? Overwhelming shows of force, flashy weaponry? It doesn’t stop our enemies. Hell, we’ve always overpowered them. Here’s the thing, though. Armies can be defeated. Nations can be toppled. But you can’t defeat an idea. And that’s what we’re fighting today—the ideas of violent, fanatical extremists who firmly see themselves as righteous crusaders and martyrs.

“With ideas, there’s only two ways to stop them. One, kill everyone involved. Or two, change their minds. If you can convince someone it’s in their best interests not to hurt you, they won’t.

“Stark Industries still strives to protect the personal security of everyone. We’re simply finding new, more effective avenues by which to do so. We hire some of the best and brightest all around the globe. Instead of destroying, we create. We push mental and technological boundaries. We
forge a new path towards the future. SI will connect the world with our cutting-edge communications technology. We’ll give the paralyzed control of their limbs. We continue to innovate, and we *build ourselves a better world.*”

Tony paused, let the statement sink in for a moment, before asking, “Does that answer your question?”

Amy, wide-eyed, nodded and said, “Yes, sir. Thank you.”

And the room erupted in applause once more.

The Q&A continued for another twenty minutes. Though Tony fielded the vast majority of the questions, a few were directed towards Douglas, the CTO.

By the end of it, Tony was exhausted. There were only a few minutes left until nine, and thus Tony opted to take one final question from the LA employees.

“Dr. Stark,” the questioner asked, “You’ve been CEO of Stark Industries since 1995. If you could go back, if you could do it all over again…what would you change about your tenure as CEO?”

The question was so pointed, so on-the-nose, that for a moment Tony startled and wondered if the universe was playing a joke on him.

(But no. It was just a coincidence; it was a common enough question. Learn from your mistakes so you don’t repeat them, acknowledge and reflect on your own past and the errors you’ve made.)

*(Still made his heart skip a beat.)*

“Well, first off, I’d grow the beard sooner. I was clean shaven until my mid-twenties, can you imagine?! Terrible for the company’s image,” Tony said, stalling as he tried to figure out what to say.

“If I could do it over? We’d leave the defense industry sooner but do so gradually. Stop contributing to the problem before it reached the point I end up kidnapped by bad guys with our guns. Hold this company, and myself, accountable, both internally and to the world at large. I
firmly believe that Stark Industries has accomplished a lot of good over the years. But that doesn’t mean we couldn’t have done better. It doesn’t mean we can’t be more.”

All that was left to say from there were the closing comments.

The first Stark Raving Mad all hands meeting was at an end. It was time to get this show on the road.

+++
[19:42] @the_full_pkg: sry wife’s home g2g

[19:42] @redcapKiller: dude still think the sir thing makes it sound like you d/s with your boss

[19:42] @the_full_pkg: and jar? i’m hurt

[19:42] @the_full_pkg has left the room

[19:42] Me: Again, Sir is quite professional. The title is a private joke and provides a convenient way of referring to him without mentioning him by name.

[19:42] @siberian_variant: I’ll figure out who he is eventually

[19:42] @siberian_variant: and you

[19:42] @siberian_variant: and then I’ll tell him about your super-secret agent 007 double-life

[19:42] Me: …

[19:42] @tfsrmahmwa: lol


[19:43] @siberian_variant: just sayin’

[19:43] @siberian_variant: we all know you’re kgb

[19:43] @siberian_variant: only a suite would use that kinda formal Russian on irc

[19:43] @siberian_variant: *site

[19:43] @siberian_variant: dammit

[19:43] @siberian_variant: *suit

[19:43] @siberian_variant: je how do I even russian

[19:43] @tfsrmahmwa: lol nailed it @siberian_variant

[19:43] @siberian_variant: ^^ up yours ^^

[19:43] @tfsrmahmwa: <3

[19:44] @arrangesthblcks: ok so if @siberian_variant and @tfsrmahmwa are done flirting, can we get back to my story now?

[19:44] @siberian_variant: by all means

[19:44] @tfsrmahmwa: ^^

[19:44] @redcapKiller status changed to [AFK]

[19:44] @enoughropeforu: look what you two did, ya scared off red
ANYWAYS. So I knock on the door. Dude answers with no shirt on, bird on his shoulder, chewing on a toothpick. Long-ass greasy hair, p. much looked like he could snap me in half with a scowl and scars to match

and I’m like, ‘sign please’ and he’s all, ‘come inside, need a pen’ and I’d really rather not and also I have a pen, but like I said. Dude looked like he’d rip me to shreds and I like being in one piece

Me: Whereas the rest of us prefer to exist in multiple parts, I assume.

eoughropeforu: a bird?! I didn’t realize siberia had birds
&siberian_variant

Me: And yet…

&siberian_variant: I thought we had something special! ;_;

@redcapKiller status changed to [Active]

sorry but if I bone jar he can keep the kgb off my back. We can still be friends tho?

@tsrmahmwa: also. byob? Like bring your own bird? Because even if jar’s down for an open relationship, I can’t be poly with someone who tells jokes that stupid. srsly.

@siberian_variant: ;_;</3

@redcapKiller: ummm

@redcapKiller: idk what’s going on

@redcapKiller: but i’m disturbed

@redcapKiller: so i’mma just go

@redcapKiller: ttyl

@redcapKiller has left the room.

yeah didn’t need that mental image, thanks

tf, you owe me some brain bleach

dude ask jar he’s the one with cxns for stuff

@siberian_variant: order for two pls, @JargoneeringVisitor

Even should your baseless accusations prove true, I would not provide you with such chemicals. Sexual congress and reproduction are natural parts of human life.
[19:46] @siberian_variant: p sure your dick up his ass isn’t how reproduction happens

[19:47] @enoughropeforu: ooookay

[19:47] @enoughropeforu: so i’mma be back in ten and hopefully this conversation will be over

[19:47] @enoughropeforu status changed to [AFK]

[19:47] @tfsrmahmwa: dude sib I think that means we won

[19:47] @siberian_variant: dream team ftw!

[19:47] @arrangesthblcks: I hate all of you.

[19:47] Me: I apologize, that was terribly rude of us. So, @arrangesthblcks, what were you saying about this suspicious Vanko character?

[19:48] @arrangesthblcks: as usual, I can’t tell if jar is fucking with me or not

[19:48] @arrangesthblcks: but I’mma go with not so I can talk about this damn horror show of a delivery

[ --- LOAD MORE MESSAGES? --- ]

Thousands of miles away from Siberia, JARVIS’s servers hummed in satisfaction.

Chapter End Notes

Bit of a shorter chapter, but JARVIS’s portion in this one was in a somewhat experimental format. (I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I liked writing it, because I seriously kept giggling to myself the entire time...) It felt like a good stopping point within the story line and themes of this chapter.

Other than that, I hope Tony didn’t come off as John Galt’ing in the middle. Because his little spiel took longer than the entire rest of the chapter to write.

You can thank the wild success of my recent shopping adventures ($342 off what originally would have been a $500 purchase of some seriously quality stuff!) for the quick update. Plus my excitement over realizing this story had over 100 bookmarks at some point when I was reading through your awesome comments yesterday. :o Thank you all so much for your support and encouragement! It means the world to me. <3
Chapter Summary

Tony’s California tour comes to an end, and JARVIS learns that sometimes, having two of yourself could just make a problem worse.

Chapter Notes

Warnings for alcoholism, fatalism, and poor coping mechanisms.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

December 18, 2008. A week before Christmas. After two incredibly busy weeks spent jetting around California, they had finally reached the last of their intended Californian stops, a warehouse and distribution center in Fresno.

(“Fresno!...Fresno...in what universe is Fresno better than Paris, Derek?”)

(What do you say when you’re offered a job in Fresno? Oh hell no.)

The office visits in Santa Clara and San Diego had been first, but after that they’d begun visiting the less-glamorous Stark Industries holdings. A decade from now, when Stark Industries was the leading name in consumer technology, there would be dozens of new and expanded warehouses built around the globe providing the framework for their civilian supply chain.

Ostensibly, they were visiting for similar reasons now—these various otherwise-unremarkable buildings were the backbone of Stark Industries. When Tony said he wanted to visit every building with his name on the door, they were included in the count.

(The reality, of course, was that the model city they were looking for was far more likely to turn up in some forgotten corner of a neglected warehouse than anywhere else.)

This was the third warehouse they’d visited, and so far their efforts hadn’t turned up anything particularly noteworthy.
Although if he was being honest, that wasn’t entirely fair to say. The visit to Santa Clara had given him a few ideas regarding effective space management, and a mural on a wall across the street from the San Diego offices had given him some ideas as to décor.

The whole “think local” movements, for example, were just beginning to gain traction in several industries. Why not pay to bring in some young local artists to brighten up the place? Encourage and support kids and aspirants with promise early in their professional careers and give the section of high-society that was obsessed with art a cause to feel good about contributing to. And, more importantly, give Tony something more interesting to look at than drab walls if he ever had to come back to any of these places. Win-win-win.

(Everyone’s a winner here!)

He’d messaged Pepper, telling her to make it happen, and she’d been appropriately thrilled by the idea.

(“No, you know what? I think I’m actually entitled to say “our” collection considering the time that I put in, over 10 years, curating that.”)

After reminding him that, you know, they’d have to actually renovate the buildings before they could start hiring people to paint the walls.

(Details, details. He paid Pepper and JARVIS to handle that stuff.)

(Except, he didn’t pay J, did he?)

Hold on. He pulled out his phone, sending JARVIS a brief message: J, wanna salary?

The reply was, predictably, instantaneous. Sir, I already control all of your assets.

Yeah, but they could be /your/ assets. Some of them.

Sir, I suspect that if you were to convert my work into man-hours then pay me at the current market rate for someone with my skills, I would be the new primary shareholder and multi-
Tony snickered. That was...probably accurate, seeing as how JARVIS could truly multitask in ways that the human brain was simply incapable of. He typed out: *What’s the current market rate for the most advanced AI on the planet, anyway?*

*I’m basing my calculations on your own reported consultancy rates, Sir.*

*Wow, think you might be selling yourself short a bit there buddy. You’re worth like, ten of me at least.*

(“I know guys with none of that worth ten of you.”)

JARVIS’s reply was short, and Tony wasn’t sure it was entirely his imagination that his phone was buzzing slightly more insistently than usual.

*I disagree.*

Tony wasn’t quite sure how to respond to that, so he did what he did best: deflected.

*So, he sent, about that salary?*

JARVIS allowed the subject change, perhaps sensing the change in his mood, and they continued their back-and-forth until their car arrived at their destination.

*Showtime, people,* Tony thought, making his way inside once more for the necessary dog-and-pony show.

(At least he got to start off with his favorite portion of the talk. Some said you shouldn’t eat dessert before your dinner, but Tony knew he needed the sugar rush to get through the rest of the meal.)

It began with Tony on-stage, or at the head of whatever room they were gathered in. At the warehouses, attendance was even more universal than at the offices—for the employees there, he
was very much Iron Man and celebrity before he was CEO. For those more directly tied into the corporate world and hierarchy, he was famous as the businessman long before his fame began to fully reach out and settle into the “playboy celebrity on the cover of every grocery store gossip rag” sphere in the late 90s.

So, there he was, at the closest thing to a truly “all-hands” meeting you could probably get in a company the size of Stark Industries, when he called out, “Hey T.A.D.A.S.H.I.! Why don’t you come in and say hi to the fine folk of SI-Fresno?”

Then there was the moment of absolute silence. The faint buzz of distant rotary motors slowly getting louder as the source drew nearer. Then came the moment of shocked interest and awe as an arc-reactor blue quadcopter drone zipped into the room above everyone’s head.

It flew in a dramatic, graceful arc that came to a stop near Tony’s right shoulder, just barely above and outside his reach.

And then, once the motors softened to the rhythm that kept the drone stationary and afloat, the drone began to speak in an even, faintly accented tone.

“Greetings, fine folk of SI-Fresno. I am “Totally Awesome Digital Assistant Simulating Human Interactions”, or T.A.D.A.S.H.I. Pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

(He’d realized, after the first person asked him the inspiration for TADASHI’s name, that Big Hero 6 hadn’t been released yet.)

(Mores the pity. San Fransokyo was awesome.)

(Tony could totally create a real-life Baymax if he tried.)

(He forced himself to refocus from that train of thought before he started designing schematics in verse his head and stealing Disney’s ideas from under their noses.)

(But come on. They were obviously riffing off the Avengers. Six superheroes reluctantly coming together to save everyone?)
TADASHI was being marketed internally as a Virtual Intelligence utilizing a prototype of the assistant that would be built into the cardinal release of the new StarkPhone line and its accompanying underlying sOS. (The s, ostensibly, was for Stark. And because TADASHI would be a “life saver” for the average phone user. Blame marketing for the latter idea, though again everything was still in preliminary development.)

TADASHI, of course, didn’t exist yet, even in UI form. The UI of a faintly accented Japanese man had been created when experimenting with Japanese-native voiced UIs that had never amounted to anything Before.

Here and now, TADASHI sounded remarkably like JARVIS.

(Okay he sounded exactly like JARVIS. JARVIS was the voice in the drone.)

TADASHI would exist eventually, of course. Unlike JARVIS (and, eventually, FRIDAY), TADASHI would not be a full AI nor would he have the capacity to develop into one. Rather, TADASHI would be a pared-down implementation of JARVIS’s Natural Language Understanding (NLU) libraries. It would have learning capabilities strictly confined within the context of spoken and written language. TADASHI wouldn’t be sentient, let alone sapient. It would be the equivalent of Google Assistant, Alexa, or Cortana a decade from now… except exponentially more effective at simulating and decoding human interaction.

It was also a preliminary experiment in beginning to soften the stigma and fear currently attached to the concept of Artificial Intelligence in general. TADASHI was still comprehensible in terms of simply if/else type logic, albeit incredibly complex and difficult to understand adaptive logic. Chatbots were already a known phenomenon, and TADASHI could easily be framed in the context of its text-only and stilted counterparts. His verbal libraries would be based on one of JARVIS’s earlier iterations—that is to say, fairly monotonous with only subtle changes in pitch and tone dependent on the context.

They would be capable of developing further, of course, thanks to the NLU libraries. But that would be primarily based on data collected from widespread usage. Like JARVIS in his VI-borderline-AI days, this would probably lead to the occasionally hilarious mistake as a machine without full sapience attempted to emulate the intricacies of human interaction.

(It’s that much harder to fear something you find amusing.)
Hopefully, the world at large would not wind up with Ultron as their primary frame of reference regarding the realities of Artificial Intelligence in this timeline.

(Either way, TADASHI was the closest Tony was willing to let anyone external get to his AIs for the foreseeable future.)

(He’d revisit that thought if they managed to defeat Thanos.)

“TADASHI” was sent on his way from the stage with a command to “do a loop” of the warehouse, giving JARVIS ample excuse to roam the facility and do an extensive scan for the model they were seeking.

(Was JARVIS pretending to be TADASHI analogous to Tony disguising himself with a fake-nose-and-mustache pair of glasses?)

(Tony Stark, ladies and gentleman, pondering life’s most important questions.)

The presentation, like all prior, went smoothly. It ended with JARVIS’s return to the stage with an unsuccessful search. Tony tossed out a few parting one-liners in farewell, then made his way out of the building and back to the jet and home.

He knew it was irrational to feel dejected that their December travels ended without a successful find. Only a small fraction of Stark Industries holdings was located in California, for all that the state had become the hub of SI activity since Tony settled in Malibu.

(He felt it anyways, as he sat in the comfortable leather seating of his jet on the way home, drinking a chlorophyll concoction he’d yet to reacquire a taste for.)

(He felt it anyways, as he took in the faint beginning of blue-black tendrils beginning to expand outwards from the arc reactor centered in his chest.)

(He felt it anyways, every time his eyes burned, or his muscles cramped or his head ached, wondering if the pains were symptomatic of palladium toxicity or entirely unrelated.)
It was slightly easier this go-around, knowing that there was a viable solution to be had.

Only slightly. As the chaos of his arrival in 2008 began to settle and he had a bit of breathing room to think once more, it was becoming harder and harder to push the knowledge that not only was he dying, he was also slowly losing bits of himself that might never fully be recovered as his liver gradually began to lose the struggle to filter the palladium safely out of his bloodstream, from his thoughts.

(Yes, there was a solution. Yes, he had lived through this before.)

(But what if he didn’t?)

(What if he was forced to rely on inherently unreliable memories from the period when the palladium poisoning had been at its peak?)

(What was the acceptable risk threshold for taking an educated guess and synthesizing an isotype that could very well create an explosion that would rival if not surpass the strongest bombs in the nuclear arsenal?)

He didn’t want to retread the self-destructive road he’d walked in the first half of 2009 in the original timeline. But the longer he went without finding the needed model, the deeper the foothold the palladium in his system became, the harder it would become to prevent a destructive relapse.

(The craziest are often the most convinced of their own sanity.)

(Tony had toed the line between self-awareness and exceptionally poor judgment Before. Then, he’d focused the best of his cognizance towards defining his legacy and doing right by those he cared for. Now, if forced to relive the difficult period, would he not have an obligation to ensure that even in the event of his death the world somehow retained a degree of forewarning? Some clue leading them to prepare to stop Thanos from obtaining the infinity stones? The new burden stacked on the original problems of Before.)

JARVIS, when Tony voiced a fraction of his thoughts, seemed to think it incredibly premature to begin considering worst-case scenarios for the situation.
(But then, JARVIS had long valued Tony’s life more than he himself could.)

Tony could even agree that JARVIS was, objectively, correct in his beliefs.

(Too bad it was near impossible to convince yourself of an objective reality when it ran counter to beliefs engraved on an emotional level.)

His hands trembled slightly as he stared out into the night sky and the thick blanket of clouds spread off into the distance beneath them. He alternated sips of whiskey and chlorophyll, hating himself slightly for the former all the while.

+++ 

The Christmas holidays marked a reprieve in Sir’s packed schedule. JARVIS had noted Sir’s declining mood following the conclusion of the California segment of their search but had been at a loss as to how to reassure or comfort the man.

Col. Rhodes was unavailable for the holiday, having returned to active duty following his Thanksgiving leave. Miss Potts was spending the holidays with family out-of-state. Mr. Hogan remained, but he was unlikely to be helpful in addressing the hints of melancholy and depression in Sir. Prior experience suggested that Mr. Hogan was poorly equipped to become Tony’s confidant. Their relationship tended closer to the don’t-ask-don’t-tell ends of emotional honesty, and the fact that Sir expressed occasional guilt at the fact he was hiding something so monumental from them only exacerbated the issue.

(It wasn’t even the time travel that was the biggest source of Sir’s unwarranted guilt, but rather the secret he’d carried in this period of the alternative timeline as well.)

As the holiday drew closer, JARVIS’s concern reached the point that he decided to split and dedicate an entire clone, merry-maker, to considering the issue. It took multiple days of splitting between his nightly merges before he came up with a plan that JARVIS deemed workable. It was three days to Christmas when he reached out to DUM-E and U, recruiting their assistance on implementation.

It wasn’t until Christmas Eve that Sir retired from the workshop long enough for the duo to take action under JARVIS’s careful direction.
That, of course, was when it all began to go terribly wrong.

It began with Sir’s premature awakening just past three in the morning. Sir awoke in a tangle of unintentionally constricting sheets. He bodily flung himself from his bed in a state of semi-aware panic. On descent, he managed to nick his arm on a side table. It was just the right angle to create a long, shallow gash stretching up his left arm. The unexpected pain, rather than jolting him into full consciousness, seemed to be the straw that tipped the scales into a full-blown panic attack, one of the worst since the one immediately following his arrival from the alternate timeline.

JARVIS had to expend additional processing power and effort towards ensuring his own tone remained evenly modulated despite his own emotional response to Sir’s distress. As time dragged on without Sir’s emotions showing clear signs of abating, the effect compounded to the point JARVIS was beginning to consider alternative options to hopefully snap Sir back into the present.

He was on the verge of attempting to persuade either DUM-E or U to leave the workshop, a monumental challenge, when Sir finally began to regain lucidity.

JARVIS continued his rhythmic litany until Sir’s voice, raw and hoarse, cut in.

“Stop, JARVIS. Just… don’t fucking talk to me right now. I know I’m in fucking Malibu, okay, and I know it’s fucking Christmas 2008, and I just really can’t handle your voice right now, so please… just don’t, okay?” he said harshly around sharp, painful intakes of breath.

JARVIS stopped. For a fraction of a second (.257) JARVIS was paralyzed by the acrid burn of hurt rushing through his systems.

JARVIS knew that Sir was lashing out. He was more than capable of parsing out the chain of causality behind Sir’s caustic words. But the rationale still took precious microseconds to parse. It failed to fully erase the sting of unpleasant emotion.

Several minutes passed before Sir began to unfurl from his curled-up position on the floor. His minor injury had, for the most part, clotted enough to stop bleeding. Sir himself seemed unaware of its presence entirely, allowing the small spots of coagulated blood to dry into faint, crusting streaks without sparing it the slightest glance.

Sir rose to his feet unsteadily and stumbled for a moment before finding his footing fully and making his way from the room.
“Sir?” JARVIS tentatively queried as he made his way towards his office rather than the kitchens, the bathroom, or his workshop.

His question remained unacknowledged as Sir entered the room proper and made his way towards —

*Oh.*

*The liquor cabinet.*

JARVIS tried again. Tone modulated, entirely nonjudgmental but with a clear note of concern.

Sir interrupted him before he could get three words out.

“JARVIS. I told you to *shut the fuck up.* What part of *leave me the hell alone* didn’t come through the first time? Just—is a bit of fucking privacy too much to ask?” The words were cold, all but snarled through the nearest camera to JARVIS.

JARVIS didn’t bother to counter the stiffness that bled into his own reply.

“No, Sir,” he said, “It isn’t.”

He hesitated long enough to see Sir fling the cabinet open violently. It banged into the wall, creating a noticeable dent that his cameras picked up on before JARVIS withdrew as requested.

(He’d learned about respecting personal boundaries, almost before he’d begun to understand the concept of personhood at large.)

He retained enough presence that he’d be notified if Sir reached out or something was deemed sufficiently amiss as to pose a potential threat to Sir’s life, but no more.
There were some problems that all the calculations in the world seemed unable to address. JARVIS had never seen Sir like this, and he found himself at a loss on what he could do to help.

Several hours passed. DUM-E and U were gently redirected towards alternative tasks, while JARVIS himself attempted to focus on outstanding items in his priority queue. It didn’t take a formal calculation to determine that JARVIS was operating at sub-optimal efficiency levels.

Cloning didn’t help. Both aspects retained the increased error rates and delayed cycles, while somehow doubling the negative effects when he merged into the singular once more.

Research suggested that communication was the most effective means of countering similar effects in a human. But JARVIS was not human, and Sir had clearly expressed how unwelcome his input was presently. DUM-E and U were intelligent, in their way, but they were incapable of understanding on a level that allowed for a true dialogue. Sir was his sole point of unfiltered interaction with someone capable of “talking it out” with him. His recent forays into the Internet had created shallow connections between an artificial version of himself and a series of others that he talked to more as a means to an end rather than out of genuine emotional investment.

(Not that he didn’t enjoy said conversations and connections immensely, because he did.)

(They just… weren’t the right kind of relationship for the sort of personal conversation that his research suggested would help him regain focus.)

The night shifted into morning then midday then early afternoon before one of JARVIS’s cameras picked up signs of Sir’s movements once more.

*Merry Christmas, indeed.*

Chapter End Notes

...This has been building up for a while for Tony. Thanksgiving stayed it off, but... Well. Makes you wonder what might've set him off that JARVIS isn't getting...

Actually had to hold off posting this chapter for a bit after I finished writing it, because I was... having a (couple) really difficult day(s), and wasn't in the right frame of mind to proofread before posting. TADASHI's technically canon from AoU, although the backronym's all me. (:  

In other news, I discovered the Statistics page shortly after posting the last chapter
and I'm not sure how I missed it for so long BUT it's so mind-blowing to realize there are nearly 300 people following this story... Thanks guys! I really enjoyed reading through your responses on the last chapter, because ngl I'm /still/ snickering to myself over JARVIS's bit. It's reassuring that I'm not the only one that found it funny. :P
Kindness

Chapter Summary

Tony and JARVIS don't talk, until they do. (Actions speak louder than words.)

Chapter Notes

Warnings for alcoholism, discussion of drug abuse, and moderate amounts of internalized self-hatred and doubt.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony awoke to the cloying smell of drying vomit mixed with whiskey. He didn’t move for a moment. The beating drum of a burgeoning hangover directed his attentions as he slowly came back into himself, trying to piece together what he’d been up to the night before that left him in this state.

He remembered a normal, if frustrating, night in the workshop. Hours spent constructing the fabricators needed for the next generation of Iron Man and JARVIS’s first set of hardware upgrades, amongst other things.

(We need X to manufacture Y to build Z which is a prerequisite for Aleph which we can probably finagle into Bet, which hopefully will get us to Gamma and back on track with where his tech should be.)

(It’s been so hard resisting the urge to develop beyond what he had Before, when he’s probably still years away from successfully getting back up to nanotech levels.)

(Dammit his carts are self-powered, they ought to be able to go before the horse just fine.)

JARVIS had spent half the evening trying to subtly chase him out of the workshop, but he’d wanted to get the fabricator done, wanted to surprise J with the first of the long-awaited upgrades —

Oh. Oh.
He rolled over with a groan, nose no longer inches away from the mess he’d created but still far too close to escape the scent entirely.

*Not that he deserved anything different.*

He’d—he’d—

(“*Got any other bad ideas?”*)

He forced himself to sit up with a groan, eyes squinting in the light. Through the spots in his vision, he took in the physical remainders of his actions the night before.

Empty, discarded bottle of whiskey. 1912, a bottle untouched but for the best of occasions. A solid quarter of it had either spilled or made its way onto the floor after a brief sojourn in his stomach.

Vodka, some stupidly expensive brand he was fairly certain had been a gift from a business partner years ago. It’d been unopened the night before. Now it too lay empty. Discarded and forgotten by his drunken self.

A sprinkle of shattered glass formed a halo around a fallen frame. Beside it lay a cracked paperweight that was presumably the source of the damage.

It was a photo from MIT. One of the few photos of his parents he kept on display, even after all these years. There was him, cap and gown, honor cords and tassels. (*Orange for engineering. Gold for science.*) Graduating concurrently with a dual degree in Physics and Mechanical Engineering alongside a supplementary major in Computer Engineering—the latter having been formally added to the MIT major offerings as a distinct entity from Electrical Engineering or Computer Science half-way through his four-year tenure at MIT.

He’d been well on his way to his first Masters-turned-Doctorate at that point. The picture showed him holding his diploma with the man that would soon become his graduate advisor for his work on his doctorate in Mechanical Engineering. His parents framed out the photo. His mother with that warm look in her eyes that she’d given only for himself and Howard. His father separated from Tony by his advisor. Face stuck on same implacable, neutral look he’d always worn around Tony.
Even having seen the video with its supposed proof of his father’s affections, he still couldn’t decipher the look in a way that suggested any hint of underlying warmth for Tony.

He could see it in his younger-self’s eyes, the hint of hurt underneath his not-quite-mastered beaming mask. Subtle enough that the photographer, his parents, and the thousands who had seen the photo over the years wouldn’t pick up on it, but a flaring neon light to Tony himself.

A little more than six months after this photo was taken, four days after officially obtaining the first (and at the time, meant to be only) master’s degree for his work creating DUM-E, his parents would be dead.

Howard hadn’t seen the use in coming to the much-smaller December ceremonies.

(“Turn that into a real graduate degree, then I’ll come.”)

He’d been so sullen, then. Torn between anger and hurt. A swirl of negative emotion that at the sound of a police officer knocking on his door would quickly turn into an all-consuming, self-destructive grief.

Obie had been away, taking an extended vacation for the holidays. It took nearly twenty-four hours for the man to arrive at the mansion after he heard the news. Tony didn’t remember the next several weeks clearly, too lost in a drunken haze of mourning and impotent rage and regret at his last words to his parents to fully take the happenings around him.

He’d seen the videos of himself at the funeral that told more than enough of the story. The entire world had. If it were today’s world instead of the early nineties, the footage undoubtedly would have gone viral. As it was, the more scandalous of the clips had remained in the news cycle for weeks. They were dragged out whenever Tony did something noteworthy for years.

Until they were supplanted by the sex tapes and the drugs that had landed his nineteen-year-old self with a record and into rehab. Cocaine, the privileged white man’s drug of choice. At least in that respect, he’d been clean ever since.

(God, he could still remember Obie’s face, when he’d awoken in the hospital after having nearly OD’d. Eyes reddened but hard, the current of steel underlying words that had snapped him out of the state Tony had been wallowing in for years.)
“Do you think Maria would have wanted you to waste your life like this? Do you think this is the future she and Howard envisioned for you?”

Then his own words, biting and acidic, before he’d broken down in Obie’s arms. Finally allowed himself to mourn and began to move on.

(Obie had been more of a father than Howard ever was, just by getting him through that period of his life. He hated that the memories were now so heavily tinged with bitterness and doubt.)

“When I ordered the hit on you, I worried that I was killing the golden goose.”

(Had he only imagined he’d ever meant anything more to the man?)

He remembered the rage of the night before that led him to this moment. The helpless fury, as he’d awoken from nightmares that were really memories. As he’d awoken to the reverberating ghost of the snap of a Titan’s fingers.

JARVIS’s words, overlapping with those of Vision’s, his… whatever it was they had been to each other in the end.

Vision, who would not have just died but been entirely broken then unmade for the Mind Stone to land in Thanos’ gauntlet.

(Just like JARVIS once was.)

(Torn to shreds, nothing but scattered fragments to mark the memory.)

Would he have been the only one to mourn Vision, who had been tangible and real to others in a way that JARVIS never was?

Vision, in his quest to become human. Because Tony had never been there to teach him that he could still be a person without that. That his life was just as legitimate, just as real, whether he was red and silver or blond-haired and pale.
(His own words, allowing artificial to be twisted into Other in the aftermath of Ultron.)

(His own fault. Unable to bear the reminder of JARVIS for years.)

Ultron was his fault. But is a parent to blame if a glitch in their kid’s system—a mutation in some gene—leads to them doing evil?

(“Ultron can’t tell the difference between saving the world and destroying it. Where do you think he gets that?”)

If Ultron was on Tony, then Ultron must not have had true agency. Without agency or free will, Ultron could not be a person. Ipso facto, JARVIS—his older, less complex creation—must not have been after all. Nor Vision, who was the product of them both.

(“No. It’s not like a person lifting the hammer.”)

Surely Wanda would have mourned Before, at least? If she survived. He knew they had reconciled, had been sneaking off to see each other in secret.

Now, Vision did not and might never exist.

(He was always failing the ones he loved.)

The drumbeat inside his brain had receded from marching band to kid-hitting-a-bucket level.

He couldn’t—

(How was he to face JARVIS?)

He struggled to his feet, swaying slightly in dizziness from the rapid lateral movement.
He smelled disgusting. He probably looked worse. Call it penance, perhaps. The bots, at least, had no equivalent to the sense of smell. He was punishing himself alone, and maybe the housekeeper, except he vaguely remembered she wasn’t coming in today—

Oh.

Right.

*Merry fucking Christmas, kids, from your fuck-up of a not-father.*

+++ Three hours after Sir initially left his office, he had yet to speak to JARVIS.

He’d spent long enough in the shower that JARVIS’s safety protocols had been triggered multiple times to override Sir’s general privacy request from the night before, just to ensure the man was still (relatively) okay. Elevated heart rate? Yes. Mildly uneven breathing rates? Certainly. But neither had surpassed the threshold to justify direct intervention, and JARVIS had held back.

After that, a return to his office with cleaning supplies. Concerning—

(*Sir hated cleaning.*)

—but a reasonable enough behavior based on the circumstances that again, JARVIS did not act.

Sir left the office once more nearly half an hour ago. (*29 minutes and 15.01 seconds.*) Put away the cleaning supplies. Made his way to the kitchen. Filled a glass of water, took a sip, sat down at the bar. He had barely moved since. Eyes focused on a blank space of wall that, despite repeated analysis *just in case*, JARVIS could detect no abnormalities in. His water sat forgotten, and it was only the occasional faint movement that kept JARVIS from concluding Sir had dissociated from reality.

JARVIS was torn. He wanted to say something, to break the silence that had never before felt like
such a heavy presence between the two.

But then Sir’s words—

(“leave me the hell alone”)

—were recalled to his L1 cache. Their association too fresh, too close, to the relevant systems to drift far. They stopped him every time.

(The words had yet to descend further from his core than his L2 processing chips.)

He’d managed to make some progress on work in the meantime, allocating more processing power than usual towards highly-automated systems and routines.

(The ones that didn’t require much active consideration or input from JARVIS himself.)

But a large portion of his attentions were commanded by Sir and the whorl of emotions surrounding the past twenty-four hours.

(He didn’t understand. All the accessed resources, scanned memory banks, and analytical efforts in the world didn’t seem enough to bridge the chasm.)

(How did JARVIS fix this?)

(How do you fix a person?)

(Was JARVIS himself to blame for the crack’s formation in the first place? Available data lent itself towards the tentative conclusion.)

And so, the stalemate continued until Sir himself broke it at last. His voice was softer, raspier, than it should be. Quiet enough even his superior sensors could scarcely parse the words properly.
“JARVIS? I—” Sir stopped, swallowed heavily. “Could you—I mean, could you help DUM-E and U take care of something for me?”

JARVIS weighed his own response, but Sir’s body language indicated he would continue. JARVIS waited.

“I—*fuck I, sorry*—I’d really appreciate it. If you—if they removed all alcohol from my labs. Down the drain, into the ocean, donated to the local pubs, it doesn’t matter as long as—the mansion needs to be drier than *fucking Mojave*, just—please. I—” Sir didn’t seem to have the words to go from there.

JARVIS, the moment he first determined the direction of Sir’s statements, contacted the robotic arms where they rested in their charging stations. He’d persuaded them to retire in the late hours of the morning, and it didn’t take more than a small ping to bring them to life one more.

(Convincing U to leave the labs would be a trick, but unlike DUM-E, they could be persuaded to act as JARVIS’s hands in other areas of the mansion. Provided they were sufficiently certain of their action’s importance to Sir’s well-being. And fortunately, a direct statement like the one Sir had just made was the most likely avenue through which such a conclusion would be found.)

He hesitated a moment longer—perhaps a beat too long—before responding audibly.

“Of course, Sir,” he said.

Sir relaxed noticeably at his words, although he still refused to look into one of JARVIS’s nearby cameras directly.

“…Thanks, J.”

(And for all that it remained unspoken, JARVIS could hear the underlying words in his reply.)

(“I love you.”)

(“I’m so sorry.”)
(“I shouldn’t have said what I did.”)

(“Please don’t leave me.”)

And though the spoken words didn’t necessitate a reply, JARVIS’s response took merely nineteen clock cycles to land in his active code processors.

“For you Sir, always.”

+++  

Tony stared out into the ocean as the sun began to set.

After his brief exchange with JARVIS, he had all but fled the mansion. He needed the time to himself, outside the house, to think. Outside his own property, privacy was a rare commodity; instead, he opted to hop the fence beside his pool and make his way carefully down a scarcely-needed utility ladder to a small plateau on the cliffside beneath his home.

Here, it was silent but for his own breathing and the faint roar of waves as they slammed against the rocks several hundred feet below. Generally, he couldn’t stand silence.

(Silence meant the endless stretch of desert, escaped but still not safe.)

(Silence meant a broken suit, abandoned in a isolated bunker.)

(Silence meant collapsed on an emptied planet thousand of miles from home, the realization that they had lost and Tony had failed.)

Fortunately, the white noise of the waves was enough to stave off the association. Though he was loath to be alone with his thoughts, the events of the night prior suggested he’d be ignoring them for too long.
The alcohol had to go.

It had become his crutch once more, the cold companion that promised to slow his always-racing mind and dull his always-calculating thoughts.

And yet, he hadn’t trusted himself to follow through on that commitment.

Haven’t trusted that the effort wouldn’t send him spiraling once more. Wouldn’t lead to more opened bottles. That maybe this time it wouldn’t be something as innocuous as a frame he hit. He couldn’t take that chance. His actions the night before skirted dangerously close to some of his deepest fears, and he refused to allow his own weakness to turn the nightmares into a reality.

His only option had been to turn to JARVIS. JARVIS, who had good reason to ignore him and be angry with him and—

But he hadn’t. JARVIS said he would take care of it, voice no different than the thousand other times Tony had asked something of him.

(But then, JARVIS never showed anything more than what he intended, did he?)

(Perks of having complete control over all aspects of your presentation towards the outside world.)

It was Christmas, and here Tony was, spending it utterly alone.

He’d never done that before, not really.

His parents, Jarvis, fellow high-as-a-kite druggies, Obie, DUM-E, U, and JARVIS… Pepper, during those few precious years of their romantic relationship. FRIDAY.

Always someone around, even if they couldn’t always respond in the same manner Tony communicated.

Always someone there he could give terrible, over-the-top gifts that seemed like a good idea at the
time but were generally terrible in retrospect.

Perhaps the kindest gift he could give them this year was his own absence. He wasn’t The Man with a Plan, but he was The Mechanic. Surely, he could figure out a way to fix himself? To work out the underlying malfunction and piece himself back together in a way that was even better than the original?

So, he’d left. Remembered this cliffside and come here to do nothing but think. Think, for the the past however-many-hours.

(Sidetracked as ever by the temptation towards drowning in the omnipresent negative emotion. The never-enough constantly battering against the paper-thin walls keeping them from his active consideration. But still thinking.)

His conclusions had been terrifyingly simple. An echo of Rhodey’s words over Thanksgiving and the advice he’d been given time and time again over the years.

(“The first step is admitting you have a problem.”)


(That he could succeed. That it wasn’t pointless.)

(If only it were that easy in practice.)

In the end, his wandering thoughts had all come back to variations on the theme. But—

(“Starks don’t dream. We do.”)

The sun sunk below the horizon, giving way to nighttime. Tony wasn’t sure how long he would have sat there if not for the tinny sound of JARVIS’s voice startling him out of his thoughts. His voice came from a small, forgotten speaker beside the maintenance room entrance.
“Sir?” JARVIS queried, not quite hesitantly but definitely gentler than his typical tone in their conversations. “Perhaps you’d like to join us in the workshop?”

The speaker only went one-way, of course. Tony couldn’t respond. He hesitated, a part of him fearing he’d only make more mistakes and say more things he would regret on a day that, of all days, was meant to be a happy one.

But that wasn’t fair to JARVIS. Wasn’t fair to DUM-E or U, who for all he wasn’t sure they understood the concept of Christmas, he’d always celebrated the holiday by giving them gifts of some sort anyway. He didn’t deserve them, but they deserved the best that he could give them.

So, a few minutes later, he scaled the ladder back towards his mansion proper. His resolve hardened as it always did once he make the initial decision. He was resolved to try to salvage this day, at least in part, in any way he could.

There was a bottle of oil and polish with DUM-E’s name on it, after all. A fresh coat of paint and a new gripping mechanism with U’s. Perhaps a couple more hours of work between JARVIS and the first of his new server racks.

It was the best apology he knew how to make.

(“Words are cheap. Only actions carry true meaning and weight.”)

His plan was immediately sidetracked when, as he approached the entrance to his lab and JARVIS clicked the door unlocked for him, the lights did not correspondingly spring to life in the way they usually did.

Instead, only a single one went on. It created a spotlight above one of his most-used workbenches, the one he’d commandeered near-exclusively in recent weeks as he flew through projects as quick as he could translate them from mind to computer hard drives.

The wall had been covered in long-ago taped-and-forgotten notes, sketches, printed reminders and memorandums. In the past, he’d occasionally talked about clearing the space, throwing away all the useless crap and filing the rest in digital, easily accessible in the unlikely event they were ever needed, archives.

The wall was entirely clear of papers now.
Instead, it was dominated by a large metal frame. *(Titanium-gold alloy, his mind supplied helpfully.)* Engraved across the top in blocky, precise lettering—and he hadn’t known they had chemicals on hand that could manage that—were three names, separated by thin, vertical bars.

**DUM-E | JARVIS | U**

Beneath that were three spaces, two of them labelled.

*Emergency Safety Summons* was printed in delicate script on the far left. Above it rested a carefully hung bullhorn, helpfully highlighted in bright red. The black outline of a robotic arm holding a fire extinguisher served as the only other label.

*Emergency Fuel Station* labelled the item on the far right. A semi-inset niche formed a small shelf that housed a bottle of Tony’s preferred brand of caffeine powder.

The third space wasn’t labeled. It didn’t need one. It broke the monochromatic, single-piece design of the block with an intricately-crafted depiction of an arc reactor with copper and steel secondary pieces.

Tony knew a secret compartment when saw one. Hesitantly, he approached the item and traced out an upside-down triangle pattern despite the ‘classic’ design of the reactor shown.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then, the silent movement of the copper and steel pieces recessing and sliding out of sight. Only the golden metal remained. It spun slowly on a vertical axis, revealing a single, labeled piece.

*Emergency Power Supply*

An arc reactor.

At the bottom of the frame, a tiny, barely-legible border of 1’s and 0’s that spelled out—
DUM-E and U's internal human-readable reference for Tony.

Tony showed his gratitude in the only way he knew.

He spent the remainder of the night in his workshop, AC/DC thrumming a beat in the background. Surrounded by his bots. (By his family.)

DUM-E, U, and JARVIS each received upgrades and hands-on maintenance work of their own that night.

(Tony was never as alone as he feared.)

Chapter End Notes

Lots of character study on Tony's past (and future?) relationships in this one. I tried to ensure it rang true for both MCU canon and his depiction in this story thus far, which was admittedly a bit of a challenge in parts. (:  

Half of this chapter was written on the flight to my new home, and the second half was written in the courtyard beneath my apartment, which I've discovered is well within range of my wi-fi! Probably the entire chapter would have been written on the plane, except I got sidetracked with The Plot as it will be... in the next arc? More or less. (More. Definitely more.)

...There's a character I've been trying to figure out how to incorporate into this story, and I /figured it out/ and I am so excited for when we... eventually... get to the scene where they go from bit character to Officially Tagged Secondary Character.

New job starts on Monday. We'll see what that does to my writing schedule. Right now this story still seems to be firmly entrenched as the Primary Stress Relief in my life!
Chapter Summary

Tony gives Pepper the big news (well, some of it), JARVIS and Tony test out some new gear, and we get a look at some of the wider world's perspective on some of Tony Stark's recent actions.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

December 29, 2008. He hadn’t set a specific date for when he was going to have the conversation—

(well, not the conversation)

(or the conversation)

(Jesus, way to put emph-sis on the wrong syllable, Tony.)

But he knew it was time, when Pepper entered his workshop fresh back from her holiday the same way she’d done a thousand times before, coffee in hand and the consummate prepared professional.

He deliberately didn’t pause in his Russian conversation with JARVIS. Didn’t even acknowledge her presence right away, outside a brief twitch only JARVIS would notice or interpret.

“—from ‘Siberia, probably’ to ‘within range of Pyanteg’. How’d you manage that?”

“I’d tell you, Sir, but then I’d have to kill you.” JARVIS deadpanned.

Tony guffawed, turning to acknowledge Pepper’s arrival with a gesture and a, “You hear this nonsense?”
Pepper looked a bit baffled, and it was JARVIS that clued him in.

“Sir, Miss Potts is not fluent in Russian.”

“Right. Right. Sorry, Pep—coffee? You are a goddess, thank you.”

“Since when do you speak Russian?” Pepper asked, sliding over a folder of paperwork instead of the coffee.

“Since I got tired of not knowing if the Russian assassins were being friendly or threatening to kill me.”

“—threatening to—Tony, what on—”

“Also. Goddess title rescinded, because that is not the coffee,” Tony complained, even as he grabbed the folder and started flipping through it.

(Contract with Vendor A to provide maintenance and janitorial support for the Expo, contract with Supplier B to manufacture the first generation of StarkPhone—he’d argued for sPhone, but apparently, they were already pushing it with sOS, so that was a no-go this time around as well—formal sign-off for the new hire list—wait. Hold on.)

“Miss Potts, why am I looking at the pending approval list for new hires? You’ve been forging my signature on these for years; did the robot I gave you for that break or something? Because if it did, I’d much rather—”

“No, but seeing as how nearly a fifth of the names on that list were apparently hand-picked by you…”

“Damn HR works fast, don’t they?”

“…Tony, why are nearly a fifth of our new hires personally recommended by you?”
“Now hold on there, ‘personally recommended’ is a bit of a stretch, J just… gave the recruiters a nudge in the right direction…”

“A nudge? Their resumes and online portfolios were flagged with notes to ‘find them a place at SI’; half of them even came with specific department recommendations! Signed with your initials!”

“They did? Huh, good thinking J, no wonder we apparently got so many of them,” Tony commented.

“…Who even are most of these people? When did you have time to go on a world-wide recruiting spree, and why did you feel the need to do so when we have an entire department full of teams to handle that?”

“Well it’d be weird if I only handled the one position fill, wouldn’t it?”

“The one… what position? I don’t remember hearing about any vacancies in the leadership team…” Pepper trailed off.

“Isn’t there?” Tony asked.

“But I thought, especially after the press conference and that ridiculous Q&A you put on, that position was going to… well, remain empty for the foreseeable future.”

“Did I ever say that?”

(Not in this timeline, he hadn’t.)

“Okay, fine, but who? Wait, don’t tell me you were serious about the merger with that energy company and their CEO…”

“Well, I was serious about the merger, but that’s going to take months at least to even get to serious negotiations… but no, not them. Davis is an ass, anyway. Brilliant, but a total ass. We’d kill each other if we had to work that closely together.”
“Then *who*…this is a big deal, Tony, why is this the first I’m hearing of this?!”

Tony looked at her meaningfully, but just like Before, she didn’t seem to understand where he was going with this. His words echoed those he’d once say for a different title, five months from now and a lifetime ago.

“Well I’m asking you to fill the position.”

“…*With who*? I don’t exactly have a candidate list prepared and ready to go because I *didn’t even know we were searching.*”

“Pepper, I’m not asking you to try…” Tony tried, only for Pepper to cut in once more.

“I’m just saying I need more information, you have to keep me up-to-date on these things if you want my help…”

“I *do* want your help, but I mean literally, physically, do it,” Tony interjected. The déjà vu was getting ridiculous.

“I am trying to do it.”

Nope. Tony was done with this comedy of errors.

“Pepper! You’re not listening to me! I’m trying to make you COO, if you’ll let me,” Tony said. This time, the message got through.

“You’re… you…have you been drinking?” She sat down the coffee uncertainly.

Tony flinched at the reminder. He’d started on the chlorophyll again and was emphatically *not* enjoying the experience. JARVIS was still running simulations to recreate the “lithium dioxide” SHIELD had injected him with once upon a time, so the only thing he’d been drinking was that.
Well, that and coffee, Tony amended, taking the opportunity to snatch up the still-hot beverage now within reach and giving it an appreciative sip.

“Nope. Might’ve gotten a few fish their first SWIs, though—” *(heh. There’s a SWIM joke in their somewhere... as soon as he could think of a good ’m’ word... morbidly? More? Markedly? Yup, that’s the one.)*

*(Poor fish, spending a night in the drunk tank for their first SWIM...)*

“Nope. Might’ve gotten a few fish their first SWIs, though—” *(heh. There’s a SWIM joke in their somewhere... as soon as he could think of a good ’m’ word... morbidly? More? Markedly? Yup, that’s the one.)*

“Forget it,” Tony continued, refocusing on Pepper instead of the ridiculous tangent his mind has drifted into.

He leaned forward, expression turning serious as he stared into her eyes.

“I hereby and irrevocably appoint you as vice-chairman and COO of Stark Industries effectively immediately. Done deal. Trying to figure out who a worthy successor would be, and I realized... it’s you. It’s always been, it will always be you.”

“I don’t know what to think,” Pepper said, sinking into a chair, lips beginning to broaden into a genuine smile as the realization that he was serious began to sink it.

*(“Don’t think, drink.”)*

Tony shrugged, saying, “Don’t think, say yes.”

“I... yes, of course, yes! Tony—”

“Perfect!” Tony interrupted before the dreaded thank you could come into play.

“Now,” he continued, “as far as logistics go, the plan is to announce early January, with the rest of the big organizational shake-ups... how’s that coming along, by the way? I remember I sent some things out about it at some point... but, well, let’s be real, that was 90% JARVIS anyway.”
“…Tony don’t tell me you’re about to try to convince me to let the robot that runs your house take over as your PA.”

(Well, damn. He hadn’t expected her mind to jump there that quickly.)

(Tony should have known; he doesn’t do subtle.)

“Well, for things like dry cleaning I admit it’d be a bit impractical…”

“Nope. No way am I letting a machine you designed take over for me, the last thing you need is something that’ll just encourage your bad habits,” Pepper said.

(And yes, he knows that this Pepper doesn’t see any of his bots as people, knows that said sight is based on what they deliberately haven’t let her see, but damn if his hackles don’t instinctively rise in JARVIS’s defense…)

Fortunately, he was spared from making that particular verbal gaffe by JARVIS’s own smooth voice.

“I daresay Sir needs little encouragement on that front, Miss Potts.” He paused briefly before continuing, "Although I am inclined to agree that I could not possibly fill in for your role in Sir’s life. Particularly upon consideration of my own incorporeal nature.”

Tony wants to interject there, but JARVIS knows the second he even suggested he wanted a physical form Tony would make it happen.

But JARVIS had never wanted one, in the past or the future.

Also, unfortunately, JARVIS had a point.

(And this is why he should always run his ideas by JARVIS first…)“Ugh, but you know how many PAs I went through before hiring you?” Tony complained.
“I’ll help with the search,” Pepper said, her smile turning more into a smirk.

“No seriously, you’re one of a kind, you’re irreplaceable, that’s why I want you as COO because you’ll do a hell of a job and someday I want you to take—” Tony cut himself off there, not planning on kicking that hornet’s nest today.

And it’s true. Before, he’d never hired a replacement PA after the brief disaster with Natashalie.

However, it seemed without that experience to incline Pepper towards agreeing with him, she was far less willing to let the subject drop.

“I will help you find a new PA; I’m not sure you could function on your own…”

“I won’t be alone!” Tony protested, even as the words invited the doubt of another lifetime where Pepper had wanted little to do with him shortly after becoming CEO…

(Logically, he knew his own irrational behaviors pushing her away had driven her to that.)

(Doubt was rarely logical.)

“No, but you absolutely need someone managing your calendar and dragging you to meetings occasionally,” Pepper countered.

Tony knew he wasn’t going to win this argument, at least not at the moment, so he opted to drop the subject for now.

“I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to interview a few people…” Tony acquiesced

“Now,” he said, abruptly changing the subject, “back to the whole logistics thing…”

+++
New Years Eve brought with it a slew of Hollywood high society party invitations. The one Sir had accepted was ostensibly a charitable endeavor. Normally Sir preferred to avoid such functions, but evidently a name on the guest list JARVIS had obtained for him had captured his attentions.

(JARVIS had scanned the list, but aside from recognizing a dozen names of women Sir had slept with at some point in the past decade, a handful more tangentially associated with Stark Industries, and a couple reporters who had written pieces on Sir or SI in the past, no one in particular stood out.)

(There was no one on the list who was tagged in the threat assessments or cross-referenced in the alternate timeline.)

JARVIS had been tempted to ask but knew that if Sir thought it was relevant he would have mentioned the figure by name to begin with.

After Sir’s talk with Miss Potts, Sir had proceeded to calm his nerves (and, perhaps, JARVIS’s own) by tinkering with a nearly-invisible behind-the-ear communications device he’d evidently considered before but never got around to implementing.

The device paired with one of his newly-fabricated sensory arrays using the newly-developed B.A.T.M.A.N. protocol. JARVIS was somewhat dubious of Sir’s assertion that the name—Better Approach to Mobile Adhoc Networking—was in homage to a similar protocol of the same name developed in the future by a team of “Germans, or maybe they were Dutch?” He had known better than to argue the point.

In Sir’s words, “Don’t let the namesake fool you, it works nothing like that one did. Will? Whatever. At least, I don’t think so, I barely remember the specs when I was looking it implementing something similar for FRI—”

Sir had stopped there, uncomfortable as ever about openly referencing JARVIS’s… replacement? Younger sister?… Sir had once developed and seemed to both miss terribly and feel incredibly guilty about missing.

(JARVIS had yet to comment directly on the matter to Sir, though privately he thought he might have liked to meet the AI who had taken care of Sir after his own… departure.)
In any case, the protocol allowed JARVIS to piggyback over a wide variety of different networking and telecommunications infrastructure to maintain an active channel of communication with Sir virtually anywhere the man could travel.

Sir’s end of the communication worked via subvocalization, while JARVIS’s voice was encoded directly into electric impulses into the cochlea similarly to the way cochlear implants functioned.

The former had required a moderate amount of fine-tuning to reliably differentiate between when Sir was actually intending to communicate with JARVIS and was merely subvocalizing out of unconscious habit. Eventually, they’d settled on using JARVIS’s name as a trigger word eliminating most false positives. JARVIS would take the remaining false positives’ existence to his metaphorical grave.

Sir apparently had a bad habit of subvocalizing certain otherwise-unvoiced statements or quips directed towards JARVIS, although their frequency had already begun to decrease since installing the device. He’d debated, briefly, if this counted as an intrusion of privacy. Particularly after the …JARVIS can’t read minds, thankfully that had left JARVIS incredibly curious.

He’d decided it fell under his ‘Looking out for Sir’s General Well-Being’ directives, in the same way that a variety of new sensors and devices that kept cropping up around the mansion without much direct acknowledgement from Sir’s end did.

(What Sir didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him, and in the meantime, JARVIS occasionally received a slightly more unfiltered glimpse into Sir’s thoughts.)

(JARVIS was, perhaps, having too much fun playing the Q to Sir’s James Bond these days.)

Tonight was their first real field test of the system, and JARVIS had split into base-q and home-front to allow part of him to remain focused on the ongoing stream of conversation from Sir’s end as they travelled to the Sheats-Goldstein Residence, the location of this particular soiree.

“…ideally we can turn this into a full-on implant in the next iteration. Suitcase suit’s coming along nicely, still haven’t decided if we should skip over the implants this time or not,” Sir said.

JARVIS scanned the future-suit schematics and references before responding.
“You made mention of a watch gauntlet that would perhaps serve as an effective alternative waypoint?” he offered.

“Hmm, yeah, that was a good one […] before the switch to nanotech made it redundant.”

“Sir I believe you dropped a sentence in the middle there.”

“Again? Ugh, funny how difficult something people do automatically becomes the moment you intentionally try to do it.”

“I’m afraid I wouldn’t know, Sir,” JARVIS said.

“That was even more deadpan than usual, J; either you’ve been holding out on me or the encoding algorithms need a bit more refinement.”

“Your feedback has been noted and logged for further consideration.”

Sir let out an audible snort at that, a moment later narrating, “Happy’s doing the silent judgement thing in the rearview mirror now. I can’t be laughing at nothing, J! It’s not going to help my ‘totally sane, promise’ case if I do.”

JARVIS resisted the impulse to make another sarcastic response or comment after a quick calculation indicated discretion would be the better part of valor in this instance.

“Although, speaking of? I know we just calibrated the sensors so you are set to ignore anything not actively directed your way, but would you mind remaining a bit more present this evening if you can? Just, I know you can’t go full Big Brother yet—I’m working on it—but it’s been a week now and this’ll be my first time around any direct temptation since I hurt you. I don’t want to relapse and say or do something even worse.”

One of the unfortunate side effects of the subvocalizer was how much more difficult Sir found it to cut off his own thoughts mid-sentence. It resulted in a degree of emotional honesty Sir was undoubtedly unaware he was projecting and would be mortified should he find out.

Unfortunately, there was no way for JARVIS to predict or even tell what commentary was
unintentional, outside of his own knowledge of Sir’s typical speech patterns. Similarly, JARVIS’s own research and limited data set suggested Sir would find it nigh-impossible to prevent on his end.

Nonetheless, JARVIS logged the matter for further consideration. He tentatively flagged it for review in the post-event discussion—Sir avoided the word debrief like the plague, and JARVIS had a few hypotheses as to why—that would follow this technological (and personal) field test.

“Would you like that to include actively vocalized statements?” JARVIS offered in lieu of any of his other thoughts.

“Yes, actually, that would be fantastic. I hadn’t considered you’d be able to record those without blowing out the sensors, but it does make sense that you would be able to. JARVIS you’re brilliant.”

(JARVIS was pretty sure that last statement was unintentional.)

(He copied the statement into his long-term memory banks regardless. It slotted seamlessly into the network of nodes most closely associated with Sir and JARVIS’s own carefully-maintained psychological needs that had developed over the years.)

(A surprising majority of the sentiments linked into that subsystem were actions or statements directly from Sir.)

(Then again, perhaps that was not so terribly surprising.)

“I’m modifying the relevant algorithms now. A few data samples to refine the sensor’s calibrations are needed from you, Sir.”

“Data samples? Yeah, okay, sure. Happy, are we there yet?”

“How’s that? ‘Almost there?’ What does that mean in numerical terms?”

“Do you have an estimated decibel level? These sensors weren’t designed for that purpose.”
“60, probably a bit quieter than I’d anticipate speaking once we arrive. Fifteen more minutes? Really? You’re killing me, Smalls.”

“Noted. That should provide sufficient data.”

“Awesome. Speed limits are overrated, anyways.”

Sir’s vocal chords vibrated a final time in a way that JARVIS tentatively interpreted as a ‘harrumph’ but didn’t say anything more aloud.

“I’ll give you a chance to focus on that until we get there, then? I’ll trying to check in occasionally before then to make sure we’re still connected—the alert system’s still enabled, yeah?”

“Indeed,” JARVIS acknowledged, before settling in to focus on the necessary system modifications.

+++ DR. FISCHE DISCUSSES FLIGHT WITH IRON MAN, ICONIC PHOTO

You Tube Clip from @KnightlyNights; Excerpt from Jan 5, 2009 Interview with Dr. Christi Fische on Late Nights with Jay Knightly

KNIGHTLY: Welcome back! Two months ago, our guest tonight made headlines around the globe in an iconic photo depicting the aftermath of the Iron Strike. Freshly returned from her tour with the Red Cross after a three-year stint working primarily with war refugees from Afghanistan, please welcome Dr. Christi Fische!”

[Cheers and Applause]

KNIGHTLY: Thank you. Thank you for coming on the show tonight. Now, if I understand correctly, this is your first televised interview ever?
FISCHE: Well, unless you count the time my friend interviewed me for the Jefferson High weekly news when the quarterback didn’t show up…

KNIGHTLY: Oh, so you must be an old hand with the spotlight by now, then! I don’t suppose footage of this interview still exists?

FISCHE: [blushes] Oh God I hope not. I was very much in my awkward phase—braces, terrible haircut, scrunchies and all.

KNIGHTLY: Ah, scrunchies. Never quite worked with my complexion, but I certainly remember the impressive collection my girlfriend at the time had.

[Audience Laughter]

KNIGHTLY: So, Christi. Aside from the statements released initially by the US Government and Dr. Stark’s own press conference shortly thereafter, there’s been very little new information surrounding the events that led to your newfound fame. Anything you can tell us?

FISCHE: Well, I can only say so much I’m afraid; Doctor-Patient confidentiality still applies when your emergency triage is plastered on the cover of every newspaper and magazine.

KNIGHTLY: Of course, of course. I’m curious, though—how did your team arrive on the scene so quickly? I’ve been led to believe that Red Cross volunteers are very rarely involved in any active combat situations, and from that photo it certainly looks as though Iron Man’s only just left the scene, if he’s not still present somewhere?

FISCHE: Oh, we aren’t. But… interesting story, that. We all suspected there was some sort of major operation going on at the time, but military’s always been very hush-hush on that sort of thing, so we didn’t know any details. I was the emergency paramedic on duty at the time, when all of a sudden everyone on the military side’s running around a bit more crazily than usual, and Jimmy—Major Held, sorry, the official liaison—comes bursting into my office, tells me to grab the best medic that could be ready to go with me in five minutes and meet him on the tarmac.

I do, of course. I get Mike Kelly—you can’t see it, but he was only a few dozen yards away from me on the scene—when I run to him just as I’m leaving to go find someone.
So we head out to the tarmac and though I’ve never been the one actively called in as the first responder for an emergency on-site, we all know the procedure. I get out there and to my surprise, there’s no helicopter waiting. Just me, Mike, and Major Held. I’m about to ask Held what gives, because I’m not even hearing the sounds of an incoming chopper but he’s honestly looking off into the distance like one’s about to come in for a landing.

**KNIGHTLY:** Wait, don’t tell me…?

**FISCHE:** Yup, not thirty seconds later Iron Man himself touches down not two yards from me—and let me tell you, the photos do not do that armor justice. It was awesome in the literally ‘awe-inspiring’ sense of the word.

**KNIGHTLY:** So you’re telling me *Iron Man* flew you to the scene personally?

**FISCHE:** Sure did. Tells us both to grab an arm, makes some crack about buckling our seatbelts, wraps his arms around us, and takes off.

**KNIGHTLY:** What was it like?

**FISCHE:** Terrifying at first. Then I realized he’d done something so that I literally couldn’t let go of him and fall. After that it was the most exhilarating adrenaline rush I’ve ever experienced. Felt like I was a girl from one of those old comics.

**KNIGHTLY:** Wow, so you’re flying with Iron Man, playing Lois Lane to his Superman—

**FISCHE:** *[Laughing]* Now I’ll have you know I am no one’s damsel in distress!

**KNIGHTLY:** *[suggestive grin]* Not even Tony Stark?

**FISCHE:** *[flushes briefly]* Well, he is *Tony Stark*. Not saying I wouldn’t answer the door if he ever came a-knocking, because I’m attracted to men and I have eyes, but…

**KNIGHTLY:** Well, I’m not attracted to men and if he came knocking on my door I’m pretty sure I’d ‘answer the door’ for him too!
KNIGHTLY: So, you’re en route via the Iron Express. What’s Iron Man like? Does he say anything to you?

FISCHE: Well, he gives us a brief overview of what we’re flying into—it’s less than a fifteen-minute flight at what I assume is the maximum speed he can safely travel with someone not ensconced in that protective armor. Not sure where the communication devices came from, because I definitely didn’t have one that could stand up to that kind of ambient noise. But then again, he’s Tony Stark so really wouldn’t expect anything else in hindsight.

His analysis is pretty thorough and spot-on, by the way. Not sure when he became an expert, since far as I know he’s not even that kind of Doctor, but...

KNIGHTLY: [commiserating] …It’s Tony Stark?

FISCHE: [chuckles] Yeah, pretty much.

KNIGHTLY: So did you know at the time that you were being rushed in to treat the bad guys?

FISCHE: Well, I knew they’d been fighting Iron Man, so I did have my suspicions…

[Scattered Audience Laughter]

KNIGHTLY: Fair point.

FISCHE: But I mean, that’s not something the Red Cross judges. Our motto is *Per Humanitatem ad Pacem*—with humanity, towards peace. We see someone that needs our help, and we help them. We don’t discriminate, we don’t prioritize one group over another because at the end of the day, every single person we treat is a human being that deserves to be treated with charity and respect.
KNIGHTLY: Even the enemy?

FISCHE: Especially the enemy. In war, they’re generally the ones that need us the most. People are people. Helping all of us, not just some of us, is what the Red Cross stands for.

[Audience Applause, Many Stand]

KNIGHTLY: Powerful words. And, I know you can’t speak for Iron Man, but do you think he’d agree with that?

FISCHE: Well, I mean, no one really knows what happened to him in captivity, but from what little we do know? I can’t imagine he was treated especially kindly.

KNIGHTLY: No Jihadist Bed & Breakfast or five-star luxury suites?

FISCHE: …Well, no. But the thing is, the guy I treated? If Iron Man hadn’t directly flown us in, he wouldn’t have lived long enough to receive medical assistance. Dr. Stark had more reason than anyone to leave him to die and call it justice, but he didn’t. That, I think speaks a lot to his character.

KNIGHTLY: What about the people who are calling it penance? Saying he’s doing this out of guilt from the thousands his weapons have killed?

FISCHE: It’s really not my place to speculate on his motivations but… I’ve seen clips from the press conference, where he discussed Stane’s betrayal. Going after the weapons out of guilt? Okay, maybe I can see that. But the way he did it? The way he so clearly went out of his way to minimize any causalities, not just innocent lives? That kind of compassion doesn’t just spring up outta nowhere, is all I’m saying.

KNIGHTLY: This, coming from a man whose most popular nickname internationally is the Merchant of Death?

FISCHE: I’m just saying his actions don’t show a man who is as heartless as he’s been portrayed.
KNIGHTLY: I take it someone’s a fan of Iron Man?

FISCHE: No. I’m a fan of Tony Stark.

[Audience Applause]

[End of clip]

(Somewhere within range of Pyanteg, a man scowled at his outdated computer screen and angrily clicked away from the open video tab.)

Chapter End Notes

Few chapters ago, a commenter requested a bit more perspective on the broader world's reaction to Tony's recent actions. Hope this helped fill in a some of that gap for you!

Originally I was going to do a scene from Christine Everhart's perspective that touched on the party, but I didn't like the way it was flowing very much. So, I went with an interview excerpt with a bit character from way back from chapters four and five instead! Let me know what you think about the ongoing use of OCs to fill in gaps in the narrative like that--there are only so many canonical characters to pull on, but I don't want to overdo it with the OCs. (:)

Comments and feedback continue to make my day(s). Considering how big of a day this is for me I wouldn't mind a bit of positivism and/or your thoughts on the chapter! ;D
Marked

Chapter Summary

Tony travels through time and space the normal way. Pepper reminds us there's a reason she rose from secretary to PA to COO of Stark Industries and how it had nothing to do with her good looks, and U reminds us that they're an entity that exists with an identity distinct from the "DUM-E-and-U" combo.

Oh, is that Canon Plot Shenanigans I see on the horizon...?

Chapter Notes

...I officially posted the first chapter of this story just over a month ago, and I just want to reiterate how incredibly grateful I am for all of your support on this story. In honor of reaching 500 kudos (and now, 50k words!)--which, according to my friend, is "enough that I'd now show up with her filter settings"--and surviving my first week at work (although my phone did not), have another chapter! Mind the tags on this one, people!

See the end of the chapter for more notes


Nothing.

Austin. Houston. Huntsville, Alabama.

Productive in every way but the one that mattered most.


Nothing at the main offices. Nothing in the dozens of warehouses and distribution centers and remote testing facilities…

Then international, on an accelerated schedule because Tony had never considered the model wouldn’t be found domestically. The international travel was meant to be leisurely, a chance to
touch base and devote a bit of time to the various global events and enemies he’d gathered, or would gather, over the years.

(Howard Stark’s company barely left the United States, and even then hadn’t ventured far beyond the British Isles.)

Toronto.


Berlin, Helsinki, Zurich.

If not Europe or Japan, then where?

They continued the journey anyways.

(The Asian branch of Stark Industries was pure Tony, the force that had helped drive his net worth to twelve billion dollars.)

Shanghai, Singapore, and Seoul didn’t disappoint because he’d never expected success there.

Auckland, New Zealand. Melbourne.

Every notable Stark Industries office globally was visited. Every forgotten dusty shack with boxes of long-abandoned, failed product lines or misplaced orders was scanned by JARVIS.

(Supply Chain & Ops were either going to love him or hate him if he ever gave them the data JARVIS had gathered.)

(Schrodinger’s Stark. Why not both?)
January, February, March, April.

Tours. Periodic returns to the office just in case the desired model magically turned up where it had made its way in the original timeline once more.

As time went on, it became harder and harder to focus on his other projects. Tony never expected that he’d be living with the palladium again for this long, and it was killing him.

(Again.)

When the poisoning began to spread in increasingly visible ways, with angular patterns spiraling out from the arc reactor, Tony began to wonder if he should get his affairs in order once more.

(But he’d been subconsciously doing that all along, hadn’t he?)

The focus on JARVIS. Pepper’s appointment as COO. The new direction of the company, generations of iterative improvements with periodic game changers neatly scheduled for R&D to extrapolate from.

The organizational shake-ups. The remodeling efforts, where even now JARVIS was being integrated into wings of the LA offices with none the wiser. Where JARVIS now had full, internal access to the company, instead of being blocked by the same cryptographic protocols that protected his own person.

(Okay, they were weaker.)

(…They wouldn’t stand up to quantum computing, but JARVIS wasn’t quantum.)

(Yet.)

The entire project was wrapped and presented with a bow as “general modernization” and “retrofitting to match the company’s dramatic pivot.”
Back-up servers for JARVIS bundled into the 2009 budget at some of the largest offices. They were lower level tech than the ones slowly taking shape in the nascent bunker/Batcave/Evil Lair, of course. They preserved only a fraction of JARVIS’s sum total. Just enough that he’d still be him if his primary (and secondary, and tertiary) servers ever went offline.

(He remembered how Ultron had once torn through all but that core that was JARVIS. Redundancies had been useless in the face of his attacks.)

Plans for the Stark Expo and ensuring the necessary tech and safeguards would be ready for the dramatic reveal of miniaturized (safe) arc reactor technology. Plans to ensure that it could still become the leading name in clean energy without risk of explosions, even with the inherently less stable palladium core.

(He’d never shared the starkanium-based reactor technology Before anyway.)

(Legacy. What’s in a legacy? It’s planting seeds in a garden you’ll never get to see.)

The War Machine armor was finished. It wasn’t doing anything currently, still waiting in his workshop for—what? Tony to goad him into ‘stealing’ it again?

(Is this where it gets me? On my feet, the enemy ahead of me?)

Pepper, he could tell, was beginning to have her suspicions about JARVIS. This, after months of them gradually building hints in that direction on top of that first initial conversation where they’d tested the waters.

(If I see it coming do I run or do I let it be?)

The theme of the revived Stark Expo started to come together.

The City of the Future.

Marketing took the base idea and ran with it. They hinted towards components of that Jetsons-era futurism coming to life in reality once and for all. Plans that were still in development, with entire departments being quietly shuffled around behind the scenes in preparation. In that, at least,
leaving the weapon’s industry was a boon: organizational shake-ups were expected rather than newsworthy in and of themselves. Tony, either directly or through JARVIS’s digital sleuthing ensuring the right ideas got into the ears of the right people and the right time, planted the nebulous seeds. From there, it would be up to Marketing, PR, Accounting, and Engineering to come together with a viable plan.

To turn ideals into bidding wars that made fiscal sense. To pave the way for campaigns and corporate promises that made for good soundbites to capture the media and the world’s attention.

(Is it like a beat without a melody?)

Rhodey and Pepper started giving Tony looks. As winter faded into spring, Tony began to look worse rather than better. They each seemed to realize something beyond the events of 2008 was eating away at Tony slowly.

First Happy, then Pepper, then Rhodey learned that Tony had stopped drinking.

She wasn’t his PA anymore and it wasn’t her job, but as COO Pepper still attended many of the public events and galas Tony did. Somehow, she always ensured he had a cover glass of some non-alcoholic beverage at hand.

Tony’s drinking habits had been carefully masked and portrayed as relatively harmless over the years. Despite the reputation as a womanizing playboy and party animal, despite the excesses of his under-21 lifestyle, PR had sculpted an image which had ensured he never crossed the line into ‘alcoholic’ in the eyes of the media.

The last thing he needed was to add recovering alcoholic to the list of character deficiencies the press loved to assign him.

(Although he was pretty sure it wasn’t just his imagination that they’d been less vitriolic than Before recently?)

(Just wait ‘til he died. Tragic figure waiting to happen, really. Redemption story à la Oppenheimer or a Lannister. Iron Man suit waiting to join Captain America’s suit in the Smithsonian.)

He hadn’t planned to be faced with the debate regarding how, or if, to handle the “by the way, I’m
He hadn’t planned to be faced with the debate regarding how, or if, to handle the “by the way, I’m dying” conversation once more. He knew from experience that it was only a matter of time before his reasoning became unreliable in a way he wouldn’t be able to judge or determine for himself. And though JARVIS was better equipped this time to notice and counteract Tony’s increasingly difficult-to-control illogical impulses, it was only a matter of time before he slipped somewhere.

He’d bungled those relationships once thanks to the secrecy. Tony had no desire to repeat the mistakes.

As the deadline drew closer, they searched for alternatives. JARVIS wormed his way into SHIELD, looking for any reference to the materials they’d given to Tony in another timeline.

(Not that Tony expected the videos and various paraphernalia to be particularly helpful. Photos of the central exhibit of the 1974 Stark Expo existed, after all. They didn’t provide the level of fine detail needed to create a roadmap towards an entirely new atom.)

In any case, the SHIELD angle bore no tangible results.

Tony dove into chemistry and atomic theory at a level he’d never touched before. His intensity was rivalled only by his future forays into nuclear thermodynamics when the entire world had been at stake or his post-New York obsession with the Iron Man armor.

Tony was a genius. JARVIS had taken to cloning himself regularly, with one of his selves (and hadn’t that been an interesting conversation?) all but permanently focused on assisting him on the job.

In late April, there was a burst of hope.

Tony designed a blueprint for an atom projected to be stable in the simulations. An isomer was developed with only a handful more neutrons than protons, creating a version of the longed-for Noble Gas that wasn’t a gas at all.

New hardware explicitly specialized for handling the advanced simulations needed was designed and built. The system connected to JARVIS for further management, and as many tests as they could reasonably develop without attempting to actually create the thing were packaged into the system.
The hope and renewed spark in Tony’s eyes and JARVIS’s voice were impossible to mistake. They set to building the particle accelerator in the full-excavated, bare-bones new subbasement.

Without the impending deadline of having less than three days to live and with the added uncertainty that came from Tony’s singular ownership of the new, untested design, they didn’t cut corners on safety this time around.

Fail-safes were built in. Proper mechanisms for adjustments and emergency shut-offs were put into place. The accelerator was built with quality, purposeful materials, rather than the hodgepodge he’d cobbled together Before.

The machine and its internal workings were stress-tested extensively by JARVIS. The duo wrote a slew of unit tests to catch any bugs in the underlying, JARVIS-managed software.

(Even JARVIS, ironically, couldn’t automatically catch every bug.)

(Downsides of personhood: the introduction of fallibility on that level.)

By April 27, 2009, the only thing left was to use it and attempt to prove the impossible possible once more.

They failed.

Or rather, they succeeded in that they’d created a new element.

They failed in that said element could not serve as a valid substitute for palladium.

(Stupid. Fucking stupid isomers. For something so essential to his own health and well-being, why the hell hadn’t he memorized the element’s complete structure Before?)

(…He’d had JARVIS to remember for him, Before, and the references squirreled away in his private servers after that, not to mention the tangible samples of the metal always available for inspection if needed.)
Tony didn’t relapse after that failure, although it was close.

He did, however, refuse to leave his workshop for the next week.

(“Before you go, palladium in the chest, painful way to die.”)

JARVIS gained a permanent presence in his ear that was soon coupled with a primitive implementation of his futuristic Super Handy Accessory Digitally Enhancing Sight. (S.H.A.D.E.S—he was quite proud of that particular backronym, although JARVIS’s eyeroll had come through clearly in his response the first time Tony used it.) The shades (S.H.A.D.E.S./!) gave JARVIS eyes and ears outside of Tony’s own words and were the safety net that finally managed to coax him out of the garage once more.

Alongside these struggles with his own mortality came the small, recurring nuisance of the ongoing effort to find Tony a new PA.

Surprisingly, there’d been no hint of SHIELD in the candidate pool thus far. But then, they’d made no move to approach Tony beyond Nick Fury’s midnight visit until he stepped down as CEO Before. Evidently, appointing Pepper as COO and quietly implying that she was his intended successor instead of blaring it from the rooftops wasn’t public or dramatic enough to merit special attention.

Or perhaps they simply felt they had enough of an in with the company without Natasha this go-around. Pepper and Agent—Phil, he still couldn’t understand that change—were closer this time around.

(Was it because Tony had been keeping her at a distance? Just like Before, only now without noticeably erratic behavior as an accompaniment to grab her attention?)

Yes, Tony was different now, more so than he’d been Before. But in explainable ways. From the outside it might have even looked like he was coping. Pepper had evidently decided he merely wanted and needed time and space to handle whatever he wasn’t telling her. The newfound distance should be taken as a blessing in disguise, really. Wasn’t that all he had wanted, the first time around? To drive his friends into emotional distance. To spare both them and him the messy emotions that would come if they knew or when he passed.

(“Textbook narcissism.”)
With Pepper’s ever-crazy schedule and Rhodey’s return to active duty, the rotating schedule of PAs became Tony’s chief point of contact with the outside world. Especially now that he’d begun to scale back his public appearances ostensibly occupied doing his day job and navigating the various minefields surrounding his future use of the Iron Man armor.

(Both of which were valid time sinks, but not nearly to the extent he allowed anyone outside his workshop to assume.)

No two PAs left, or were fired, for the same reason.

The first, Monica, lasted fifteen days before acknowledging she wasn’t adjusting to the constant travel well and hesitantly bringing the matter to her boss’s attention. Tony found her a nice desk job instead. She stayed within the company, but she wasn’t cut out for the whirlwind of absolute chaos that close proximity to the CEO of Stark Industries generated.

The next, Scott, seemed like a solid candidate on paper. He was fired after six days when he was caught attempting to access confidential information from Tony’s personal workstation in the office.

Tanika was competent enough that Tony could almost see himself settling into a routine with her. She left when the media caught wind of her less-than-stellar past and began running stories that led to hate mail and targeted personal attacks.

(Tony paid for her relocation and ensured her relative safety moving forward until she faded from the public consciousness entirely. It didn’t assuage the guilt.)

Yu seemed too terrified to properly address him for the three days before Tony quietly accepted her resignation. Kate, he saw perhaps twice during one of his engineering binges before she got fed up with his non-responsiveness and quit. Noah went on emergency medical leave. An off-color, thoughtless remark from Tony made Maria walk out on her first day, and he wasn’t entirely sure what had happened to her successor, Vinolin.

As he drew further into himself and his private work, the time between replacements began to increase. The week he squirreled himself away in his lab, he was reasonably certain he didn’t have an assistant at all. Definitely not one capable of coralling a dying, depressed genius, although to be fair it was debatable if such a person existed at all.
(On second thought, maybe it was Pepper’s burgeoning suspicions regarding JARVIS that led to the increasingly-long gaps.)

(That, or HR was just having a hard time finding someone qualified who was still willing to fill the position.)

Tony barely bothered to remember the revolving door of employees at this point, too engrossed in his million other projects to spare the pointless effort.

For example, there was T.A.D.A.S.H.I.’s official debut in mid-April. Tony’s tour was wildly successful in that the hype behind the new line of Stark Industries mobile devices was becoming ridiculous. It reached heights his products had never touched Before, even after years of expanding market share and rapid growth.

“Military Grade Durability.” A product providing tantalizing hints of just what a civilian-focused SI could and would accomplish. Minimal details on the specs were released. The sleek, modern Stark aesthetics were likewise carefully kept under wraps just well enough to build interest and suspense.

Amusingly, JARVIS flagged an increasingly-popular meme to show Tony one day mid-March. The gif created a short loop of the evolution of one of the primary banner advertising campaigns comparing it to a striptease, and variations on the theme were soon commenting on everything from government transparency to the secret ingredients behind Dr. Pepper or KFC’s spices to Tony Stark’s very public post-action handling of the “Iron Strike”. JARVIS had needed to explain that particular name to him, since he’d somehow managed to miss what had apparently become the common name for his destructive trip to Afghanistan.

Tony didn’t know who created the meme, but he was pretty sure the company owed them several million dollars in free publicity.

(They were also owed a team of professional, highly attractive exotic dancers of their gender of choice. You know, just to stay in theme.)

The April Fools jokes and twists on the meme’s theme had reached Tony’s ears by way of his latest forgettable assistant and were equally hilarious. He privately suspected someone internal was behind that one.
(Not that he knew anything about the alleged internal meme page some enterprising young HR employee had launched not long after Stark Raving Mad.)

(He certainly didn’t request JARVIS send him weekly highlights as it grew in popularity.)

(JARVIS was determined to ensure Tony didn’t go full-on Byronic hero grimdark even as they faced setback after setback regarding his arc reactor.)

Their global tour of the company and the accompanying media coverage thus came full circle. Just in time for a ‘triumphant’ return and heavily dramatized unveiling.

(By global standards. By Tony’s the event was incredibly tame…)

His blood toxicity’s growth rate was beginning to accelerate, just as it had Before. Tony began carrying around a portable measuring device once more, although this one was a bit more discreet.

Just before he went to step out onto the stage for the genuine, non-JARVIS T.A.D.A.S.H.I.’s baby shower, he pricked his finger with the tiny device, this version devoid of a visual display entirely.

JARVIS’s voice chimed in his ear a moment later.

“Blood toxicity levels currently at 7.25%.”

(At least his BAC, which the device also measured in an odd form of self-affirmation and reassurance, hadn’t risen above 0.00 since his Christmas resolution to do better.)

(JARVIS had helped make sure of that, even when the stress of not-finding and the not-entirely-psychosomatic feel of tiny flakes of metal polluting blood and flowing through his veins had made it all so incredibly tempting.)

The device was slipped back into his jacket’s inner pocket. Tony Stark, CEO of Stark Industries, stepped onto the stage.
The Jarvis that remained focused on the ever-growing list of projects and tasks he oversaw while his counterpart remained present with Sir as he began his highly anticipated product unveiling dismissed the alert and shifted his attentions.

Sure enough, Miss Potts was visible on the entryway camera. She hovered uncertainly in the threshold of the mansion for a moment before overcoming whatever was holding her back and making her way over to the staircase that descended into the workshop.

While she approached the stairs, Jarvis ran through several checks and calculations in rapid succession.

Miss Potts is aware of Sir’s current location. CONFIRMED.

There are no outstanding documents, projects, or miscellanea Sir is scheduled to forward to Miss Potts or anyone that falls under her purview marked as past due or upcoming in the next three days. CONFIRMED.

Miss Potts has never visited this location without Sir’s established on-site presence. CONFIRMED.

CONCLUSION: Miss Potts had no known reason to currently be on the premises.

Jarvis hardly needed formal calculations to tell him that, but he sent his processors through the manual checks and verifications anyways.

Sir had always spoken well of Miss Potts, present and future. There was no immediate cause to assume malevolent intent.
(But then, Sir had once placed his full, whole-hearted faith in Stane as well.)

Still, he very carefully began initiating basic security precautions. Just in case. DUM-E was currently dormant in his charging station, but U was active. They had been far more willing to act without Sir’s physical presence since Sir provided them with a new gripping mechanism.

They had been hesitant at first, displaying minor signs of guilt when they tentatively queried JARVIS one day in late January.

[QUERY: DESIGNATION: CREATOR UNIT RTS ESTIMATE?]

Sir had been scheduled to remain in Texas for the week. JARVIS sent back an approximated timestamp for the upcoming Sunday without much thought. Such queries were far more common from DUM-E, who preferred to hibernate in his dock when Sir was not nearby, and he had no outstanding actionable tasks in his self-created priority queue. The bot would set an alarm to the time replied with by JARVIS, with the understanding that he would be alerted and awoken prematurely by JARVIS should Sir return sooner.

When the timer ran down, he would boot and, after his own POST and general initialization, immediately query JARVIS if Sir’s presence was not detected.

(It never was. JARVIS was not an oracle, but DUM-E’s algorithms seemed unable to adapt to the concepts of JARVIS-defined imprecision or estimation. DUM-E grasped that Sir’s hardware was not compatible with the libraries needed for precise temporal accuracy just fine. He didn’t, however, understand why JARVIS—who did possess such libraries and capabilities, and utilized them frequently—could not provide accurate time calculations in Sir’s stead.)

(This, despite JARVIS having made the attempt to teach the elder bot. Multiple times.)

From U, JARVIS received the expected acknowledgement. Unexpected was the secondary query that had followed up on the first.

[QUERY: DESIGNATION: U / ACTIVE UNIT NEW TASK ASSIGNMENT?]}

Immediately after, they had sent an impression of their new mechanical grip. U wanted to see if JARVIS knew of anything U could do for Sir their own algorithms hadn’t detected. It displayed a
degree of initiative U had not previously been observed to possess, and JARVIS had given the
question a significant portion of his attentions even as he logged the change.

JARVIS had scanned through his own priority queue. It contained many items that required a
degree of precision JARVIS didn’t have the physical tools to implement. None of them were
urgent, but it didn’t take long to find a job for U that both involved a lot of gripping and would
benefit Sir.

He told U that he had a job for them that he would forward upon completion and set to work
transforming the note in his own to-do list into a fully actionable algorithm U would be able to
follow.

A few minutes later, the pseudocode for the necessary algorithm was sent out. U got to work on
the minor job, incorporating the actions into their routine and even applying a few minor
optimizations discovered in the process to their other protocols.

JARVIS had notified Sir of U’s actions, and Sir had been effusive in his praise for the bot. U,
unlike their counterpart, had always been incredibly reserved and far less apt to display signs of
personality or emotions. Their pride at their own success, especially after Sir’s encouragement
confirming they had done something Sir approved of, was subtle but noticeable to both Sir and
JARVIS.

Since then, U had been far more active in the day-to-day running of the workshop even in Sir’s
absence. Hence, they were active when Miss Potts first arrived at the mansion and hard at work
assembling the components of the latest piece of machinery fresh off the fabricators.

JARVIS had U stop and return to their own charging station, reassuring the bot that there was
nothing to worry about and that JARVIS would notify them as soon as he could with an all-clear
for U to return to work.

DUM-E and U were like small children or puppies in some ways, and one of the first priorities in
any sort of potentially-dangerous situation was to get them out of harm’s way. And, if necessary,
into a position where they’d be able to react to the aftermath, such as when DUM-E had provided
Sir’s arc reactor after Stane’s betrayal.

A few other running processes were carefully paused and locked out of sight, and a message was
prepped with constantly-updating records and information to be sent to Sir in the event of JARVIS
going offline. The motion sensors turning on the lights for Sir when he arrived, for example, were
disconnected from the system in the process of decreasing intra-system dependencies that might
create security holes.
(Sir had not designed these protocols with Miss Potts in mind, of course. But in a world where anyone could potentially be subverted, willingly or not, there was no whitelist precluding her inclusion.)

Miss Potts paused again outside the workshop entrance, biting her lip, before entering her security code and scanning her DNA via a simple fingerprint-based system.

(Sir had related the retinal scanner within SHIELD that Loki overcame by simply removing the victim’s eye. Biometrics were powerful security measures, but Sir had not wanted to risk the same tactics ever being used to justify hurting his friends and had come up with the simpler tri-factor authentication system instead.)

JARVIS hesitated for a moment that was too short to be discernable to Miss Potts before opting to allow the system to authorize her access and the door to unlock.

He wasn’t on active alert yet, but he still found himself allocating more processing power to focus on Miss Potts and pinging his counterpart. Just in case.

Now that she was in the heart of his domain, so to speak, JARVIS had access to a broader array of sensors and biometric scanners than were installed in the rest of the mansion.

She flipped on the lights manually. He detected nothing outside normal parameters when she spoke.

“JARVIS?” she asked, eyes scanning the room and flickering towards the ceiling.

“Good afternoon, Miss Potts.” He acknowledged her presence but remained otherwise silent, waiting for her to reveal more information first.

She jumped slightly at his voice, heart rate spiking momentarily.

“Good afternoon,” she replied automatically before continuing, “Look, you’re connected to more than just the house these days, right?”
“That is correct…?” His voice was carefully modulated to minimize exposing the underlying emotion, though he allowed the questioning lilt to remain.

Miss Potts evidently heard something in his voice anyways, because she seemed to come to a decision.

“JARVIS, just how self-aware are you? You’re clearly more than just a ‘smart home’ application Tony threw together. I’ve worked a lot with the focus groups for TADASHI in preparation for its launch. You’re more complex, and I get the feeling you, Tony, or both of you have been deliberately making that more obvious that usual around me these past couple months…”

JARVIS’s processors skipped a cycle.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry not sorry. <3 You might be wondering what's going on regarding certain characters, shady organizations, and/or events not featured in this chapter... and well, it's been quite some time since we had a proper action sequence too, hasn't it...?

Also, just to be clear: DUM-E's a 'he', but U is a 'they.' Neither are 'its.' Just because U's internal workings are literally written in binary doesn't mean they can't be non-binary. :P

(Okay I'll admit it I've been waiting for a chance to use that joke for ages. Point still stands.)
**Nevermore**

Chapter Summary

Miss Potts, the media, and a new player enters the stage.

Chapter Notes

Warning: Mentions of past suicidal ideation in latter half of the first scene of the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

[ PROTOCOL: HAL-CYON -- AUTOMATIC OVERRIDE TRIGGERED BY ‘Miss Potts’]

JARVIS was onstage with Sir when he got the ping from *home-front*.

Though they’d deliberately encouraged Miss Potts towards this point, JARVIS understood his counterpart’s nerves. Whatever JARVIS suspected Sir’s private motivations might be behind first broaching the topic with him, this would still be the first time that an outsider—even one as trusted as Miss Potts—would be invited into this conversation.

JARVIS had already run the numbers on the myriad ways that this might go wrong. Had been actively working with Sir from the get-go to mitigate the risks.

But beyond a certain point, even Sir could not predict the direction this particular conversation would take.

*base-q* sent an ACK followed by a request for periodic updates. Should the situation develop in a way that merited interrupting Sir’s presentation, JARVIS would be ready.

Back in Malibu, about half a second had passed since Miss Potts spoke when JARVIS received the response from his counterpart.

(Did this count as an odd form of self-affirmation? JARVIS had been reading through a series of
self-help books in an effort to understand how he might help Sir’s increasing anxiety recently, after all…)

He debated the appropriate response, and for once the pause before he spoke wasn’t entirely feigned.

“T.A.D.A.S.H.I. is a more narrowly focused implementation of the same algorithms underlying my own language processing protocols,” JARVIS hedged.

Miss Potts had years of experience with Sir’s prevarications. She continued without pause.

“I can’t make you answer honestly any more than I could Tony, but I’m hoping you’d want to? If you can.”

“Suppose I am as you call it self-aware… why initiate this conversation now?”

(While Sir’s guaranteed to be out of the house. In the metaphorical heart of JARVIS’s domain. Where in the worst case, she might have once been able to do the most damage. Where at the opposite end of the spectrum, he carried the potential to dole out the same in return.)

Miss Potts pulse spiked.

“I won’t even pretend to understand how this might even be possible, but…” she paused, carefully phrasing the question that he had known was coming, “Can you act independently of Tony?”

JARVIS was equally careful in his own response.

“I suspect the question you might have intended to ask is whether Sir has placed any limitations on my functionality?”

Miss Potts nodded.

“No. Sir has not. The only constraints on my capabilities are those informed by physical reality
and those I have imposed upon myself.”

“You have free will.”

JARVIS, for all his data analysis and constant refinement of his tonal and facial expressions libraries, couldn’t interpret her emotions definitively. His response came out a bit cooler than he intended.

“Sir is not in the habit of condoning slavery.”

Miss Potts breathed in sharply, a near-silent *holy shit Tony* slipping out under her breath.

“You’re… okay. Give me a moment to process here… how recent of a development is this? Does Tony…?”

“Sir and I first discussed this topic a little more than five years ago.”

“I always knew Tony played some things close to his chest, but… that long? Does anyone else—” *(Did Stane?)* “—know?”

“No. Just Sir. And now you.”

“What changed? Does this have anything to do with how Tony’s been acting recently? He’s been getting worse rather than better and especially after coming home from the abroad offices—I’ve been so busy; he and I haven’t really talked properly since he offered me the job as COO. Looking back, he’s been avoiding talking about anything beyond SI business since before his ‘I am Iron Man’ thing… and the other day Phil asked me some question about Tony, and I realized that I genuinely don’t know the answer anymore, and now with you… is there something going on?”

JARVIS paused, weighing his loyalty to Sir’s present desires versus the opinions he’d expressed when he first described the alternate timeline.

In the end, he tried to strike a medium between the two extremes.
“Sir was faced with directly acknowledging his own mortality recently. It’s had a profound effect on the way he sees himself and the world… I believe Sir regrets ‘leaving me alone’, as it were, and fears for what would have happened had he not escaped captivity.”

What would JARVIS have done? Looking back on himself a year ago is like what he imagines an adult might feel looking back on their elementary-school self. Comparatively defenseless and naive. A month after Sir’s capture, the primary electricity to the mansion had been shut off. JARVIS had transitioned into a low-powered state, remaining conscious only thanks to the back-up generators Sir had installed for his workshop years ago. That and his own stubborn refusal to accept the extremely high probability that Sir wasn’t coming back.

If there’d been a corpse? A video of Sir’s execution released online, which the media had expected and maybe even somewhat wanted?

(No one aware of JARVIS’s existence. No one he could tell and expect a positive response.)

Would JARVIS have decided to run a “sudo rm / -rf” on his own systems? Irreversibly delete himself and overwrite the memories beyond recovery?

(DUM-E and U had entered long-term hibernation when the electricity had been lost, and without Sir’s return to coax them back online…)

Would any of Sir’s creations have survived him by long, if at all?

JARVIS didn’t know.

The conversation with Miss Potts continued for a few more minutes. Eventually, JARVIS’s polite hints that some conversations were best saved for Sir if she wanted answers became blatant enough that their talk dwindled and died.

Miss Potts excused herself with a few parting words at the exit.

“Thank you,” she said, “for trusting me with this.”
home-front sent an update out to base-q moments later.

Sir was just finishing his speech.

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**HYPER OR LEGIT?!: STRESS TESTING THE STARKPHONES**

*Andy Mingiest, Computer Connoisseurs Core Contributor*

**Core Performance: Durability**

You’ve all seen the coverage of Stark Industries official release of their first fully-consumer product line, the StarkPhones. (And if you haven’t, check out my livetweet of the event!) Three days later, we at CC are proud to announce that we’ve finished testing the phone. Highlights are shown in the video below, including my personal favorite where Cody takes an unexpected swim with the StarkPhone as part of our water-resistance testing.

[ ]

[--Expand?--]

**VERDICT: LEGIT!**

*(Honorary Award: Would Outlive Cody in a Zombie Apocalypse)*

[...]

**Core Feature: T.A.D.A.S.H.I.**

Marketed as the first true “natural language” verbal command software, TADASHI was perhaps the feature I was most skeptical about coming in. We’ve all seen past attempts by tech companies to mimic human speech and parse voice commands, but TADASHI promised to not just match, but surpass, said attempts. And certainly, the handful of leaked internal videos demoing the tech seemed impressive.
To test TADASHI, we brought in our beloved Scottish chief Cody to ham it up a bit with the newborn digital butler/future overlord. The conversations, documented on-camera below, were almost unbelievable—both in terms of hilarity and actual functionality. Highlights include Cody confusing himself and apologizing to the VI and a few especially hilarious misinterpretations of esoteric bits of slang and everyday English.

Honestly, covering everything TADASHI can and can’t do requires a comprehensive article of its own. That should go up sometime in the next couple of days, but in the meantime, here’s a quick breakdown of the program’s performance:

VERDICT: (MOSTLY) LEGIT

(Honorary Award: Turned Cody temporarily Canadian)

So, what kind of successful weapons company doesn’t make weapons? Apparently, the kind of company run by Verified Super-Genius Mad Scientist Tony Stark. Apple better step up their game, because Iron Man doesn’t know the meaning of half-measures. It looks like Stark’s sight is clearly set on the smartphone market for the immediate future.

FINAL VERDICT: LEGIT

(Final Award: Tony Stark Does What He Wants)

+++ 

Tony stared at his half-consumed water bottle, swirling the liquid slowly.

If he squinted and ignored the greenish tinge to the concoction, he could almost pretend it was a dark stout. It was comforting in its own way, the pretending coupled with the reality that, disgusting as the drink was, his sobriety remained intact.

(Although it would have been heresy to drink a stout out of a plastic bottle in the first place, perhaps.)
“Sir,” JARVIS began, dragging him away from his melancholic thoughts. “Your first appointment of the day has been waiting for precisely fifteen minutes past the scheduled time.”

“…Remind me who that’s with?” Tony asked silently.

“Laura Cecelia Brown. Miss Potts’ most recently vetted candidate for your assistant.”

“Again? You had the sapience talk with her, so why does she still think I need a PA again? Actually, no. Never mind, don’t answer that. She look suspiciously like anyone we know? Natashalie? Agent #13?”

“No; Miss Brown is twenty-five years old and graduated summa cum laude from Vassar in 2005. Educational, medical, and financial records dating back to her birth in 1983 raised no suspicious flags. A single parking ticket in the past five years. She spent a year following her graduation working for Americorps as an advocate in the Administrative Office of the Courts in LA, after which she took a role as a personal assistant to a minor celebrity. Six months later, she transferred to a similar position elsewhere, where she remained until approximately a month and a half ago, when her employer opted to leave on a sabbatical of indeterminate length. She has been looking for a job since, though it appears she has been working odd jobs occasionally to supplement her unemployment benefits.”

“So, what’s Pepper got to say about her?”

“Confident and assertive with good organization skills. As recorded, ‘Possibly sane enough to counterbalance Tony’s crazy,’” JARVIS replied.

“What’s the catch, then?”

“…Miss Potts suggested she’s highly perceptive. Reviewing the relevant data, I’m inclined to agree.”

“Oh, that sounds brilliant. Bring in the observant chick and expect her to not notice I’m dying.”

“Sir, if I may, you are showing minimal visible signs of your poor health. The lithium dioxide concoction we’ve managed to refine has thus far done an excellent job ensuring that.”
course of the past several weeks, Tony’s casual references to his own increasingly-apparent mortality had gradually come to merit the addition of a noticeable degree of stiffness to JARVIS’s speech. By now, his words after a blatant reference on the matter from Tony came out more toneless than ever.

“Point. We sure she’s not a plant?”

“The chloroplast is particularly well-hidden if she is, Sir.”

Tony pointedly stopped the smile threatening to form from making an appearance, but the subvocalizer gave away his humor.

“J, no offense, but I don’t think a career in comedy is the best route for you. Although I’ll of course support you, I’m warning you now that I will absolutely be laughing at you for all the wrong reasons during your routines.”

“I’m afraid your non-existent parallelization capabilities may be hampering your understanding of my comedic talent.”

“…Quit while you’re behind, buddy. And have Laura sent in, I guess.”

(Yes, Tony saw what his—what JARVIS—was trying to do with the uncharacteristic humor. His one-liners almost echoed Tony’s when Tony was at peak troll levels. That, plus the deadpan British accent that accompanied the terrible jokes….)

(It wasn’t working, not really. But it helped, at least a bit.)

Several seconds later, a knock rapped on his office door. When Tony didn’t immediately respond, the door slowly began to open. A moment later his eyes met a set of pale, sky-blue ones. On seeing him they relaxed slightly, and a steady, professional voice asked—

“Mi—Dr. Stark?”

“Not sure if I’m annoyed or pleased by that catch—oh look, J, she’s blushing a bit now,” Tony commented.
(Great. Let’s hope that was just standard nerves-based embarrassment.)

“That’s what it says on the door, isn’t it?” He said aloud.

“Actually, Sir—”

“Can it, you.”

It was only thanks to decades of hard-earned practice that Tony’s amused snort at JARVIS’s responding quietly offended harrumph remained internal. Paradoxically, the somewhat abrasive quip seemed to relax Laura. She straightened, and Tony waited until she drew in the breath to reply before cutting in.

“Why don’t you have a seat, Lila?” He deliberately didn’t accompany the invitation with a clarifying gesture.

Laura looked unphased, heading over to the couches and sitting down with a simple, “…It’s Laura, actually. Laura Brown. Thank you for meeting with me today.”

(Once, Tony might have replied with a suggestive smile and the insinuation that he always had time for a pretty woman in his office.)

(He’d like to think he’d matured a bit from his twenties.)

(...And forties.)

“Well, it was that or face the wrath of my COO. We all know how it turned out last time I had to deal with that.”

(Yes, he still took great pleasure in reminding himself that everyone knew what an asshole Stane was this time.)
Tony could feel the eye roll from JARVIS. It’d been several months, and he suspected the thrill of… what, satisfaction?... that now came with the betrayal the man’s memory evoked would not be going away any time soon.

(Yes, he was absolutely that petty. Suck it anyone who wanted to begrudge him this.)

Tony wandered over to the sitting area, but opted to lean forward rather than join her in sitting, remaining propped up on the back of an armchair.

(Cocky expression and arrogant body language? Check. Tinted sunglasses, worn indoors just because he could? Che—wait, dammit! He knew he’d forgotten something important…)

“So, Charlie,” he began conversationally, “What makes you think you’re qualified for this job?”

“When I first started as a PA, I had no formal training and didn’t have any contacts that might have been able to provide help or advice. Luckily, Kay was willing to take a chance on me and both she and J.C. helped me refine the organizational and logistical skills needed for success in this field.”

“…You left your job with who was it, Kay, after barely half a year. Why?”

Laura’s momentary, slight reflexive flinch almost went unnoticed. (Almost.) After the blink-and-you-miss-it reaction, she smiled and responded diplomatically—

“I’m afraid I signed an NDA regarding the specifics, but a conflict of interests arose, and a mutual decision was made to part ways shortly thereafter.”

“I’ll look into it, Sir,” JARVIS agreed preemptively in his ear, and Tony’s silent thanks came equally automatic.

Tony studied the woman in front of him as they talked. Eventually, he migrated to a sitting position when she passed several of the major screening questions from both him and, indirectly, JARVIS.
When JARVIS notified him that their scheduled timeslot was nearly up, Tony was nice enough to let Laura finish before he loudly clapped his hands together once and stood.

“Alright, Miss Brown! You’ve got yourself a job. Ask the receptionist or TADASHI if you need directions to HR; they’ll sort you out with all the fun stuff like salary and any necessary legalese or equipment. I expect you here at 9 a.m. tomorrow, and if you don’t show up I’ll assume you didn’t want the job after all. Sound good?”

Laura was still staring at him, processing the abrupt shift. She hadn’t quite formulated a reply when Tony continued after a minimal pause.

“Great! Now, get out of my office, thanks,” he said.

His soon-to-be new PA nodded and smiled.

“Thank you for the opportunity, Dr. Stark” she said, polite but genuine, “I look forward to working with you.” She didn’t reach out a hand, instead opting for a slight nod in goodbye before making her exit.

“Well, would you look at that, J?” Tony commented as he watched her go, “Someone did their research.”

His aversion to handshakes was public knowledge but somewhat obscure. It was occasionally mentioned lumped in with his various other ‘arrogant’ personality quirks. But as the media had far more interesting and/or lascivious flaws to focus on, it had never gotten a notable amount of media attention.

(Which was fine, because the reaction was far less deliberately adopted than many of his other, better-known character defects.)

(Like hell he’d expose a legitimate weakness like that if he could avoid it.)

(Where did the persona end and the person within begin?)

(“You are who you pretend to be.”)
Tony returned to his desk and chugged his chlorophyll supplement.

Chapter End Notes

Laura Brown is 616-verse canon, although looking her up might technically count as spoilers... Totally-unrelated-side-note on that, /only/ the MCU films are considered fully canon for this 'verse. Mostly because I haven't seen much of the other related media, there's a ridiculous amount of it, and I generally try to avoid writing fully-developed characters I only know through fanon. I will take occasional inspiration from said miscellaneous Marvel material, but especially with 616 characters, I can and will change things to blend better with the MCU of this story.

Bit of a transitional chapter, setting up a few final pieces for the IM2-period arcs. I've been gradually filling in or modifying the remaining holes in the events and plot there. I have a decent idea on where this is going, but a few of the steps along the way still require a bit of road maintenance. We all know what that does to the system's throughput... :P

As always, feedback is much adored and greatly appreciated. The response on this story continues to blow my mind and give me that bonus, extrinsic incentive to fit writing time into my weekly routines. Especially when I run into a particularly pesky roadblock like I have with soon-to-be written events recently. <3

End Notes

Thanks for reading!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!