And Those Myths I Read
by dls

Summary

Tony Stark hoped to be accepted not for his deeds, his name, or his intellect; but for who he is. He found what he's searching for in the most unlikely place: the lesser house at a magical school.

Or: The fic aspiring to make Hufflefluff a proper tag.

On hiatus while I work on IYHTTA.

Notes

Many thanks and hugs to Fiskibein for the adorably fluffy art.

References/Quotes
Title from "Must Be the Love" by BT and Arty featuring Nadia Ali.
See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

So, um, yep. I wrote a thing, a not 5+1 thing.

I had been thinking about what Hogwarts house Tony would be sorted in since writing the scene where Scott introduced FRIDAY to Pottermore in "5 Quotes about Tony Stark and the 1 Quote from Him" and I originally thought Ravenclaw but then soon realized that Tony is totally a Hufflepuff. Which is not to say he doesn't have the traits of the other houses - bravery, intelligence, and ambition - but I think the trait that ultimately defines Tony is his heart.

Since this sort of just happened, I don't have an outline for it like I usually do for my fics, though hints of Team Iron Man are present and will likely be explored further (hence the tag). I'm not all that kind toward the characterization of Team Cap and I don't feel bad about that.

I debated posting an unfinished work, but thought it may just be the motivation I need to keep going and it ends at a good place with no cliffhangers so... ;)

Beta-ed by Arboreal.

Tony did his best to hide his disdain and discomfort as the headmaster unceremoniously dropped the tattered hat atop his head, despite his mother's many reassurance that an enchanted artifact was unlikely to be a carrier for head lice. He was still struggling to wrap his mind around the fact that magic existed and he was, apparently, magical because his mother was a witch.

His parents' separation, however, was accepted with ease and relief.

Howard laughed off the first letter as a clever prank but scowls soon replaced smiles when more appeared. The flurry of envelopes circling their family as Howard raged in disgust and disbelief was a hilarious sight that always induced giggles from mother and son in retrospect, but in that moment, the fury contorting Howard's face had been one of violence. Maria and Tony departed from the Stark manor that night, leaving behind their belongings as they seemingly teleported, apparated, to a smaller but more inviting cottage where Tony promptly decorated the rug with his dinner. What followed was one of the best summers of Tony's life, spending time with his mother and learning about, literally, a new world.

Despite his very thorough reading of Hogwarts: A History, Tony still flinched when a voice sounded in his mind even though he was expecting it.

"Hm. Difficult. Very difficult."

"Nothing new there." He thought back with a snort.

The Sorting Hat continued on without pause. "Brave, so very brave. Bright too. Ah, and quite ambitious."

"Why thank you." Tony preened, soaking up praises that were previously a rarity for him.
It hummed, low and displeased. "No, oh no. I see now. Sacrifice fueled by courage, ingenuity over intelligence, and, what is this, oh. Approval."

Tony bristled, his fists clenched and jaw tight. "Um. What are you talking–"

"Each of the Hogwarts house will do great things with you as one of theirs, but you, Tony Stark, would be best served in Hufflepuff!" The Sorting Hat shouted its last word then the world came flooding back as it was removed from Tony's head.

"Hufflepuff." Tony dazedly mumbled to himself as he was led to the table clothed in yellow and black.

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The next morning, as the flock of owls flew in with the day's mail, Tony received a lovely package from his mother with little mechanical trinkets that Tony had been working on back in New York. They did not compare to the shocked surprise of seeing Jarvis' note, though.

Maria had offered a divorce settlement too favorable for Howard to refuse. She would leave his prized empire untouched in exchange for their personal belongings. Jarvis had quit his job shortly after and was now a guest, along with his wife Ana, at Maria's London townhouse where the house elves were both delighted at new people to serve and horrified at having their jobs stolen by muggles. Jarvis expressed his immense pride in his young master and outlined plans for Tony's Christmas visit.

Tony sniffled and fought back the wave of tears at the eternity between September and December.

The boy sitting next to Tony reached for the pitcher of orange juice and poured both of them a glass. "It gets easier." He said gently. "I'm James, but there are literally fifty of us so most people call me by my last name, Rhodes."

"Tony." He took a sip of his juice, the sweet liquid soothing on his dry throat.

"So, what's that you got there?" Rhodes pointed at the beginning of a mechanical arm with a pancake-laden fork. "A robot or something?"

"Um, yeah. How did you know–"

Rhodes anticipated the question easily. "My parents are muggles. I didn't know I was a–" His voice pitched deep and dramatic. "--wizard until I got my letter."

"Tony." He took a sip of his juice, the sweet liquid soothing on his dry throat.

"That's DUM-E." He enunciated carefully. "He's going to help me with things when I'm done building him."

"Like an assistant?"

"A friend." Tony corrected without thinking and hid his embarrassment by gulping down the remainder of his juice.

"That's much better than an assistant." A new voice commented, it was a girl with auburn hair and a dusting of freckles on her fair cheeks. "I'm Pepper." She refilled Tony's glass then urged him to have some bacon before heading to their first class.
When Christmas holiday came, Tony was surprised to discover that he would actually miss his housemates, friends, over the two-week break.

Rhodes, a third year, had taken Tony under his wings and mediated many incidences where Tony's sarcastic sense of humor or sharply intelligent insights led to unintentional slights. Steve, a scrawny Gryffindor first year who made up for his lack of height with sky high righteousness, confronted Tony on multiple occasion over perceived offenses. The accusations ranged from Tony's disrespect for authority, though the professor had welcomed an alternate line of inquiry regarding transfiguration, to Tony's teasing of Bruce, a quiet Ravenclaw first year who had appreciated the camaraderie.

Bruce and Tony met in the library and recognized each other's brilliance instantly. They became good friends and valued study partners. The Ravenclaw House bore the reputation of intelligence and with it came the demand to maintain and acquire knowledge at a relentless pace. Bruce confided in Tony that the constant competition among his housemates had gone from exhilarating to exhausting after the first month. Tony's fleeting attention span and mercurial interests would have fared poorly in Ravenclaw but those traits were precisely why Bruce valued his company.

Pepper was a first year like Tony, but carried herself with the confident grace and treated Tony with fond exasperation of a seventh year Prefect. She had a protective streak miles wide and valued equality with ferocity. Steve was terrified of her, as he should after his one and only encounter with Pepper's cool wrath.

The Gryffindor boy had, rather belligerently, told Tony to stop distracting Bruce from his studies. Pepper had intervened swiftly and effectively, ignoring Steve's aggressive justice and Tony's baffled indignation, and asked for Bruce's thoughts. Bruce, usually shy, had answered in a clear and strong voice that he appreciated Tony's company. Steve had stalked off, rushing away from Pepper's stern warning against hasty assumptions and actions.

Tony looked forward to sharing that particular story with his mother, Jarvis, and Ana.

The rest of the first year passed without incident, except for Tony's new friendship with a Slytherin second year named Hope.

With his parents' divorce finalized over the winter, Tony returned to school free of the Stark name and bearing his mother's maiden name with pride. Which, unfortunately, attracted some unwanted attention from a few ambitious Slytherins. The Carbonells were a prominent and ancient wizard family, carrying plenty of political and financial capital. Tiberius' fawning gestures of friendship grated on Tony's nerves, but not nearly as repulsive as Natasha's manipulations to belittle Tony's self-esteem in order to have him seek an alliance with her.

Hope interrupted such an attempt, stepping between the two first years and quieting Natasha's latest speech of how even a Hufflepuff could still prove himself given the right circumstances with a vicious glare. Natasha slithered away silently and Hope stayed to outline the routes favored by her housemates so Tony could better avoid them.

Naturally, Tony did not follow her advice and waited for her the next day by the same corner. He batted his lashes and requested her bodyguard services. She rolled her eyes but walked with him.

Hope was ambitious and resourceful, but refused to reduce any person to their surname and its
associated connections. As the only child of a high-ranking government official and expected to enter the political arena, she understood the pain of dealing with those who saw her as a means to an end. Unlike her housemates, who were eager to play at being grown-ups, to forge alliances instead of friendships and to speak of games instead of genuineness, Hope preferred to delay that inevitability for as long as possible.

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"You know, I could be playing you right now." Hope smirked. "Staging the rescue and appealing to your shared sense of struggle." There were shadows in her bright green eyes.

Tony considered this before he shrugged carelessly. "You could be, but you don't want to be." He bumped his shoulder against hers. "That's good enough for me."

Hope's answering smile lightened the darkness in her eyes and crinkled her nose.

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The second year brought the Hufflepuff House the earnest and excitable Peter, who took to Tony as soon as Tony commented on his Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles socks. Pepper and Rhodey - so much better than Rhodes - cooed and awed at their interactions, dabbing at the corners of their eyes with exaggerated movements and false sniffles.

Bruce waved with ink-stained fingers from the Ravenclaw table, bleary-eyed and looking a bit green with fatigue.

Across the great hall, Steve found a new friend in a tall first year whose preferred name was an abbreviation of his middle name. Bucky did a much better job at reining in Steve's impulsive brand of righteousness than any lectures from students or professors, encouraging his friend to weigh all perspectives before jumping into action. Though he would also follow faithfully, until the end of the line, should Steve charge headfirst into a situation.

Hope reported that Natasha had found a new target to recruit, a Gryffindor with keen eyesight and most likely a lucrative future as a seeker. Clint seemed awed at the attention he received and went along with Natasha's plots happily.

It was a quiet year, less tense confusion and more comfortable understanding of this new magical world he now inhabits.

Tony invited his friends to spend a week of their Christmas break with him and was delighted when all of them attended, even Bruce who took a break from endless charts and only brought two trunks of textbooks for the visit.

The news of an attack at Hogwarts came when they were deciding whether Ana or Friday, the Carbonell family house elf, made the best chocolate chip cookies. Maria interrupted their fifth round of cookie sampling, a flimsy excuse to consume more sweets, and wrapped Tony in a tight embrace as she urged the other children to contact their parents.

An ogre, augmented by dark magic that colored its skin bright red and shed all of its hair, had breached Hogwarts. The Red Skull, as it was referred to by the wizard media, was apprehended by Steve, who ignored his Head of the House's order to stay put in a quest to confront the ogre, and Bucky, who followed Steve to dissuade him of this reckless stupidity. The pair was lauded as unexpected heroes in the papers.

Christmas holiday was extended by a week, necessary for the aurors to conduct a thorough
investigation which ended with Professor Zola under arrest. The dangerous scepter found in his room and his crazed ravings were evidence plenty. Zola cackled madly as he was hauled away by aurors, the sharp edges of his manic grin cut across his face like the curved blade on the staff. The Ministry of Magic issued a statement explaining that the professor had unwittingly come across a dark artifact that corrupted his mind and reassuring the public that with the culprit and the weapon in custody, they had nothing to fear.

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Hogwarts welcomed its students with a lavishly decorated hall and scrumptious feast.

Steve and Bucky entered the great hall to enthusiastic cheers from the Gryffindor table, where their tale of bravery and victory was told and retold. They seemed certain that their housemates' impressive act would garner hundreds, if not a thousand, house points and thereby ensuring the House Cup would be theirs. Sam, a second year, was already bragging taunts at the other houses.

Tony desperately wished it was not the case, not only because it would validate Steve's recklessness but also it was wrong to reward a bad behavior that accidentally led to a good outcome. It was a sentiment shared among his housemates.

When Headmaster Fury addressed the school regarding recent events, the students fell silent without any prompting in their eagerness to learn what had occurred and what would happen. He was his typical no-nonsense self, parroting the same facts provided by the Ministry of Magic with an air of impatience and a small hint of weariness.

Deputy Headmistress Hill looked equally stern as she stood. "Some housekeeping business to address before we begin the feast. As I am sure you have heard, two students were involved in the incident over the Christmas holiday. To Mister Steve Rogers, for irresponsible disregard of rules set in place to prevent injuries to oneself and others, fifty points from Gryffindor."

A loud crash sounded.

"To Mister James Barnes, for seeing sense and the excellent use of the stupefy charm, twenty-five points to Gryffindor."

"This isn't right!" Steve cried indignantly. "We did the right thing!"

Deputy Headmistress Hill glanced impassively at him. "You did not, Mister Rogers. You endangered yourself and Mister Barnes. You could have jeopardized the team of aurors searching the school grounds had they come upon the ogre first and could ill afford the distraction of two school children, or given the ogre hostages and leverage had you been taken. Through sheer luck and random chance, you were able to escape unscathed. Luck and chance are not valid reasons to award house points." Her already thin lips pursed angrily, a pale line warning against those who dare cross it.

"We saved the school!"

"Mister Barnes did through quick thinking and quicker reflex, and he was rewarded accordingly." She scowled before easing her expression into one of mild disapproval. "Five points from Gryffindor for rude behavior, mind your manners Mister Rogers."

Steve sputtered but whatever protest was muffled by Bucky’s hand over his mouth.

The feast began shortly after, the mood significantly less jovial, yet Tony felt the knot twisting his insides loosen and he breathed easier.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I want Tony to learn to be cautious with his kindness because not everyone understands or appreciates it; he should save it for the people who do.

Oh, and Steve should stop jumping into other people's business.

Lastly, I've kind of figured out where I want this fic to go and updated the tags accordingly - Nothing Bad Happens and Everything is Good. :)

Tony's third year at Hogwarts began with selecting elective classes. Students were required to add two electives to their schedules, some were recommended for three. Tony was one of those who had been encouraged to take on more but he respectfully declined, citing leisure time as his reason.

Maybe it was a rebellion to Howard's teachings, but Tony hadn't spared his father any thoughts at all.

As it was, Tony simply learned to value relaxation and prioritize self-care. Gone was the need to constantly prove himself, because it was unnecessary when his housemates were less concerned with what he does, can do, or will do, they were far more interested in who he is.

The steady stream of support quietened the nagging insecurity of never enough or always too much. There was comfort in not having to shout to be heard, security in not having to ask to be answered, and worth in not having to shine to be seen. Tony flourished under such care.

Maria noticed.

"You seem happy." She said, brushing a line of kisses along Tony's forehead and breathing him in. The sweet milky smell of an infant was long gone, though Maria still teased Tony occasionally about her cheesecake boy, but she felt the swell of maternal love all the same.

"I am." Tony nodded absently, his ink pen, because quills were simply too low-tech and too out-there for him to bother adapting, scratching noisily against the parchment and plotting out his daily schedule for the upcoming year. He paused then restated the words with awed realization. "I am. I'm happy."

Maria blinked away her tears, along with the pain and regret that colored the first eleven years Tony's childhood. "You are."

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Tony considered Muggle Studies, weighing the benefit of knowing the material against the cost of time spent. Pepper indirectly made the decision for him when she signed up for the course, curious to see how the magical community she now belonged to viewed the non-magical world she had grown up in. Tony ended up taking the class vicariously through her immaculate notes and animated anecdotes.

Care of Magical Creatures was another possibility, until Tony learned all of Gryffindor third years had enrolled in the class. It wasn't worth the constant stress.
Divination was rejected outright.

In the end, Tony settled on Arithmancy and Study of Ancient Runes. Numbers and symbols would always appeal to him, the endless fascination of patterns versus chance.

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The Hogsmeade weekend trips were talked about with much enthusiasm among the third years. Tony was jittery with anticipation since Maria signed the permission slip over the summer, much to the fond exasperation of his friends.

Rhodey alternated between advising on the proper robes for Tony's first visit and teaching him an overly complicated handshake that was supposedly required to gain access to the bathrooms.

Hope smirked when Tony asked for clarifications and chided him on trusting a Slytherin over a Hufflepuff. When Tony frowned and lectured her on stereotypes, she gave him a fierce hug and the recommendation to hop into Zonko's Joke Shop for a surprise. It felt like an actually useful tip until Hope turned pensive and mused about the unpredictable nature of surprises.

Bruce and Pepper listened to Tony's feigned complaints and wild speculations with amused grins and lifted brows. While their excitement did not match Tony's, they did share it and delighted in goading him on. Pepper sarcastically lamenting Tony's decision to forego Divination and Bruce readily offered tea at every gathering.

Tony found his friends immensely annoying and utterly wonderful.

Because the truth was, Tony loved surprises. He could easily find information on Hogsmeade and its shops, but there was no intrigue or amazement in knowing beforehand. A little mystery was good for the soul.

His friends' easy acceptance of his incessant questions and willingness to play along, even successfully riling him up, made warmth bloom from his chest and settle in his body.

Maria promised to visit Tony on his second Hogsmeade trip, wanting him to enjoy the experience with his friends first. She neither confirmed nor denied the information shared by Tony's friends, because she knew her son well and shared their cheerful indulgence of his quirks.

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Hogsmeade was everything Tony thought it would be and more.

Hope joined them at the entrance to the village with a fourth year Hufflepuff who Tony had seen in the common room but no name came to mind.

"Hey." Rhodey greeted. "Have you met Tony? Tony, say hi to Scott."

"I know how to talk to people, Rhodey Patootie." Tony grumbled good-naturedly and waved. "Hi."

During his first week at Hogwarts, Rhodey had taken an interest in introducing Tony to whoever happened to pass by. Rhodey had called it a character-building exercise and Tony had labelled it cruel and unusual embarrassment. In retrospect, though, it helped Tony feel more comfortable and confident in his conversational skills when previously he adhered strictly to the children were meant to be seen, not heard rule Howard enforced firmly.

Tony often wished he could express his gratitude but he suspected no amount of words can ever sum
up how much Rhodey's kindness had meant and had changed.

Bruce confided that the practiced smile on Tony's face when they first met was rather intimidating. Thankfully, the emptiness in Tony's expression was soon replaced with enthusiasm for meticulous notes and a friendship quickly forged between two brilliant minds.

Hope would occasionally teased him about the deliberately lowered pitch of his voice, a habit courtesy of Howard to make his young son appear more mature and intelligent. She would cackled gleefully when Tony squeaked his protests and denials at those slanderous lies.

From the mischievous glint in her eyes, Tony knew Hope was gearing up to tell that absolutely untrue tale yet again so he employed the greatest weapon in his arsenal and turned his pleading and pitiful puppy eyes upon her.

Hope snorted but made a zipping motion across her lips.

Scott glanced between them with a sort of pleased resignation that these people are his company for the day, before his eyes settled on Hope and became anything but resigned.

The group made their way down High Street, chatting happily about the town and the adventures to be found there.

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Honeydukes was, literally, candy land.

Tony and Scott lingered at the store long after their friends had found what sweets they liked and moved on to exploring the town.

Tony was scanning the boxes of Bertie Botts Every Flavoured Beans and scrutinizing their content with a dedicated focus usually only devoted to transfiguration, his favorite subject. He had spent the last half an hour trying to determine which box held the most number of coffee-flavored jelly beans.

Scott was digging through a large bin filled with lollipops. He was convinced there was a pancake flavored lollipop buried somewhere, despite the owner's multiple assurances that they were sold out.

Tony's calculating gaze snagged on one box and he picked it up with a whoop of triumph.

It was echoed by Scott seconds later, as he extracted himself from the bin carefully and without making a mess, which was quite a feat considering the small piles of candy had collected at his shoulders and back in his upside-down position. In his hand, he held up a beige colored lollipop like a trophy.

"Impressive!" Tony whistled.

"Well, I have a nose for these things." Scott wiggled his nose proudly. "My mom used to call me Ant Man." He paused then added hastily. "When I was younger, much much younger."


Scott rolled his eyes and bumped his shoulder against Tony's playfully as they made their way to the front of the store, where an excessively long line waited.

Hope found them when they were a handful of customers away from checkout. Pepper, Rhodey, and Bruce had gotten a table at The Three Broomsticks and sent her to corral them to lunch.
"Look what I found." Scott presented the hard-won lollipop to Hope as one would a bouquet of flowers. His smile soft and shy and smitten. "Your favorite."

Tony made a concentrated effort to focus on something else, to give his friends some privacy for an obviously intimate moment.

Staring straight ahead, Tony saw a boy who was deciding between a box of cauldron cakes and a bag of exploding bonbons. He had shockingly white hair and a green scarf around his neck, likely a Slytherin. A few moments later, he set down the pastries and paid for the rest of his selections, counting out bronze Knuts from a tattered pouch.

Tony frowned, feeling a pang in his chest at the sight of someone forced to give up such simple enjoyments. Despite Howard's many faults, he had provided handsomely for his family and Tony could not recall a time when he ever hesitated on a purchase. When he stepped up to the counter, he grabbed the box of cauldron cakes and added it to his pile as he slid a handful of gold Galleons to the shopkeeper.

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By pure chance, the same boy was peering at the store signs when Tony exited Honeydukes.

"Hey." Tony cleared his throat and waited for him to turn. "You, um, left these on the counter." He held out the pastry box in what he hoped to be a friendly gesture. His other hand clutched at a massive bag containing his other purchases.

The Slytherin boy's brows furrowed in confusion. "Those are not mine. I did not buy them." There was a slight tilt in his voice, an accent Tony couldn't quite place.

A girl approached them, a matching green scarf in sharp contrast with her auburn hair. "Pietro, who is this?"

"I don't know, Wanda." Pietro said.

"Um, I'm Tony."

"What do you want with my brother?" Wanda asked, eye narrowing suspiciously.

"Nothing." Tony took a step back and would have taken another except then Pietro would not be able to accept the box Tony was still offering. "Just wanted to give him these cauldron cakes."

"I did not buy them." Pietro repeated.

"I know." Tony winced. This wasn't how he envisioned it would go. "I saw that and um, got them for you." Wariness was clearly etched across their faces. Tony was officially panicking. "It's not a big deal, you shouldn't have to miss out just because--"

"We're poor?" She snarled out. "You don't get to mock us because you have money."

"I saw that coming." Pietro looked contemplatively at Tony, who was fidgeting uncomfortably. "You did not."

"That's not what I--"

"Back off, Stark." A familiar and much dreaded voice joined them. Steve. The Gryffindor boy had been reticent after the public reprimand last year, but he seemed to rediscover his voice over the
summer holiday along with a few extra inches of height and a bit more strength in his previously frail frame.

Tony glanced back at Honeydukes and wondered what was keeping Scott and Hope.

"Who are you? And do you also come bearing baked goods?" Pietro drawled, sounding infinitely amused and shrugging off his sister's incredulous stare.

"What?" Steve blinked blankly several times before he recovered. "My name is Steve--"

"--and this isn't any of your business." Tony groaned, wishing someone would take the cauldron cakes so he could pinch the bridge of his nose, where a headache was forming.

"It is my business when you're picking on kids, Stark." Steve took a step closer. "Someone has to look out for--"

"I'm not a kid!" Wanda protested.

"We look out for each other, we do not need your help." Pietro glared at Steve before taking the pastry box from Tony. "Thank you for being thoughtful but use some thoughts next time."

Steve sputtered.

Tony gaped.

Wanda opened her mouth, likely to object, but was dragged away by her brother.

Tony and Steve stared at each other awkwardly before Steve shuffled off with a halfheartedly warning against bullying directed at Tony.

When Hope and Scott finally emerged from Honeydukes, giggling and holding hands, Tony practically threw himself at them in his relief.

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At lunch, Tony related the stressful encounter over a large platter of fish and chips they all shared.

Bruce hummed sympathetically. Pepper rubbed soothing circles into his tensed back. Scott couldn't stop grinning despite there was nothing humorous about what happened. Hope was blushing. Rhodey looked thoughtful.

After lunch, Bruce and Pepper headed off to Scrivenshaft's for school supplies while Scott and Hope suddenly felt the desperate need for coffee that demanded a trip to Madam Puddifoot's. Which left Tony with Rhodey, a convenient and likely planned turn of events given the look on Rhodey's face.

"I just wanted to do something nice." Tony said dejectedly. "I didn't mean to offend them."

"I know, Tones." Rhodey sighed. "But you can understand why Wanda was upset, right?"

"Yeah. It's not a good feeling when a stranger points out your problems and fixes them easily." Tony mumbled guiltily. "And it wasn't even a problem for them, it's me who thought it'd be a disaster to miss out on cake and decided to fix it."

"Hey, it's not all bad." Rhodey patted Tony on the back encouragingly. "Pietro took the cakes, so at least he knew you meant well."
"I guess."

"And they both told Steve off, that's definitely something."

Tony snorted at the memory of Steve's dumbfounded expression. "True."

"C'mon, let's check out Zonko's, don't forget to hop!" With that, they set off for the joke shop where hopping into it earned one a piece of candy, which turned out to induce hiccups for five minutes.

Eventually, Tony's mood recovered enough to enjoy the rest of the trip and returned to the castle with multiple packages, most of them gifts.

A wide selection of candies from Honeydukes for the first and second years, with a special bag set aside for Peter. A pair of magnificently appalling socks for Jarvis, knowing full well that the man would humor Tony and don them with only an impassive quirk of his brows. A quill and ink set for Ana, who had mentioned an interest in calligraphy when she complimented Tony's penmanship in her last letter.

The twenty or so chocolate frogs were all for him, though. They were the perfect study snacks, both the sugar rush and the act of capturing escaped frogs helped chase away the lethargy.

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The next day, Pietro found Tony on the Quidditch field.

"I need to work off those cauldron cakes." Pietro smirked. "Want to race?"

"Definitely." Tony grinned. Rhodey was right, it wasn't all bad.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

The Tony & Pepper and Tony & Bruce scenes were inspired by the amazing fanart by Fiskibein. I couldn't help myself.

Loki will make an appearance in the next chapter! He was supposed to in this one but DUM-E demanded the spotlight. Also, I changed the tags a bit since this fic is shaping up to be more friendship-centric and pre-FrostIron. :)

I used to be/still am a bit of a people pleaser and said yes to everything, which actually made me starting to resent my friends for including me in a really messed up way and made me vulnerable to people taking advantage of me. I think Tony has those people pleasing tendencies too, so I wanted to explore that but in a happier and fluffier setting. And even though Howard isn't around anymore, he still did a bit of damage.

Tony's progress on DUM-E, the robot meant to be his friend during a lonely childhood filled with too many expectations and too few excitements, was frustratingly slow. Creating a mechanical construct in a world without electricity was next to impossible. He supposed he could assemble DUM-E at home over the holidays, their London townhouse was wired for electricity, added to ease Jarvis and Ana's transition from the muggle world to the magical world, but Tony wanted to bask in his family's affection as much as possible after spending the majority of the year away. Not to mention hiding away in his room felt too much like Howard sequestering himself in his workshop.

During the school year was the best option, though free time was a scarcity with his full school schedule and busy social life. In addition to the Hogsmeade trips, there were picnics, impromptu Quidditch matches, library study sessions, board games in the common room, and many more events his friends invited him to. Every so often, Tony was struck by how incredible it was that there are people who want to spend time with him, who actively seek out his company, and who are genuinely disappointed when he can't make it.

It was hard to say no, so he did his best to say yes, as long as it won't affect his schoolwork too much.

There had been many afternoons or evenings where Tony wanted to work on smaller parts for DUM-E or downsize the design so DUM-E could be assembled manually only to be called away by a visit to the lake or a game of exploding snaps. He always went willingly and happily, delighting in the adventures had and memories made, but there was always that sniggle of guilt when he returned to his room and glanced at the untouched wirings and unfinished parts.

DUM-E wasn't forgotten, he just wasn't prioritized.

That was the hardest truth to face, because it echoed of Howard's treatment of Tony and his father was the last person he wanted to be.

* It was Pepper who first realized something was amiss.
They were spending a morning lounging in the grass by the Quidditch field, alternating between watching their team practice and casting charms to amuse themselves. Tony had his head cushioned on Pepper's midsection, making idle conversation with the occasional noises from her stomach as it processed breakfast. She tolerated his ridiculousness with a fond hand brushing through Tony's wild brown hair, her own red locks fanning above her like a fiery halo.

Yellow daises dotted the grass around them, courtesy of Tony's Herbivicus charm. He'd plucked a few and scattered them in Pepper's hair as well as tucked one behind his right ear to show their house pride. Tony would have covered the Quidditch field with them except for the clean-up required before the next team arrive for their practice.

A stream of glowing orbs floated from Pepper's wand, summoned by a Lumos Mobilis charm. The orbs were translucent but appeared turquoise, taking on the blue from the sky and the green of the grass. Tony poked at one and grinned when his finger touched nothing but felt warmth. The magic of it all made him dizzy with ideas.

The biggest obstacle in constructing DUM-E was the lack of sufficiently powerful tools. Tony was in decent shape, the constant walking around the castle and the broom races kept him healthy, but he wasn't strong enough to hammer or drill through metal. The electric tools he had brought with him sat uselessly beneath his bed.

But.

If magic could create and contain light, which was a form of energy, then perhaps it wasn't so farfetched that Tony could make a portable power source that functioned like electricity. He would have to do more research and consult a professor or two, but it could work. It could even be self-sustaining. Inspiration flowing through his veins and flooding his senses, his fingers twitched where they were splayed across his abdomen.

A shout of triumph from the Quidditch field interrupted his thoughts and jolted him into a seated position, Tony squinted in the direction of his housemates and let out a cheer of his own when he saw Peter holding up the snitch. He settled back down against Pepper when Peter began his victory dance, a wobbly wiggle that seemed extraordinarily unsafe when one was hovering in the air.

Tony's eyes drifted close as Pepper's fingers threaded through his hair in soothing strokes. "That's nice." He purred.

Pepper hummed amusedly, keeping her movements steady and rhythmic. "What's going on in that head of yours, Tony? You're practically buzzing."

"A moment of pure genius, I think I have a shot at finishing DUM-E." Tony preened. "I can tell you more after I do some research this afternoon." Pepper's hand paused minutely before continuing, which, as the recipient of the hair brushing, Tony noticed immediately and his drowsiness vanished in a second's time. "What's wrong?" His eyes snapped open, alarmed.

"It's nothing, Tony." Pepper said gently. "I was going to see if you'd like to go to Hogsmeade--"

"Oh, I can go with you." Tony forced himself to relax, nothing was wrong. A Hogsmeade trip sounded like fun, he could bring Peter back some more sweets from Honeydukes and his ink supply was running a bit low so a visit to Scrivenshaft's was needed. The research could wait until later and so could DUM-E, he was a pile of loose parts anyway.

A part of him sneered that DUM-E was still a pile of loose parts because of Tony kept waiting, it was the same voice whispering abandoned and neglected whenever Tony caught sight of the faded
blueprint for DUM-E at the bottom of his trunk.

"No, it's fine." Pepper's hand stilled and she sounded confused. "You--"

Irrational dread pooled in Tony's stomach. "It's not fine. I'm going with you." He snapped, wincing as he caught the strident tone in his voice. "Sorry, Pep. I meant I'd be honored to accompany you, my dear friend, on a journey to the fine down of Hogsmeade."

There was a rustle of movement then Tony found himself staring into Pepper's concerned face above him. She had pushed up to a seated position and was studying his expression with intense focus. Whatever she was searching for, she must have found it because she huffed out a sigh and resumed running her hand through his hair. The change of angle meant she was tracing his hairline, cautious not to displace the daisy there, instead of the top of his head.

"Tony, you know you don't have to say yes to everything I, or anyone else, invite you to."

"I know that." Tony replied, a touch of defensiveness tinting his words. If Pepper noticed it, she didn't react. Instead, she kept brushing his hair and spoke with calmed patience. "And you've said no to outings before."

"Yeah."

"So why not to this one?" Her hand stopped again.

There it was, the crux of the problem. Tony didn't feel guilty saying no when he had an essay to write or a project to complete, but it was an entirely different matter when it was something selfish like a hobby, a waste of time. He grimaced when his thoughts took on a distinct Howard-like snarl. "It's just DUM-E, you're more important."

Pepper blinked at him for a few seconds and Tony idly noted that bewilderment did not suit her face. She recovered quickly enough. "Oh Tony. There's no comparison here."

"But--" A sharp tug at his hair cut off his protest.

"If you wanted to work on DUM-E or--" Pepper added when Tony opened his mouth to interject. "--any DUM-E related projects, then you should."

"He's just a hobby." Tony shrugged.

Pepper glared sternly at him. "That's not what I remember, you said he was your friend."

"Well, yeah. But you're my friend too, Pep." Tony argued. "I'm so lucky to have you in my life, you and Rhodey and Hope and Bruce and Peter and Scott, and I'm going to do everything I can to keep you guys."

"We're not going anywhere."

Silence stretched on between them, Tony gnawing on his lips and averting Pepper's increasingly incredulous stare.

"Tony? You know that, right? We're your friends and we are not going anywhere."

"I-- I guess?" Tony ventured, uncertainty edged his face and made him look impossibly young. "I just don't want to disappoint you guys."
"The only way you can disappoint me is if you decided to chase after a troll by yourself." Pepper rolled her eyes. The troll incident was still a popular topic, though the frequency of its reference had decreased to once a week, much to Steve's dismay and Bucky's relief. "You're not going to disappoint me if you wanted some time to work on a project that's important to you because if it's important to you, then it's important to me."

Tony nodded hesitantly. "Okay, so I guess I'll be doing some research this afternoon?"

"Great, I'll bring you back something from Honeydukes." Pepper promised. "I look forward to hearing about your pure genius idea at dinner."

"Okay, Pep."

"And I look forward to meeting your friend, DUM-E, someday soon."

"Me too." A smile bloomed across Tony's face, reflected and multiplied in the glowing orbs hovering above them.
Tony spotted Bruce the moment he stepped into the hushed space of the library.

The Ravenclaw boy had claimed one of the bigger tables for himself and his many books, piled high around him like an academic fort. He was completely entranced in his studies, his purple quill scratching steadily across the parchment. It was a gift from Tony, after learning about Bruce's fondness for the color and catching it in Scrivenshaft's window display in passing. It never ceased to make people do a double-take when they spotted the shy and reserved Bruce wielding such an ostentatious writing instrument, which was the main reason Tony purchased it in the first place. He had meant for it to be a gag gift, to make Bruce laugh then set aside unused. So it was a complete surprise when Bruce accepted it with a giddy grin and a promise to put it to good use.

Which he did.

At every opportunity.

The sight of Bruce scribbling with the brightly colored quill always made Tony feel a sort of bubbling warmth in his chest, happy and pleased that his friend treasured something from him, even if it was trivial and silly.

"Brucie Bear!" Tony greeted as he draped his jacket over one of the chairs. "What're you working on?" He slid into the seat next to his friend, throwing an arm around Bruce's shoulder and leaning in to peer at the notes.

"Ancient Runes." Bruce blinked up owlishly behind his green-rimmed glasses. "Remind me again why I thought this would be a fun class?"

"Because you, my friend, have an amazing sense for patterns and details." Tony cooed, rubbing comforting circles into Bruce's shoulder.

Bruce snorted but did relax somewhat.

They lapsed into companionable silence for a while, Bruce reviewing his notes and Tony stealthily drawing doodles in the margins. There was a smiley face, a cat, and a geometric shape of an inverted triangle inside a circle. Bruce arched an inquiring brow at the last one when he reached over to close the notebook.

"It's a power core." Tony explained, then found himself launching into an animated babble when Bruce gestured for him to explain. "So, what do you think?"

"It is possible." Bruce mused, absently adjusting his glasses. "But first we need do…"

"Research!" Both shouted excitedly, earning a severe look of disapproval from the librarian.
After his talk with Pepper, Tony started to decline some invitations to social events. To his surprise, there wasn't any negative consequences.

Peter wasn't crushed when he passed on a game of pick-up Quidditch. Hope brought him back a shimmering feather from a visit to see the Hippogriff that he missed. Scott was ecstatic when he saw Tony after a missed game of exploding snaps, because Scott could regale Tony with the epic tale of his harrowing victory.

The difference between wanting to keep his friends and knowing they were his to keep was transformative. Tony felt more confident and balanced. By no means did he take his friends for granted, but he didn't fear their rejection or dread their consternation should he decide to spend an afternoon tinkering or reading.

The research for a self-sustaining power source was far more intensive than Tony had anticipated. He was planning to revolutionize the magical world after all. He made some headway delving into the history of elemental charms, which informed the direction of his project, but nothing further. Still, it was more than he had previously and Tony chose to focus on that.

Summer break came and Tony returned home with the incomplete DUM-E in tow. He planned to leave the robot at home for the next school year, the weight of it was both a physical and emotional one to carry.

Jarvis prepared a deliciously rich dinner of pasta and his family listened raptly to Tony's enthusiastic explanation of his magical power core idea, with Ana occasionally reminding him to *swallow your food then talk*. By the end of the meal, everyone looked suitably impressed and excited.
"It sounds to be a promising project, young Sir." Jarvis commented, remaining in his seat so Friday could clear the table. They seemed to have come to an agreement regarding the household chores. "Perhaps an assistant would be beneficial for your work? Or better, yet, a friend?"

"Bruce is helping with the research." Tony replied, attention mostly on the slice of chocolate cake topped with fresh strawberries in front of him.

"Mr. Banner has his own studies to tend to." Ana pointed out casually. "What about DUM-E?"

"He's not done yet." Tony frowned, shoving a large bite of cake into his mouth and sheepishly accepting the glass of milk Ana pushed his way.

"Well, you do have a whole summer ahead." Maria suggested. "I'd love to see my bambino at work."

"Mom!" Tony whined at the nickname, blushing faintly.

"I have missed working with machines." Jarvis said wistfully, narrowing his eyes when Tony shot him a skeptical look. "I'll have you know, young Sir, that I built my first car."

"He did, it was a thing of beauty." Ana added, smiling at her husband sweetly. "I'm happy to provide cakes and other baked goods as motivation."

Tony could only nod, overwhelmed by and disbelieving of his family's willingness to support his pursuits.

It wasn't until later that night did a thought occur to him. Howard removed himself from his family by choice and Tony would never make that mistake. *He was nothing like his father.*
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Surprise update! I've plotted out the rest of this fic, it should be wrapped up in 3 more chapters...provided no one gets chatty or demands a scene.

For this fic, DUM-E is only about half the size of the MCU version.

Jotun! Loki makes his entrance! Yay!

Tony returned for his fourth year with DUM-E towing his trunks. The robot merrily beeped and booped across Platform 9¾, scanning the crowds of families and clutching at Tony's robe with his arm.

With linked arms, Maria escorted her son to the train and placed a gentle kiss on his forehead. "I'll see you soon, bambino."

"Can't wait." Tony replied, flushing a bit at the nickname. He was leaning forward to pull his mother in for a hug when he felt resistance at his back. "DUM-E, let go!"

DUM-E whirred a whine but loosened his grip.

Maria embraced her son tightly. "I love you, be happy."

"I love you." Tony held on just as fiercely. "And I am."

*

DUM-E was considered a pet, thus allowing him to accompanying Tony at Hogwarts, after an extensive exemption was filed. Maria had handled the paperwork with her usual efficient grace. Tony had drafted a twenty-page supporting document detailing the history of artificial intelligence and robotic advancement for Headmaster Fury, which he strongly suspected the older wizard did not even read. The smudge of motor oil that glued pages six and seven together was still in place. At least his friends thought it was an entertaining read, particularly the cinematic examples and excerpts. Plans were made to watch the Terminator series over Christmas break.

There was, understandably, a bit of commotion when DUM-E strolled down the hallway aboard the Hogwarts Express. The staff had been briefed on this unconventional pet situation but the students had not. Whispers trailed their every move.

Speculations flew wildly. Many guessed it was a muggle-born student in disguise, having learned of the Halloween customs that muggles practiced, DUM-E's awareness of his surroundings certainly lend credence to that theory. Some thought it was a fashionable American-styled cart, with the attached wheels for easy maneuvering and playful sounds for amusement. Others knew it to be a robot but dismissed it as an elaborately complicated toy. A few thought of Tony's previous last name and his estranged father, and wondered if it were a gift from the renowned inventor Howard Stark who might be attempting reconciliation; those were promptly shut down by an impressively intimidating Hope.
Inside the train compartment, DUM-E spun in circles happily and preened at the attention from Pepper, Rhodey, and Scott.

There was some gentle teasing about the name, to which Tony defended by listing his other ideas such as U and Butterfingers. He squawked indignantly when Pepper fondly forbade him from ever naming another being without consulting her first. Rhodey and Scott started a game of three-way catch with DUM-E, tossing around an ever-growing ball of foil made of Exploding Bon Bon wrappers. DUM-E was enthralled by the bright orange color.

A loud thud followed by a pained yelp made them glance at the closed door.

"Peter, is that you?" Rhodey called out, with a grin on his face and a shake of his head. The Hufflepuff seeker's fast twitch movements didn't always sync up with his thought process.

"Yeah." Peter had one hand rubbing at his nose and when he opened the door. "My brain said it's closed but my face didn't get that memo."

DUM-E made a concerned click with his claw.

"Is this him?" Peter was practically bouncing. "It's him, isn't it? I can't believe it, I mean, I can because he's here but it's just--" He threw both hands up as one would to fling confetti. "Wow!"

Scott snorted at Peter's antics, entirely forgetting he had a similar reaction upon meeting DUM-E, which Rhodey pointed out immediately. Pepper watched them bemusedly as she sorted through her box of Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans, setting aside the coffee-flavored ones for Tony and sneaking in a few sausage-flavored ones just because she could. Tony made the most hilarious face when he bit into those.

"I'd have DUM-E give you a high five but I don't want you to pass--" The sharp sound of a throat clearing interrupted what Tony was going to say.

"Excuse me, you're blocking the hallway." Steve glared at Peter. The Gryffindor boy, who must have hit another growth spurt over the summer, gaining another feet in height and widening his frame with new muscles, towered over Peter.

"Whoa, is that robot?" Bucky exclaimed, peeking over Steve's shoulder. "Awesome!"

"Sorry about that." Peter shuffled forward to squeeze into the already packed compartment. His efforts made more difficult because DUM-E thought Peter was coming to greet him and rolled forward, effectively blocking the path.

"What's the hold up? Oh hey, cool robot." Clint, the Gryffindor seeker, looked over Steve's other shoulder. "Hi Peter!" The two seekers were bitter rivals on the Quidditch field but were almost-friends off of it.

Peter waved at Clint awkwardly, one foot hovering in the air with nowhere to land given DUM-E wide base.

"Come back here, DUM-E. Give Peter some room." Tony called out, giving DUM-E a high five when the robot wheeled back obediently. "This is DUM-E, um, Doubtfully Useful Machine, version E. I built him." Tony explained, smiling at Bucky and Clint while ignoring the frown on Steve's face.

"Show off." Steve muttered, loudly, and charged through the opening made available by Peter stepping into the compartment. "C'mon, Bucky."
"He's really cool, and, um, sorry." Bucky said sheepishly and scurried after Steve.

Clint lingered. "Why is he doubtfully useful?"

"Um." Tony stammered. "I meant, doubly useful."

"Uh-huh." Clint narrowed his eye but the twitch at the corners of his lips undermined the shrewdly assessing look. "Well, it was nice to meet you, DUM-E. I have to run, Tasha doesn't like waiting." He hurried down the hallway with a hasty goodbye.

"Tasha?" Tony puzzled.

Pepper arched an eyebrow. "Natasha Romanoff?"

"Yeah, but he's the only one who can call her that." Peter supplied helpfully.

The group took a moment to process this new information.

"Well, Hope did say Natasha is more, er, mellow these days. Lots of little smiles and all that." Scott finally said with a shrug.

"Smiles, huh?" Rhodey bumped his shoulder against Scott's. "Like the one on your face right now?"

"Well, yeah." Scott beamed. "She makes me happy."

"And you make her happy too?" Tony asked, pushing back his shoulders and sticking out his elbows to appear bigger and more intimidating. With limited success. "Because as much as I like you, I like Hope more."

"I like you more too, Tony." Hope's voice sounded amused, touched, and nearby. "And yes, Scott here, when he's not being an idiot, makes me very happy. Hey, DUM-E."

DUM-E beeped and clicked his claw in greeting.

"Hi Hope." Scott stood up, blushing lightly and grinning brightly. "Would you like to sit down?"

"No, thank you." Hope said, then quickly added when Scott's face fell. "I'm on my way to say hello to some friends and thought you'd like to meet them?"

"Oh. Oh! Of course!" Scott climbed over Rhodey, leaped over DUM-E, and was next to Hope in one in a blink of an eye. "I'd love to."

"See you at the feast." Hope waved. "Great job, Tony!"

"Thanks Hope!"

A chorus of good-byes followed Tony's reply.

Peter sat down in the spot Scott vacated with a sigh of relief. "Hi DUM-E." He cooed. "It's pretty cool that you're a doubly useful machine."

"Doubtfully useful machine." Tony corrected.

DUM-E emitted a low-pitched whirring of woe, earning a sympathetic pat from Pepper.

"I don't believe that, he's great." Pepper said kindly. "Maybe you need a snack, you get cranky when
your blood sugar gets low."

Rhodey nodded in agreement. "You do get hangry, Tones."

With a joyful boop, DUM-E picked up a bag of ever-expanding cotton candy with great enthusiasm and too forceful of a grip. The bag exploded with a pop. Its content coated Tony in a fluffy foam.

Pepper hiccupped with giggles while Rhodey and Peter collapsed into a heap of snickering mess.

Tony scowled ineffectually through the layer of sugary froth. "DUM-E, you're a tragedy."

*

"The Triwizard Tournament has a long and illustrative history of danger, dismemberment, and death." Headmaster Fury announced ominously as soon as all the students were seated at their respective tables.

The Great Hall fell silent with rapt attention and anticipation only achievable by the promise of peril.

"As such, it has been discontinued."

A chorus of groans sounded from each of the houses.

"However, inter-school interactions are vital for facilitating collaborations, promoting diversity, and strengthening the wizarding community. Therefore, this event has been revived for this year—" With a wave of his wand and a muttered Sonorus, Headmaster Fury continued at an amplified volume over the raucous cheers. "—with several crucial modifications in place, chiefly, there will be no champions, no tasks, and no trophy."

The students practically wilted from the repeated disappointment, which went unnoticed by Headmaster Fury while Deputy Headmistress Hill simply looked amused.

"Students from Asgard Academy of Magic and SHIELD Institute will be our respected guests for the year. They will join in our studies, share our meals, and learn from us as we learn from them. They are due to arrive in a month's time." Headmaster Fury finished with a sharp nod. The students responded with tentative applause, uncertain if their excitement would be dashed quickly again.

Plates of roasted meats, buttered rolls, and glazed vegetables appeared on the table. The mouthwatering food did not hold its usual appeal for most of the students, who were either busy speculating about the two visiting schools or retelling the gruesome tales of past tournaments.

Tony tasted none of the delicious richness of his dinner, concentrating on filtering through the chatter around him for information about the other two schools.

The SHIELD Institute, located in New York City, hid in plain sight among the muggles through clever environmental engineering and cloaking technology. Its academic focus veered toward the scientific, explaining magic through methodical inquiries and fringe theories known but generally unaccepted by muggles. Also, Director Coulson was rumored to be a zombie.

The Asgard Academy of Magic was on another realm and only accessible through a portal called the Bifrost. The Odinsons served as co-administers of the academy, a husband and wife team with a godly understanding of harnessing the most primal aspects of magic through use of artifacts and weaponry. Gossip hinted at a family feud among the Odinsons and their two sons, but it was unsubstantiated.
Later that night, Tony buzzed with excitement as he shared what he'd learned with DUM-E long after his dorm mates had gone to sleep. DUM-E beeped in response through the first five times of Tony's animated retelling, then the robot promptly pulled the covers over Tony's head.

"Hey, what's that for?" Tony whined, pushing the blanket off of his face only to have it covered again. "DUM-E!"

A series of dings mimicking the notes of a lullaby sounded.

"Are you telling me to go to bed?" Tony narrowed his eyes in suspicion then found them drifting close when he realized how tired he felt. "Did Jarvis put you up to this?" Jarvis had been chatting rather secretively with DUM-E before they departed for King's Cross Station.

DUM-E whirred quietly in affirmation to both questions, tucking the corners securely around Tony.

"This is what I get for building a learning system." Tony groused through a yawn. "Good boy." DUM-E's happy chirp was the last thing he heard before falling into the welcoming arms of sleep.

*
The next weeks passed in a blur, each of Tony's professors began the year with no grace periods and dived headfirst into O.W.L.'s preparations. Even with only two elective courses, he had again declined to add a third, it was still nearly three weeks after the semester began did Tony finally have a free afternoon for research.

Tony was in the library with DUM-E. The robot helpfully carted the books to their table. Tony was scanning the shelf when he heard a thud and a sad whine. "I'm renaming you Butterfingers!" He called out, assuming DUM-E had dropped the tome.

"Bucky Butterfingers does have a certain ring to it." A new voice replied. "But I think I'll pass."

Startled, hadn't heard anyone else in this section of the library, Tony hurried back to his bot. There had been a lot of questions about DUM-E and not all of them worded kindly, few people knew DUM-E was a learning robot and therefore understood what was said about him. Their carelessness had caused many dejected beeps and pitifully drooped arm.

Tony breathed a sigh of relieve when he found DUM-E clutching a book in his claw and squeaking inquiringly at a Gryffindor boy, who was smiling up reassuringly at DUM-E and gathering his scattered notes without looking.

After giving DUM-E an assuring pat and directing the bot back to their table, Tony helped pick up the rest of the papers. "Here you go, Bucky Butterfingers."

"Thanks, but just Bucky is fine." He peered at DUM-E nervously. "Did you really build that robot?"

"Yes." Tony fought to keep his voice even though he bristled internally at the question.

"That's so cool!" Bucky gasped. "Did you use muggle tools like wrenches and screwdrivers?"

"Screwdrivers." Tony corrected automatically, blinking as he struggled to understand what was happening. It would appear that he misread Bucky's star-struck awe as unfriendly skepticism.

"Screwdrivers." Bucky repeated reverently. "How did–"

"Bucky!" Steve barreled down the aisle, coming to an abrupt stop next to his friend. "What did he do?"

Tony rolled his eyes at the typical presumptuousness of Steve's question. The Gryffindor boy had judged Tony to be a bombastic bully since their first meeting. It was the second day of their first year, before potions class. Tony had been prattling on about his life as a muggle, talking up the extravagant lifestyle for dramatic effects. Steve had asked snidely what Tony would be without his riches. Never one to back down, Tony had replied genius, engineer, wizard, smart ass. It had escalated from there, with Steve challenging Tony to a duel, and only ended somewhat peacefully when the professor walked in and promptly docked points from both houses for their behaviors.

While Tony admitted he didn't make the best first impression, Steve's continued dislike was disproportional.

"Nothing." Bucky answered, frowning a little. "I was–"

"Well, that's a first. C'mon, we'll be late for practice." Steve led him away with a steady hand on Bucky's back.

"Bye bye, Bucky Butterfingers!" Tony called out cheerfully, winking at Steve's glare and Bucky's
snort. He faintly heard Bucky's protest but paid it no mind. His time was precious and Steve wasn't worth any of it.

*

Headmaster Fury had just finished making the announcement of Asgard Academy and SHIELD Institute's imminent arrival when a large aircraft suddenly materialized above the Great Lake. It shimmered into existence with a rumble.

Students crowded to the windows, tracking the aircraft as it flew over the water and left a trail of rippling waves behind. They all jumped when a thunderous crash landed behind them in the Great Hall. Alarmed eyes squinted shut against the rushing stream of colorful lights and opened to find a group of teens in leather armor and hooded capes standing regally behind a woman in a gown of flowing gold. Attention shifted to SHIELD's aircraft as it came closer to the castle, bending the trees with the force of its engines.

While everyone else was watching the aircraft's landing and waiting anxiously for the passengers to exit, Tony's eyes remained fixed on the visitors from Asgard. Technology was of little interest to him compared with the sheer impossibility of the Bifrost. He was the first to see the faces of the Asgardian students when one by one, they pushed back their hoods.

"Whoa." Tony exclaimed, unable to suppress his surprise and volume. "You're blue!" His words echoed in the silent room, causing the other students to turn back with their own curious glances and exclamations.

A pair of ruby-red eyes found Tony in the crowd with eerie efficiency, tapered with a mixture of anger and annoyance.

Tony gulped. He really was awful at first impressions.
Chapter 5

Hooray an update! Not entirely happy with this chapter because this was one of those rare moments where I had to make myself write because my head space lately wasn't a fluffy place at all. But I knew I'd feel better once I start thinking Hufflefluff thoughts - and I do, so yay for that!

I had planned for Tony to wallow in angst/guilt for a bit longer, but then I remembered that this is a fic where everything is good so I moved a few things around.

Steve's backstory will be in the next chapter, as will a fluffy picnic by the lake. Getting close to wrapping it up. :)

Tony tried to rectify his mistake right away, one foot already lifting to plant itself in front the other and sending the sincerest wordless apology he could with a pleading look.

The blue guy -Tony really needed to find out his name or at least come up with something less offensive - rolled his eyes then pulled the hood over his face. A move promptly copied by the other Asgardian students in a show of solidarity.

Tony winced at the implications of that inherently defensive act.

The double doors burst open with a flurry of activity and the group from SHIELD Institute marched in. Dressed in casual muggle clothing, a mixture of jeans and khakis with button-ups and t-shirts, the SHIELD students looked, for lack of a better word, ordinary. Which was likely the goal of their wardrobe choice. An expressionless man in a nondescript black suit was the last to enter and moved to the front of the pack with confident steps, the students parting away to clear path.

What followed was a whirlwind organized chaos as Headmaster Fury ordered his charges to return to their respective tables silently, with a glare aimed at Tony, so their visitors could take their seats at the specially-prepare tables set up at the front of the Great Hall with no delays nor interruptions.

Reluctantly, Tony trudged back to the Hufflepuff table and plopped down next to Rhodey with a long-suffering groan. He felt Deputy Headmistress Hill glower at the noise and huddled closer to his friend for support.

Pepper tugged on his hair in reprimand before ruffling it affectionately, Tony heard her fond sigh followed by a reminder to think first before she released his hair with a gentle pat.

The Asgardians removed their cloaks before taking their seats and Tony, who had been watching them attentively, was startled to see only pale or tanned complexions present. He was still gaping at the impassive faces when Headmaster Fury introduced Director Coulson and Vice Principal Odinson, his mind reeling at what he was not seeing.

"Where did he go?" Tony whispered, lost in the utter confusion threatening to overwhelm him.

"It's probably a cosmetic charm to change his skin color." Scott leaned across the table. "Hope does that sometimes." He said in the manner of a man divulging a great secret.
Peter made exaggerated kissing sounds at Scott, which caused the older boy to scowl playfully in return.

"I guess it's possible but it'd require a lot of practice. What do you think, Tony?" Pepper tilted her head in contemplation.

Tony nodded absently, only dimly aware of the conversation around him. There was a pit in his stomach, heavy and cold, when he thought about his careless words causing a complete stranger to alter his appearance. He felt sick with shame.

* 

Instead of approaching the Asgardians after the feast like he had wanted to, Tony heeded Pepper's advice to give them a chance to settle in first. The early evening hours were deemed the best time frame, allowing the afternoon for unpacking and a chance to extend an invitation to join them at the Hufflepuff table for dinner.

With the exception of the Welcoming Feast, the visiting students were free to sit at whichever table they choose as part of the effort to promote interschool relations. They would also be attending classes with Hogwarts students of the same year, studying subject most closely resembling the coursework they had at their respective schools. For example, *Potions* was called *Chemistry* at SHIELD Institute and *Alchemy* at Asgard Academy.

Tony lied sprawled atop the duvet on his bed, fingers twitching and tapping in a futile effort to track and perhaps accelerated the passing of time. Waiting was always the worst part.

DUM-E beeped in concern, extending a claw to the ticklish spot on Tony's flank. The robot had mistakenly interpreted Tony's involuntary giggles as genuine happiness, which Tony didn't have the heart to correct. So now DUM-E employed this technique whenever Tony appeared troubled.

It worked like a charm.

Tony shot up into a seated position, wrapping his arms across his midsection. "DUM-E!" There was a squeaky chuckle in his voice.

DUM-E clicked his claw slowly, as if applauding himself on a job well done.

"Okay, okay." Tony grumbled halfheartedly. "I'll go to the library or something, alright?" He slipped his shoes on. "And for the record, I wasn't sulking."

DUM-E tilted his camera skeptically.

* 

The library was quiet and empty on a sunny afternoon.

After seeing but not reading the same line of text for the fifth time, Tony groaned and dropped his head to the table. The thud echoed in the open space. Wanting to vent his frustration, he repeated the movement several more times and would have kept going if not for the sound of a throat clearing.

Apparently, the library was quiet and *nearly* empty.

Tony kept his nose pressed against the wooden surface, feeling the telltale mortified heat in his cheeks, and his arms flailed out to shove his notes and books into a haphazard pile. He did not have the capacity to deal with one more thing. Once gathered, he lifted his face just long enough to
establish eye contact, catching a flash of green, and mumbled out an apology before scurrying out of the library with sheets of paper obscuring his line of sight. The door frame rammed into his shoulder and Tony yelped indignantly, hearing a bark of laughter behind him as he pivoted to regain his balance.

Scott and Hope were in the hallway, hands entwined and identical looks of startled amusement on their faces as they watched Tony stumble out of the library with a pile of barely contained notes and books.

"Tell me you haven't verbally vomited on the librarian and are fleeing now the scene." Hope teased. "You're only allowed one a week and you've used that up already."

Tony tensed, the flash of hurt sharp against the anxious guilt already eating away at him.

"She didn't mean it like that." Scott explained hurriedly, picking up on Tony's unease and showing more perceptiveness than Tony had given him credit for. "She's just trying to lighten the mood, maybe make you laugh about it a little."

Beside Scott, Hope shifted sheepishly. "Too soon?"

"Yeah." Tony didn't relax fully but some of the tightness faded from his frame. Maybe this would become another funny story years down the line, but at the moment, all he felt was this feeling that made his head throb, chest clench, and stomach drop.

Hope winced. "Sorry."

Scott pulled her in for a brief hug, brushing a kiss on the side of her head.

"It's okay." Tony managed a weak smile. "I'm sure I'll find it hilarious in like a decade or ten."

* 

The Asgardians had constructed an impressive campsite at the edge of Hogwarts' school grounds. The golden tents reflected the fading afternoon sun and bathed the field in light. Even the Forbidden Forest seemed brighter and more welcoming in the glow.

Tony wished for his sunglasses, squinting as he made his way to the first person he saw. A lanky boy with dark hair leaning against a tree with his eyes closed. "Um, hello."

Vividly green eyes snapped open and scanned Tony with an enigmatic arch of fine brows. "Hello."

"I, um." Tony inhaled deeply, commanding his jittery nerves to behave. "Can I ask you a question?"

The boy shrugged. "I don't know, can you?"

Tony blinked, then his eyes narrowed. "May I ask you a question?"

"Why yes, you may." The words were said in a tone of smug benevolence.

Tony's lips tugged upward at the snark. A kindred spirit. "I kind of, sort of, most definitely put my foot in my mouth at the feast today—"

"I haven't the faintest idea of what you speak. Whatever happened at the welcoming feast today?" Green eyes widened in seemingly genuine confusion, if not for the intentional emphasis placed on a specific word.
There was a challenge there, and Tony supposed it was warranted. His behavior had not been welcoming and this boy must be close with the Blue Guy to be so protective. "Like I said, I put my foot in my mouth—"

"What an apt, though disgusting, phrase."

Tony barreled on, there was an urgency to say what he came to say. Even if it wasn't to the intended recipient. "—and made a thoughtless comment about someone I've never met. Which led to this person, who, again, I've never met, in my life, to change his appearance to avoid more idiots calling attention to it." He rubbed a hand over his jaw. "I shouldn't have done that. It, it wasn't right. He should feel comfortable in his own skin and he's not hurting anyone being blue. So I'd like to find him and apologize."

A moment of silence as the other boy considered Tony's words. He shook his head.

Tony's heart dropped to his feet.

"I did not hear a question."

Tony huffed out an exasperated laugh. Briefly, he wondered if this was how Pepper and Rhodey felt. "Can you help me find him?"

"No."

"What is it with you and semantics?" Tony rolled his eyes. "Will you help me find him?"

"Words have power, as I am sure you have learned today." The boy said solemnly, pinning Tony with a meaningful stare.

Tony nodded guiltily.

"As for your question, the answer is still no."

"Why?" Tony hadn't meant for the whine to enter his voice but it would seem today was a day for things he hadn't meant to happen to, well, happen.

"Because." He straightened from his slouched position, standing nearly half-a-foot taller than Tony. "You need not any help for you have found me." Crimson bled into emerald and blue traveled over pale skin. "I am Loki of Asgard and Jotunheim."

*

Loki's story was at once complicated and straightforward. It was told in the span of minutes, an inadequate length of time to cover a life's story.

Raised in the Odinson household, Loki had grown up believing himself to be Odin and Frigga's son and Thor's brother. Until the year of his eleventh birthday. It was Asgardian custom for all children of age to attend a public ceremony for their magical aptitudes to be evaluated. The ritual was simple. The children would be taken to the armory, where countless magical artifacts gathered dust in disuse until the rightful wielder comes along. The relics selected their owners, granting them the gift of magic.

Thor had gone the year before, Mjolnir had practically flew into his hand with a thunderous boom. The armory was silent and still when Loki stepped within its doors and remained eerily so as the
minutes ticked by.

Murmurs rippled outward from the gathered crowd.

"Loki." Frigga called, voice tight with something more than worry. "You are our son, and we your family."

Loki had thought she meant to offer him comfort and wrapped the words around his heart like armor. It would need some protection from the bruised ache and tearing pain of not worthy. When he turned to join his family, he was greeted with startled gasps and shocked exclamations. He was blue.

Once they were out of the prying, though well-meaning, eyes and in the privacy of their home, Odin explained Loki's origins.

The Odinsons had found Loki, abandoned, and took him in as their own. Loki's skin had faded from cerulean to alabaster as soon as Odin lifted him from the ground. Whether it was the result of self-preservation instincts or influences from Odin's Gungnir remained a mystery.

Loki was Jotun, a race capable of manipulating magic without the aid of an object. They drew their powers from their surroundings and in less experienced mages, the reverse was a possibility. Hence Loki's unwitting transformation and reveal during the ceremony. The artifacts had called to him, beckoning his true self forward.

Despite few very difficult years, the Odinsons had managed to regain some sort of equilibrium and Loki learned to control his magic and its manifestations. It was not his family that had brought him back from the brink of self-exile, tormented by questions of identity and lies of betrayal, but the realm and its people. The Asgardians, who had endured Loki's elaborate pranks and applauded his accomplishments, knew him as one of their own and could not, would not, un-know that.

"Why tell me this?" Tony finally asked, when Loki grew quiet. "Why forgive me and trust me with this?"

"You believed I should be comfortable in my own skin." Loki stared resolutely ahead as they made their way to the castle for dinner. "Without ever hearing my words or witnessing my deeds. It was a kindness I had not known possible. I believe your words carried no malice and it is easy to forgive such a blunder."

"Oh." Tony ran a hand through his windblown hair, unsure what to say in response. "Um, thanks."

"You're welcome."

They walked in companionable silence, the ground changing from grassy field to paved stone as they entered the courtyard.

Tony glanced up. "So, today. Was it Hogwarts?"

"Impressive." Loki nodded. "Ancient and powerful magic courses through the walls of your castle, it called to me."

"Don't sound so surprised, I'm a genius." Tony pouted.

"I find eating one's foot to be a poor demonstration of intelligence." Loki lifted a brow in disbelief. "Neither is slamming one's head against a table, nor running into a door frame."

Tony choked on his saliva and turned an alarming shade of red, flushing from both the mortification
Loki patted him soothingly on the back. "You left some pages behind, first in your haste then from your collision." Green eyes locked on brown, dancing with intrigue. "I am quite intrigued by your ambition to construct a magical power core. It is a brilliant idea."

"Genius." Tony croaked then cleared his throat to get rid of the hoarseness in his voice. "I told you, I'm a genius." He smiled winningly, eyes crinkling at the corners.

"Saying something repeatedly does not make it true." Loki smirked, his hand stayed between Tony's shoulder blades, a gentle pressure urging him forward. Toward something wonderful and new. "You will have to show me."

"Oh, I will." Tony promised.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Beta-ed by totallynotevil.

Fun fact! I almost left this fic where it was because the word count was at 12,345, which my OCD tendencies greatly appreciated lol. Also, I'm upping the chapter count because I'm not ready to let these Hufflefluffs go...and because I'm incapable of following my own outlines. ;)

There was a sort of tradition among their group of friends. The first Sunday of each month was decreed the official picnic day. They would gather together by the Great Lake, sharing food prepared by the Hogwarts elves and trading treats from Hogsmeade. It was a time to give each other updates of their weeks and advice, when requested, on any issues one of them had encountered. The suggestions given were only sometimes helpful but always appreciated, for either a good laugh or actual utility.

No one knew precisely when this scheduled meeting of theirs had started, though most suspected either Pepper or Hope. Everyone made their best efforts to attend, even when the academic work load picked up for the older students as they began preparations for the O.W.L. exams.

Talks of the future featured frequently into their conversations, which made Tony pout in a legitimately pitiful way instead of his usual puppy eyes to get the others to trade him their coffee-flavored jelly beans. Rhodey, who would be graduating next year, sighed with exaggerated resignation and said he could try to visit them in Hogsmeade periodically if they wouldn't mind switching up the location once in a while. Scott and Hope, fifth years with two years left at Hogwarts, seconded that suggestion.

Change didn't seem so frightening when Tony knew his people would always stay constants in his life.

*

The Sunday after the Triwizard Tournament had officially begun, some new faces showed up at their gathering.

Jane was a fourth year at SHIELD Institute, brown eyes sparkling with wit and warmth. Bruce invited her to join them, the two had apparently bonded over correcting Justin's disastrous potion accident. The reckless Slytherin fourth year took liberties with the strict directions outlined and decided to add a bit of flair when he tossed a handful of African Sea Salt into the mixture instead of a dash. They also shared a passionate preference for the metric system of measurement over the imperial.

Pepper met Darcy by hilarious happenstance. Darcy, also a SHIELD fourth year, was shouting a half-hearted threat of pepper spray at an Asgardian heathen whose concept of chivalry was closer to chauvinism. They had been fighting over whether Darcy could open the door by herself when Pepper walked by and answered instinctively upon hearing her name.
Thor was Rhodey's guest, the Asgardian sixth year could only stay for a short while due to a scheduled Floo Network call with his father. He headed straight for Tony and offered the most enthusiastic handshake Tony had ever received.

"Friend Tony!" Thor boomed. "Friend Rhodes has informed me of your regrets over your thoughtless actions, a plight I share the utmost sympathy with. I want you to know that I, too, am familiar with the taste of feet in my mouth."

Tony blinked, his thoughts scrambled and his ears rang from Thor's deafening volume. "Good to know, I think?"

"My brother speaks often of your delightfully descriptive choice of words." Thor beamed, happy and proud, and clapped Tony solidly on the back.

As he stumbled, dots connected in Tony's mind. Thor Odinson, son of Principal and Vice Principal Odinson and Loki's adoptive brother. "Oh."

"That is all you have to say? Oh?" Loki's lanky figure materialized seemingly out of thin air, though it was more likely that he had just stepped out from behind the towering beech tree.

"Gah!" Tony flailed and berated himself for being easily startled. He shouldn't be surprised to see Loki here, after all, Tony was the one who invited him in the first place and had firsthand knowledge of Loki's trickster tendencies.

DUM-E trilled in alarm and rolled over. The robot's movement smooth on the uneven terrain thanks to the caterpillar track pads Tony had installed after a week at Hogwarts. There were simply too many steps for DUM-E to navigate successfully with wheels and even with the rubber tracks, Tony sometimes had to levitate DUM-E over more difficult obstacles.

"What is this charming metal creature?" Loki practically cooed at DUM-E.

Tony's stomach did a strange flip-flop of both jealousy and pride at the attention his robot child received. "That's DUM-E, um, which is not the same as dummy. It stands for Doubly-"

"–Doubtfully–" Peter coughed, entirely unsubtly.

"–Useful Machine." Tony shot Peter a glare that looked promisingly threatening but was in reality an empty gesture, which the third year already knew.

"Fascinating." Loki reached out a hesitant hand. "Can I?"

Tony smirked. "Oh, I don't know. Can you?"

"I wasn't asking you." Loki scowled but his tone was fond, possibly approving Tony's reference to their first conversation.

Since Tony's apology and Loki joining them for dinner, they had formed a tentative friendship on the foundation of curiosity, sarcasm, and cleverness.

"DUM-E?" Tony merely patted his robot with an arched brow.

DUM-E sounded out a series of long and short beeps.

"Morse code." Bruce helpfully explained then translated when Loki frowned in confusion. "DUM-E asked, can you?" Only the twitch at the corners of his lips gave away his amusement.
"He takes after his creator, I see." Loki narrowed his eyes but also tilted his head in fascination. "May I?"

DUM-E waved his claw in an up-and-down motion before extending it toward Loki in an approximation of a handshake.

Loki grasped it gently, mimicking the motion.

Tony watched the interaction with a soft smile on his face that grew wider when green eyes flicked up to meet brown ones. They snapped apart when Thor loudly declared his familiarity and prowess with this contest of unwavering gaze and challenged Rhodey.

Pepper and Hope had the same secretive smirks when Tony sat down and helped himself to a plateful of food. He eyed them suspiciously but said nothing, not knowing what to ask or how to respond if they answered. The issue was quickly forgotten when Loki settled in next to him and the two of them became absorbed in a discussion of the mathematics of runes, one that Bruce and Jane joined as well.

Jane was describing the concept of imaginary numbers and comparing it with the illusory runes Loki had mentioned when Thor let out a triumphant yell. Rhodey had looked away first, though he maintained it was only because Peter was threatening to take the last of the jam doughnuts.

* * *

"Why do you talk like you're a Shakespearean character?"

"I know not of what you speak." Loki appeared genuinely perplexed.

Tony knew instantly what to get Loki for Christmas.

* * *

Tony greeted Hope at the door to the Hufflepuff common room. "Welcome!" He said grandly and swept low into a bow. "After you, milady."

"Why thank you, good sir." Hope curtsied, going along with her friend's antics. Briefly. "What's with the theatrics?"

"Been catching up on my Shakespeare." Tony's nonchalant reply made Hope's eyes taper with suspicion.

"Uh huh."

"What? I have depth."

"Uh huh."

Tony rolled his eyes good-naturedly and directed his friend toward Scott, who was alternating between scowling at a piece of parchment like it was his mortal enemy and staring at it intently as though it held the secrets to the universe.

"Hope, help me." He sounded uttered panicked and pointed at the jumble of loops and lines. "I can't read this and I need it to finish my potions essay."

"I take this to mean you are not ready for our date." Hope sighed with a sort of amused irritation. "Let me see."
Tony peeked over Hope's shoulder, recognizing the familiar scrawl instantly. "It says 'add a sprig of peppermint to the infusion of wormwood to offset the scent' and that at the end is a doodle."

"Thank you thank you thank you." Scott's face brightened in understanding and he quickly scribbled down some lines. Once he was done, he set down his quill and flexed his fingers, several of his knuckles crackled in relief. "Now I'm ready for our date." He smiled toothily up at Hope, who was peering Tony with renewed suspicion.

"How did you even read that?"

Tony shrugged. "It's Loki's handwriting, I can read it upside down and with one eye closed."

"And how do you know it's Loki's writing?"

"Because I've read his notes before." Tony stated slowly, wary of the self-satisfied smirk on Hope's face. "We're working on a project together."

"Oh hey, will you see him today?"

Tony scrunched his nose at Hope before answering Scott. "Yeah, we're meeting at the library later."

"Great, can you get this back to him?" Scott put away his own things then rolled up Loki's notes neatly and handed it to Tony with a grateful smile. "I have a date with this vision of loveliness and patience." He stood and brushed a kiss on Hope's cheek.

"And that's my cue to get going." Tony made a gagging noise and dodged the pinch Hope aimed at his flank. "Have fun!"

*

Tony and Loki had claimed the corner table by the window as theirs by virtue of their frequent visits to the library. They were making steady progress toward developing a working hypothesis for a magical power core. Many afternoons were spent together scouring for answers among Asgardian tomes, scientific studies, and magical texts.

They learned each other's quirks and habits, such as Tony's tendency to talk with his hands and Loki's occasionally slip into Old Norse when deep in thought. Tony even picked up a couple of phrases while listening to Loki's muttering, much to Loki's delighted surprise.

"Admit it, I'm a genius."

"I will admit you have the potential for ingenuity."

"Eh, I'll take it."

Bruce joined them periodically and so did Jane. But mostly, it was just the two of them, which was just fine.

*

"Where's your robot?"

"Negotiating with the house elves for more study snacks." Tony replied automatically before realizing the voice asking the question wasn't one he could immediately place. "Which I am totally willing to share if you don't tell– Oh it's you, Bucky Butterfingers." He sagged in relief. Madam Pince enforced the no food or drinks rule with an iron fist, which only made Tony feel hungry upon
entering the library. Plus, Bucky was an alright guy, as long as his over-protective and overly judgmental friend wasn't around.

Bucky snorted, plopping down in the chair across from Tony, elbows on the table and hands under his chin. "How does that work exactly? I heard he can use Morse code."

"Morse code." Tony corrected. "And to be honest, I'm not really sure how he talks the house elves into giving him stuff. You can ask him when he gets back."

Bucky scratched his chin. "Huh, alright. Will he be back soon?" He shifted uncomfortably. "Steve's finishing up his Charms essay then we're supposed to go flying."

Tony chose not to dignify that with a response but his disdain for Steve must have shown because Bucky tensed and sat up straighter.

"Look, here's what you need to know about Steve." Rolling his shoulders back as though he was preparing for a fight, Bucky somehow also looked nervous as he chewed on his bottom lip, weighing his words carefully. "Steve, well, Stevie--"

"Stevie and Bucky, of course." Tony sneered, any good will he had toward the Gryffindor boy had vanished.

"Stevie grew up thinking he was a squib." He said the word as though it would explain everything.

It did not.

"And?" Tony arched a challenging eyebrow. "So what if he grew up thinking he's not magical or whatever? He's obviously not since he's here." Dimly, he was aware that his voice had taken on that note of malicious dismissiveness Rhodey had pointed out and taken effort to curb.

It would appear that Bucky noticed too, because his eyes tapered as if he was reassessing what he thought about Tony. "Yeah, it turned out Stevie's not a squib after all but he didn't know that and worse, his parents didn't know. So when Stevie turned seven and still didn't show any signs of being magical, his parents sent him to a muggle school with some distant muggle relative to help him adjust to the magic-less life everyone thought he was going to have. Stevie went to that muggle school for two years before he finally turned some bully's hair blue and proved he was a wizard after all." A dark look passed over Bucky's features. "When he came home, he told everyone to start calling him Steve."

Tony wanted to make a glib comment about Steve's identity crisis but Pepper's reminder to consider his audience came to the forefront of his mind, so he stayed silent.

"So cut him some slack, alright? He's been through a lot." Bucky finished with a sigh. "So cut him some slack, alright? He's been through a lot."
"No." Tony said, keeping his tone steady and neutral. Whatever anger he had felt toward Bucky, toward Steve, faded away and left behind in its place was an annoyance tinged with sympathy. At least now he understood why Steve had reacted so badly to his boasts of life as a muggle during their first encounter. "I get that he's had a rough time, but that doesn't give him a free pass to bully everyone else around him." He made sure to catch Bucky's gaze before he spoke his next words. "I'm sorry that happened to him, being bullied because you're different is awful and trust me, I know." Tony thought back to his early years at school, either isolated due to his classmates' jealousy or surrounded by those who sought to gain something.

Bucky scoffed, undoubtedly thinking what everyone else thought upon meeting Tony – little rich boy complaining about his first world problems.

"Trust me, I know." Tony stated emphatically and watched the other boy's eyes fill with surprise and perhaps a bit of shame. "But it's still not okay for me to act like my feelings are the only ones that matter and it's not okay for Steve to act like that either or for you to enable him."

"No! We promised to be there for each other 'till the end of the line."

"I have no idea what that means, but I think you'd better go before Steve comes looking for you and blames me for something I didn't do." Tony eyed the door meaningfully. "Again."

The chair scraped loudly against the stone floor as Bucky pushed it aside to make his exit.

DUM-E beeped inquiringly at Bucky as the Gryffindor boy stumbled through the doorway, offering a pumpkin pastry and wilting pitifully when the gesture was ignored.

Before Tony could beckon DUM-E over, Madam Pince strolled by and sent a warning glance to both the robot, who was technically in the hallway and not in the library, and Tony, who had assumed an expression of the utmost innocence.

She did not believe him and Tony grudgingly packed up his books to head to the Great Hall for dinner, muttering darkly about productivity loss along the way.

*

Loki adored the complete collection of Shakespeare's works, bound exquisitely in dyed green leather with gilt edging and attached satin bookmarks.

Tony waved off the horrified apology when Loki admitted he did not prepare a Christmas present, since it was not a holiday celebrated on Asgard. After all, it was a gift, freely given with no other expectation aside from the joy on his friend's face. He trailed off when Loki caught his hand in a loose grasp.

"Thank you." Loki said with an all-encompassing tenderness in his softened gaze, fond smile, and light caress on the back of Tony's hand. Long elegant fingers brushed gently along Tony's skin, tracing patterns that Tony could not decipher. "A protection rune." Loki murmured when Tony's brows furrowed in concentration.

"Neat." Tony whispered, though he wasn't sure why he had felt the need to nor why he felt a pang of disappointment when Loki pulled away.
"Hi Tony!" Peter bounced into Tony's room, twirling his broom and shifting his weight from side to side. The Hufflepuff seeker was always a bundle of energy, which contributed to his success on the Quidditch field.

Tony looked up from his stack of papers. "Spiderling!" Peter had earned that nickname from his daredevil antics of dangling precariously from his broom while reaching for the Golden Snitch, like a spider hanging from its web. "Ah, excellent. You brought it."

Peter skipped over to the desk and handed over his broom. "So, what're you going to do?"

"Oh you know, stuff." Tony said vaguely as he flipped the broom upside-down to inspect the twigs. "I'll have to run some numbers but if I'm right, which I usually am, it should give you an extra boost for the next game."

"Huh, alright." Peter's trusting nature was both endearing and worrying. "Thanks, Tony."

Tony cleared his throat.

"Oh, um, I meant, um, let me know before you make any of the changes because of, um, safety reasons." Peter amended, punctuating each um with an awkward clap.

"Nicely done." Tony chuckled, marking down the slope of the broom handle before returning it to Peter, who beamed at the compliment. "So, how's life going? Are you getting into enough trouble? Anyone giving you trouble?"

DUM-E buzzed in interest, perking up at the prospect of creating mayhem.

"No, no trouble." Peter shook his head then tilted it in contemplation. "Well, Steve kind of got in my face the other day—"

Tony tensed. "What?" The amused edge in his voice sharpened into something more protective.

"It's nothing!" Peter quickly reassured. "Really, I promise. Bucky hauled him away before he could even get a word out."

"Huh." Tony blinked. Briefly, he wondered if Bucky had listened to him after all. He certainly hoped so. Seeing everyone in the rigid roles of enemies and victims sounded like an exhausting way for Steve to live. "That's weird."

"Totally." A beat of silence. "Wait, what did you mean if I'm getting into enough trouble?"
There was something about Loki that kept Tony on his toes, another expression that had Loki wrinkling his nose in distaste and muttering about Midgardians' strange fascination with feet in their vernacular. The twists and turns of Loki's brilliant mind, the sway and spin of Tony's fascination, and push and pull between the two of them felt like a mysterious dance that only they knew the moves to.

Tony had always liked a mystery.

And dancing.

Tony and Rhodey were a study in opposites as they made their way back to the Hufflepuff common room, arm in arm and caught in an animated discussion about the merits of coffee versus tea.

There was a sort of militant look to how impeccably Rhodey dressed, tie always perfectly knotted and robes sitting squarely on his shoulders. His hair was cropped closely to his skull and kept neat.

Tony, on the other hand, was more carefree with his appearance. Throughout his years at Hogwarts, his tie had never been tightened properly and the button on his collar never fastened. His school robes were either shrugged off or falling off of his shoulders. They were only staying in place at the moment thanks to Tony's backpack, a bright attention-drawing crimson.

The color was a bit of a controversial choice for any student not sorted into Gryffindor, but Tony refused to give up his favorite color because it wasn't that of his house. Gryffindors did not have a monopoly on red.

"It's a matter of efficiency." Tony stated. "Coffee has a higher caffeine content than tea."

"It's a matter of diversity." Rhodey countered. "Tea offers more flavors and combinations."

"You just like it because a certain someone likes it. Her name starts with…" Tony twirled his wand in a seemingly casual arc and outlined the letter P in a glowing stream of light.

Rhodey jerked minutely and Tony would have missed it if not for their proximity to each other. "I have no idea what you're talking about, and that looks like a question mark."

"Oh I think you know exactly what and who I'm talking about." Tony winked but eased up his teasing when he registered his friend's stiff posture and sudden frown. "Hey, you okay? I didn't mean—"

"The thing is, I don't even know. Not really." Rhodey sighed. "It just feels nice to be around her. She, um, compliments me."

Their steps slowed significantly as both knew this was not a conversation to be had around other Hufflepuffs, especially one redhead in particular.

"Is that why you're wearing that sweater vest again? Because she said that one and only time it looks nice?" Tony made a noise of understanding. "It's all become so clear to me now."

"No, I mean, yes. Both!" Rhodey's neck cracked disconcertingly when he abruptly turned the shaking motion into one of nodding. "I don't mean compliment like compliment, I meant compliment compliment."
Tony gave his friend a blank look.

"Like, we have similar tastes. We read the same books, listen to the same music, likes the same foods and just have so much in common." Rhodey explained, a faint blush coloring his cheeks.

"I get that, you're the same but not really because then that'd be boring." Tony grinned. "There's just something exciting about never knowing for sure what the other person's going to do or say, right?"

"Um, I think so." Rhodey had a peculiar expression on his face, part amusement and part concern and part something Tony couldn't identify. "So you were talking about me and Pepper, right?"

"Of course!" Tony chuckled, baffled why his friend would even ask that. "And hey, you said her name. That's progress! Pepper progress!"

Rhodey hissed as they rounded the corner and the large pile of barrels, one of which was the secret entrance to the Hufflepuff common room, came into view.

"Are you boys talking about me?"

If asked, neither Tony nor Rhodey would admit to screeching upon hearing Pepper's voice.

"Based on your enthusiastic response, I'm going to say yes." Her delicate brows were raised and her lips were pursed, either trying to hold in laughter or to appear stern.

"We are totally talking about you." Tony tapped out the secret code on the correct barrel to unlock the door. "But I have to check on DUM-E so Rhodey here can tell you all about it." With a cheerful wave, he slipped through the door and the last thing he heard was Pepper's intrigued hum and Rhodey's hesitant stammer.

At their next picnic, Tony nudged Loki when he noticed Rhodey and Pepper sitting closer to each other than before, leaning into Loki to explain the part he'd played in getting his friends together.
Peter tested out his newly upgraded broom with a buzzing sort of excitement that vibrated through his body. The aerodynamic adjustment Tony made to his broom, a shaving of the handle and few trimmings of the twigs, made all the difference. With one kick to the ground, Peter propelled himself into the air and almost tumbled off at the unexpected speed.

"This is amazing!" The Hufflepuff seeker shouted down as he weaved through the air in a series of horizontal loops and vertical spirals.

"I second that opinion." Loki, as was his habit, stepped out from behind the bleachers.

Tony must have grown used to Loki's shenanigans or at least better at masking his response, because he noted the Asgardian's sudden appearance calmly. His days of startled yelps were long behind him. "I told you I'm a genius."

"You are much more than that." Loki's words tumbled out, bumping into each other until it was one jumbled sound instead of coherent sentence.

It was not an answer Tony had expected and he said as such, puzzled at the meaning but pleased all the same.

Loki cleared his throat then clarified. "To improve performance of a magical item without spell work is quite a feat. Your intellect and inventiveness are indeed impressive."

"An avalanche of adulatory alliterations!" Tony chuckled weakly as he tried to deflect the praise, Loki's intense sincerity catching him off guard and heating his cheeks. He felt surprisingly warm in
the still wintry January air.

* 

Tony felt that same warmth return as Loki painted an intricate rune on his right hand.

For the powerful protection spell to work, Loki channeled his Jotun side for this task. It was fascinating to watch the colors fade and flourish across Loki’s familiar features. Fair complexion tinted darker to blue while emerald eyes became ruby with a blink. To know that Loki trusted Tony with this side of him was incredibly humbling, especially given their history.

Tony noted absently that the crimson ink used was the exact shade as Loki’s eyes. Once that observation had been made, he couldn't help but flicker his gaze between the elaborate design and Loki’s concentrated gaze.

Red was his favorite color, after all.

"It is done." Loki announced all too soon. "You will be protected from water, the most mercurial of elements."

Tony eyed the glistening paint. "Is it waterproof?" He ignored the fluttering in his stomach, chalking it up to anxiety related to the boat ride they were about to embark on. At the Great Lake. Home of a giant squid and his other inappropriate-sized friends.

Loki huffed. "Only you would ask if a rune meant to protect against water is waterproof."

"You didn't answer my question." Tony pointed out, the smirk at the corners of his lips growing into a grin when Loki’s eyes darted to the corners.

Loki grumbled some words under his breath, the sigil flashed brightly before dulling to a muted brick color. "...it is now."

Tony scrubbed at the design with a testing thumb and turned it upward to thumbs up when the rune did not smudge. At Loki’s confused frown, Tony launched into an explanation of the hand gesture that somehow morphed into an all-out thumb war. It ended with their fingers intertwined and palms pressed together, breathless with laughter.
The boating event was intended to evoke some of the thrill from the olden days of the Triwizard Tournament, without the risk of death and dismemberment. Instead of champions swimming with monstrous aquatic creatures, boats charmed to follow a predesignated route would carry a maximum of four students across the lake then circle back.

"If you wish to keep your limbs, do not put them in the water." Headmaster Fury declared without preamble then stalked away in his customary manner.

Deputy Headmistress Hill heaved a put-upon sigh and began dividing the students into smaller groups based on preference and numbers.

Tony caught an exchange of alarmed looks between Rhodey and Pepper and felt the hair at the back of his neck prickle. Nothing good, or fun, happened when the two of them shared that identical look of determination. He took a small step back and that was as far as he got because his friends flanked him with frightening accuracy and looped their arms through his.

It was almost like they didn't trust him to adhere to safety guidelines.

"Oh c'mon! We aren't even in the water yet." Tony wiggled his right arm free and rubbed the hand across his jaw. He kept his left arm where it was though, because he did not want to risk the mothering wrath of Pepper.

"Hey, what's this?" Still keeping Tony's arm prisoner, Pepper squinted at the rune in the afternoon sunlight.
Rhodey peered at it too, but instead of waiting for Tony's answer, he turned to shout in the direction of the Asgardian group. "Loki, what's this on Tony's hand?"

Tony chose not to think too deeply about why Rhodey jumped to that conclusion.

Thor's jaw dropped in shock when he caught sight of the symbol. He looked like he was about to comment when Loki stomped on his adoptive brother's foot so all that came out was a yelp.

"A protection rune in case he attempts anything reckless, which is highly likely." Loki replied serenely, as though he hadn't just intimidated Thor into silence.

"Traitor!" Tony hissed in Old Norse.

Thor's eyes widened comically but wisely said nothing as he hopped on one foot.

"Good thinking." Pepper nodded in appreciation and approval. "Thanks."

Tony pouted and slumped pathetically against Rhodey, bemoaning their lack of faith in his self-preservation instincts.

Later, as their boat was gliding smoothly across the dark expanse of water, Tony could maybe admit they had a point when his first instinct was to reach out and touch the too-large-for-comfort shadow rippling past them.

* 

They were waiting for Scott and Hope and debating if it was too late for a visit to Hogsmeade when a pained cry sounded out.

It was from one of the boats returning to shore, its occupants waving frantically.

Deputy Headmistress Hill immediately cast a spell to summon the boats back via the most efficient route instead of the original leisurely course. They docked at the same time.

Scott and Hope practically leaped out of their boat, getting as far away from the water as possible.

Bucky stumbled as he exited the boat, awkward and unbalanced with his left hand cradled close to his chest. Steve was right by his friend's side, alternating between shouts for help and words of comfort.

"Walk me through the events, Mr. Rogers." Deputy Headmistress Hill's tone was clinical, which had a strangely calming effect.

"Something jumped out of the water at me and Bucky hit it with his hand." Steve's face crumbled. "This is all my fault. Will Bucky be okay? I don't think I can live with myself–"

"It's not your fault, punk." Bucky grunted out through clenched teeth.

Steve shook his head stubbornly. "You only got hurt because of me."

"Now is not the time, Mr. Rogers!" Headmaster Fury barked and shouldered the older Gryffindor boy aside. "Let's see that hand, Mr. Barnes."

Bucky winced as he slowly unfolded his arm and extended his hand. His fingers were an unnatural shade of purple and the fingernails were almost black, with the color seeping into the palm and wrist ominously.
"Hydra poison." Headmaster Fury growled as he inspected the wound. "Get Mr. Barnes up to the infirmary now!" A house elf apparated at the Headmaster's command and disapparated with Bucky in tow.

"Bucky!" Steve cried out.

Headmaster Fury trained his eye on Steve. "Mr. Rogers, come with me. The rest of you, report to Deputy Headmistress Hill."

Deputy Headmistress Hill conducted a careful head count before sending them off to their respective dormitories.

The group of friends remained together as they headed toward the castle. Loki and Thor would need to veer off toward the forest for the Asgardian tents at some point. Darcy and Jane, who was there as Thor's date, would be heading off toward the SHIELD helicarrier on the front lawn.

Tony lingered toward the back with Loki, their footsteps in sync. "Thank you." He lifted and flexed his right hand, watching the rune stretch across his unblemished skin. A shudder slithered down his back as he remembered Bucky's discolored hand.

"You're welcome." Loki bumped his shoulder against Tony's but instead of moving away, he stayed close. They remained pressed up against each other's sides until they had to part ways.