Rhodey didn’t know how Tony did it. For every project the two of them dreamed up in their dorm, often sleepy or buzzed or temporarily insane, his friend managed to get it funded. Even when the project was something silly, like building a printer that printed on flattened leaves instead of paper. To this day Tony argued to anyone who even looked like they might comment on it that the mechanical precision and force control needed to make that printer work were incredible feats of engineering. (They really were, but that didn’t change the fact that it was a printer that didn’t take paper.)

Notes

Tony Stark Bingo Square K2: Role Reversal

Where instead of Tony having the crazy science ideas/doing crazy science while Rhodey talks to administration/generals/higher-ups to smooth the way, Tony's the one who has the magic touch getting paperwork filled out and Rhodey's the one coming up with silly engineering ideas. At least, that was what I was going for.
Rhodey didn’t know how Tony did it. For every project the two of them dreamed up in their dorm, often sleepy or buzzed or temporarily insane, his friend managed to get it funded. Even when the project was something silly, like building a printer that printed on flattened leaves instead of paper. To this day Tony argued to anyone who even looked like they might comment on it that the mechanical precision and force control needed to make that printer work were incredible feats of engineering. (They really were, but that didn’t change the fact that it was a printer that didn’t take paper.)

It just didn’t make sense. Rhodey knew how hard it was to get stuff funded when it didn’t fall under the purview of a class or another professor’s research. Before he’d met Tony, any sort of engineering group or partner project he did had included a mandatory ’what can we do to make this cheaper?’ meeting. At one point, with an impossible deadline looming on the horizon and not enough funds to both do all the tests they needed AND purchase all of the necessary parts and materials, he and his group mates had actually built a shrine to the ACME surplus store, hoping for some sort of early-restocking miracle.

And yet Tony pulled the grant money for everything from spare parts to rush shipping out of his ass and then acted surprised when their classmates got on their hands and knees and begged him to let them copy his paperwork.

“It’s gotta be because he’s a robot nerd,” Rhodey’s friends said. “Even if his robots can be kind of weird, it’s still robotics. People like robots, especially friendly ones like his. That’s gotta be it.”

“Nah man, there’s some other people on the fourth floor trying to get funding for a robot project, and they’ve been getting nothing but goose eggs.”

“Then how does he do it? I’ve seen his paperwork, it’s always a mess. I think he made some grammar mistakes, too. In what world would anyone give a grant to that?”

Tony was blessed with supernatural powers of persuasion. That was the only conclusion Rhodey had been able to come to after a solid year of working with the kid on project after project. He could make anything sound serious and worthy of investment on the part of the scientific community in general and their school in particular. Any grant proposal he wrote was guaranteed to get approval.

“So like, were you born with it, or did you make a deal with the devil?” He asked one day.

“What?” Tony said. His eyes had that sort of glassy, not-all-there sheen to them that they got when he pulled his attention away too quickly from whatever it was that he’d been engrossed in.

“The grants, man. How do you do it?”

“Grants? What do you mean?”

“Come on, man, you see how stressed out everyone gets about writing grant proposals. It’s never enough, and you can never get it for the stuff you’re actually interested in. But not you. Whatever you work on gets funded. Look, as we speak you’re putting the finishing touches on a flute that plays itself. Who would fund that? Did you somehow convince them that you could sell this thing to the Department of Defense?”

Realization dawned on Tony’s face, quickly followed by delight.

“Oh yeah, you know me. Just have a talent for it, I guess. Say, wanna make it so this flute can turn into a tuba if you hit a high C?”

His eyes didn’t meet Rhodey’s for the rest of the night.
Something about that night made him suspicious. Tony had been just a bit off for a week afterwards, though he’d been unable to put his finger on anything specific that was different about him. Sometimes, when no one else was watching, Tony got that same melancholy, evasive expression he got whenever someone brought up his parents, who everyone in their dorm knew never came to visit.

Was there some sort of connection between his family and his ability to write bulletproof grant proposals? He turned it over in his mind for days, but he couldn’t think of anything.

Part of him knew he should just let it go and just be grateful that the kid’s genius extended to getting funding. He clearly didn’t want to talk about it. But the rest of him was overwhelmingly curious, and a little wary. Usually when Tony didn’t want to tell him something, it was because he’d done something dumb like getting drunk and then trying to build a lightsaber so he could recreate his favorite Star Wars battle scenes with that claw-armed robot he’d built in the engineering building basement.

So he only felt a little bit bad when, out of curiosity, he proposed something absolutely ridiculous. Something no one would ever fund.

“Hey Tony, I’ve got an idea. Let’s make a flute that plays itself.”

Tony shook his head, but he was smiling his I-can-one-up-that smile. “I like the direction you’re going, Platypus, but I’m pretty sure that’s already been done. And if it hasn’t, music without a visible player isn’t quite as captivating as it probably was back in the Dark Ages. No, what we should do is make a flute that’s also a tuba.”

Rhodey squinted. “A what?”

“You know, it could change from one into the other while you play it! Think Transformers, but with instruments instead of cars. Hey, do you play the flute? Or the tuba? Because I sure don’t. Never mind, we can worry about that later. If it becomes an issue, we can just make a robot that plays the flute.”

That idea sounded sufficiently crazy to Rhodey. If Tony could get funding for that hot mess, he had to have supernatural powers.

“Mr. Stark, do you think this is some kind of joke? This project is a serious part of your grade. This is not the time to be wasting your talents on parlous tricks.”

Tony crossed his arms in indignation, and Rhodey sent up a prayer to whatever gods were watching over engineering students with dumbass partners that he didn’t mouth off too hard.

“It’s not a trick, professor, it’s a difficult application of mechanical engineering to a physics problem. Making a new instrument is nothing to scoff at.”

Professor Bertrand took a deep, visible breath.

“If you can get funding, then it technically meets the requirements of the project. However, I worry that you will have trouble doing this, and that proposing another idea and attempting to secure funding a second time will put you too far behind to do quality work.”

Tony smiled. “Don’t worry about funding, Professor, I’ll take care of that.”
The man rolled his eyes. “I’m sure you will, Mr. Stark. I’ve heard about your talent for grant writing.” Tony smiled. “And about the robots that keep getting loose from your dorm and terrorizing the freshmen.”

“Hey, they never do any harm! Besides, what prospective engineer would ever turn up their nose at the chance to play with a robot?”

“Remember, documentation of your funding is required when you turn the project in.” The professor addressed that last bit to Rhodey, as if appealing to the saner party. Rhodey tried to communicate with his eyes that there was nothing he could have done to reign Tony in even if he wanted to, but he didn’t think it came across quite right.

Sure enough, Tony showed up at his dorm door a week later with a grant in hand. Rhodey’s eyes just about bulged out of his head. He’d been preparing another, saner project idea, but it looks like he wouldn’t need it. His partner had honest-to-goodness supernatural grant writing powers.

“Jesus, man, a week? That’s all it took to get funding for this insane idea?”

“I told you not to worry about funding! Now, let’s get to the actual fun part. I made some prototypes, but I’m pretty sure this isn’t going to be playable, so we need to figure out how to compress on a curve…”

Rhodey would have been convinced Tony was some sort of Fae creature at this point, had it not been for his love of every sort of metal under the sun. Not only did he get funding to make a flute that turned into a tuba, he actually had ideas on how to do it. They’d only had to make a few prototypes to get something workable, and now, with the deadline drawing near, they had two products; a flute that looked just like a normal flute, but could turn into a full-sized, normal looking Tuba, and an instrument about the size of a lapdog that was an unholy combination of flute and tuba.

Though he had to admit, he’d had fun. It was an interesting challenge, and figuring out how to play the damn thing had been hilarious. There was something revitalizing about applying his knowledge to something so silly. And apply his engineering knowledge he did; making this thing work was the most fun he’d had in ages. He found himself staying up late tweaking it, and bringing it up during study hours when he got bored doing his homework for other classes.

Everything was almost ready. He just needed to put all of their notes and documentation into a folder and bring it to the professor’s office. He had all of the notes, and most of the documentation; he just needed the paperwork from that grant Tony had gotten, and they were all set to turn this thing in with an hour to spare.

The problem was, the grant was nowhere to be found.

It wasn’t there. He’d gone through the entire pile three times, looked in all of the file cabinets, gotten down on his hands and knees to look under the desk, gone through the recycling, and Tony wasn’t answering any of his texts.

There was no time for this! The project was due in two hours. They couldn’t just lose such an important part of their project! The professor had specifically said to include copies of their funding, and this was the only thing they turned in for a grade all semester long.

*Finally* his phone buzzed and lit up with a text from Tony. What took him so long to answer?

*I’m on my way, be there in three minutes.*
“Tony, you found it! I was looking everywhere but it wasn’t in the folder with everything else. Come on, we can still make it but you’ve everything else, so I thought for sure it must have gotten knocked into the recycling bin or something.”

“Yeah, found it,” Tony stuttered through that I’m-totally-lying smile that Rhodey was coming to fear more and more each time he saw it. “No problems at all. Come on, let’s go turn it in.”

The had to run to make it to the professor’s office in time, but they managed to set the folder in the assignment submission box before the clock struck five, so it was worth it.

However, as he was setting it down and rubberbanding the folder closed so none of the papers inside would come adrift, he noticed something odd about the grant proposal sheet, which was sitting on top of everything else. Tony’s name was signed on an awful lot of lines. In fact, it looked like his name was signed on all of the lines. But that didn’t make sense; to do that Tony would have had to apply to himself, on his own recommendation, for a grant created by him in his own name. A grant, now that he took a closer look at the actual contents of the page, that was called the ‘Make Rhodey’s Sick Tuba-Flute Idea A Reality’ Grant.

He looked up and met Tony’s wide, guilty eyes, but before he could say anything the professor emerged from his office to pick up the assignments, so Rhodey quickly snapped the rubber band in place and set the folder down with all the others.

“Hey, so, Rhodey-bear-”

“You know I saw that grant title, Tony. Talk.”

Tony deflated.

“Yeah, so I’ve never written a grant proposal in my life.”

Rhodey threw up his arms.

“Are you kidding me? How do we get funded then?”

Tony shrugged. “I fund us.” He shrunk in on himself a little, so that he was no longer all the way in Rhodey’s space.

“How? You can’t even legally drink yet, how do you have that much money?” Tony was like a small, excited science puppy, or perhaps a kitten obsessed with batting around robot ideas. How could he possibly have money enough to do stuff like this?

Tony shrunk in a little more, then stiffened, like he was stealing himself for a big test. “I’m rich, Honeybear. You’re thinking about going into the military- doesn’t the name Stark ring any bells?”

It took him a minute.

“You’re- oh my god. Stark Industries.”

“Yeah,” Tony grinned sharply. “Stark Industries.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me that, then? I honest to god thought you had supernatural powers, dude, all my friends are halfway to building a shrine to you like your some sort of grant-writing deity.”

“So… this isn’t going to be a problem?” Tony asked. His eyes were blank and distant, but not
completely closed off. Huh. This must have been a bigger deal for him than he’d thought.

“Nah man, that’s nothing. I’m almost mad at myself for not figuring it out.”

“Great,” Tony smiled, instantly back in his space and hanging off his sweatshirt. “Unrelated side note, in the unlikely event that my parents or someone from the company shows up looking for me, don’t tell them I’ve spent all my time on robots, okay? Dad really wants me to keep doing the weapons thing, but I don’t know. I sort of like this whole never-having-to-talk-to-him thing I’ve got going on here, you know? You’d hate Dad, he’s the sort of guy who wouldn’t like Dum-E. Dum-E! Who doesn’t like Dum-E?”

“Sure thing, Tony.”

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