Guilt For Dreaming

by Vetinari

Summary

Tony Stark unexpectedly wakes up after making the ultimate sacrifice during the final battle of the Infinity War.

Now he's stuck in 1976, with no plan, no future and no clue.

Of course it would help if he could work out if he'd actually achieved his goal when he'd killed himself.
See the end of the work for notes.
Pushing down the agony to the deepest corners of his mind Tony focussed on making his way through the waves of reality warping chaos towards the Infinity Gauntlet. FRIDAY’s voice guttered and died in his ear as the more complex systems gave up on him, HUD fading to darkness Tony was left alone in the claustrophobic confines of his armour. The suit was silently shredding to pieces around him the precious synthesised vibranium titanium alloys flaking away like so much rust, its complex pseudo-crystalline structures breaking down into simple molecules, the very atoms disintegrating into subatomic debris, photons floating away like starlight.

Even given the meagre protection the suit provided progress was torture, he was shedding pieces of himself as he marched onwards he knew it. He could feel his skin dissolving away in great patches despite extremis’ frantic efforts at keeping him whole; there simply wasn’t enough material left to effect repairs. He dreaded to think what he’d see in a mirror right then, perhaps his flesh would finally match the horror of his soul.

Vision was dea- gone, torn asunder when The Mad Titan’s forces had burst through their last desperate barricade less than an hour ago and ripped the mind gem from his core. He choked back that thought, still too raw at the loss of his, his son, and reran the mission specs for the umpteenth time.

The other Avengers had still been shooting him hateful glares even as he’d volunteered for this last ditch suicide mission; they still blamed him for everything. Had been ever since Sokovia, and The Accords, perhaps even before then. A tiny part of him knew it wasn’t true, but the rest of him was resigned to the inevitability. Everything was always his fault regardless of whether or not he’d been involved in the situation in any way shape or form. He’d learnt that harsh lesson decades ago. Steve’s look of pure derision, not even hate, had hurt though.

Their previous last-ditch plan had failed miserably and Park-Peter was dead as a result. Tony was under no illusions that he was worthy enough to have even a smidgen of a sip of omniscient power, but he could do this at least.

With a great effort of will Tony refocused on his mission, hit the gauntlet with a carefully calibrated mystical and temporal energy beam from The Device. (There hadn’t been time to come up with a name; the beam had been an utter bitch to prepare as it was. Working with Strange and Richards simultaneously was an …experience. Prying rudimentary magical theory past Strange’s tight lips had been an effort in futility, thankfully Doom had proven surprisingly helpful, here at the end of all things.) The gems would scatter to the four corners of the universe, the backlash would wipe Thanos from existence and they’d be free of his threat. The universe would be rewritten. Simple. Of course being at the epicentre of events, the backlash would erase Tony too, but that didn’t matter much in the scheme of things. The universe was far more important than even the great Tony Fucking Stark, hell poor Peter’s dead dog was more important.
The other Avengers were fighting and dying around him as he staggered doggedly forward, providing the distraction he needed to get close enough. He winced when he spotted Hulk’s normally invulnerable form stumble in the distance, vivid red blood pouring heavily from a terrible wound. Richards’ elongated form lay shattered in pieces across the field of battle, forming a morbid tableau, Rocket hadn’t hesitated to use his frozen limbs as crude projectile weapons, too caught up in his grief at the loss of Starlord and Groot to mind what his actions were doing to his comrades.

Gritting his teeth around the metallic taste of blood Tony pushed forward in a great burst of effort, ignoring the strange tearing sensation as he felt something, fabric, no the undersuit wasn’t that thick, fall down his leg inside the armour. His left arm was hanging useless and ignored at his side, skin and muscle long since dissolved away. All of the extra protective plating they could scrounge from the sorry remains of Asgard had gone into shielding The Device from the devastating reality rewriting radiation. Sweat and other fluids running down his face beneath the somehow still intact faceplate Tony finally, finally, dragged his rotten carcass in range.

Aiming his uru and magic enhanced repulsor through blurry eyes Tony targeted the gauntlet and miraculously managed a hit. Three of the six gems apparently shattered on impact, Tony blinked in surprise; he honestly hadn’t expected this to work at all. Absently he noted that he’d fried his good arm when the device fired, all of the shielding had been directed outwards after all.

Thanos and Iron Man stared stupidly at one another for a moment that stretched to infinity. The pair caught in the epicentre of a storm that engulfed the universe, and large swathes of the multiverse. The Infinity Gauntlet seemed to crumple in on itself, Thanos cried out in agony doubling over clutching his left arm to his chest. Tony bitterly thought it served the bastard right, Loki hadn’t deserved his fate. The remaining gems lit up haphazardly in a blinding lightshow of orange, blue and green. The flashes increasing in speed to epileptic fit inducing intensity.

The void of darkness edged Nothingness that formed between them was pants wettingly unexpected, it wasn’t just darkness, people too often assumed that darkness was the opposite of light rather than the absence. This was something more, something malevolent and somehow self-aware. It immediately began sucking inwards, as if noticing the attention. Tony felt sick satisfaction at Thanos’ strangled cry of pain as it touched him, the purple titan immediately began to wither, the arm nearest the void actually vanishing to dust before his eyes. The rest of the Mad Titan vanished as if he never was a mere moment later, the crippled Infinity Gauntlet vanishing with a surreal and cartoonish pop.

Tony could almost feel the fabric of reality ripple around him, the carnage seeming to fade away. He slumped in relief, it was done, he didn’t even attempt to resist the pull of the Nothing it was his due. He’d done his duty. Perhaps saving the universe would be enough to cleanse him of his ocean’s worth of blood.

As he felt himself fading Tony noticed a hooded female figure out of the corner of his eye, nodding at him approvingly - it couldn’t be could it? Surely she was courting Thanos, had resurrected him
several times, which was why the utter annihilation from existence had been so painfully necessary. He was left utterly mystified when she lowered her hood, revealing a young …goth rather than the anticipated skeleton.

Then the overdue shockwave finally deigned to kick in, wiping out the rapidly fading evidence of the battle and sucking Tony the final length into Nothing. He had a split second to notice that the colours of the remaining gems brightly outshone the rainbow like effect – brilliant blue and orange mixing disturbingly followed by a high crest of vivid green.

As reality faded to Nothing he heard the beating of her wings.
Chapter Summary

Tony wakes up and tries to come up with a plan.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 1: I'm Not Quite Right At All, Am I?

Tony awoke gasping, and took a moment to be surprised that he was awake at all. It was too quiet, everything felt wrong. The almost comforting incessant buzz of extremis was gone. He couldn’t breathe, extremis wasn’t responding, there was nothing there to regulate his biological functions he couldn’t breathe.

He panicked. Attempting to sit up he realised he was tangled in sweat slick sheets and that his limbs felt heavy and leaden. Shakily reaching up to push his hair back from his face he let out a startled shout, and stared in confused dismay at his hand. His tiny, child-sized hand. What the hell?

Reaching towards the little spot in his mind that he mentally thought of as extremis’ area Tony tried to boot it up again. He was rewarded with an intense lightning bolt of pain to his temples, spinning vertigo joining the intense all over body ache.

He lurched towards the side of the bed, but didn’t quite make it, the resulting vomit dripping down the vertical edge of the mattress onto the floor.

He didn’t know how long he sat there hyperventilating in the darkened room in the centre of the soiled bed.

“Master Tony?”

Jumping in fright at both the noise and the sudden light complete with looming shadow, Tony tried
to back away from the source of the voice. Forgetting that he was tangled in the bedclothes he managed a startled yelp and fell off of the bed dragging most of the sheets with him. Fortunately he’d fallen off the opposite edge to the vomit puddle.

“Tony!”

The exclamation of alarm at the thump had his brain reeling in shock. He knew that voice. No it had to be a trick. Stupid, pathetic, Stark men are made of iron. He had to be better than this, who knew what tricks Tha- The Titan was capable of. He should have at least investigated the room he was trapped ins-

His internal tirade was cut off at the sudden bright light that blazed in the room. Cringing back in pain as black spots danced across his vision Tony again tried to retreat from the intruder.

He didn’t get very far, between the sheets, the inexplicable heavy feeling and his new status as a midget, Tony found he was incapable of extricating himself from the knotted ball. The tall man rapidly crossed the room in a couple of strides and scooped up Tony’s struggling form, ignoring the uncoordinated flailing with humiliating ease.

Peering blearily up at the person gently manhandling him onto the bed Tony swallowed down his protestations when the blurry face above him slowly resolved itself into the familiar features of Edwin Jarvis.

“There there Tony, just wait here whilst I go and fetch something to clean you up.”

Shuddering in exhausted fear Tony allowed himself to relax back into the bed. Even if this was a trap, he could selfishly let it run out for now, he was in no state to make a break for it. It was nice, letting the illusion of Jarvis care for him again.

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Edwin gently mopped down Tony’s sleeping form with a damp cloth, he’d been unpleasantly surprised when the boy hadn’t stirred when Jarvis had deposited him on the floor to change the sheets, or even at the wet touch of the cloth.

Edwin peered down at his young charge in consternation as he settled him into the clean sheets. The
fever still hadn’t broken, and Tony had been worryingly confused when Edwin had checked in on him, the vomit he’d cleaned up another cause for concern. If Tony’s temperature continued to rise, consequences to Howard’s reputation be-damned, he was going to take Young Sir to the hospital and get him professional treatment. A childhood cold wasn’t supposed to be this dangerous.

As if sensing Edwin’s anger Tony stirred uneasily,

“J- Jarvis?”

The wary fear in his young charge’s voice nearly broke Edwin’s heart. He wished dearly that Peggy were here. Young Tony damn near worshipped her, for all that the young boy exaggeratedly claimed she was “scary”, which Peggy had always preened at as intended.

Plastering a calm façade onto his face Edwin warmly enquired,

“Yes Young Sir?”

“Wh-“ an uneasy swallow, “Where am I?”

Carefully smoothing down the frown that wanted to make itself known Edwin responded with a calm he didn’t feel,

“In your bedroom of course Young Sir.”

Edwin carefully didn’t react at the suspicion that crossed Tony’s flushed face, his slightly unfocused eyes darting back and fourth rapidly as if to verify that information for himself. There was a pregnant pause, Tony’s laboured breaths loud in the silence.

“Wh-“ Tony’s tongue darted out to wet chapped lips, “When – I mean what day is it?”

Edwin really was concerned now, Tony hadn’t been this bad when he’d put him to bed earlier that evening, grouchy and ill tempered yes, but not delirious.
“It’s Thursday Tony, don’t you remember?”

“No, I mean. What’s the date?”

Edwin’s mood dropped into icy fear.

“Tony?”

“The date! I said what’s the DATE?!?”

Tony’s mood flipped alarmingly from lethargic to enraged in a moment. Edwin took the path of least resistance to placate him, answer the question.

“3rd August, Tony.”

“Year.”

“What?”

“What YEAR?!”

“1976.”

Immediately Tony slumped back into the sheets despair radiating from every pore, the mercurial shifts had Edwin reeling to catch up.

“Whe-Where’s Howar- Dad?”

Edwin frowned outright at Tony’s sudden forgetfulness, noting sadly that even at the height of apparent delirium there was a justified tinge of fear in Tony’s voice.
“Your father is on one of his expeditions,” Edwin spat the last word out with distaste, “He’s due back at the end of the month.”

The despair seemed to leak out of Tony at that, leaving behind world-weary exhaustion. Tony’s eyes fluttered closed, his harsh breathing evening out into the deep regularity of sleep.

Mopping down Tony’s brow with a cold cloth Edwin prepared for a long night of watching his charge’s temperature like a hawk.

He thanked his lucky stars that the house was otherwise shutdown; it was just himself, Tony and a skeleton staff for general upkeep until Howard returned. As he’d said to Tony, Howard was somewhere in the arctic searching futilely for Steven Bloody Roger’s frozen corpse. Edwin knew the epithet was unfair, but he’d watched the guilt eat at his once friend until it left the bitter shell of a man that he now knew behind. Edwin didn’t think he’d ever forgive Howard for holding Steven Rogers up as an example to which he always, always, found Tony wanting. Maria was currently visiting family in Italy, during a stopgap in her travels for her charity foundation.

He removed the thermometer from Tony’s mouth and worriedly inspected the temperature, 103F – not good but not as high as he’d feared. Edwin thought it would be safe to quickly nip down to the kitchen and fetch a bowl of cold water and a clean cloth. It was going to be a long night.

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Edwin spent most of the next day keeping an eye on Tony, he’d managed to coax him into eating a piece of plain toast, but the boy had no appetite. As he chopped the ingredients up for their evening meal Edwin debated with himself if he should ask Ana to come and help him keep Tony company. He didn’t want to intrude on his beloved wife’s free time, which he would be doing if he asked her to take leave to come and look after his employers child, but he knew she cared for Tony as much as he did.

The fever wasn’t getting any worse at least, Edwin didn’t want to risk Ana’s health unnecessarily he wasn’t sure if her immune system was up to it. He decided to wait until Tony got better, until then he was contagious, and he didn’t feel right exposing others. As he prepared the dish he’d learnt from Ana, Jarvis decided that a visit from his wife might be good for all three of them, Tony could use some company, and spending a couple of weeks under the summer sun on the mansion’s grounds could be good for her health. Not to mention he’d be able to stop pulling double shifts, he was exhausted.
So Tony was six, six what the hell?? He was currently holed up in his childhood room with a bad summer cold on strict bed rest. Turns out that typically of the man, Howard had abandoned him to Jarvis’ care for the summer.

Tony was inordinately irritated by his six-year-old self’s choice of décor. The room was actually painfully plain and cold like the rest of the mansion, all oppressive brown wainscoting, ghastly green brocade wallpaper and heavy dark furniture. Neither Howard nor Maria approved of Tony adding any touches of his own to the mansion – inside his room or out of it, but the little he’d been allowed was depressingly star-spangled. His bedding was in shades of red, white and blue, there was a Captain America poster tacked to his wardrobe door, and his long-lost Cap figure was posed, limbs akimbo, on his dresser.

Despite Jarvis’ words about an expedition yesterday Tony was still semi-terrified that Howard would storm into the room any moment, accusing him of malingering, with the familiar rant about displaying weakness and the refrain “Stark men are made of Iron.”

More than once when he’d still been living with his parents Tony had been sent to school when he’d had absolutely no right to be there. The teachers had rapidly learnt to leave him alone when he turned up in that condition, pursing their lips disapprovingly (not that Tony had understood that the disapproval wasn’t for him) and letting him hide out in the nurse’s office for the duration of the illness.

Tony really did feel fucking awful, 5-day hangover level wrecked, complete with inability to keep much more than water down. The heavy leaden feeling in his limbs had only increased, and he was either wracked with the shivers or far too hot. Sleep was impossible, so he figured he might as well try to work out what was going on. But he kept losing time, Tony could have sworn it was bright out a minute ago, yet the sky had a distinctly dusky tinge to it.

He was still staring at the sky in a daze attempting to remember just when this was, when Jarvis re-entered the room carrying a tray,

“Suppers up!”

Tony was suspicious of the falsely jocular tone but said nothing. Supper turned out to be chicken soup and bread, both homemade by Jarvis. Tony shivered nostalgically as the smell of the broth wafted up at him, gods he’d missed this. Digging into the matzoballs Jarvis had included with enthusiasm he rarely held for food Tony chewed and slurped his way noisily through the bowl.
He unsuccessfully tried to stifle a yawn, predictably as soon as Jarvis saw it he insisted on helping Tony get ready for bed. Tony tried not to feel too gleeful that Jarvis even tucked him in too.

He resolved that he’d try to work out what the hell was going on tomorrow.

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The following morning the fever had finally broken. Edwin was relieved at the development though he didn’t envy Tony the persistent cough. Tony had insisted that he was well enough to come down to the kitchen because he felt “cooped up” in his room, and that it “smells funky”. Edwin had only resisted the urge to point out that the smell was all Tony by a great force of will, painfully aware of how fragile his charge’s ego was. He had only eventually ceded to Tony’s wishes on the basis that he could make sure that Tony didn’t do anything foolish when the boy inevitably got bored.

Humming as he scrambled eggs for their breakfast he noticed Tony’s strange, almost wistful, gaze. Edwin put it down to the illness, after all Tony hadn’t been out of his room for about a week and that felt like a lifetime at that age. Despite his relief that the fever, in his opinion the most dangerous symptom Tony had shown yet, had gone down Edwin didn’t like the sound of his cough. It was a wet hacking noise; he’d keep a close eye on his charge’s health, perhaps make Tony take some expectorant that evening.

He smiled at Tony’s dubious look at the eggs and wholegrain toast. Whilst he knew that Tony preferred sugar, sugar and more sugar for breakfast, Edwin thought that the boy could do with the protein.

Tony heaved a melodramatic sigh and picked up a fork, he immediately started shovelling eggs down his gullet. Noticing Tony’s sudden lack of table manners Edwin raised an eyebrow in mild reproach.

Tony paused mid-chew, eggy mess grotesquely visible in his open mouth, and flinched. Ducking his head, Tony swallowed loudly, removed his elbows from the kitchen table, and adjusted his grip on his utensils from a fisted clench to dinner-party polite. Edwin filed away the unsettling response for further analysis later.

The comfortable silence the pair usually shared had an uneasy tinge to it that morning. Tony wouldn’t meet his gaze, and had apparently lost his appetite at Edwin’s non-verbal reprimand. Tony poked listlessly at his eggs, pushing them around the plate rather than actually eating them.
Edwin knew from experience that pushing Tony when he was feeling down like this wouldn’t get positive results, but his young charge needed to eat. The poor boy hadn’t been able to keep much down this past week,

“Don’t you like your eggs Tony? I know you usually prefer Cap’n Crunch in the mornings, but I thought this would be gentler on your stomach.”

Tony startled, before he guiltily started shovelling the eggs down at an alarming rate, table manners apparently forgotten again.

“Please Tony, slowly, you’ll choke.”

Although not intended as a reproach Tony clearly interpreted it as one. Edwin resisted the urge to sigh, Young Sir was being remarkably skittish this morning and he wasn’t sure what had brought it on.

Edwin watched Tony carefully as he slowly finished the rest of his breakfast at a measured, pace, manners impeccable. The old butler wished he hadn’t automatically checked Tony’s table manners, it was such an ingrained response that he hadn’t thought twice about it. Edwin had only started doing so to help Tony remain under Howard’s notice.

As Edwin bustled around, tidying up the remnants of their meal, the awkwardness between them didn’t abate. It only grew thicker with strange undertones that he didn’t know how to begin to interpret.

“Jarvis?”

Edwin absolutely did not jump when Tony’s quiet voice broke the silence.

“What’s the date again?”

Swallowing down his worry, and remembering that Tony had only calmed down the other night when he’d listed off the full date Edwin responded,
“5th August 1976.”

Tony’s entire face seemed to crumple at the reminder of the date, and Edwin wasn’t sure how to respond. He carefully watched his charge’s expression for any clue as to why this fact upset him so much.

Face eerily blank Tony jerked his rickety chair back, and stood rapidly.

“May I be excused?”

“Of course!”

Edwin worriedly watched Tony’s retreating back as he left the kitchen.

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If this place was an illusion it was a good one, they’d even included the splintered scuff on Tony’s wardrobe that he’d long since forgotten about. Of course that had somewhat scuppered his plan to tear down that Cap poster as soon as he could stand, his six year old self had been sneaky, Tony was impressed.

He needed to find something to put up there instead; he didn’t think he could bear to stare up at Steve Rogers, posed painfully patriotically, from his bed for much longer. He’d already successfully put Little Cap away in a box somewhere in the depths of the mansion, he’d allowed himself the tiny possibility that he might find it again someday and a brief smile at the well loved toy, paint already completely worn through in places. But Tony Stark as he was now, couldn’t carry around Little Cap as a protective charm in his pocket as he’d once done, not after everything that had happened.

The sheer star-spangled hopefulness of his few childhood possessions had Tony’s thoughts spiralling down dark well-worn paths, he’d had enough of this kind of self doubt to last a lifetime, hell it had lasted a lifetime, but it seemed some things were inevitable no matter what was going on around him.

Steve Rogers was far better than him, always had been, always would be no question of it, he was pure and good and everything Howard had always claimed. But the self-righteous perfection,
always, always in the right, and blind devotion he inspired in others infuriated him.

Tony had worked so damned hard to bring the Avengers together, and Cap had torn it all down without a seconds thought. They’d worked together as a team for years, and he’d thrown it all away in an instant without even trying to listen to Tony’s explanation about their delicate political situation. He’d thought he’d known better than more than half of the sovereign states of the world, and he’d somehow concluded that the UN, the bloody UN, the benevolent organisation behind Universal Human Rights and the Geneva Convention, were going to allow Bucky Barnes to be executed.

Perhaps it was Berlin that had done it, maybe if they hadn’t been in Germany Cap wouldn’t have seen Nazis at every street corner?

Urgh even now, years later Cap’s instant automatic mistrust of Tony still ached. Had he honestly thought that Tony had any of that kind of political clout that he’d come up with the document that had split them all apart? Tony agreed with the broad-brushstrokes of The Accords, always had, accountability had to be a good thing, right? The police, the military, medical professionals all had to go through training and certification before they were allowed anywhere near the general public. Accountability was the keystone of so much of the modern system of morality. There was a reason that vigilantes were considered outside the law and dangerous for fucks sake, even he, hypocrite that he was understood that. Otherwise any idiot with a gun could claim that the person he’d just shot dead deserved it like the bad old days of Might is Right.

Tony had recognised that the Accords were deeply flawed, tried to explain that they’d be able to sit down with the UN to ratify them; they’d be part of the process. They’d hash it out with 137 world leaders until there was a system in place that protected everyone, the public, the super-powered vigilantes (because let’s be honest that’s what they had been at the time), and the people unlucky enough to have abilities who just wanted to lead normal lives.

But instead Cap had taken one look at the things, seen swastikas, and torn his world down, destroying any hope of getting the Accords amended and furthering Ross’s bloody agenda. Cap had proven their point for them, and Tony had had to spend so much time on damage control and appeasement, that by the time Tha- The Titan had reared his ugly purple head Tony had been worn thin and ready to drop.

He’d barely had the energy to try to come up with a solution, let alone fight battle after battle alongside people he no longer trusted, or make nice with said same people, living under his roof, spending his money but shooting him contemptuous looks every time he dared to be in the same room as them. He deserved it he knew, but the general public had deserved better. More than once they hadn’t had his back in a fight, or ignored his tactical suggestions and people had gotten caught in the crossfire. Peter had gotten hurt far too often, the poor kid tarred with the same brush as him. Vision only accepted on sufferance. He thanked his lucky stars that Rhodey had been their military liaison and therefore hadn’t seen the worst of it; Tony wouldn’t have been able to stand it if he’d.
gotten hurt - again – trying to protect him.

No one who’d sided with him that dreadful week had been safe. Even those who’d joined the team long after the events in Berlin had been forced to take sides. Cap had drawn a line. Immutable. The team was forever divided and frankly it had shown.

Those final months had been awful. Absolutely awful, and somehow only the neutral magic users Strange, Doom and Loki of all people had seemed to understand.

And then they’d started losing their people, first Thor and Loki when Asgard burned, Peter, Sue, Stephen, Luke and Jessica, Matt, T’Challa, Vision. The litany of the dead grew in his minds eye, decaying faces staring down at him, blank eyes accusing. It was his fault, all his fault, if only he’d been better, then Steve would have agreed to work with him and they’d have had a unified front to stand up to the unstoppable cosmic forces battering down on them all.

“I’m sorry. I’m so so sorry. I wasn’t good enough I know. It’s all my fault. I’m sorry.”

The faces of those who he’d seen fall in the final battle joined the others, Bruce, Reed, Starlord, Groot, Hope, Kamala, Victor.

Tony came back to himself on the floor in front of the wardrobe, crumpled and soggy Captain America poster clenched tightly in his fists.

If Jarvis noticed Tony’s red rimmed eyes that afternoon he didn’t say anything.

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Edwin finished cleaning up the kitchen before he checked on mansion security, and gave the surfaces in the main living areas a cursory dust.

Edwin and Tony skirted around each other for the rest of the day, Edwin’s exhaustion and the sheer size of the mansion allowing Tony to avoid him with ease. If Tony’s earlier behaviour hadn’t been so uncharacteristic Edwin wouldn’t have been too worried, Tony had a tendency to hide in strange corners of the mansion putting together little contraptions in a bid to impress Howard. He had a love/fear relationship with his father, forever trying to gain the man’s attention and impress him, but always terrified of the consequences. Which were inevitably poor, at best Howard would dismiss the
boy with barely a glance in his direction.

After checking in all of the likely places, Edwin had given it up as an impossible task and went to air out Tony’s room. Edwin knew that all of the dangerous areas were secure – including the routes outside, Tony would come and find him when he was ready. (Edwin felt like a terrible caretaker at this thought, the boy was six for heavens sake! However the Stark-Carbonell genes were already showing true, Tony had a stubborn streak a mile wide, and more than enough intelligence to back it up.)

Tony had been correct in his assessment, however crudely phrased, his bedroom had been doing double duty as a sickroom recently after all. Edwin left sandwiches after clearing a spot on Tony’s bedroom perpetually parts-littered desk. He’d ended up changing the sheets out a second time in as many days.

Edwin was beginning to worry about Tony’s wellbeing, the cold had faded to a general lethargy and unpleasant cough, but the jumpy edginess? That had lingered. If Edwin was being honest with himself the expression he kept catching on Tony’s face was a painfully familiar one. Tony tended to wear it whenever Howard was around. The alarming thing was, he’d never seen it directed at himself before.

Noting the disappearance of Tony’s beloved Captain America action figure and the giant poster on the wardrobe (he smiled ruefully at the revealed gouge in the wardrobe door, he still remembered Tony’s panicked confession and the plan they’d come up with together to hide the evidence) Edwin’s worry for Tony increased tenfold.

For all that Edwin disapproved of what Howard was doing to Tony with the stick of Captain America, Tony adored Steve Rogers. More often than not he asked for tales of the Howling Commandos for his bedtime stories, the fact that Tony had removed all evidence of the good captain, his idol, from his room was more than a little alarming.

After discreetly looking around Edwin espied the damp remnants of the poster in the wastepaper basket. The action figure was nowhere to be seen.

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Fortunately for Edwin’s peace of mind Tony materialised from who-knew-where in the kitchen at dinnertime. It was difficult to set rules with a child, when he was technically one of your employers, but Tony had always respected the few boundaries that Edwin set, and morning and evening meals were one of them.
Edwin attempted to draw his charge out into conversation, drawing on and discarding several topics that had previously been guaranteed to lure Tony into loud proclamations and debate. Robots, engines, maths, computers, Captain America (Edwin had hesitated over this one, but he’d been dredging the bottom of the barrel) none of them raised a spark of interest. Polite, Jarvis hesitated to call them evasions, but he didn’t have any other word for it, but no real answers or conversation. Tony’s responses were all surprisingly perfunctory, even the slightly underhanded choice of Rex, the robot dog Tony was trying to finish before Howard came back to the mansion elicited nothing more than a quick rather technical reply about proper wiring practices. Edwin was taken aback when Tony latched upon his awkward and desperate conversational salvo about music with all the fervour of a starving man grasping at a banquet.

“Do you like music Tony?”

“Of course! What’s not to like? The baseline really helps me keep my mind on track, and the words drown out the -”

Tony lapsed into guilty silence as if he realised that he’d done something wrong, Edwin couldn’t have that. It was the first real response he’d had all night,

“What genre, um type, of music do you like Tony?”

“Um…” Tony’s face took on a strangely considering expression, as if he was trying to work out what answer would be the correct one, his expression hardened, shoulders squaring as if making a decision “Hard Rock. Uh- that is Heavy Metal, Rock, Punk. You know ACDC, Black Sabbath, Metallica.”

“Who?”

Tony blinked as if he’d never considered that someone could not have heard of, well presumably the list was band names. Edwin wondered how he’d come across them. He’d never heard Tony express a particular interest in music before; Edwin decided it must have been at the awful private school Howard had insisted upon.

Tony’s face started to fall again, Edwin hurriedly jumped in with a semi-panicked suggestion, he wanted to see Tony rambling enthusiastically again, not this quiet jumpy child that had taken his place.
“Well Tony, we could look at my music collection tomorrow and see if there’s anything you’d like to listen to?”

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As promised the next day saw Tony and Jarvis both sat inside Edwin’s little suite. The rooms were fairly comfortable, well appointed and a reasonable size. However Edwin much preferred the cosy rooms at the tiny house he and Ana shared.

Edwin looked at Tony in fond amusement, his young charge’s outrage at the woeful lack of any “modern music” in his small but perfectly formed thank you very much, Jazz collection, had him biting the inside of his cheek in an attempt to keep a straight face.

Knowing Tony as well as he did, he knew that laughter would only be interpreted as mocking. Edwin was grateful that Tony finally seemed to be settling back down to himself, he’d been worried there for a while that something was seriously wrong.

“Well perhaps we should rectify that when you’re less contagious?”

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Once Edwin was satisfied that Tony’s persistent cough had finally receded to acceptable levels he made good on his promise. The pair took one of Howard’s ridiculous cars into New York proper.

It would be good for Tony to get out of the house for a while, even if it was only for a drive. Edwin’s breakthrough on the music had been the only one, mores the pity. The previous couple of days had seen the pair of them in an uneasy holding pattern, Edwin was unwilling risk upsetting Tony when it could be nothing more than an old man’s imagination, and thus far Tony had seemed happy to abuse that reticence.

“Where are we going Jarvis?”

Edwin smiled mysteriously,
“Oh just a little shop that I know.”

Tony’s look of dismay as they pulled up outside of “Jazzin Solos” made Edwin chuckle.

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It was the realisation that ACDC didn’t exist, not properly, not yet, that pathetically made Tony’s chest ache. Once the shock of losing extremis had worn off it had actually been a relief to be alone inside his own head again. No more live stream of the world’s hatred of him direct into his brain in cold uncaring binary. Or at least for now, Tony wasn’t sure yet if it was gone or dormant, or just suppressed as part of some cruel trap.

Tony wasn’t entirely convinced that the cosy situation with Jarvis was going to last beyond the time it took him go to sleep and wake up again. But it was nice to pretend for a while.

He’d just about convinced Jarvis that his current inexplicable new interest in music wasn’t a fad that would be discarded and forgotten about within days, only to be horrified when they’d finally reached the mysterious record store and the clerk hadn’t even heard of ACDC.

Swallowing down the lump in his throat Tony half-heartedly browsed the ridiculously outdated collection of music, albeit on a format that hadn’t aged into defunct even back in his time, it was downright depressing. Somewhat cruelly he ignored Jarvis’ worried glances, he was supposed to be six, supposed to be oblivious right?

The store was grotty and smelled strongly of tobacco smoke (with more than a whiff of something… herbal) and the stacks were reassuringly full, if eccentrically catalogued. The shelf dividers were clearly homemade, hand scribbled artist names and genres sharpied directly onto brown chipboard. The brick walls plastered with black and white images of the old Jazz, Blues and Rock masters, big band names side by side with the likes of King Curtis and Little Richard.

The shop clerk matched the eclectic feel of the place, his personal style a disconcerting mix of Jazz aficionado, and aging hippy. Old fashioned 5-piece suit, long greasy hair held back by a peace-sign adorned sweatband, hairy toes poking out from his pressed trouser legs, pudgy feet squeezed into some charmingly hand-woven flip flops.

For all that Tony really wasn’t nostalgic something about this place gradually made a tight knot unfurl in his chest. The silence of his rooms had been unnerving him all week, the promise held here
was liberating.

This was a style of shop that Tony hadn’t even been aware that he’d missed, digital copies lasted forever with the correct precautions, and he’d easily been able to take his entire music collection with him wherever he went in the future. And yet Tony had kept his record collection, albeit in the same dusty corner of the Malibu mansion as Howard’s heavily edited Stark Expo film reels.

Despite his dismay at the lack of heavy metal, he caught something intriguing on the edge of his vision. His eye was drawn to a striking cover of black and pure white, bold red lettering running into one giant uberword as German was prone to.

Turning to look at the LP (he was in a record shop buying LPs for gods sake!) head-on he read off the album name bemusedly: STATIONTOSTATIONDAVIDBOWIE. Huh. He’d been vaguely aware of the guy, enough to make note of his death and acknowledge his apparent musical genius to the press when it came up, but he’d never really paid much attention. Perhaps it was time to change that.

Reaching almost reverently up to the shelves, ignoring the clerk’s mild outrage, he was stymied by his lack of height.

Thankfully Jarvis was right there with him, gently reaching over his head and passing the record down.

“Are you sure Tony? Remember you are only allowed to choose three records.”

“Yes.” And then a belated, “Please.”

Eventually Tony and Jarvis left the dingy little record shop with four albums in hand, well in Jarvis’ hands, given that the LPs were currently bigger than Tony was wide, three for Tony and a Jazz record for Ana.

He’d had a bit of a fight with both Jarvis and the clerk over his choice of record. Jarvis had expressed concern when he’d picked a second David Bowie LP from the stack,

“Wouldn’t you prefer to pick a selection of artists Tony?”
“No.”

To be fair Tony had picked the second Bowie LP purely for the reaction it would garner if Howard ever saw it. The bloody thing was glorious, a twisted playboy centrefold of an image with a naked half-dog half-man version of Bowie looking directly out at the viewer with Tony’s own trademark “I know you want me so let’s fuck” look in his eyes. The clerk had actually perked up by that point with the promise of a sure sale, and had mentioned that he could order in more Bowie records for them if they came back. Tony had been tempted, but thought he should actually listen to his purchases before making a decision.

Frankly he’d been surprised Jarvis hadn’t tried to push him into buying something more “age-appropriate” but he should have given the older man more credit. He always had cared for Tony far more than he’d dared to let on, and it showed whenever they were alone together and he could carefully indulge his young charge.

It was a relief to see the clerk’s face light up in recognition at the name Black Sabbath, pointed disgust at Tony’s poor taste, and Jarvis’ lack of intervention at Tony’s choice of a “satanic” band sure, but recognition nevertheless. Tony had been disappointed that the only LP under their name was Paranoid – but it was far far better than nothing. Having a familiar band’s music clutched in his stumpy six-year-old fingers was a hell of a balm to the soul. Even though Jarvis’ choice of music shop was lacking in hard rock at least he’d found something of home.

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Edwin smiled down fondly at the top of Tony’s head as he drove them back to the mansion, the boy was practically vibrating with excitement. Their purchases clutched carefully to his chest. Their little trip had definitely been an excellent idea.

Edwin thought it might be wise to make sure that Howard never saw Tony’s budding music collection, perhaps he’d suggest that it be stored in his room?

When they got back to the mansion Edwin carried out the plan,

“Tony – why don’t I show you how to properly place an LP on my set-up? That way Howard won’t know if you accidentally do anything to the needle. Records are delicate, and needles more so.”
Tony rolled his eyes at him. Edwin wondered where he’d picked up the habit.

“I knooooooow how to play an LP Jay-“ a guilty pause, “Jarvis.”

“Well you won’t mind reminding an old-timer like me how it’s done then will you?”

Edwin watched Tony carefully as he placed the LP on the turntable with seemingly practiced hands. Where his charge had learnt the proper technique he wasn’t sure, Howard had certainly never let him anywhere near the turntable in the family living room.

Edwin excused himself to make lunch whilst still ruminating over the growing list of changes to Tony’s personality. He seemed different, simultaneously more confident and more nervous all at once. He even held himself slightly differently. Edwin wanted to believe it was down to Tony’s recent illness, but he hadn’t helped Peggy Carter and Howard Stark carry out clandestine operations for all those years without picking something up. He’d have to be a very dull fellow indeed to not pick up on some of the skills needed for the job.

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Once Jarvis left Tony hurriedly and reverently plunked the hard won Black Sabbath LP on the turntable in Jarvis’ little room. Tension he hadn’t even been aware of gradually faded out of his shoulders as the first low metallic almost lazy chord of Warpigs leaked out over the speakers, the harsh electric buzz thrumming almost laconically. Perversely he relaxed completely as the air raid siren rang out.

Chuckling to himself darkly at the irony of a warmonger adoring this distinctly anti-war album, he noticed once more the irony that he’d probably subconsciously named Rhodey’s suit after this track. Probably had something to do with the pleasing coincidence of his own alter ego’s name and this album.

Hrmn perhaps he could use this album’s “influence” during his formative years as an excuse to never follow his father’s legacy into the weapons industry.

Iron Man when it came on was not as much of a comfort as he’d thought it would be. The song’s doom laden tone, and wrathful lyrics hit distressingly close to home after everything that happened between himself and the other Avengers, the rest of the world really they saw him like this, and then his mind turned to the distressing months during the build up to Thano- and well he’d gone off to
save the world and ended up somewhere utterly strange hadn’t he?

Forcibly biting down on his distress in case Jarvis were to come in to see him having a panic attack over a rock album Tony hurriedly ripped the LP off of the deck almost unheeding of the possible damage the needle could have wrought. Only the thought of Jarvis’ disappointment added any degree of care to his actions. He couldn’t bear the idea that Jarvis would think him so careless with something he’d bought for Tony.

Rifling through the brown paper LP bag Tony hesitantly dug out STATIONTOSTATIONDAVIDBOWIE, as he’d forever think of it in his head. Gently placing the LP on the deck he laid back on the floor trying to calm down and focus on the music, he wanted the act of listening to prevent further distressing thought about everything he’d left behind. Fortunately the strange unexpected sound of a train of all things working it’s way across the room had his mind spinning in new more mechanical directions, the harsh spin of his thoughts slowed to a calmer ticking over.

The cool detached tone of the song suited Tony’s mood eminently, seamlessly matching the refrigerant coolant for blood helplessness of his mood without forcing his mind into a downward spiral of dark self-loathing panic. This time the dire chorus of “It’s too late!” screamed out by Bowie synced with his emotional state instead of tipping it over the edge. By the time the ten minute long opening track had played out Tony felt far more in control of himself, not better, he didn’t think he’d ever feel alright ever again, but with his hands grasped firmly around the steering wheel.

Feeling a renewed interest in the world around him, Tony reached out and started examining the unfamiliar record sleeve; he found he appreciated the stark cold contrasts of the design. Chuckling darkly at the ironically named song Golden Years, Tony realised that he’d found a new musical soul mate. He’d never usurp ACDC, but this David Bowie understood the pain of living in the public eye, and expectations, and the desperate helpless rage of living down to a public image. Of course Tony realised he may well have been projecting onto the somewhat obtuse lyrics – he wasn’t in the best emotional place right now, though honestly he didn’t think he knew what a good emotional place was. Still, squashing his extremis enhanced brain the size of a planet (and several server banks and satellites) back into his still expanding six year old self’s head can’t have done him any good.

He’d given himself a whole week to bask in Jarvis’ care. Tony really wanted this situation to be real, but even struck down with a serious fever the whole time he’d been thinking that he’d been through far too much weird shit even before he’d created Iron Man to trust in his perceptions. Shuddering at the memory of what Ty had done to both of them in his obsession, Tony lay back on the carpet to stare at the ceiling and think.

Assuming this wasn’t all some elaborate trap, and Tony still hadn’t dismissed the option, he thought he was currently in the last month before Howard sent him off to that fancy boarding school. Howard had sent him off at age six and a quarter in spite of, or perhaps because of the genius he’d
shown when he’d toddled into his study with that circuit board at four, and the V8 engine he’d put together when he was si- well a few weeks ago at this point. Again assuming this wasn’t all some elaborate charade.

He, he really needed to test this wasn’t a dream world of some sort. Though of course the rules of the DreamVision tech wouldn’t necessarily apply here, given the level of tech equals magic insanity that Thanos and his armies had had access to. Though if this dream world was based on his memories, would an album he’d never knowingly listened to before be available? He didn’t think even his brain would dream up the cold soundscapes he was currently enjoying. He hadn’t thought that he’d ever come to like this sort of music. Ironic really considering that it was electronic, cold and familiarly funky in a very soothing way. It felt like one of his engineering binges, one of the healthy ones, where creation for creation’s sake was a joy rather than repentance or an escape from other thoughts.

Letting the plans for testing his environment tick over on one level of his mind he got back to thinking through his ideas of what to do, just in case everything really was as it seemed.

He vaguely remembered getting sick, and Jarvis staying with him. He’d been sent away not long after, after the incident at dinner. Howard had hit him for some fictional perceived slight, not that he’d known that at the time. He’d never known what he’d done wrong, just that he had. No the physical violence hadn’t been the final straw; it had happened often enough, it had been Howard forcing him to gulp down that glass of bourbon to be a man that had done it.

Maria had somehow been able to ignore the physical abuse, but forcing her bambino to drink alcohol? When both of his parents were already alcoholics?

Again though he hadn’t realised any of this the first time around, he’d just thought he’d done something wrong. That he’d been sent away because he’d been bad, or at least worse than usual.

On the verge of another panic attack Tony let the ritual of flipping the LP and positioning the needle carefully on side two keep him from tumbling over the edge. The off kilter melodies of the current track soothed him back down into a more productive frame of mind. Gods – he really wasn’t in a good place right now. If his hypothetical captors had wanted something from him, all they’d have had to do was dump him in a cell and start the torture – he’d crack like an egg in his current state. He sincerely doubted that anyone would ever be able to put him back together again either, not the King’s horses, nor SHIELD, nor the Avengers, or the surprisingly compassionate King T’Challa. Not that they’d ever shown any inclination towards giving him the time of day. But the image of Egg-Tony, complete with goatee, being clumsily held together in Hulk’s large green hands as the Black Panther reamed into the other Avengers for their incompetence with the glue and tape brought a twisted smile to his face.

Once he’d managed to reacquire some facsimile of calm Tony realised he needed to sit down and try
to come up with a plan of action, just on the off-chance that this was really real. He had a vague grasp of world history, or rather current events – but the really big stuff? He’d been there. He needed to make sure it didn’t happen that way again. He really hoped that Tha- The Titan was truly gone, but there was no way to tell, so he needed to prepare as if he was still a threat. Starks knew when to hedge their bets.

Perhaps it would be a good idea to try to contact Asgard, warn them not to let Loki fall. He’d grown to like the miserable git in the run up to The End, their backgrounds were too similar for him not to notice the parallels. Nah they’d never listen to a puny Midgardian, not without a hell of a push. Tony remembered what Jane had told him about the casual and shocking level of jingoistic racism the Asgardians displayed during that mess that led to the destruction of Greenwich.

But as Fury had said so many years ago, they were hopelessly and hilariously outgunned. And it would be lovely if first contact wasn’t a violent incident that resulted in a small town getting, first levelled, and then, adding insult to injury split apart as a community. They were forcibly relocated and made to sign NDAs that ensured they’d be sued into the ground if they so much as whispered about the incident with The Destroyer.

The destruction of that little community had been made moot not long after, with the Invasion of New York, and magical craziness of the Glowstick of Destiny.

Huh maybe he should branch out his specialities a bit. Of course he’d still continue with the tech, he couldn’t not, it was in his blood, and his innovations were needed. But maybe just maybe he should attempt to do as Strange, or rather Doom – with his bizarre but potent mix of science and mystical knowledge – had done before him.

Blinking in surprise at his own conclusions Tony snorted at himself, he’d always hated magic. And now he was proposing that he learn it?

At least his brain was young and malleable enough again to take to the bullshit and nonsense.

And it could prove useful in ensuring his current level of existential dilemma never reoccurred. Being able to detect mystical hoodoo directly would be ridiculously useful.

Speaking of, he had picked up some of the basic theory from Strange and Doom lately. Though he hadn’t had time to feel smug, several of his long-held observations and theories had proven true. Perhaps he could attempt to apply it? Urgh no doubt the illusion would account for that. Still it might be worth a shot.
This whole situation was untenable – he had no way to get outside verification that what he was seeing was the real world. He didn’t know the rules of this place. Didn’t know if he was caught in the Matrix, or if he’d already taken the red pill.

And even if an outside party did turn around and say that everything was real and true and right… He couldn’t take their word for it. Gods it was enough to drive a man mad, though Tony secretly thought he’d been insane for far longer than even the meanest of the gossip rags gave him credit for.

Allowing himself the tangent, Tony got back to planning for a potential future. He had to make sure he was sent off to that boarding school, much as the very idea of the place made him shudder in revulsion. He’d hated it there. Hated it. It had only gotten better when Ty- Tony swallowed down the bile that even thinking of Tiberius invoked.

Either way he had to get to the boarding school, and test out of the system ASAP. Earn himself some measure of freedom from Howard. Even if it earmarked him out as an even bigger freak than he’d been the first time around.

If this was for real he needed to get out from under Howard’s thumb, he needed to get away, reconfirm his qualifications – and oh gods that was going to take years, but it had to be done.

Tony Stark needed to be known as a technical and scientific genius once again, much as he’d hated everything that came with Stark Industries and his public persona he had to be in a position to take control and build up Earth’s defences pre-emptively.

Cap would probably be sneering at him right now, once again he was choosing to further his own goals, his selfish capitalist empire was going to have to exist in order for this half formed plan to have any hope at succeeding.

Sighing to himself Tony realised with a heavy heart that he’d need to add a business degree to his resume, he’d avoided it the first time around, effectively leaving all of the heavy lifting to Obie – and look how well that had turned out.

Was MIT far enough away from Howard’s influence? Whilst his memories of the place were mixed at best, he’d met Rhodey there. He couldn’t bear the idea of not knowing his oldest friend in this lifetime.
Of course if none of this was real, perhaps school was part of the trap. Maybe they’d sneakily get him to build for them?

Realising his thoughts were spinning in increasingly erratic circles Tony sighed and turned to put on the third and final LP he’d acquired today. He still had a few weeks of breathing space to work things out.

He took the time to appreciate the opening strains of Diamond Dogs — “This ain’t rock and roll, this is genocide!” Yeah he definitely wasn’t letting Howard see this LP.

Leaning against the LP cabinet Tony prodded gingerly at the corner of his mind he thought of as Extremis – and got a blinding headache for his troubles. It felt like knives were stabbing into his eyes. Hell it felt like the migraines Tony had gotten when he’d come down with heavy metal poisoning from the palladium. Thankfully they’d left with the palladium arc reactor, and the Starkanium (don’t laugh, Howard had named it, the bastard. Tony had been hoping to register it as Unobtainium only to find Howard had beaten him to it) he’d synthesised had somehow fast-tracked the process of flushing the palladium from his system. He hadn’t thought about it at the time, but once the fight was over he’d been grateful for that small miracle. He had not been looking forward to years of chronic illness as his body broke down the fat the palladium had been sequestered in.

Taking deep breaths through the pain Tony forced himself to focus back on the music, Diamond Dogs was segueing into the next track. He half-heartedly spread the gatefold sleeve out to find its name – Sweet Thing. Tony shut his eyes and found himself appreciating the gloomy soundscape and evocative nonsensical imagery the next 10 minutes brought.

“Is it nice in your snow storm, freezing your brain? Do you think that your face looks the same?”

The line brought him up short, remnants of his headache sparking behind his eyes as they shot open. Damn that was his twenties in a nutshell; he knew a coke bender when he heard one. He was going to do his damndest to avoid that vice this time around.

As the familiar electric riff of Rebel Rebel blared over Jarvis’ speakers Tony settled in to listen to the music.

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Edwin found himself peering fondly down at Tony’s small form sprawled on the floor in the middle
of the rug surrounded by his newly acquired LPs. The room was designated as his whenever he needed to stay the night rather than go the short distance home to the house just off the mansion grounds and Ana. The LP Tony had clearly put on still spinning through its music, somewhat alarmingly the lyrics were a chanted repetition of “shake it up shake it up” but Edwin just knew that Howard’s one track mind would immediately hear “gigolo gigolo” instead. The track descended into a cacophony of noise before thankfully trailing off into silence as the needle reached the run out groove and moved back to it’s cradle.

Beyond the basic necessity of keeping Tony’s belongings from Howard there was no way on earth he was ever letting Howard get a hint of this particular LP. If it weren’t for the look of hurt betrayal that was sure to grace Tony’s features Edwin would have been tempted to confiscate the damned thing for his own good. But he knew it was no good – one look up at him with those ridiculously oversized chocolate eyes and he’d cave immediately.

Edwin carefully stowed the dangerous LP in its equally dangerous sleeve, and slipped it between some of his own records. He pondered whether to wake Tony from his snooze, the tyke was drooling into his rug.

Glad as he was that Tony was getting some much-needed rest, he still wasn’t fully recovered from the virus. (Frankly Edwin had been shocked at the amount of self-restraint Tony had shown there, he’d been sure that the Young Sir would instantly be found in the little area he’d claimed as his “workshop” inhaling solder fumes, heedless of the instructions to carry out the process in a well-ventilated area.) But he still looked wan and pale, or rather more wan than usual.

Gently shaking his charge awake Edwin decided that he’d continue trying to draw Tony out of his shell over lunch, and let him take another nap once he’d eaten.

Lunch was a fairly light meal of tomato soup and sandwiches. Whilst lunch at a table wasn’t one of Edwin’s rules, he’d missed Tony’s company, so pushed the issue.

“Did you enjoy the records?”

Tony’s face took on that unfamiliar considering cast again, Edwin was quickly learning to hate it,

“It’s ok if you didn’t Tony. There’s no shame in buying a record and realising it’s not as good as it looked in the shop.”
'Uh – well, I really liked the David Bowie records, but there was one song on Paranoid that I. Well. I thought I like it at first, but I, um, well I didn’t.”

Edwin really wasn’t sure what to make of that little speech, he was well used to Tony stumbling over his words, brain constantly running faster than his mouth could keep up. This slower brand of reticence was yet another worrying new development. However Tony’s taste for one of the two artists gave Edwin an idea of just what he could use to replace that ruined Captain America poster.

“Well it’s fine to not like all of the songs on an album Tony, there’s a reason there’s you can lift the needle off whilst the record is still playing you know.”

Tony shot him a look that Edwin had no idea how to interpret, and pointedly started in on his soup.

Edwin decided that he really did need to bring Ana in to help with this.

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Tony couldn’t believe he’d been doing nothing more than hanging out with Jarvis for nearly a whole week, he stared out of his open window with mixed feelings, the unexpected nostalgia that kept cropping up warring with the more familiar feeling of icy coldness that he associated with his childhood “home”. He inhaled the smell of grass and the gentle waft of Maria’s favourite flowers appreciatively and reluctantly moved away from his window to settle down for a round of serious problem solving. He was glad it was apparently summer here - he’d been living in Malibu all those years for more than the lure of LA’s beaches, and ever since The Accords, and Siberia, he’d hated the cold more than ever. It was time to try and answer some of those nagging questions that kept spinning around in his brain.

Phase One in the Work Out If His Current Situation Was Mystical Mojo Plan (it was a hell of a mouthful but he was working on it) involved sitting cross-legged on the floor of his small bedroom and attempting something he’d not dared try in years. Meditation.

He’d first learnt the technique from Bruce, back when they’d just been Science Bros, high off their success at repelling the Chitauri attack the pair had spent weeks together sciencing and just talking about things that neither of them had shared with anyone else.

Of course eventually even Bruce in his infinite calm and wisdom had tired of Tony’s… Tonyness one day and gently persuaded him to sit with him in silence to try to clear his mind.
Clear his mind. That was important, not emptying his mind. That was a dangerous and stupid goal to aim for Bruce had been extremely firm about that. And for all that Tony had internally scoffed at the so-called danger, he’d heeded Bruce’s words. Bruce had never given him reason to doubt, so when his fellow scientist instructed that the technique was just so Tony had listened.

It was a good thing he had too, as he’d later found out when he’d met his Awesome Facial Hair Bro, Stephen Strange. They’d ended up fighting demons, actual bloody demons together. Not to mention the whole load of crap that came with every single encounter with Doom, he still felt his teeth grinding whenever he thought about Spamalot.

Consciously refocusing on calming his multiple thought streams down Tony got back to thinking through the meditative process. Allowing the mental armour upgrades, and dozens of other ideas for prototypes to continue unimpeded he followed the fond memory through to its conclusion.

Tony hadn’t really enjoyed meditating back then, he could see that there could be some benefits to the mind-state, but he hadn’t really felt the need to consciously alter his habitual thought streams when they worked so efficiently towards scientific discovery and creation. He’d willingly joined Bruce when the mood struck, but never really sought out opportunities to do so. After Sokovia, and The Accords the very idea of willingly examining his own hateful mindscape had been absolutely abhorrent.

Taking a series of deep calming breaths in through the nose and out through his mouth Tony gradually managed to settle down into a light trance. He leisurely began sorting through his working knowledge of magic, acquired over years of dealing with Asgardian-brand idiocy, uru, Strange’s requests and Doom’s particular brand of scientifically laced awfulness.

On a simplistic logical level Tony knew that magic at it’s most basic was energy manipulation. He had the scan readouts to prove it, and thanks to his eidetic memory, or perhaps the effects of extremis he could pull up several sets of data in his minds eye to compare.

Of course nothing in his life was ever that simple, the type of energy varied from individual to individual, with situation, and with the object. Sometimes the energy released was something simple and quantifiable – like thermal energy, or gamma radiation. More often it was something that his sensors couldn’t identify, and occasionally, much to his frustration – whatever it was blew out all of his equipment.

Useful as his heard-earned technical knowledge would probably prove in the long run it was useless to him now, though perhaps the basic ideas about energy would prove a decent stepping off point. When questioned magic users had always been adamant that attempting to explain what it was like,
was akin to explaining colour to someone who’d always been blind. Even when trying to be helpful
their explanations had been frustratingly vague and hand-wavy. A common thread to the
explanations, which even more annoyingly had as many variations as assholes and opinions, was that
a particular frame of mind was needed. Again the explanations about the frame of mind were all over
the place, but it was a start.

Remembering the mental state he’d used when accessing extremis on an extremely fine level, and
remembering the pain he’d incurred on every other attempt, he was careful to stop short of actually
trying to access the software. Tony attempted to focus his attention on trying to work out if it was
possible to feel out anything like that level of energy detection with purely the senses he’d been born
with. It was frustrating enough that he almost dropped himself out of his hard-earned meditative state.
Relaxing his grasp on his thought processes he released the frustration and tried to look at it from a
different angle.

Where did the energy come from? How was it manipulated? Nope no that was going down the same
route again, and he’d been sitting here long enough that even in his six-year-old body he could feel
things beginning to protest.

He moved on to testing out whether his solution to the DreamVision incidents with Ty would solve
anything. This whole situation, with its frankly awful level of existential angst was horribly familiar.
He’d simply…willpowered his way out of both situations if he was being honest with himself. Tony
wasn’t sure that would work even if his whole situation was a horribly advanced technological trap,
but it wouldn’t hurt to try.

Tony started applying will at his environment, attempting to manipulate it with thought alone. He felt
vaguely ridiculous, sitting there straining like he was trying to take a particularly difficult dump. In
the end he had to give it up as a bad job when he began to feel his heart racing and his temple
throbbing.

Letting his mind wander where it would Tony absently came up with a new design of Starkpad that
had a much more efficient battery life, using an ecologically sound bio-battery system that was
ridiculously recyclable. Of course the technology to manufacture the device’s basic computer
components probably didn’t even exist yet. Let alone recreating the bacteria and cell for the battery.
But it was a nice thought.

The bio-battery specs had him pondering the play of the wind through the leaves of the tree visible
from his open window. Still half in his exerting will mindset and half in his extremis-monitoring
mindstate he thought he heard something questioning. There was an inexplicable and terrifying sense
of being examined by something unknowable, other and fundamentally alien. He tried to answer
back, but he didn’t speak the language, didn’t even understand the question. The wind spoke to him,
he was one with the birds and the clouds in the sky, and he felt the turn of the earth. The sense of
questioning seemed to grow angrier, impatient. He wished he knew what it wanted, he felt tiny and
insignificant next to this being, though of course he knew the feeling all too well had done long before his trip into the Void. Something about that thought seemed to satisfy the other. And the sense of impending doom left abruptly.

Holy flying fuck! What the hell was that? It felt horribly like a hallucination, with a sinking feeling he dragged himself out of the impending flashback, he did not want to remember the time he’d been roofied by that idiot who’d thought LSD was the same as-

Tony came back to himself panting on the floor, feeling as though he’d just run a marathon with the arc-reactor out and no idea what on earth had just happened.

Oh gods he now had a third option to add to his list of potential scenarios, 1) Trap by Tha- The Titan, 2) Back in time 3) He’d gone insane. Bag of cats, batshit, certifiable, nuts, crazy, mentally disturbed…

Cutting the stream of thought off ruthlessly Tony tried to focus. Right. Shakily grabbing the glass of water on his desk, he noticed the breeze caressing his hair. Tony gulped it down in one long swallow, and turned to look warily at the tree. Nothing. It was a tree.

Well Phase One had been a long shot anyway.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for all of the kudos and bookmarks! I was surprised that my evil little prologue got so many hits to be honest, I had originally intended to post this chapter at the same time as the prologue, not just leave the evil little introduction hanging like that. So again thank you!

I really hope this lives up to people's expectations.

Soo this chapter was originally half the length, and twice the plot... Um. There definitely is a plot, (it's got a flowchart and everything) but Tony's inner monologue of doom happened. He's really supposed to be in an unhealthy place right now, so I hope that comes across!

Again, not beta read so all mistakes are my own. (Feel free to point out any glaring issues!)
(Should I add the de-aging tag as a label? I mean... Technically it kinda sorta is, but it really isn't)

...And finally - anyone got any tips for a preferred text editor to keep formatting straight? The Rich Text converter is doing strange and painful things, I mean I could go through all of the HTML tags by hand but I'd rather not!
Smiling Through This Darkness

Chapter Summary

Edwin and Tony gradually begin to relearn how to interact with each other.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 2: Smiling Through This Darkness

On another plane of existence the being known as The Ancient One frowned in consternation as an unexpected ripple echoed through the mandala chamber that she was using to model the universe. She’d only caught it because she was looking for it. The sand patterns were agitated, the usual soothing susurrations of the mandala almost deafening in the huge temple chamber.

There had already been an overwhelming tidal wave of change recently, she had no idea what had caused it since she’d been part of the stream herself, caught up in the alterations to space-time she couldn’t tell what exactly had changed. If she hadn’t been attempting to converse with a parallel counterpart in another universe she may not have even been aware of the changes at all, the spells of protection she’d been weaving to enable conversation across the void had cushioned her from the worst of it.

As it was all she’d been able to do was look around afterwards and search for clues. Try to piece together just what was different from the swirling eddies of chaos in the mandala, all the while eyeing the gaping tears left in the fabric of space-time with her third eye wondering what was missing that had previously been there. She could tell that something had happened, and recently, to the skein of the whole multiverse, but frustratingly she was no closer to working out what.

To the untrained eye the mandala looked just as chaotic as usual, no pattern discernible in the mess of coloured sand. To the Ancient One the jagged shards in the chaos indicated a truly cataclysmic event had either occurred or been averted, possibly both at once. Form flickering between her previous incarnation, that of a wizened Tibetan monk, and her current, a pale androgynous high-cheekboned woman, in her agitation, The Ancient One attempted to locate the source of the unexpected disturbance to the mystical plane.

It was a tedious process, the mandala was haphazardly settling back down into its usual chaotic flow making it more difficult to spot ripples, the tears were slowly resealing themselves. The areas of
agitated turbulence mixed sickeningly with the new pattern of chaos that was slowly overwhelming the evidence of whatever it was that had happened. Streaks of vivid green, orange and blue featured strongly in the “repaired” areas, randomly interwoven with the larger scheme making it more difficult to determine just what the new pattern was.

After an age of careful examination she finally managed to trace back the small unwelcome ripple to its source. It originated somewhere on the mundane planes of Earth, the mystical hub that was hers to protect. The unmistakeable shape the pattern was forming there had The Ancient One frowning in puzzlement, all Potential Powers there should have been accounted for, and there weren’t any due for five years. She’d so been looking forward to the birth of the next Potential candidate for the role of Sorcerer Supreme, the good Dr Strange would be an amusing being to watch she could already tell. Apparently she’d missed one. The Ancient One immediately blamed the megalomaniacal Latverian magician; most surprises on Earth could be contributed to his overly smug face.

She was about to leave the mandala chamber, halfway through turning when she realised just what it was about the tiny blot of Potential that disturbed her so very much. It was wreathed in blue, orange and green. The effect was subtle, but she couldn’t believe that she’d nearly missed it.

It was vital that she find this Potential, if they were truly as important as the mandala implied. Well. It was vital that she be the first to exert an influence, and not a being less benign than herself.

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Once he’d recovered from the lingering effects of the illness Tony basked in Jarvis’ presence. Howard was due back at the end of the month, Tony felt as if a vital deadline was looming, one of the Obie-imposed deadlines. Even away from the mansion Howard’s personality was oppressive. The atmosphere in the mansion was one of slowly looming dread.

Jarvis was doing a good job of trying to keep his spirits up, but Tony had spotted the man shooting him worried looks when he thought he wasn’t looking. Tony was spending his every waking moment worrying about the latest addition to his list of possible scenarios, and avoiding Jarvis so that he wouldn’t upset him.

Eluding the few members of staff around the mansion with an ease born of long-practice he covertly made his way down to the basement. Tony nearly had a heart attack when he slipped over a wet-spot in the hallway, he’d only just managed to catch himself on a sideboard, almost upsetting a vase in the process. Tony frowned at the bucket and mop around the corner, the gleam of the sun had a slightly different quality on the wet spot, he’d have probably spotted it sooner if he hadn’t been so busy sneaking. Tony wasn’t exactly sure why he was tiptoeing around, the staff had all known about his little hidey-hole.
Tony hadn’t felt the urge to build all week, he was surprised that he’d held out as long as he had frankly, the schematics were certainly piling up in the back of his mind. He needed to do something with his hands, the urge to fidget was becoming unbearable. He’d decided to compromise, he wouldn’t try to build anything beyond mid-00s level tech, he figured that was out of date enough to not cause any damage if this was all an elaborate ruse to use his brain.

He checked the tiny area under the back staircase that kid-him had claimed as a “workshop”, in all honesty chosen due to it’s distance from areas of the mansion Howard was likely to be at. He frowned as he noticed the potential for fume build up. As a child he’d foolishly ignored the issues with the space, in favour of it’s Howard avoiding properties. But his adult self did not want to put his brain through years of inhaling toxic chemicals purely for the sake of avoiding his assclown of a father.

On the off chance that this was real he needed to find a different space in the mansion to covertly claim as his own. Surely there was somewhere that fulfilled both his child-self’s needs to pass under Howard’s notice, and his adult self’s desire not to do unnecessary, irreversible, cumulative brain damage.

Finished with inspecting the tiny space’s (in)appropriateness as a workshop Tony began examining the projects scattered about on the sad rickety little table that was jammed in underneath the servant’s staircase.

He pulled a face at the pitiful attempts he found there, simple automatons, a few ridiculous engines, and a tiny armature that looked suspiciously similar to Dum-E’s design. The half-finished robot dog was a particularly sad little object, built as a friend for a lonely little boy, given as a desperate offering to a callous father. Unwanted images of its fate flashed before his minds-eye, crushed under Howard’s boot, barely half a day after it’s completion. He contemplated leaving the stupid, childish toy unfinished, but he knew it would raise Jarvis’ suspicions. From foggy memories and their recent conversations kid-him had gone on about the damned thing often enough. Did he really want history to repeat itself?

Tony opened up the access hatch and inspected the wiring. Well at least there were some advantages to being pint-sized again; his small fingers were able to get into areas he’d have struggled with as an adult. However despite the unexpected ease of access, the area he was peering into was dark and full of awkward corners that he couldn’t see around. Sighing to himself he moved to dissect the little dog. He had to admit that kid-him wasn’t half bad at this, there were a few spots of wiring that were slightly tangled, and the chassis was clearly scavenged scrap rather than the custom formed casings he usually preferred, but the overall design was sound.

Once he had all of the pieces laid out Tony heaved a much more pained sigh. From his vague
memories of 70s tech he had a sinking feeling that the little robot was actually on the bleeding edge of this stinking era. The handful of oversized integrated circuits built into the body of the dog had him muttering darkly about the great tech expansion of the 80s.

Well, if he had to rebuild the hateful thing he was going to do it right this time.

Tony carefully snuck down into his father’s workshop, it seemed years of future knowledge made a previously inaccessible goldmine ridiculously easy to break into. His father was painfully predictable in hindsight, the entrance combination on the old fashioned lock was the third set that he attempted – a variant of the atomic numbers of vibranium, Steve’s birthday, and though he hadn’t known it when his teenaged self had cracked this particular code, Howard’s SHIELD ID.

He resisted the urge to sneer when he saw the state of the workshop. Tony had been on the verge of contemplating using the space as a temporary workshop for the next couple of weeks until a better alternative presented itself. Christ – to think he’d idolised his father at this age. The shop was an absolute mess, booze bottles, cigarettes and meals only a few steps from gaining sentience cluttered the corners, contaminating worktops everywhere he looked.

The usual habitual spin of schematics in the back of his mind stuttered to a halt in disgusted shock.

It was probably a good thing that Howard hadn’t focussed on med-tech, anything biological in here would inevitably turn into a poison. Some of the tall tales Aunt Peggy had told him when she was in the nursing home about Howard’s accidental chemical weapons began to make a horrible sort of sense. Tony wondered how many of the Commandos far-too-early deaths post-war had been Howard’s fault one way or another.

Of course that was ignoring the woeful lack of proper laboratory protocol in here, even at a glance Tony could see several sets of chemicals that should never ever mix sat painfully close to each other on the worktops. Hazardous chemicals that should be stored in a safety cupboard left willy-nilly on numerous surfaces (remembering the incident that had led to the safety cupboard in his Malibu lab getting sliced in half, Tony winced. He’d been lucky that the particle beam hadn’t caught anything too inflammable. He’d been able to deal with that whilst JARVIS was running scans on the new arc reactor, fortunately U and Butterfingers were able to follow instructions when it was actually important). Metal samples were unlabelled and stored haphazardly, the scanning electron microscope was far too close some heavy-duty machinery (Howard would never be able to get decent images out of the poor thing, the intense vibrations must have ruined the electron-beam’s calibration by now), well, Howard’s tools were in a dreadful state full stop.

Christ, Tony really, genuinely, couldn’t believe the state of the place. Even at the deepest depths of an engineering binge, Tony had never mixed his lab spaces as heinously as this. His small Malibu workshop was a temple to manufacturing processes: metallurgy, composites, foams, polymers,
surface sciences, high-tec ceramics manufacturing. For all that the space didn’t look it at a glance it had carefully designated areas for different types of work. The processes that gave off poisonous fumes well contained within fume hoods, and the necessary heat shielding and dampening in place well beyond minimum safety specs. JARVIS’ analysis hardware was as far from the heavy machinery as Tony could get it.

In horrible contrast this place was a disaster waiting to happen, it was no wonder Tony had managed to get seriously injured here the few times he’d been allowed down to help. He still bore the scar- no he didn’t, but the phantom ache in his leg reminded him of the compound fracture that had hospitalised him for months when Howard had asked him to lift the T-beam blocking his way without checking the area was safe first. The T-beam’s other end had been linked up to some horrifying contraption that looked even more mad-science than Howard’s usual monstrosities. Howard hadn’t bothered disconnecting it, and when Tony had tried to shift the heavy thing it had started up the… Whatever it was. Tony thought it might have been a heavily customised extruder with an adjustable output, but understandably his memory of the incident was hazy.

Grinning bitterly Tony thought to himself, there’s no such thing as health and safety protocols in this place; it would be like installing fire alarms in hell. Shaking himself out of the memory Tony cast about looking for things he could filch without Howard noticing. Whilst his Old Man was a drunk, and had been away for several months, the old bastard had an inconveniently accurate memory sometimes.

He settled on stealing several small pieces of metal from Howard’s scraps bin, as well as a handful of semi-ruined circuit boards that he thought he could salvage. He didn’t really want to risk the chemicals, he didn’t trust Howard not to have cross-contaminated them. Gods, he hadn’t expected to find out that his kid-self had paid more attention to lab safety then his dad did. As he cast about for equipment, he espied the corner of a promising looking vat half-hidden by the overfull chemical waste bottles under the muck encrusted fume hood. Ah perhaps he would risk siphoning off a few choice chemicals after all…

As he was about to leave Tony caught a glint of a metal he hadn’t thought he’d ever see again. The characteristic oily blue sheen was unmistakeable.

Smiling wickedly as he espied the appropriate tools Tony couldn’t resist the urge to imagine the pained grimace on Howard’s face. When Howard stomped this time, he was the one who was going to come off worse. Remembering Fury’s line about ant meeting boot, his grin grew far too many teeth. Well this bullet ant was perched on top of its hill waiting, and all of its buddies were peering down at the puny human from the trees above. And they were hungry.
Edwin frowned at the half-arsed job the cleaner had been doing on the hallways. He needed to talk to the skeleton staff, they’d always been reliable, but the streaks left on the hardwood floor proved he needed to have a word; it was probably the new girl. She passed all of the background checks with flying colours, but she’d probably never had to clean a parquet floor before.

Hell of a butler or no, even when it was only himself and Tony living at the place, cleaning the mansion really wasn’t a one man job. He wished that his duties gave him more time to keep an eye on what Tony was up to, or failing that an excuse to follow the boy around without having to make up reasons. Tony’s continued skittishness was genuinely worrying him.

When Edwin spotted evidence that Tony had been inside his little “workshop” he smiled in relief. His charge was still far too quiet and jumpy for his liking, but the proof that he’d started taking an interest in his favourite hobbies again was promising.

The adorable robot puppy that Tony had been working on all summer was in pieces on the rickety little desk, once he’d gotten over the initial shock Edwin wasn’t too worried about the development. The pieces were all laid out in a neat grid, a clear order evident even to Edwin’s untrained eye.

He assumed that Tony had found a fault somewhere and moved to fix it. Edwin sincerely hoped that the dear boy finished his little project by his self-appointed deadline. Whilst he suspected that Howard wouldn’t appreciate the gesture, it would break Tony’s heart if he thought he hadn’t been good enough to meet his own expectations.

Edwin felt a lot more cheerful as he went about the rest of his tasks for the day, now if only he could convince Tony that he wasn’t going to suddenly turn around and do a Howard to him. Edwin gulped, mood plummeting at that awful thought.

He wondered where the camaraderie between them had gone, whilst he’d initially been willing to blame this new awkwardness on the illness, as more time passed the excuse sat heavier on his mind. Edwin knew in his heart of hearts that it was no real explanation at all.

He just wanted Tony to stop jumping at his own shadow, at this time of the afternoon the boy could usually be found following Edwin around the house, attempting to “help” with Edwin’s duties so that he’d finish sooner and they could play Howling Commandos together. However as had become usual the boy was nowhere to be seen.

Now that Tony was fully recovered Edwin found he couldn’t justify the faulty reasoning any more. Sighing as he started up the prep for their evening meal, Edwin realised that he was truly looking forward to his upcoming day off.
Usually when he was the sole caretaker in the household Edwin took his bimonthly day off with mixed feelings, well aware that Tony really didn’t like the babysitter who was hired to look after him every second Sunday. However he dearly loved his wife, and sorely missed her company whenever Howard left Tony in the lurch like this.

Edwin had been looking forward to Ana getting back all week, with everything that had been going on with Tony lately he’d missed her company, and her capable advice more than ever. Ana had such a way of putting things into perspective. Whistling as he polished the silverware Edwin cheerfully suppressed a grin at the thought that Tony was beginning to get back to his favourite past time. He didn’t notice, but the cleaning crew threw each other looks of relief, Edwin had been running them ragged for weeks.

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The next morning Tony began searching the mansion top to bottom for a more appropriate workplace. He covered his tracks by rushing through some “work” that he thought matched what he might have managed as a child, before rapidly making his way towards the lesser-used areas of the mansion.

Somewhere safe and Howard proof. Not too much to ask right?

He started in the usually closed off east-wing, picking the simple lock was the work of a moment, seems hanging out with super-sneaky superspies had it’s uses after all. Dust motes floated thickly in the air clearly visible without the stereotypical shafts of sunlight. The entire area had a creepy disused feel to it, permanently drawn curtains adding a downright sinister gloom. Everything was covered in white dustsheets, white shapes loomed out at him at unexpected moments from the darkness. As he began his systematic search of the rooms he disturbed the thick film of dust that coated every surface, the east wing was only really opened up when Howard or Maria held a party large enough to need the extra space. AKA rarely.

Tony supposed they’d held more parties when they were younger, but when he’d been a kid the only events he remembered being held here with any regularity had been Maria’s annual balls for her foundations. Howard usually held Stark Industries events in central New York, too ashamed of his alcoholic wife, and crybaby of a son to risk them ruining his business deals.

In many ways the East Wing of the mansion was perfect. Plenty of space, privacy galore, it was highly unlikely he’d be disturbed here. Of course, the privacy was also the east wing’s clear weakness. If anything were to happen, no one would find him for hours.
Sighing, and immediately regretting it as he got a lungful of dust, Tony resigned himself to sticking to the more populated areas of his childhood “home”. Damn, since when had he become so safety conscious?


Edwin counted Tony turning up unasked in the kitchen at lunchtime as a win, the silence wasn’t quite as awkward as it had been, but conversation still wasn’t flowing easily between them either.

Edwin mentally raised his eyebrows at the fine coating of dust on Young Sir’s clothes. It was adorable that Tony clearly thought he’d gotten away with it. Just over a week into his time with this new, skittish version of his charge and he’d well learnt his lesson to not let either disapproval or his concern show on his face, Tony responded poorly to both emotions, well even more poorly than he had done.

He hoped Tony hadn’t gotten into the attic again, that area of the house was not safe, the floor gave way to insulation and beams unexpectedly about three quarters of the way through the large space, in the very darkest corner.


Tony’s next checkpoint was the attic. He climbed up there that afternoon, using a little used access point – hatch in a ceiling, fold down ladder – rather than the more travelled route, the servant’s staircase. He’d needed to cobble together a long pole from tools stolen from the garden shed to shift the hatch.

He came up in the foul asbestos filled end of the attic.

He immediately ducked back down and slammed the trapdoor shut. No. Nope, no way. He was not adding asbestosis to his list of potential future health problems.

Tony practically ran to Howard’s workshop, he took the most direct route there, taking the calculated risk that he’d run into Jarvis Tony did not want to contaminate more of the mansion than strictly necessary. He rushed through opening up the complex lock irrationally trying not to breathe too deeply.
Grateful that Howard had at least had the common sense to install a safety shower Tony pulled the cord and jumped under the freezing steam of water fully clothed. He focussed on scrubbing out his hair before stripping down rapidly and kicking the sodden pile of clothing to the centre of the stream of water.

He hadn’t really thought beyond that point. He was now naked, in the middle of Howard’s toxic waste dump of a workspace; Tony wasn’t sure how he’d safely get to the door, let alone through the mansion. Shivering violently at the intense cold Tony cast about desperately for something that he could use to cover up. He eventually spotted the child-sized set of coveralls that Howard had begrudgingly bought for him at Jarvis’ insistence. That was a fond memory, he still remembered the look of triumph on Jarvis’ face when he’d won that argument.

Whilst less than ideal the coveralls were better than nothing, and even better the coat hooks were fairly close to the shower, meaning he didn’t risk melting his feet off by walking across the floor with its suspicious stains and perpetually wet patches.

Now he just had to dispose of his asbestos contaminated clothing. He thought that Howard’s fume hood and some acid would do nicely.

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When Edwin spotted Tony sneaking around the mansion in his coveralls he stifled a laugh. He wondered what Tony had done to his dusty clothes. If the boy thought he was being subtle he was in for a rude shock. He almost felt sorry for the skeleton staff, Tony had tracked dust all over the mansion. No follow able trails, mores the pity, but enough mess to require more work than his usual cursory run with the duster.

Edwin sighed disapprovingly when he found the tied together mop and garden tools underneath the attic access hatch. What on earth had possessed Tony to go poking around up there again?

Fortunately the hatch was properly secured, so Edwin didn’t feel the need to go checking on the attic. He hated going up there, something about the air in the dusty space always left him short of breath. Perhaps it was remiss of him not to check that nothing was out of place in the attic, but given that Tony was running around apparently fine, and the open insulation lined area was directly underneath the entrance-hall, and there were no visible holes in the ceiling, he felt he could get away with it.
Pulling on his gardening boots, Edwin gathered together the sagging pole, and took the tools back to the shed. He’d return the mop and inform the cleaning crew about the bigger than usual mess whenever he came across them.

Over supper Edwin pointedly enquired about Tony’s change of clothes,

“What happened to your other t-shirt Tony?”

“Huh?”

The blank look on Tony’s face was surprisingly genuine, the flash of panicked guilt that followed was more expected. Edwin resisted the urge to grimace when Tony’s shoulders immediately hunched, he’d hoped that they were getting beyond this.

“Do I want to know what you did with your dusty clothes Tony?”

Edwin did his best to inject warmth and humour into his voice. Tony’s pinched expression gradually relaxed when it became clear that Edwin wasn’t going to hit him.

“No?”

Tony tried to give him a cheeky grin, but the expression didn’t read true, there was still veiled panic behind the boy’s eyes. Edwin smothered the urge to reach across and take Tony’s hand, the poor boy had been shying away from all physical contact for weeks now. First reaction always an instinctive flinch. Suppressing his own flinch at that thought Edwin settled for more warm teasing,

“Well I do hope the clothes monster didn’t eat them Tony. Lord knows we’re already dealing with a mop monster, a garden tools monster and a dust bunny of incredible dimensions.”

Tony’s body language gradually un-tensed at Edwin’s tone of voice, face-flushing red as Edwin’s words registered.

“Sorry Jarvis.”
His voice was small, facial expression ashamed, but he’d relaxed. Edwin noted that no explanation appeared to be forthcoming. Humming noncommittally Edwin began to wordlessly gather the remains of their meal up, making it obvious that Tony wasn’t in the clear just yet, but that he wasn’t actually angry with the boy.

Tony cracked and blurted out.

“I’m sorry I was trying to find some parts for my dog.”

“What was that?”

“I was trying to find some metal for the robot dog.”

“I see.”

Edwin relaxed a tad, Tony seemed to be telling him the truth.

“You know I don’t like you going up to the attic Tony.” Edwin chided.

Tony dropped his eyes to his plate, but thankfully he continued to finish his meal rather than forget it entirely. Edwin smiled fondly at his charge, it felt like they were making some progress, much as there shouldn’t have been progress to make in the first place.

Edwin’s knees almost buckled in relief when Tony asked him to tuck him in that evening. Finally.

He’d been waiting for this moment with baited breath for a week and a half. He’d been afraid that Tony had decided that he’d outgrown the need for their little evening ritual but hadn’t wanted to ask.

Edwin had been extremely careful, he knew that Howard had no idea that he fulfilled the duties Tony’s parents should be carrying out automatically. But he’d honestly been worried that Howard’s constant rants about being a man already, and not a sissy little crybaby had gotten to his young charge in a new and cruel(ler) manner.
Edwin softly enquired if Tony would enjoy a bedtime story. His system flooded with relief again when Tony gave a tiny little nod in response.

“Any preference?”

“Uh – Lord of the Rings?”

Edwin was secretly pleased that Tony hadn’t asked for a Commandos story yet again, though he was surprised that Tony wanted Lord of the Rings. The last time he’d suggested the story Tony had loudly complained that the entire thing made no logical sense, and demanded that they swap to a factual book.

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Once Jarvis left Tony stared guiltily up at his bedroom ceiling, sleep evading him.

He was a middle-aged man possibly trapped in a prolonged torture chamber, possibly trapped inside his six-year-old body. Tony wasn’t sure if his emotional turmoil was due to whatever was being done to him, or maybe because he was stuck inside his six-year-old body, for fuck’s sake. How was this his life? Then again, Tony had been forcing his emotions down and aside to deal with later for such a very long time, perhaps it made a twisted sort of sense that he was cracking now that he was finally in an apparent place of safety.

Except he wasn’t, was he? Tony honestly had no idea if he was stuck in an impossible trap by Than-The Titan.

Tony honestly felt awful about lying to Jarvis, but he couldn’t trust him. He didn’t know if the older man really was Jarvis at all, or a construct in this impossible trap. If he was he was doing his job perfectly. Tony felt so damned conflicted.

After who knew how long staring up at the ceiling, thoughts running in circles Tony got back to trying to work out just how to work out what the hell situation he’d landed himself in.

Phase Two of Tony’s Find Out What The *Fuck* Is Going On plan involved testing the boundaries of his potential prison. He’d already established that he had the materials and tools to make dangerous tech, now to find out if he could actually do so.
If Tony actually built something deadly, it would be one more tick in favour of this whole situation not being a trick by Tha-The Titan. Logic dictated that the simulation would attempt to be as realistic as possible, within limits, such as not allowing the central subject to find his way out of the programmed parameters. If Tony could just find his way to a region where the spell or programme or whatever glitched, or the edges wrapped back around enclosing him, then he’d know one way or the other what he was up against.

If Tony could build himself the means to hurt himself, or maybe do irreparable damage to this, this simulation then perhaps they’d see the futility of imprisoning him in such a manner and let him out into the real world.

Tony thought he’d rather face actual physical torture than see that pained, pensive look on Jarvis’ face one more time. He hadn’t quite realised what that look had meant until it left, when he’d finally built up the courage to ask to be taken care of. Its sudden absence made it’s meaning painfully clear. The look of beaming joy on Jarvis’ face when he’d asked to be tucked in for the night. Gods, he was supposed to be a genius and he hadn’t realised just how much he was upsetting Jarvis. Jarvis. His d-, his Jarvis.

Tony had been so worried about upsetting Jarvis, that he hadn’t realised how much he was upsetting Jarvis.

Blinking back the tears Tony stared up at the darkness and tried to work out what the hell he was supposed to do.

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Tony was really dredging up strange places in his quest for an appropriate mini-me workshop. He’d thought of and dismissed the long disused stables (too dilapidated), the potting shed (too full of literal crap), and the disused dog kennels (too small) before concluding that anything outside of the mansion proper was out.

He’d been getting (and ignoring) strange looks from Jarvis and the numerous interchangeable cleaners for days now. Though to be fair they knew about the giant mop-pole that he’d cobbled together the day he’d rediscovered the asbestos in the attic.

He’d found his way into the old coal cellar, it was right next to the wine cellar, which always had heavy foot-traffic given Howard and Maria’s inclinations. The cellar was close enough to the kitchen
that Howard was unlikely to ever deign to stay down there for longer than it took to grab the nearest bottle of wine, he may have started off poor and working class, but the man had quickly taken to the upper classes habit of ignoring and abusing the help.

Tony figured that the coal cellar was close enough to the servants’ areas of the mansion that if something did happen he might well be heard and found in time.

The coal cellar hadn’t been his first thought when he’d decided he needed a well-ventilated area, however the massive access hatch in the ceiling for the coal deliveries might just work.

Tony decided to put it on the maybe list, he did not want to have to spend months scrubbing coal dust off of every surface.

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The dreaded/anticipated Sunday rolled around, Edwin sighed audibly at Tony’s reaction to the babysitter.

It wasn’t quite the desperate pleading he’d been dreading, of course it wasn’t, none of Tony’s reactions the past couple of weeks had matched his expectations. The poor boy had peered up at Miss Fisher’s bobbly cardigan, tissues stuffed into the sleeves, glasses dangling from a string around her neck and just looked utterly confused.

He turned a questioning face in Edwin’s direction.

“Tony, this is Miss Fisher remember? The babysitter?”

“Miss Fisher.”

“Macey dear!”

“Macey.”
Tony felt out the name as if it was unfamiliar, he squinted up at the young woman suspicion writ large on his young face.

To be fair to Tony, the boy had never liked the woman. However Tony was acting as if he’d never even met her before, the lack of recognition was alarming. Edwin wondered if that cold had done serious damage to Tony’s brain, but no he reassured himself, he’d kept his eye on Tony’s temperature as soon as he’d noticed the fever, it had never gotten dangerously high. And besides Tony had almost completely rebuilt Rex within the space of a couple of days. Putting that little dog together had taken up most of the boy’s summer, the new burst of speed was proof that he was doing ok, right? Or perhaps it was another item for the list.

Miss Fisher seemed taken aback by Tony’s overtly negative reaction. Whilst his charge wasn’t exactly good at subtle, he’d long since learnt it was better to play along with his babysitters. For Edwin’s sake if nothing else, Edwin remembered having to comfort the poor boy after Tony had overheard the last shouting match between himself and Howard.

Swallowing down his worry, Edwin bid Tony farewell and left his young charge in Macey’s competent, if rather unimaginative, hands.

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Tony had completely forgotten about Miss Macey Fisher, the babysitter. She’d probably become unnecessary when he’d been sent off to boarding school, he glared up at the dreadful woman when she pinched his cheek. Unfortunately his six-year-old face rather ruined the expression, it was less threatening, more petulant when you were sporting puppy fat rather than a goatee.

After the third suggestion that he sit down and do some finger-painting with her Tony had given the idiot woman the slip. He rather thought his actual six-year-old self would have felt resentful at the woman’s patronising take on looking after him, let alone the ex-CEO with over twenty years of experience at dealing with ruthless competitors.

He’d ended up in his father’s workshop, much as he hated the filth of the place the woman would never find him here, let alone manage to get inside. The space would do for the very basics, like cutting things in half. He ended up jury-rigging a way to work with that delicious blue-tinged metal by cobbling together an even more one-time-only example of the lasers that he’d habitually installed in his suits ever since he’d worked out how to make the cooling systems portable enough.

The horrible thing had overheated almost immediately, sparking its displeasure even as it worked. Still it did the job, the long sharp length of metal was now in four shorter and much more useful
Tony was tempted to run down to his mini-me workspace and immediately start working on integrating the sharp struts into the pathetic little dog, but thought better of it. He’d much rather avoid Maddening Macey for as long as humanly possible.

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After a pleasant day spent in the company of his wife Jarvis finally worked up the courage to bring up his concerns about Tony with Ana over dinner.

“It isn’t like him dear, he sits in his room for hours doing nothing.”

“You said that he’d gotten back to his little dog project though?”

“Well, yes, but-“

“But you think his heart isn’t in it any more?”

“Perhaps. Probably. I’m not sure. I really don’t know what’s going through his head these days Ana.”

“Oh Edwin darling. Perhaps Tony just needs some time to himself?”

“No darling, I don’t think that’s it at all. Sometimes I catch such a look of longing on his face.”

Edwin sighed heavily, Ana caught his hand before he could rest his face in it. She clung, grip fierce across their little wooden dining room table.

“Perhaps darling you should make it more obvious that you’d appreciate spending more time with the dear boy? You’ve told me often enough how under socialised the poor dear is. Do you really expect him to pick up on your subtleties? It took me months to work out how you felt about me, do you honestly think that child is going to be able to see behind your mask of British aloofness?”
“Perhaps.” He allowed, “I mean there’s been *some* progress, he asked to be tucked in again two days ago. No repeat performance though.” Edwin sighed, running his hand through his greying hair.

Ana fixed her husband with a piercing glare, fiercely biting out,

“Don’t you dare blame yourself for this Edwin. You and I both know it’s Howard’s fault – “ she trailed off, in a softer tone she continued, “You’ve managed to protect Tony from the worst of it, I know you’re doing your best within the limits we have.” She shot Edwin a guilt-ridden look, “Besides you and I both know how bad the social system can be.”

Edwin looked down at the wood grain of the table, they both loved Tony like a son, and they’d failed the poor boy.

“Oh Ana.”

“Just be there for him darling, and let him know that you *are* there for him. That’s all either of us can do.”

Edwin sighed heavily,

“Speaking of which, would you mind taking some time off darling, come to the mansion to keep Tony and I company?”

Ana smiled at her husband,

“Well I don’t have any missions coming up. I’ll see what I can do. I’ll let you know if it’s possible by the end of the week.”

Edwin looked over at his wife lovingly,

“Thank you darling.”
As Jarvis and Ana discussed Tony’s newfound personality changes, Tony had given his Sunday babysitter the slip yet again. He’d hurriedly choked down the horrible “casserole” that she’d concocted (he’d had worse over the years but he was beginning to remember this awful woman’s cooking) and pretended to get ready for bed willingly enough so she’d let her guard down again. The insufferable woman had caught up to him on the third floor landing of the servant’s stairs, fortunately he’d already dropped off his filched metal in the alcove. He didn’t want to think what she would have done to the tech down there if she’d caught him. Given her ideas of appropriate activities he rather suspected that she’d end up damaging the items in her ignorance when trying to take them away for his own good.

He’d stuffed the bed with cushions stolen from one of the many couches around the mansion to hide his absence, and was hiding in the gardens looking up at the full moon, thinking yet again. That was the only thing he really seemed to do nowadays.

Tony had been so worried about upsetting Jarvis, that he hadn’t realised how much he’d been upsetting Jarvis.

That thought had been spinning around in his head ever since he’d come to the realisation. Of course, if Jarvis wasn’t really Jarvis then maybe he should be upsetting the man.

The dark spin of his emotions had pushed the schematics in unpleasant directions, he mentally redesigned the non-lethal crowd control device, working out that it was possible to create a counter-frequency as a failsafe. Even if the nasty little paralysis machine got out there, Obie wouldn’t be able to use it against him. Catching the turn his mind had taken Tony tried to push back to working on his current situation.

Tony rubbed at his eyes ruefully, everything about his situation was suspiciously similar to that stupid British cop show Peter had once forced him to watch. Barking out a cynical laugh he found himself quoting the tagline from the show in a faux British accent,

“Am I mad, in a coma or back in time?”

At least that whiny British dude hadn’t jumped back into his child self… Though he had had the Neanderthal man in his amazing camel coat, and his cronies to deal with, so swings and roundabouts he supposed.
As he peered up at the dark vastness of space his mind was pulled unerringly towards that image of The Void, not the all too real horror of the nuke, the familiar terror of hypoxia or even the Nothing that so haunted the Chitauri, no, nothing so tame. He was reliving that awful scene in his head, the vision of the future that showed all of the original-founding members of The Avengers dead on that lifeless rock, and it was. All. His. Fault.

Christ, whilst that potential future hadn’t come to pass, the actual events that had occurred were much much worse, and just as predicted it really had been all his fault. Why wasn’t he good enough? Why was he never good enough? Not for Howard, or Obie, Pepper, Steve.

The litany started up in his head again, Thor, Loki, Peter, Sue, Stephen, Luke and Jessica, Matt, T’Challa, Vision… This time the names warped, his vision of the future twisting the faces into the pained grimaces of Steve, Bruce, Nat, Clint, Thor, the tiny part of him that was still cogent noticed a red tinge to the image, Steve, Bruce, Nat, Clint, Thor, Ste- red? Red. It was such a familiar shade… Steve, Nat, Steve, Nat, Bruce, Nat, Nat, Nat.

The cognitive loop eventually shook him out of the flashback, his mouth tasted like something had died in it, metallic taste- ah, he’d bitten through his cheek, of course.

Tony honestly had no idea how long he’d been slumped there in the grass, but the dampness gave him some idea. The dew that had built up meant it must be pretty damned late, or rather early.

He avoided looking up at the stars again, another pleasure that he’d ruined for himself with his selfishness. He had fond memories of being a member of Cambridge University’s Astronomy Club whilst he’d been studying there for his third doctorate. He smiled at the memory, lying out in the boggy fens, far, far away from light pollution, sharing awful tea out of a thermos and munching on strange British cookies whilst they wiled away the time waiting for cloud cover to pass.

With a grunt he got up and moved closer to his intended destination.

Why had he fixated on Nat? The tough superspy had made it, as far as he knew. He quickly rattled off a list of words that he associated with her in his head trying not to think too hard about the answers. Nat, liar, betrayal, Not Recommended, Russia, Itsy Bitsy Spider, superspy, sneaky, scary, teammate, friend, Russia, Russia, Red Room. Red. Red.

What about red?
Unbidden, multiple theories about temporal physics spun through his head, as far as science was aware it was impossible to physically travel back in time. Paradoxes, world ending, hole in the universe the size of Belgium, the whole shebang. Parallel universe travel on the other hand was perfectly possible, Tony had experienced that lovely situation first hand.

Shaking the whirl of thoughts out of his head in frustration Tony instead got back to trying to find out whether this whole situation was real or not.

He didn’t think he was in a coma. Unfortunately Tony knew what that felt like, he’d had plenty of experience there. He really hoped it wasn’t a coma, he didn’t want to have to jump off of a roof to become a red smear on the sidewalk if this all turned out to be some kind of brain-death induced hallucination.

It was with some trepidation that Tony sat down to meditate. Of course in typical Stark style he took the bull by the horns, his chosen spot was directly beneath the tree of freaky LSD nightmares.

Leaning back against the rough bark of the imported oak Tony started to work his way through the breathing exercises Bruce had taught him. It may be fucking late, well early now, but dammit he was going to finish what he’d come out here to do.

It took him several attempts to calm down enough to get anything close to a light trance; Tony’s hands wouldn’t stop shaking, even fisted tightly in his lap.

When he finally managed some semblance of a trance state Tony tried to get to work on the problem at hand.

Did this feel like a coma? He didn’t think so, it felt too real, nothing was disjointed or illogical or out of place. Well, except for the tree. Damn. Tony hated that his growing list of potential situations kept growing longer rather than shorter.

Than- The Titan, Time Travel, Insanity, Coma.

DreamVision, advanced technology, magic.

Magic.
Trap or no it was probably magic. It was always bloody magic.

Magic: Bullshit wrapped in an enigma.

The usual play of schematics was muted, there were some half hearted ideas to maybe think about improving the efficiency of the current (hah future) model of dialysis machine that Stark Industries produced, but nothing solid. The flashback had really twisted his usual thought processes into utter chaos.

Red. Why had that flashback been red? Red. It was important he knew. But whatever it was kept slipping through his mental fingers. It was slippery all right, as though it literally didn’t want him to look at it, the idea morphed into a tendril in his minds eye. He poked it and was rewarded with a burst of pain that made the extremis migraines pale in comparison.

Grimacing Tony glared out into the darkness.

He wasn’t sure he’d be able to re-enter the extremely fragile trance state he’d achieved. After several aborted attempts Tony managed to calm his mind enough that he thought he might be able to re-try his experiment the other day.

Remembering what he’d been doing when the bad acid trip had intervened Tony tried to reach the mindstate he’d been in when all the craziness had happened, will-exertion, extremis access, plus vague nature crap. But his heart just wasn’t in it. He didn’t think he’d be able to cope with another heart attack inducing shock that evening, or rather morning. He wasn’t sure if he’d successfully recreated the state of mind he’d been in or not, but he knew it was time to call it a night.

He figured he wouldn’t be useful for anything in this state.

He eventually fell asleep glaring up at the tree canopy in the moonlight.

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Edwin was surprised by the look of exhausted relief that Macey Fisher shot him when he arrived at the mansion on Monday morning. Whilst Tony had always made it very clear to Edwin how much
he disliked the woman he’d never run her quite this ragged before. Fear of Howard was a powerful motivator, Tony always tried to be good for his sitters. But a budding genius combined with a hyperactive six-year-old’s energy did make an exhausting combination, he was intimately aware of that fact.

However this wasn’t the usual resigned exhaustion of a sitter unused to looking after an incredibly intelligent child, besides Macey was well used to Tony by now. For all that she still didn’t seem to grasp that her usual choice of activities bored the boy silly. Macey looked at once terrified, guilty and relieved. An alarming combination.

“Macey?”

Edwin questioned lowly.

“He disappeared on me!”

“What?!”

“Twice! He vanished after you left, he only slunk back hours later for dinner. Then when I checked in on him in his bedroom he was gone.”

Edwin shot the flustered woman an angry look.

“Why didn’t you phone me?”

“Wha- Oh! No, he’s asleep in his room now.”

Slumping in relief Edwin didn’t let up on the glare. He looked at the quavering woman down his nose, for all that Tony was safe and sound now he really should have received that phonecall. He was tempted to fire the woman on the spot, but being honest with himself Tony had given him the slip several times over.

“Fine. Fail to call me again though…” Edwin allowed his voice to trail off threateningly.
Edwin watched the woman leave angrily. He’d be having a word with Tony, actually, no. The boy would only get even more secretive if he did.

He rubbed his eyes tiredly, he really hoped that Ana would be able to get the promised leave. She was far better at reading people than he was, perhaps her perspective would help shed some much needed light on this situation.

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Jarvis had been making it much more difficult for Tony to sneak around lately, every time Tony so much as thought of looking around for a new workspace the other man was there, looking at him.

He’d been half contemplating putting together a stealth module, but forcibly halted the stream of schematics before the design could get anywhere serious. Tony was beginning to worry that just thinking about the tech would give Than-The Titan the information.

Tony wasn’t sure if that meant the other had finally given up the pretence, and was just acting as a jailer would, or if it meant that Jarvis was worried about him. Of course Tony had spent years living in a far more crowded space. He’d learnt how to avoid people when he didn’t want to see them, the hateful months leading up to Than-The Titan’s invasion had raised his skill level in that area to ridiculous levels by necessity.

Avoiding Jarvis’ increasingly halting attempts at conversation Tony deftly vanished into the depths of the mansion to search.

In the end Tony found the perfect space in a room he’d forgotten all about. Something in the back of his mind made a note of that, if this place was a trick they were doing a hell of a job of dredging things out of the very depths of his subconscious. The room in question was a bizarre leftover from the days when Maria and Howard had apparently been happily married, before he’d come along.

It was fairly near the servant’s quarters, so Howard was unlikely to be going down that way, yet close enough to people that Tony didn’t feel too nervous about doing dangerous work there.

The room was an indoor squash court. Tony found that coincidence extremely amusing. For some reason it had been abandoned for as long as Tony could remember, but it was in the mansion proper, and had an entire row of windows along the back wall. The space was fairly large, and though it
smelt of must and decaying rubber the ventilation was more than adequate for Tony’s purposes.

Tony grinned, he felt like he was finally making progress.

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Tony looked around at his newly claimed space with no little satisfaction, it had taken some doing but he’d managed to clear out the worst of the filth. The area wouldn’t do as a research lab, it would never be clean enough for that, but as an area for cobbling together a few basic gadgets it was perfect.

Tony’s haul from Howard’s pathetic shitstorm of a workshop had proven useful. A lot of the tech he’d stolen from his father was decades ahead of it’s time, his vague ideas of 70s tech involved transistors, valves, tubes and tape. Tony had the makings of a set-up to produce silicon wafers if he managed to get the area clean enough, he wasn’t sure he’d actually be able to manufacture any useable chips out of them, not yet but the possible ability to produce the basic materials he needed was heartening. Of course to get beyond the single block of crystal the Czochralski dip stick method provided, he’d need a clean room that was far more sterile than that found in most medical labs let alone operating theatres. Tony sighed – he had the know-how but the means were still evading him, he wasn’t sure how he’d get a photolithography set-up fine enough to let him make chips up to the standards he needed anyway.

He finished soldering the circuit board he’d drawn out, without the proper chips he was limited in what he could do but he could easily push what he had to it’s limits. He never thought he’d say this, but why oh why wasn’t his freaky Than-Titan prison in the 80s? He’d kill for the 80s right now. Integrated circuits had come on leaps and bounds in the 80s, Tony wondered if he’d be able to circumnavigate Moore’s Law, skip ahead of the exponential growth in chip capacity to make something useful. The laughably simple software he’d overwritten in the pathetic little robot dog had already been pushing the limits of current tech. Gods the 70s were so depressingly backwards, he’d forgotten just how much tech had leapt forward since his childhood.

Sighing about the disparity between 70s chips and the kind of processing power that he was used to Tony got back to trying to work out if he could, or even should make himself a basic AI. A virtual assistant would be incredibly useful, even in this era of next to no computer networking. At this point he could code the learning routines and basic personality profile in his sleep, there was a reason he’d had more than one baby-AI in backup when JARVIS had… JARVIS.

The thought of JARVIS made something twist in his chest. Despite what the others had thought Tony had more than one backup of JARVIS in storage. Of course he did, he took better care of his frien- people than that. Hands shaking Tony carefully put his tools down and willed them to stop moving. They didn’t.
Truthfully Tony hadn’t booted up the most recent back up of JARVIS immediately for two nearly inseparable reasons, he’d no longer trusted the Avengers not to turn on him and he desperately wanted to make sure that JARVIS was safe. They’d fried his attempts to fix things, taking the word of those spiteful children over his own, the attempt to upload JARVIS to the android body had been interrupted halfway though the process corrupting both the parent file and the copy irreparably, leaving Vision painfully new and naïve in the middle of a crisis, lacking many of the memories that would have enabled him to make his own informed decisions about whether to trust the Avengers. How could he trust them not to turn around and kill one of his oldest friends out of fear, if they’d had any idea of the level of autonomy that JARVIS actually possessed...

Once everything had calmed down, Tony still hadn’t booted up JARVIS for far less selfish reasons. FRIDAY had proved herself a capable AI, eager to learn and help. He couldn’t just turn her off like that, not when she was only just finding her legs so to speak. And then there was what that would do to Vision, the young being already thought he was a disappointment. Tony couldn’t bear the thought that his, his son, would think that he preferred the “butler” (though JARVIS was so so much more to him than that) to the fully autonomous person in front of him, it wasn’t Vision’s fault that he lacked the memories, couldn’t remember just how much trust Tony had placed in his parent code. Gods, Tony sincerely hoped that Vision had been aware that he was anything but a disappointment.

Glittering binary running through his minds eye Tony realised with some surprise that he was visualising the code of both FRIDAY and JARVIS perfectly accurately. He hadn’t personally had much of a hand in either of their routines since he’d booted them up, beyond helping them to update their security protocols. Was this his eidetic memory or extremis talking? There were reams and reams of code. He hadn’t honestly expected to be able to call up their… souls like this, Tony had been planning on writing himself a new frie-assistant. Did he have the right to try to boot up his old frien- assistants in this day and age? Was his memory truly that good? Or would any attempt to recreate them be an insult, they’d both grown and learnt so much since they’d first been turned on. Did he have the right to try to recreate them? One digit, one line of code out of place and they wouldn’t be the same people. Hell even if he actually managed to get it right they’d be cast adrift, tech even further behind them than it had been.

He realised he’d been staring blankly at the oversized and woefully underpowered chips in front of him for some time. Christ what he’d give to have woken up in the 80s.

The thought of how useful even eighties-level microchips would be right now had him thinking back on the coal cellar, such a useful space sitting neglected. If it weren’t for all of the soot, coal and buckyballs coating every surface – deftly pushing down the images of his parent’s murder down to the deepest depths of his mind, he would not let Bucky Fucking Barnes ruin science for him dammit, he’d loved the structure of buckminsterfullerene for decades - Tony had a sudden flash of inspiration at the thought of all of that perfectly arranged carbon. He dredged up the paper that Li, Kinloch and Windle had published all those years ago (…in the future…) to the front of his minds eye, their process had been so laughably easy, but damned near impossible to scale up. SI had managed it after five years of research, and they’d signed contracts promising half of the money to the Materials Department at Cambridge, given that that was where the process had first been developed.
Tony didn’t need to scale the process up all that much, just a little. And the coal cellar was the perfect place for it, no one to go down there and get asbestosis from the carbon nanotubes (asbestosis? Carbon nanotubetosis?).

Grinning widely Tony ran down to Howard’s workshop to steal some more equipment, he was going to spin one of the strongest fibres known to man out of smoke. It was going to be awesome.

(Intrusive Footnote:
The carbon nanotube rope out of smoke thing? Real science, real paper, real scientists, real process. Windle is hilarious if any of you ever meet him. I figured if anyone in the MCU could work out how to scale the process up it would be Tony Fucking Stark, super-genius engineer extraordinaire right?)

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Edwin whistled as he strolled up the block towards Jazzin Solos, Ana was right he needed to make the first move. The past week had made that painfully clear when Tony had made no further steps to re-joining him at any of their usual shared activities.

The little bell over the door jingled merrily as he entered,

“Hello Frank.”

“Oh – Hey Mr Jay, Mike said you came over with that Sprog you’re looking after?”

Frank had the evening shifts at the shop, the clerk was the diametric opposite of his coworker. Where Mike was all old-fashioned suits and tie-dye hippy charm, Frank’s style was double denim and leather, fashionable flares and cowboy boots.

“Actually that’s why I’m here. Do you have any”, Edwin pulled out his shopping-list notebook and flicked to the correct page, ”Black Sabbath, ACDC, David Bowie, Metallica… Or any recommendations based on that list?”
Frank chuckled,

“Yeah, a start a trashcan fire.”

Edwin shot the clerk a withering look.

“I’m also in the market for a large poster about two feet by five.”

“Alright, alright. I’ll have a look, I think that’s the kind of crap the boss has been into lately, I’ll see if he’s left anything out back.”

After some negotiation Edwin left with 3 records (2 for Tony and 1 for Ana), and a large poster.

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Tony took advantage of Jarvis’ absence that evening to do the final set up to the equipment he needed to weave carbon nanotube rope out of almost literal thin air.

He was so hyped. This was stuff from the present that he could actually do here and now, in this foul year of our lord 1976.

In the end for lack of anything better Tony had compromised on the design of the small furnace scavenged from an old boiler stuffed in a dark corner of the mansion and some of the precious scrap he’d allowed himself from Howard’s destroyed projects. The exhaust vent fed along the old coal cellars own exhaust systems, before meeting the rush job he’d come up with in Howard’s workshop – a series of pipes that fed into the extractor system in Howard’s fume hood.

The whole system had several fans speeding the exhaust’s progress out of the mansion and into the fume hood’s filters.

He really hoped the fume hood’s vents would stand up to the heat. Though frankly Tony couldn’t care less if Howard were to get poisoning from his fume hood breaking down, or nanotube induced asbestosis.

Tony had sealed off everything else as best he could, before caving to the inevitable. He’d pinched the kid-him sized set of heat-resistant coveralls, for the times when he was allowed to help Howard
pour molten metal, a respirator and several sets of particulate filters. He’d wear this outfit at all times in the coal cellar, and it wouldn’t leave the little area in the corridor outside he’d designated as a decom-zone.

Starting up the numerous monitoring sensors he’d jury rigged out of 70s circuitry (linked via short-wave radio to an alarm that would sound if any of the numbers went into the red, he was going to carry the little box with him everywhere in the mansion), Tony got to work on feeding the gas into the furnace, checking every few seconds that his welding held true and there wasn’t a leak in the system.

Eventually Tony deemed it safe enough to let the automated systems take over, he’d come in to check on the furnace every few hours, primarily to make sure there wasn’t any dangerous exhaust build-up where there shouldn’t be, but also to make sure that the ancient jury-rigged equipment was actually holding up.

He opened up the ethanol feed, smiling in satisfaction as the smoke started to be spun into thread, it seemed to be working perfectly. When he deemed that the processed had stabilised he removed a small sample of the nanotube filament to run tests on to make sure that it had formed as anticipated.

He double and triple checked all of the safety measures built into the furnace before exiting the room and heading over to Howard’s shop. The fume hood seemed to be holding up.

Tony knew it wasn’t exactly safe, leaving a furnace running at 1200C unattended for any length of time, but he didn’t exactly have any choice, and the number of failsafes he’d built into the thing should stop any disasters.

Besides the coal cellar was built of solid rock, and was quite a way away from the actual house, it was under the garden, next to a wine cellar also built of solid rock, and Howard’s underground workshop, a space much much more likely to blow up. At worst the heat would spoil Howard’s wine collection.

As he prepared the sample for the numerous tests he’d need to run Tony hummed in satisfaction, whilst manufacturing an advanced material wasn’t exactly what he’d had in mind Tony thought he could live with this.
Edwin beamed at the way Tony’s face lit-up when he handed both the first of the LPs, and the poster over. Frank had outdone himself, or really his boss had. Albeit unknowingly.

The poster in question was a large black and white photo headshot of David Bowie blown up far larger than life-size. The man was looking out and down at something off camera, a frown on his face and cigarette between thin lips. The image was a striking one. At the bottom of the poster in block red capitals ISOLAR TOUR 76 was spelt out. Edwin hadn’t expected to be looking at music in relation to Tony until at least the boys teens, but as always Young Sir had surprised him.

The first of the LPs Frank had “borrowed” from his boss’s collection was Queen, A Night At The Opera. Edwin hadn’t been sure about it, the sleeve had looked rather old fashioned to his eyes, but Frank had insisted that “the crap Syd likes listening to” was halfway between Bowie and Sabbath.

From the expression on Tony’s face he’d been right, Edwin wasn’t sure what to make of the look of pleased familiarity but he was glad he’d put it there.

“No Tony, don’t go thinking that this will be a regular thing.” Edwin tried to look kindly stern; “You won’t get given a reward every time you destroy something. But you and I both know what would happen if your father” Edwin spat the word like a curse, “ever saw that dent in your wardrobe.”

Tony nodded up at him mutely, brown eyes huge in his face. Edwin pretended not to notice the wet gleam.

Together they moved up to Tony’s room, Edwin helping Tony tack the new poster up on the wardrobe, he thought the new poster looked far better than the old one. For a start it didn’t clash as much with the décor in the room. Though he conceded that he was biased, Edwin didn’t like propaganda, not after the horrible bile he’d witnessed in Ana’s home country, and he most certainly did not like Steve Rogers, or rather, what Steve Rogers had come to represent in this household.

They retired to Edwin’s rooms for the afternoon, Edwin had to admit he was pleasantly surprised by Queen. Though he did wonder how on earth Tony knew all of the words to Bohemian Rhapsody.

The next week was spent in relative domestic bliss, Edwin’s and Tony’s relationship still wasn’t back to what it had been, unfortunately Edwin just didn’t know what he could do to cross the yawning breach that had grown between them. However Ana’s advice about verbally expressing an interest in Tony was paying off. – If too slowly for Edwin’s sense of growing anxiety.
It seemed that Tony had finally gotten the message that Edwin welcomed his company at lunch, and it fact would actually prefer it. Sadly, Tony hadn’t asked to be tucked in again since the night he’d read him Lord of the Rings, nor restarted his habit of following Edwin around during the afternoons. Though whenever Edwin suggested they listen to music together Tony jumped on the chance.

Whilst Edwin appreciated their newfound method of bonding over listening to music together, Tony was still far too cautious around him for his peace of mind. Whenever they disagreed over whether a particular track was worth listening to again or not Tony had a nasty tendency to hunch his shoulders and physically back away from him as if scared of a blow.

Edwin had no idea where the all too clear body language was coming from. He’d never hit the poor boy; lord knew Howard did more than enough of that, and over something so trivial?

He’d learnt to telegraph his actions clearly, and make no sudden movements. If Edwin didn’t know better he’d assume that Tony was suffering from shellshock, but he dreaded to think what could possibly have happened to Tony to turn him into this, this ghost of himself whilst the boy was under his care.

Despite his ever mounting anxiety over Tony’s wellbeing Edwin appreciated that the boy seemed to be gradually relearning the trust they’d once shared, just as Edwin was gradually relearning how to interact with Tony. He just wished he knew what had happened.

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Tony and Jarvis were in the small staff kitchen, the area had always been their “space” in the mansion, most of the household staff preferring to eat the leftovers the chef left behind in the main kitchen than to cook for themselves.

They were peacefully sharing the task of making a loaf of fresh bread when the quiet harmony they’d gradually started to rebuild was shattered irrevocably. The doorbell rang, and the old-fashioned bell system started to ring. The bell labelled “Entrance Hall” was jangling back and forth almost angrily.

Looking at each other in mild shock Edwin and Tony both hurried out of the little kitchen towards the main entrance. Howard Stark was standing there, mountains of baggage in tow, with a face like thunder.
Howard stormed back into their lives two weeks early, in a foul temper. The expedition boat had sustained serious damage when it ran across an iceberg, he’d apparently returned the long way round via Italy since he had Maria in tow.

With Howard’s return there was an immediate influx of people to the house, cooks, cleaners, maids, waiting staff, the works. Despite the state of Howard’s finances the man refused to let the monetary issues show, in any way that might make it to the public eye, so no expense was spared on staff.

Of course Tony had made himself scarce as soon as was polite. Despite the increased foot-traffic Edwin had no idea where Tony had disappeared off to.

Tony slipped away to the coal cellar as soon as he was left alone. He needed time to work out just how he was going to handle Howard. He could have kicked himself, he should have thought about this, once dismissive glance from his father and he was – hah – six all over again.

He slumped down in the furthest corner of the room from the furnace and leaned against the wall. Staring blankly at the furnace monitors, he noticed his breathing echoing through the respirator harshly and made the effort to slow it down from the verge of hyperventilation. The schematics that habitually ticked along in the back of his mind had all taken a dark spiky turn. Smart bombs, and weaponry designs that would make the atomic bomb look like a water balloon were mixed in with designs for safe rooms, body armour, and protective gear. Noticing the violent theme his engineering had taken Tony forcibly halted the stream of ideas.

The sudden silence in his mind was deafening. All he could see was the look of utter contempt on Howard’s face.

Tony half-heartedly attempted some self-encouragement. Come on Stark, you’ve just engineered the manufacture of one of the strongest fibres known to man nearly 40 years early with an old boiler and some scraps. You’re better than him. You’re better than this. You’re the only name in green energy. You’ve saved the world.

His attempts at bolstering his own mood fell flat, Howard’s latest dismissal filled his minds eye, worthless, hateful, not good enough, never good enough, he flinched back, hitting his head on the
wall behind him. Steve’s final look of derision loomed out of the dark.

Even in the depths of despair the scientific part of Tony’s mind knew better than to remove the respirator in this room, he backed out of the nanotube cellar and hurriedly stripped off the protective gear.

He knew better than to be late for the “Family Dinner” that Howard had ordained. He should probably go and get ready, anything less than formal dress wouldn’t be taken well.

A large part of him hoped that this really was a trap by The Titan, or a coma. Then again maybe not, he knew he’d never let himself out of this hell if all this were some trick of his subconscious.

Tony consciously straightened his spine. Stark men are made of iron. Never show them your belly. Strut. He’d worked with people who hated him for years he could survive a few weeks in the company of his father.

Edwin was thankful that he’d gotten that poster when he had, a week later and there’d have been hell to pay. As it was Howard was demanding that the family share a meal together that evening in the dining hall. The chefs were bustling about the main kitchen, the peaceful atmosphere in the mansion shattered.

Edwin did what butler’s did best, and organised the chaos.

After the initial burst of activity had died down Edwin rushed off to find Tony, expecting the worst. The boy was in his bedroom, dressing for the family dinner looking for all the world like a man preparing to face an executioners squad.

Edwin had been shocked when Tony had turned around and looked up at him with the most world-weary pair of eyes he’d ever seen. Old, old eyes stared up at him out of a young face. He couldn’t read the emotion on Tony’s blank face, but Edwin thought the tight skin around the boy’s eyes was unpleasantly telling.

A part of him had been overjoyed that Tony wasn’t cowering or quaking in fear, but this alarming new reaction was just another item on his ever-growing list of changes. He’d desperately wanted to
take the boy aside and comfort him, but he’d been trapped by his duties and Tony had fled.

It seemed some things were destined no matter what he did. Tony had made a concerted effort to not meet Howard’s eye once at dinner. Of course that was taken as an insult, and he’d been thrown into the mantel with the force of the blow to his cheek.

Maria cradled Tony to her breast and very quietly reprimanded Howard.

“Howard! No more, not again please.”

To be fair to his Mother, she was trembling. Tony had never noticed how frightened she was of his Father before. He wondered how he hadn’t noticed, wasn’t he supposed to be a genius? He could have tried harder to help his mother. He should have tried harder.

The huge, overfull, glass of bourbon shoved into his hands came as no surprise.

Even expecting it Tony’s heart crashed down to his feet at the hateful gesture. He’d thought he’d gotten over this moment, apparently not. He froze, he couldn’t decide if he should gulp it down as before. Of if he should throw it away.

He threw it away. The delicate crystal tumbler smashed satisfyingly. He’d not exactly been teetotal, but he’d managed to cut down his intake from highly functioning alcoholic to occasional binger, and though it was a strange and twisted streak, and really wasn’t much of a streak at all, he wasn’t about to break it for Fucking Howard. Besides he knew the damage that amount of alcohol could do to a child.

Howard reared back, puffing up like an offended goose he struck Tony, hard.

Tony crashed into the coffee table. His already bruised jaw throbbed angrily at him, he raised a shaky hand to his face and tried to feel for a break.

Distantly he registered that Maria was shrieking.
As his vision blurred around the edges Tony thought to himself, huh, maybe he's really killed me this time.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for all of the kudos, bookmarks and comments! I keep getting random emails during the day telling me that people like this thing, and it's been great for keeping me writing when the self-doubt inevitably kicks in.

Once again this story hasn't been beta read, so please do feel free to point out any errors you spot.

This is another long chapter - I hope this stuff which is so incredibly in Tony's head continues to hold people's interest! I promise the actual plotlines will begin to reveal themselves soon.
Chapter Summary

The situation spirals.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 3: Draw the blinds on yesterday it’s oh so much scarier

Edwin was alerted to the, incident, by the shouting. He entered the dining room suite at a run and caught a glimpse of the problem through the open door. Maria was shrieking at Howard, Tony’s small limp form cradled to her breast.

Infuriatingly the serving staff were blocking the doorway to the anteroom, all keeping well back from the chaos. Edwin swept through the small crowd of waiters and maids that had gathered around the entrance of the side room, glaring at them with the contempt they deserved.

“Howard what have you done?”

Maria was shouting, Edwin noticed that she kept the couch between them at all times,

“Tony, Tony darling, my bambino, my baby.”

Howard was red in the face, swaying on his feet shouting back just as loudly and incoherently himself,

“Maria! It’s all your fault he’s a sissy boy! Look at the way you’re coddling him. He needs to be a man. Stark men are made of iron.”

Maria kept circling the furniture in the suite, using it to keep Howard out of grabbing reach. She was awkwardly clutching Tony’s small, but not quite small enough to make her load easy, form to her chest taking him with her as she moved. Howard’s face slowly turned puce, another burst of rage forced it’s way out of him in a stream of invective and spittle.
“Look at you! Is it any wonder he’s such a pathetic little mummy’s boy?!”

The chaos that followed was difficult to parse. Maria’s face warped in rage, she quickly, but carefully, laid Tony’s limp body down at her feet, and lunged across the coffee table for Howard. Swearing in rapid-fire Italian she crossed the gap between the two of them surprisingly agilely, given that she was wearing stilettos and a tight cocktail dress.

“Ti amazzo!”

“What are you doing you stupid Sicilian witch?”

“Figlio di Troia!”

The table screeched loudly as her stiletto scored its surface, Howard backed around the table just as quickly, but stumbled as he tripped over Tony’s small form. The boy was sandwiched uncomfortably in the gap between the couch and the coffee table, Howard’s foot dug into Tony’s abdomen before he caught himself on the hard edge of the table. Maria took advantage of his distraction; she scrambled over the coffee table again, talon-like fingernails outstretched.

From her new vantage point on top of the coffee table, she scored a set of gouges down the side of Howard’s face, the tip of her index finger bisecting the end of his moustache. The curse slipped through Howard’s lips almost involuntarily, a shouted exclamation of pain and rage,

“Argh! Stupid fucking whore!”

“Ce un cibirut!”

Clutching his face Howard reared back in pained shock, before raising his fist as if to strike her back.

Edwin called on skills that he hadn’t had to use seriously in years. Long legs crossing the room rapidly, he strode across the small anteroom and forcibly separated the pair of them before either could do any serious damage to each other or the small boy lying slumped awkwardly on the floor between them. Resisting the urge to hide his head in his hands until the whole situation went away Edwin surmised that they’d both been drinking heavily all evening. Neither one was backing down,
he had to use all of the martial arts skills that Ana and Peggy had drilled into him to stop them from hurting each other and himself.

If the situation weren’t so serious the scene would almost be comical, Maria kept trying to reach past him over his shoulders towards Howard. Her arms were outstretched, flailing in her husband’s direction. For his part Howard had his chest puffed out angrily, he was red in the face and shouting abuse about Maria’s family, Maria’s virtue, or lack thereof, and Tony’s failings as his spawn. Blood slowly soaking the white collar of his shirt Howard bellowed out,

“The ungrateful little shit doesn’t appreciate single malt bourbon when it’s forced down his throat. It’s all your fault, you’re a filthy moor-infested Sicilian blooded slut, you Mafioso bitch. You’re a whore aren’t you? Maria, you slut, who did you sleep with? Who!? He can’t be a Stark, Stark’s appreciate good scotch when they’re given it. You filthy cu-”

“Brutto figlio di puttana bastardo!”

Edwin genuinely couldn’t believe his ears, that his old friend was capable of spewing such hateful filth towards his own family -

“Bastardo! You, you – how dare you!”

Edwin’s moment of distraction cost him, Maria evaded his grasp and leapt towards Howard. Heels thoroughly destroying the finish of the coffee table she grabbed him by the collar and started trying to shake her husband bodily.

From his position crumpled half under the coffee table Tony groaned something inaudible, clearly struggling his way back to consciousness. Edwin had had enough of this nonsense. Tony was in danger of being crushed underfoot and the staff were still uselessly huddled in fright around the doorway. Edwin noted with some satisfaction that the newest member of the skeleton crew was the only unafraid face in the bunch; she was industriously clearing away the broken glass in the corner.

Howard’s patent-leather clad foot came uncomfortably close to kicking Tony in the kidneys,

“Stop this at once!”

Maria, and surprisingly Howard both fell silent meekly at the tone of his voice. Maria still clutching
Howard’s shirt tightly, Howard with a facial expression that could curdle milk.

“Maria, we need to get help for Tony.”

Maria seemed to calm down at that, releasing her husband and moving to scoop up her son, somewhat predictably Howard immediately started up again on the verbal tirade,

“Whoreson. Mafioso slut, whose is he?! The pathetic little shit can’t be mine!”

Edwin interrupted the stream of hatred coolly.

“Howard, do you really want SI’s stocks to take that hit if the news gets out that you killed your own wife and child?”

Edwin wasn’t sure if it was his words, or his tone that got through to the man. But fortunately Howard seemed to falter at that; he seemed to come back to himself, blinking down in horror at Tony’s crumpled form and Maria’s tear-streaked face. Howard stumbled backwards and away from his family, face twisted in self-loathing he turned and shakily poured himself a large helping of whiskey from the drinks cabinet.

His old friend’s reaction disgusted Edwin, but it would do for now. He gently, but firmly pushed Maria aside and started checking on Tony’s vitals. Calling out instructions to the staff that were still crowded uselessly in the doorway he got to the important business of making sure that his charge was all right.

After twenty frustrating minutes of barking orders Edwin finally had the situation under control enough to call in the family physician. The man was well paid, in fact he was paid enough not to ask awkward questions, or raise any alarm bells. Edwin hated to the very depths of his soul that the extra money was so very necessary but in this instance having a discreet doctor available around the clock was an absolute boon.

Tony knew that he’d woken up, there’d been pain and light and noise, and now he was lying on a flat horizontal surface. It was even vaguely comfortable, which was quite a large step-up from his expectations.
He cracked open his eyes cautiously, the ceiling was cracked, plaster forming a familiar landscape of crevices and gorges. He was back in his childhood bedroom again, he glanced to the side, it seemed to be the middle of the day. Tony groaned as the ache that made up the entirety of the left side of his face made itself known to him. He catalogued his teeth with his tongue; thankfully they all seemed to be there. Though he honestly thought that it wouldn’t matter that much, he was young enough now that they’d grow back in. (Hah! Tony wondered how he hadn’t caught the parallels before, new-old teeth, that really was weird.)

Tony shifted on the bed, a whole new host of aches lit up his nervous system, his entire lower abdomen felt strangely tender. The horribly familiar sensation of bruised kidneys gradually made itself known, body cashing in cheques that he hadn’t even realised he’d sent out.

A familiar woman was dozing in a chair at the foot of his bed she looked anything but matronly despite her attempts to appear so with that floral dress. She looked tough, hardened in a way that forcibly reminded him of Natasha at her most beautiful and deadly.

Ana Jarvis was sat at the end of his bed, sleeping peacefully. Something in his chest loosened and Tony relaxed immediately, he’d missed the woman dreadfully. He’d honestly forgotten just how much she meant to him, it had been such a very long time since he’d seen her last.

Tony pushed down the wave of utter heartache that threatened to overwhelm him completely. He couldn’t believe how thoroughly he’d managed to forget this woman, she’d taken care of him when his parents couldn’t be bothered with him.

He focussed fuzzily on her face, she looked exhausted and he had a sinking feeling that his current situation had nothing to do with it. The tiredness looked bone-deep, her face milk-white, skin nearly translucent in a manner that spoke of long-term illness. Tony desperately hoped that he remembered the timelines wrong, but he knew that his memory for numbers was excellent.

The thought that had been jumping up and down trying to get his attention finally made itself clear, the sheer amount of medical gear lying around his childhood bedroom was frankly alarming.

The creepy family doctor had obviously been in to patch him up, that thought was utterly horrifying. Despite his best efforts and the rising wave of panic Tony found himself drifting back down into unconsciousness lulled down by the pull of the drugs.

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Once the immediate danger had passed Edwin was guiltily grateful for the brief respite in his duties that the terrible Incident had provided. Howard had holed himself up in his workshop like a petulant child in a sulk, Edwin was under no illusions that his old friend was working, he recognised the beginnings of one of Howard’s alcohol binges when he saw it.

The great snit that Howard was in at least meant that the man wasn’t making any more outrageous demands of the staff, and somewhat luckily Maria’s continued outrage at Howard’s actions had prevented the man from hiding away until after Doctor Constantine had finished tending to Tony. So the cuts on Howard’s face had been tended to, Edwin had felt unbutlery vindictiveness at every pained hiss his employer had made as the doctor had dabbed at his face with the iodine. Dawn had been breaking when Edwin had finally packed the doctor off with a grateful smile, and several hundred dollars of hush money from the mansion’s petty cash fund.

The incompetent staff Howard had brought with him had been cowed by the events of the previous evening, so Edwin had had very little trouble sending the majority of them home for the day, and giving the more reliable skeleton-crew their orders in the certain belief that they would be obeyed.

During a lull in the chaotic activity he’d called his wife Ana and asked that she’d take a day off at the mansion, fortunately for his state of mind she’d agreed immediately, no sign of hesitation in her voice. Edwin had desperately wanted to sit in with Tony himself, however he’d needed to make sure that Maria didn’t do anything foolish in her current state of mind. The woman had been on the verge of tearing at her own hair when he’d seen her last.

Well, Tony mused resignedly as he stared up at his bedroom ceiling, laid up with half his head covered in ice packs, it seemed Howard nearly killing him had irrevocably altered the timeline. He should be begging not to be sent to that bloody school by now, not confined to the mansion until his face healed up enough that he was decent for the public eye again. Tony had lost a whole day, he really didn’t like the frequency at which he was being bedridden, he hoped it wasn’t the beginning of a trend.

Fortunately Howard’s reputation played into Tony’s hands, his black and blue face meant the older man didn’t want him interacting with the staff more than absolutely necessary. So for once Tony was actually getting the recuperation time that his injuries required. Once again Tony was aware that he was losing stretches of time to his infirmities, but with Ana’s continued presence he hadn’t cared.

Whilst he’d longed for her company Tony hadn’t been able to bring himself to be selfish enough to wake Ana, she’d looked so very pale. When Jarvis came in with a nameless staff member in tow to
relieve her, Tony had settled for thanking his lucky stars that the creepy doctor hadn’t been back yet. He repressed the shiver of utter revulsion that his memories of the man and his clammy hands brought up. Forcibly pressing down the memories of that awful man and his awful secretive touches into the darkest depths of his mind he tried to focus on the here and now through the haze of drugged pain.

Ignoring his latest interchangeable keeper Tony absentmindedly hummed the riff from Thunderstruck, incapable of remaining silent for such a long stretch of time. He was struck with a pang of deep homesickness when he realised that the song wouldn’t be written for another fourteen years. Damn he missed the familiar strains of ACDC far more than he’d ever have thought possible. He couldn’t in all truthfulness say that he missed very much about his home-situation back in the future, but familiar and much loved music was one of the few things that he unequivocally longed for.

Half-heartedly working on a way to improve the suits interfaces and response times without the aid of Extremis or an AI, Tony focussed on upgrading the implant designs he’d used in conjunction with the MK42. If he could improve the subroutines in the receptor chips it would take hardly any processing power at all to connect the suit to his nervous system’s outputs.

The schematics for the devices he’d injected into his arms all those years ago had him spiralling again, flashing onto the eerily similar ports in the people trapped in the Matrix. Tony really didn’t want to contemplate the likelihood that this whole situation was a giant fucking trap, one that he had sprung. Tony didn’t know where to stand, in the here and now there was no sense to be had, just Tony Stark where he had no fucking right to be.

Tony was aware in a distant sort of way that he wasn’t in a normal frame of mind; he didn’t think he’d have thought a sentence quite that twisted at anything approaching his usual operating parameters. Staring at the yawning chasm of shit that was his life, the almost certainly real current-future and possibly unreal current-past. Christ, that thought was even more garbled than his usual parallel streams of pure ideas, the English language really wasn’t designed for this kind of utter temporal and existential uncertainty.

Tony started the breathing exercises that would help him drop into a meditative trance and help him create some order out of the whirling chaos of his mind. However between the painkillers, the remaining aftershocks of the panic, and the persistent ache in his jaw and side he gave up on the attempt fairly quickly. He’d ended up focussing on nothing but the strangely distant sensation of the pain rather than separating his thoughts from the concerns of the physical.

Actually he was pretty bloody bored by this point, but he knew better than to push his luck where Howard was concerned. If indeed this was actually Howard, for all that his father’s actions had read pretty close to his expectations Tony still wasn’t convinced this wasn’t all a horrible Titan-induced hurricane of piss that he’d have to clean up.
Staring up at the ceiling, counting the cracks in the plaster he could feel the frustration building up, real or not, what had he actually achieved in the last few weeks?

Fuck all that was what.

He’d been so caught up in his own head that he hadn’t managed to make any progress at all on finding out whether or not this situation was what it seemed, or somehow, improbably, even fucking worse than the one he’d just left. As soon as he could sneak away he was going to get back to working on Phase II of his WTF is Going On plan.

Forcibly dragging his thoughts onto a productive track he got back to hedging his bets. Tony remembered something that he’d read about Jarvis, Edwin, the Original Jarvis on the SHIELD files that JARVIS had acquired for him. Jarvis and especially Ana were both apparently experts in martial arts – perhaps he could use this latest incident with Howard as an excuse for the sudden interest.

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Edwin hugged his wife tightly when she came down from her shift watching Tony the next morning. She looked wan in the bright summer light, dark circles under her eyes contrasting unpleasantly with the waxen paleness of too little sleep. He was grateful that she’d chosen to use one of her rare not-on-active-duty days off helping him watch his charge.

“How is he?” he asked quietly.

“Sleeping, the poor dear.” Ana looked pained, “Howard’s really done it this time, the poor mite is black and blue all over.” She scowled suddenly, “If word were to get out about this we could take Tony away from that horrible, odious little man.”

“If only we could guarantee that we’d be the ones to take him in darling.” Edwin sighed, they’d had this discussion a thousand times before, and their reasons for inaction still hadn’t changed. Despite Ana’s eyeroll he voiced the thought out loud, it could do with the reiteration,

“But you and I both know that Tony would only be used as a political pawn. I dread to think what would happen to him Ana if he ended up in the system.” He gusted out a breath, the next argument was hateful, “And unfortunately Stark Industries is too important to the world at large to be allowed to collapse under the weight of the board squabbling for power.”
Ana’s face darkened further at the reminder,

“Damn Stark Industries. And damn Howard Stark too.”

“I know darling.” Edwin agreed in pained tones.

“I hate that we can’t do anything for the poor boy. Hate it.”

Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, given that they’d had this conversation a thousand times before, and as always were no closer to coming to an acceptable solution, Ana had to rush off to work. Edwin didn’t envy her the sleep-deprived day ahead, a woman in a high-powered position still faced difficulties even now nearly thirty years after people like Peggy pioneered the concept.

Ana pecked him on the cheek and hurried out of the kitchen door in the direction of the garage. Edwin thought he heard her mutter.

“And damn SHIELD, and us all.”

He found that he rather agreed with the bitter sentiment.

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Tony was surprised when Jarvis tentatively put his head around the door that afternoon, he’d been brought bowls of nourishing gruel by generic interchangeable members of staff and had thought the older man would be far too busy organising the household to take care of him. The butler looked worn thin, tired and old in a way that made Tony’s heart ache.

Jarvis turned pained eyes on Tony, seeming to inspect him head to toe for more injuries. When he’d apparently satisfied himself that Tony wasn’t about to drop dead at any moment Jarvis thrust an unmistakeable flat square shape towards him.

Tony blinked up at him nonplussed from the bed.
Sighing heavily Jarvis sat on the edge of the bed, mattress dipping under the older man’s weight. Tony shifted away so he wouldn’t roll into him. Jarvis quickly backed away as if he’d been struck, Tony froze, he didn’t know what to do, how to react.

Jarvis seemed to spot this and started making soothing hushing noises,

“There, there Tony, it’s alright. I promise. I promise, I would never hurt you.”

“J-Jarvis?”

Tony croaked out. Did he honestly think? Is that why J had been so miserable lately? Tony felt awful. Dammit, even when he knew he was hurting the people he lov- he couldn’t help it.

Unable to bear the look of remorse, and suspicious dampness in Jarvis’ eyes for a moment longer Tony threw himself into the other man’s arms and clung to him tightly.

Jarvis seemed to crack at that, wrapping Tony up in his arms, resting his chin on Tony’s head, and murmuring,

“Tony, oh Tony, my boy. I’m so so sorry.”

They remained like that for several minutes, Tony could feel that his hair was getting damp. The sudden knowledge that Jarvis truly genuinely cared set him off too, and soon Jarvis’ shirt was utterly ruined, sodden with tears and snot.

Eventually the pair pulled apart, Jarvis looking down at Tony with such love and inexplicable guilt (what on earth did Jarvis have to feel guilty for?) in his red-rimmed eyes that Tony almost burst into tears again. He’d always known that Jarvis must have cared, but to know that he cared on this visceral level was another thing entirely. He desperately hoped that this situation wasn’t all some cruel illusion, Tony was semi-convinced he would break if it turned out that this Jarvis was illusory, and that the real Jarvis hadn’t cared for him after all.

Somewhat sheepishly Jarvis reached around behind him, and picked the LP bag up off the bed,
“I was saving this for later, maybe a Christmas present, but after everything that’s happened I think you and I could both do with some cheering up.”

He somewhat gingerly passed the LP over, as if afraid that Tony might break.

Tony was surprised when the brown bag revealed a dark night-time scene, the dark blue-black sky and the gleaming wet streets of London. A blonde man stood in the alley pictured, leaning on some boxes, clutching a guitar, and wearing a bright turquoise jumpsuit. The title itself had tiny stars embedded in the font, the whole image somehow ridiculously evocative, the album was The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and The Spiders From Mars.

“Mike ahem, “ordered” in a first pressing specially so I do hope you like it.”

Tony flipped the LP over and gazed down at the back cover, Bowie was posed provocatively in a red London phone box, sneering contemptuously out at the camera. He snorted when he spotted the instructions underneath the track listing, “To Be Played At Maximum Volume.” Tony had every intention of doing so at the first opportunity.

Tony stared down in awe at the gift, it wasn’t the album in itself that was precious, it was the very fact that Jarvis had thought of him, and put so much effort into buying a gift for him, for Tony.

Blinking back the tears that wanted to reform, Tony didn’t know what was wrong with him today, he just couldn’t stop all of these strange emotions from welling up left right and centre, Tony timidly glanced back up at Jarvis.

“Th-Thank you.” He managed to croak out in a small voice.

“You’re welcome Tony.” Jarvis’ voice was warm with a tone that Tony hesitated to put a name to. The older man looked fond, at least Tony thought he looked fond. Tony was becoming less sure of his ability to read facial expressions with every minute he spent in Jarvis’ company, too many unfamiliar emotions, full of warmth and, dare he think it, care for him to feel comfortable trying to name.

Forcing back the growing knot of emotion that wanted to sit heavy in his chest Tony got around to asking the question that he’d been ruminating over ever since he’d woken up with half his face black and blue,
“Jarvis, um, can I, can we,” Tony trailed off uncertainly, swallowed and tried again, “Could you please teach me martial arts?”

“What was that Tony?”

“Jarvis, could you please teach me martial arts?”

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Staring down in consternation at his charge Edwin considered his suggestion, it was obvious that Howard had triggered the idea in the boy’s head, and honestly Edwin couldn’t blame the poor child.

He thought he should consult Ana on this, Edwin had a feeling she’d have plenty of suggestions about how he should go about teaching Tony the basics without giving him any grand ideas about fighting larger opponents than himself. Before he could reply Tony started talking rapidly, “We’ll need to keep this on the down low.”

“Tony?” Jarvis questioned, amused by the assumption of agreement, and unsure what his charge meant.

“We need to keep it quiet that we’re doing this. I don’t want Howard to know.” Tony seemed to check himself here, “I don’t want anyone who’d want to kidnap me to know I can defend myself.”

“Ah. I see.”

Tony seemed to take Edwin’s pondering tone as a signal to bring out more persuasive arguments. Edwin felt his consternation growing as Tony’s face settled into an incredibly grave position, voice low, rushed and certain with a self-confidence that he’d never heard from his charge before. If he didn’t know better Edwin would think that Tony were gearing himself up for a business deal with rivals, his behaviour was so similar in body language and tone to Howard’s at an important meeting,

“There’s already been what, three, kidnapping attempts? I need to be able to take care of myself, even if I’m in a situation where fighting back would be the worst idea in the history of mankind, if I
were to somehow get myself out I’d need to be able to look after myself. Or maybe even be able to
put myself in a position where a kidnapping wouldn’t actually be possible.”

Edwin paused before replying, whilst he hated that the boy sounded so, so adult, Tony’s arguments
actually seemed to make sense. The boy was being rational and logical, for all that Edwin thought
that this turn of events was triggered by the emotional fallout from Howard’s latest round of, well,
there was no other word for it, abuse. Being honest with himself, Edwin wouldn’t have blamed Tony
for his motivations being less than sensible, but his charge’s arguments seemed to make sense.

He decided to acquiesce,

“Okay Tony, but, we only start once you’ve healed up enough.”

“Thank-“

“And,” he interrupted, “Ana has to be there to supervise.”

Edwin was puzzled by the momentary flash of triumph on Tony’s face, he had been sure that
bringing up Ana would put his charge off the idea. Thanks to Howard Tony had some very definite
ideas about what women could and couldn’t do. But if anything Edwin felt as if he’d somehow just
been played.

He wasn’t sure that he liked the feeling, or the implications.

This new manipulative streak was yet another item for the ever-growing list of personality traits that
Edwin was compiling. He wasn’t sure if he’d ever bring up the full extent of the changes with
someone else, quite a few of the differences were extremely difficult to explain verbally let alone
convincingly. Even with Ana he’d struggled to convey the breadth of his concerns.

Edwin wasn’t entirely sure what the puzzle pieces were adding up to yet, he felt as if he had nearly
all of the pieces of the jigsaw now. If he could just find an edge, or a corner, some part of the picture
that wasn’t just yet another useless piece of sky, than he felt as if the whole image would come
together and start to make sense.
The following evening there was yet another gentle knock on the door, Tony was getting tired of people walking on eggshells around him, it only made him more acutely aware that the other shoe was going to drop any moment, and that Howard’s patience would soon run out or possibly worse The Titan would reveal himself. If Jarvis hadn’t practically ordered him to stay in bed Tony would have hidden himself away in his shop as soon as he’d woken up, but he was still on the good-drugs and didn’t trust himself to do any delicate or dangerous work.

He was surprised when instead of Jarvis, or one of the few other staff members allowed in to see him, Maria stuck her head around the door. Her gaze lingered on his face, taking in the ugly bruising but she wouldn’t meet his eyes. She was looking around everywhere but at him, he caught the moment when she realised he’d done some minor redecorating, her expression morphing from one of shame to puzzlement for a fraction of a second.

“Oh Tony.” She breathed out; in a moment she’d crossed the room and gathered him into her arms for a breath-stealing hug. After a moment of stunned immobility Tony found himself clinging tightly back. He’d forgotten this, her softness, her scent, the way she truly cared.

“Mom!” he sobbed back, clinging tighter still.

It was so easy to forget the genuine love she’d somehow held for both Tony and Howard, selfish hateful Starks both. It was all too easy to focus on the bad times, despite the utter care she’d always shown him on her good days.

There was something horribly fragile about his mother, she had been a strong woman once upon a time, before Howard had happened. Tony knew it for a fact; he’d seen the evidence. A scientific genius in her own right Maria had caught Howard’s attention at a stupid social event by fending off Obie’s unwanted advances with cool indifference, sass, and when all else failed a well placed heel to a groin.

It had transpired later that evening that the pair of them had far more in common than merely having to attend the same unpleasant societal events with New York’s upper classes, Maria had been amongst the score of scientists working on the Manhattan Project. Somehow she’d earned herself enough of a reputation in an era as backwards as the forties to gain herself a position as a researcher there. Whilst she didn’t have a particularly major role, after all she was only a woman, she had been there on her own merit for her scientific mind, not to fetch the coffee.

Tony still wasn’t sure why Maria had fallen for Howard’s flash and dazzle, she was far more intelligent than that, but he was painfully aware of just how charming his father could be when he wanted to put the effort in. After all, Tony had employed the same techniques himself many a time;
he’d learnt the hard way that it was the only way to survive when you were an incredibly young “naïve” CEO at 21 and the sharks were circling.

He was horribly aware that the drugs were doing strange things to his thought processes, they were rose tinted and nostalgia filled. Christ, perhaps this was part of the trap.

Tony wasn’t sure which of the many possible existential scenarios he’d prefer to be real at this point, he couldn’t face the idea of dealing with his parents and all of their shit. Yet somehow the thought that his mother was merely a figment was utterly terrifying.

His spiralling thoughts were interrupted by Maria’s own stream of nonsense,

“Oh my bambino, can you ever forgive me for allowing your father” the words were spat like a curse, “to ever lay a hand on you?”

Tony’s heart sank, whilst Maria wasn’t having one of her truly bad days he thought that she might be having one of her bitter days, one of many she’d spent drinking and bemoaning loudly to anyone who would listen that Howard Stark had ruined her life. Whilst Tony was aware that there was an awful lot of truth in that statement, he hated seeing his mother so darkly and helplessly angry with her lot in life. She could have done things to help herself he knew, after all her siblings would have welcomed her back into the fold of the Carbonell family with open arms.

“It’s okay mom.” He uttered on rote, “It’s not as bad as it looks.”

He noted that she seemed to relax at those words. Ah, she actually was having a bad day then. If she’d been entirely with it Maria would have checked on his wellbeing for herself, not just taken his word for it.

The visit home must have been a bad one if a little shouting match with Howard affected her so much. Holding in the sigh by effort of will Tony hugged her again, this time more for her comfort than his own. Tony admitted to himself that he was angry with her for this. He knew it was unfair, but he was a Stark, and they had a well-earned reputation for selfishness.

She’d gotten better by his late teens, he’d just been building a proper relationship with her when she’d been snatched away. Tony acknowledged that that little fact may have contributed to his reaction when he’d found out about Barnes’ involvement, well that and the way he’d found out. Steve had lied to his face for two whole years about it, despite hypocritically ragging on him about transparency within the team.
Tony was far too relieved when Maria seemed to think she’d done enough mothering for the day. He couldn’t cope with the massive step-back in their relationship, not in his current state of mind. He supposed that was all part of Than-The Titan’s trap, and he was playing straight into the purple ass’s hands.

Now that the household consisted of more than just Edwin and the cleaning crew he had more opportunities to spend time with his darling wife, however every time he made the short journey to their shared home Edwin felt a sharp stab of guilt. He felt as if he was betraying Tony every single time he left him alone in that hateful mansion with Howard. Edwin had decidedly mixed feelings every time their lonely shared summers came to an end, and this time around was no exception. Edwin was of the opinion that home was where you had to feel safe. If you didn’t feel safe, it wasn’t home. Edwin was under no illusions as to how Tony felt about the mansion.

Thankfully something about the incident seemed to have knocked some sense into his erratic master, Howard had retreated to his workshop, avoiding everyone else in the household except when forced. Edwin had only really felt comfortable leaving Tony in the household after giving the staff explicit instructions not to let Howard anywhere near Tony’s bedroom. Though fortunately Edwin felt that the idiot man was unlikely to make an appearance that evening.

Over a shared dinner of shepherd’s pie (it had been his turn to cook, and he’d opted for British comfort food given the situation) Edwin finally found the time to voice the question he’d been meaning to ask Ana all evening,

“Darling I need to ask you for a favour.”

“Yes dear?”

Edwin swallowed, his previously appetising supper sitting like concrete in his stomach. He wasn’t sure how Ana would take this suggestion, but he’d already as good as promised Tony that this would happen.

“I need you to teach Tony martial arts darling.”

Ana surprised him with the wry tone in her voice,
“Am I to assume the latest incident with Howard brought this on?”

Edwin didn’t quite know how to respond to that question,

“Well, yes darling.”

“Damn that man.” She hissed, “Well you’ll be pleased to know I got the time off you asked for.”

Edwin smiled wanly at his wife, she continued in a determined tone of voice,

“It’ll be no trouble to teach Tony some of the basics, lord knows you could do with a refresher course dear,” Ana shot him a warmly condescending look, “and I was planning on spending my hard-earned holiday with the pair of you anyway. It’ll be fun, wiping the floor with both of you big strong men.”

Edwin found himself smiling at his wife sappily, her no-nonsense approach to life and love somehow always managed to catch him by surprise despite the manner in which they’d met.

Avoiding the young woman mopping down the kitchen corridor Tony snuck down to the nanotube cellar, it was a relief to have the freedom to move around again. He’d hidden the painkillers in his cheek to take advantage of Jarvis’s absence, ever since the chaos that came with Howard’s return it had gotten far too difficult to check up on the progress he was making down there.

Shrugging on the coveralls and respirator, and wincing when the mask pushed against his still tender jaw, Tony eagerly entered the dark and sooty chamber. The spool of filament was filling up, but not as quickly as he’d like. Whilst he’d managed to make a relatively efficient set-up it wasn’t anywhere near the levels he’d achieved with SI back in the day.

Breathing out a heavy sigh through the respirator filters in disappointment Tony quickly checked over the ethanol feed levels, topping up the tank when he saw that it had gotten a little low, though fortunately not low enough to trigger his alarm. Tony had no idea how he’d have gone about explaining that one to Jarvis. Though there wasn’t as much filament being produced as he’d like in
an ideal world, Tony needed to start thinking about how he’d process the fibre into something useable.

It would be quite easy to make a basic rope from the filament, the only real difficulty would be in making sure he didn’t introduce any flaws into the structure when he twisted the fibres together. Tony had spotted some 316L stainless steel tubing in his kid-self’s scraps-bin that would be perfect for the task, and might later be repurposed for the casings of those implants he’d been thinking about.

If he could produce enough filament to make something more complicated than that though, he’d need to start thinking about more complicated processing equipment.

Thoughts about forges, metallurgy, phase diagrams, temperature and leatherworking spinning through his mind Tony felt downright cheerful as he habitually snuck through the mansion back to his squash-shop. Tony started to reconsider his plans for those wonderful struts of blue-tinged metal that he’d pinched from Howard’s scraps bin, perhaps he shouldn’t waste all four shards in the robotic dog. Whilst the original long thin shard was far too slender to make anything useful, the shorter lengths of metal he’d created could be formed into something extremely useful indeed.

He automatically started to catalogue the materials he’d need to make the designs he was contemplating. Tony knew he’d need to find a source of wood, or failing that a plastic he could cast with similar properties if his half-formed idea was going to take fruit.

When he arrived at the shop Tony finally got around to integrating one of those metal struts into the chassis of the robot dog. It didn’t take very long given how much time he’d spent deliberating over the idea, the shard wasn’t actually there to do anything structural so didn’t actually need to be worked. If history repeated itself he was going to be ready this time.

Closing up and setting aside “Rex” Tony got on to his attempts to programme basic learning software into the small rudimentary computer formed from several pieces of circuitry he’d managed to cobble together. Whilst it wouldn’t be up to snuff, it could be a proof of concept for his MK42 replacement ideas. He’d need to build himself a computer with halfway decent specs to properly compile this stuff, but it was useful to run through the concepts.

Mentally cataloguing the electronics he’d seen around the mansion that he might be able to press-gang for his purposes Tony unthinkingly improved Rex’s chassis, automatically replacing several panels of bodywork with improved shapes that more closely resembled the musculature of an actual hound.

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Luckily Tony had finally been allowed up and about the following day, he’d been going stir crazy cooped up in his room like that. Following the sound of music he found himself outside the music room, it’s centrepiece a large grand piano. Cautiously entering the forest-scene wallpapered room Tony found himself sticking his head around a doorjamb this time. Some of his fondest memories of the mansion involved this room, also some of his worst.

He could hear the far too familiar strains of his mom playing “Try To Remember” on the grand, the song sent a thrum of nostalgia up his spine banishing the lingering homesickness the lack of ACDC had brought on. Even on her bad days his mom had always loved playing this song with him.

“Hi Mom.” Tony choked out, he hoped she was having a good day; somewhat selfishly he didn’t think he could stand it if she was having a bad one.

“Hello Bambino.” She beamed back at him, “Do you want to join me?”

“Please.” He breathed out.

His mum shuffled along the piano stool, making room for him, wincing at the ache in his abdomen Tony took his habitual spot at the high C, he would be playing rhythm in counterpoint to her melody two octaves down.

The notes came to him easily despite the decades between the last time he’d played and now. Tony lost himself to the music and the memories, he allowed himself to simply appreciate the moment.

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Edwin smiled softly to himself when he heard the familiar strains of Maria and Tony playing the grand together, in this at least the pair could provide each other some much needed comfort.

The influx of staff to the household had at once made his life easier and more difficult. Edwin no longer had to deal with the minutiae of cleaning the mansion, but instead he was managing a staff of thirty or so.

Fortunately the skeleton-staff had been allowed to stay, and they at least were competent enough to be left to it. Nodding to the new-girl on the skeleton crew as she mopped the far end of the hallway Edwin made his way over to a mess in the making that he could see beginning to happen.
As he calmly threatened the incompetent fools with demotion Edwin plotted. He needed to organise things by the end of the week so that he’d have the freedom to help supervise Tony’s lessons with Ana. Edwin thought that one of the smaller halls in the west wing would do nicely for their purposes. The halls had originally been planned as entertaining rooms anyway so there was plenty of floor space, and if he remembered correctly the wood was nicely sprung for dancing, or sparring.

Edwin refocused on dressing down the idiot who’d thought that floor-polish was a suitable substitute for the wax that was supposed to be used on the banisters. He was spending far too much of his time dealing with the idiocy of the staff that Howard had hired, Edwin had seen even less of Tony in the past couple of days than he usually managed when the poor boy was attending school.

Still Ana’s leave was due at the end of the week, Edwin was looking forward to having another excuse to spend time with his young charge, and Tony had actually suggested this one.

The extra time together might just provide the final pieces of the puzzle that he needed.

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The next morning saw Tony attempting to sneak Rex to his decoy workshop under the stairs, he didn’t want anyone but Jarvis to know about the little robot animal yet. He certainly didn’t trust anyone, even Jarvis, to know about his newly chosen workspace. Unfortunately the route that swung around to his old workshop under the stairs took Tony down the oppressive, dark wood wainscoted, long straight corridor that went directly past his father’s study. There were no alternate routes, no turnings, and nowhere to hide if Howard should spot him. It hadn’t been an issue when it had just been him and Jarvis in the mansion. Tony could curse himself for forgetting that the route between one half of the house and the other took him past this room, but it had been decades since he’d lived in the mansion.

Tony had planned on making his way down the corridor as quickly as he could without making his footsteps echo loudly along the hard wooden chamber that formed the corridor’s walls, floor and ceiling. However the snatch of conversation that he overheard as he passed the partially ajar door to his father’s study stopped him dead in his tracks,

“Howard listen to reason man, you’re haemorrhaging money, you need to cut a deal.”

“No Obadiah, I’ll never betray my principles like that, SI does not deal under the table and especially not with communists, or double crossing Nazi affiliated corporations.”
As Tony was beginning to learn, few things are hidden from a quiet child with good eyesight. Obadiah was looming almost threateningly over Howard, whilst he didn’t have the sheer bulk that he’d possessed in the future he was still a tall man. And as a young man, he hadn’t yet run to fat, so what bulk he did possess was mostly muscle.

Howard for his part refused to be intimidated, scowling furiously up at his business partner he got right into the other man’s space, moustache bristling with his anger.

After an apparent age Howard seemed to slump, anger leaching out of him, he turned and poured himself a generous helping of whiskey from the decanter. As Howard was gulping the drink down in a long swallow Obie continued the argument,

“Howie, you need to make a deal, get in bed with Roxxon, it’s only temporary. With SI’s finances the way they are...”

“No! Obie, they’re all Nazi bastards. I, I can’t. I won’t.” Howard seemed to square his shoulders and said quietly, “Steve wouldn’t.”

Obie glared pointedly at the scratch-marks down the left side of Howard’s face, eyebrows moving in an exaggerated fashion. They were both aware of the reasons why Howard hadn’t been able to leave the mansion to meet with the board or go out in public for the past week, despite his well-publicised return to New York.

If Tony hadn’t spent decades swimming in the shark-tank of corporate bullshit he doubted he’d have been able to follow the non-verbal conversation, as things stood the body-language was clear as day.

Obie was threatening to reveal the details of the latest incident in the Stark household to the press if Howard didn’t play ball, and Howard was attempting to call his bluff. Tony thought that Howard would win this one, Obie wanted to run SI not burn his cash cow to the ground.

“No Obie, I refuse to work with those bastards who tried to frame me.”

“Howard, that was all conjecture, there was never any proof. Besides – “
“I said NO, Obie.”

Obie gradually seemed to realise that there was no changing Howard’s mind on this matter. As he’d always done with Tony when there was no recourse he rapidly changed the topic of the conversation, in the hope that Howard would forget the discussion so that he could carry out the plan of action regardless. The calculating expression crossed his face again; it was so transparent Tony wondered for the hundredth time how he hadn’t spotted it before. He thought that Howard might have been able to read it, but the other man disappointed him by rising to the bait.

“So Howard, how’s your boy doing?”

Obie’s gambit worked perfectly, Howard’s face immediately twisted in rage, this time aimed at Tony,

“Ungrateful little shit didn’t know good single malt bourbon when I shoved it in his face. Pathetic little mommy’s boy. Sissy. I swear he’s no son of mine, no Stark would ever-”

Obie seemed to realise that he’d miscalculated with his choice of gambit; he clumsily attempted to break the productivity halting rage with a jovial quip, all the finesse he’d possessed by Tony’s time missing.

“Young people these days, eh?”

Tony quietly snorted to himself from his spot in the corridor, he focused on the first half of Howard’s rant; ignoring the second for fear that it would break him. Typically of his father, the man was being a snob about a topic he knew nothing about. Single malt bourbon my ass. The whole term was an oxymoron.

Single malts were all about 100% Barley maltings, heritage and frequently, Scotland. There were single malts, blended malts, blended whiskies, and grain whiskies. And then there were the utterly separate US definitions, such as Bourbon and Rye. Bourbon by definition was produced using a mash of 51-80% corn, again by definition nothing close to resembling ”single malt”. The two whisky disciplines by the very text that defined them were legally utterly disparate.

Tony was pretty thoroughly lost in the technicalities of the different whisky and whiskey definitions. He was trying desperately not to think about the scotches that had given him the final push into full-on alcoholism; Tony genuinely loved the taste of the heavily peated scotches that tended to come out
of Islay. He could almost taste the contrast of the sherried variety of Ardbeg that had been a firm favourite of his, the heavy smoky peat, segueing delightfully into the sweet tones of the sherry casks the liquor had been aged in.

That appreciation for the flavours, made his issues with the Demon Drink all the more painful to deal with. There was no such thing as non-alcoholic scotch, no other way to gain access to that savoury miasma of smoke and pure taste.

He attempted to drag his thoughts away from the remembered flavours of his favourite drinks, but Tony only succeeded in derailing his thoughts onto the Japanese single malts that he’d gradually developed a taste for, or even the delights of peated Australian whiskies. Where the flavour was definitely the intense savoury peat that drew him back every time, but somehow utterly unlike any peat he’d ever tasted from Scotland.

On the basis of taste alone (who was he kidding, he’d picked up alcohol for more than the taste) Tony had ended up drinking a glass of scotch a night, gradually increasing his intake in increments until he was on nearly a bottle of scotch a day at his lowest ebb. Oh he’d liked Bourbon plenty too, the almost-sweet taste of the whiskey could be pleasant when he was in the right mood. The almost spicy rye-forward blends had melded nicely with the sweetness of the corn. However Tony had generally preferred the far more savoury flavours that tended to be prominent in even the most basic scotch whisky.

Lost in his thoughts on alcohol, and alcoholism Tony didn’t realise that Howard and Obie’s conversation inside the study was winding down until it was far too late to do anything about it.

Howard stepped out of his study and double-took when he spotted Tony right outside his door, the older man’s face twisted with rage instantly. Fortunately Obie’s presence stopped Howard from doing anything to Tony there and then, but his father’s face promised retribution later.

“Tony! My boy!”

Tony peered up at Obie’s bulky form looming over him, he couldn’t help but take a step back away from the man.

“How did you manage that bruise eh? Scrapping in the garden? Rough and tumble with the other lads?”

Tony internally laughed cynically, what other lads? Espying Howard’s severely quelling look Tony straightened his spine and answered with spiteful honesty,
“Yes, rough and tumble.” He drawled coolly, “I ran into Howard’s fist.”

Obadiah did his best to look shocked, the expression soon fading into cold calculation. It saddened Tony to realise that the older man had likely always been a shark, ersatz father figure or no. It was a painful epiphany, that Obie had always viewed him as the “golden goose”. He’d honestly hoped that the betrayal hadn’t been that long in the coming, but he should have known better, nothing good in his life was ever pure for long.

Howard was still glaring pure murder at him from over Obie’s shoulder; Tony shot him a look of pure loathing. If looks could kill, Stark Jr would win the contest hands down he knew - Tony had had decades to practice that paparazzi-perfect look of contempt. Though truthfully he didn’t mean it, Tony was a worse monster than Howard had ever been.

Once more thanking his not-so-lucky stars that Obie’s presence was good for something at least; stopping Howard from getting physical with him. Tony backed away from the pair, Howard’s eyes continually promising bloody murder all the while.

“What’s that you’ve got there myboy?”

Tony suppressed a shudder at the too familiar nickname and the falsely jovial tone that Obie was employing; he automatically shoved the pathetic little robot dog behind his back. He didn’t want Obie to see any tech that he’d made, the response ironically pavlovian considering precisely what he was carrying.

He found himself backing further away from the pair of men, before turning and running in a manner very reminiscent of the six-year-old he appeared to be. Howard’s loud voice followed him down the corridor, increasing the feeling of claustrophobic panic,

“Get back here boy! No son of mine would be so rude to a guest!”

Obie said something inaudible to Howard that Tony couldn’t catch, tone cajoling. Fleeing into the depths of the house Tony didn’t dare to go down to his shop in case Howard should get it into his head to follow him. Instead he headed over to the staff kitchen, hoping to run into Jarvis - one of the few adult figures from his childhood that hadn’t been utterly tainted by the perspective that adulthood brought.
Edwin was pleasantly surprised when he found Tony in the tiny staff kitchen, there was something off about the boy’s facial expression, but Edwin couldn’t quite read it. He still hadn’t learnt the new book that was his charge’s changed set of default expressions, and the now sickly green bruising following his jaw line and merging with the boy’s cheekbone was throwing off his ability to hazard a guess.

Thankfully the staff were all treading carefully today with Obadiah Stane’s visit so Edwin actually had the time to try to work it out. He was grateful for the moment of respite from the idiocy of others, much as Stane gave him the willies. There was just something about the man that raised his hackles, though damned if he knew what it was.

Edwin was doubly surprised when he spotted the gleaming shape of Rex the robot puppy on the little kitchen table, between the utter chaos that came with Howard’s return and the Incident he was ashamed to admit that he’d nearly forgotten about the little robot’s existence. Though being fair given the sheer insanity of the last week he could hardly be blamed that it had slipped his mind. The design looked somehow sleeker than he remembered it being, the little robot far more canine shaped than the boxy little cylinder on legs than he remembered.

“Oh did you finish him Tony?”

Tony seemed downhearted somehow,

“Yeah.”

Edwin was worried enough by the unenthusiastic response that he dared a direct question,

“What’s wrong? Did something not work with his design?”

“Huh? Oh no, it’s fine. He works perfectly. See?”

Tony depressed a hidden switch in the dog’s underbelly, Edwin suppressed a wince when he realised precisely which section of anatomy the button corresponded to, and the little robot sprung to life.
Rex toddled surprisingly realistically across the kitchen table towards Edwin, yapping with apparent enthusiasm when he tentatively reached out and petted it on the head.

Edwin was impressed, he hadn’t remembered Tony saying anything about the little robot actually behaving like a real animal. Then again he shouldn’t be too surprised, his young charge was a budding genius after all.

The little dog made it’s way back over towards Tony, butting its little head against the palm of his hand until he half-heartedly petted it, whereupon it barked excitedly, and it’s little springy tail started wagging.

Tony seemed to sag at the response, though Edwin couldn’t for the life of him guess why. The little robotic puppy was far better than anything he’d have imagined. Something about the little robot’s happiness made Tony wince, and he quickly, but carefully, lifted the dog up and re-engaged the off switch.

Not knowing what to do with Tony’s inexplicable despondency Edwin got on with the business of serving them up lunch, before somewhat underhandedly offering to play Tony’s latest LP with him. Music was still the only social activity that he’d had any real success with at drawing Tony out of the shell he seemed to have retreated into. Edwin regretted that with the return of the family he’d had hardly a moment’s peace, let alone much time to spend with Tony. Lord knew the poor boy desperately needed some human company.

He was glad when the boy jumped on his suggestion, Edwin had seen far too little of his charge since the Incident, Tony’s recuperation time seemed to have exacerbated his tendency to vanish into the mansion at all hours. Hopefully he’d be able to catch an hour to himself, Edwin had a sinking feeling that managing the newly expanded household was a fool’s errand, the staff were all being ridiculously nervous and prone to strange mistakes. However given the behaviour that both Howard and Maria were indulging in he wasn’t sure he could blame them for their lapse.

Edwin could only hope that Tony too hadn’t lapsed back into the utterly haunted child that he’d been a few weeks ago, though he honestly suspected it was a wasted hope. Their relationship had still been far too strained when all of this nonsense had swept into their lives, Tony still alarmingly skittish. Now that things were calming down again Edwin could only restart his desperate overtures with his young charge and keep his fingers crossed that the puzzle he was putting together wasn’t going to form as alarming an image as he suspected was hiding underneath all of those painful silences.
Tony and Jarvis were sat in the older man’s rooms, preparing to listen to Ziggy Stardust together when Jarvis was called away to deal with something Maria had done. Tony gratefully stayed where he was, he didn’t want to have to try and deal with her brand of trouble, it was usually emotionally crippling.

After a moment’s hesitation Tony carefully settled the needle onto the LP, relaxing as the opening, a solo drumbeat, sounded out over the speakers. He had been planning on examining the LP’s intriguing looking cover, however the dire apocalyptic tone of the first song caught his attention, yet again Bowie’s work was drawing terrifying parallels with both his current mood and his past. The months of build-up to Than-The Titan’s invasion really had felt like a countdown to doomsday.

By the time the screamed chorus of “We’ve got five years that’s all we’ve got!” came along Tony was on the verge of hyperventilating, Bowie’s plaintive cries pushing him right over the edge into utter existential uncertainty. This current crisis even worse than the usual brand of shite and piss he had to deal with. It wasn’t just the usual self-flagellating thoughts of whether or not he deserved to try and do right by the world, but whether or not reality actually fucking existed. His whole world had spiralled down into the question of whether this, _here and now_, was real or not.

Tony was likely caught in a trap, one that he couldn’t even begin to see the edges of. He was dragged back into the moment when he caught the next song’s message about the dangers of love sweeping over the world, startling a cynical spurt of laughter out of him. Tony still wasn’t sure if he was projecting his mood onto Bowie’s lyrics or not but the bleak seventies-ness of the LP cover probably backed up his suspicions that Bowie was at least as cynical as he was about these things.

Tony was grateful for the interruption to the dark whirl of his thoughts, the LP was just barely giving him something to focus on, however the next song’s lyrics of utter nonsense allowed him to withdraw back into his own mind, only the dark tone of the music itself penetrating the confused tangle.

It was as if his body, trying to devote as many resources as possible to untangling the spiralling thoughts was drawing those resources from the rest of him. His vision darkened, Tony slid to the floor, knees weak. His whole world narrowed down to the numbers printed on the record deck. The speed selection buttons and the orange glow of the speed indicator light absorbed all of his focus, Tony tried to use Bruce’s breathing exercises to calm down to no avail.

There was nothing but bewildered despair.

The speed dial had blurred into unreality because his eyes were filled with tears. Tony was startled back to the present when the uplifting Morse-code sequence of Starman blared surprisingly loudly
over the speakers. He hadn’t expected a song that was so positive to pop-up after the bleak beginnings to the first handful of tracks.

The surprise Morse-code only succeeded in pushing his thoughts back towards the moral dilemma that he’d been battling with ever since he’d realised it was a possibility, should he try to resurrect FRIDAY and JARVIS? Did he have the right to drag someone else down into this hell with him? Gods knew he could do with all of the help he could get down here, and the ability to implement their code would be another tick in the not-a-trap column. Or possibly not.

Making the attempt to pull himself together he realised he’d come back to himself just in time. Jarvis reappeared as the first side of the LP ended interrupting the strange country music that was echoing over the speakers, he gave Tony a concerned and puzzled look. Tony must have done a piss-poor job of hiding the evidence of his mini-breakdown.

Jarvis settled down on his lounge-chair next to Tony and gestured for him to continue playing the record. Wordlessly Tony moved to do so, relieved that Jarvis apparently wasn’t in the mood to play twenty questions with him. Whatever Maria had done must have been pretty exhausting to deal with.

Tony flushed when the first track on the second side of the LP referenced a man wearing make-up, he wasn’t sure what someone from Jarvis’s generation would make of references to gender-bending. Fortunately when he sneaked a look up at the older man through his lashes Jarvis’ face was utterly impassive and apparently appreciative of the music.

Fortunately for Tony’s peace of mind the next song was a harmless ditty about wanting to be a rock and roll star, but the following one had Bowie drawling out suggestively “oh come on, oh come on.” The song tailed off to Bowie gasping out “Come on! Uh!” repeatedly, Tony was distracted from the mortification when a familiar guitar riff thrummed out over the speakers. He honestly didn’t know why he was feeling so jumpy, he knew that Jarvis had never, would never, well he just wouldn’t – right?

Tony allowed himself to relax back on the rug, he tried to focus on the music, not his newfound fear that Jarvis would turn around and, and what – hurt him? No Jarvis wouldn’t, couldn’t, but what if he wasn’t really Jarvis? What if this really was all some horrible Thano-Titan induced LSD nightmare?

“Ziggy played guitar” droned over the speakers, Tony needed to get out, away, but he couldn’t, not without making Jarvis think that he hated the album. And he didn’t, it was pretty cool, insofar as he could tell given that he felt like he was shaking apart at the seams. The unreality of everything bearing down on him like a ton of bricks.
Tony squeezed his eyes shut and focussed on keeping his breathing regular, he really didn’t want Jarvis to worry about him, it would be selfish to upset the other man when he already looked so tired, and LPs had become their *thing*.

Somehow Tony managed to keep his panic from Jarvis, he would never be able to work out how he’d managed it but he had. Thanking his lucky stars that Bruce’s breathing exercises were proving so handy, Tony managed to refocus on the present, pleased to note that the song currently playing was a hopeful ballad of sorts – Bowie was screeching out “Give me your hand! Cos you’re wonderful! You’re not alone! Cos you’re wonderful!”

On balance Tony thought that he rather liked the album, though he cynically disbelieved the message in the final song. Since when had he ever been not alone? Even when he’d thought that he’d finally found himself his own family of choice it had all turned out to be nothing more than a thinly veiled illusion. Why would his current situation be any different?

With an ease born of long practice Tony pulled on his paparazzi ready mask of pure hedonistic enjoyment, he longed for his signature sunglasses as an extra layer of protection between himself and the outside world.

Finally he dared to glance up at Jarvis, ah, no wonder the older man hadn’t noticed his distress – he was dozing head lolling back at an uncomfortable angle.

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He left Jarvis to it; he really looked like he could do with the rest and if Tony was being honest with himself he didn’t trust the older man enough to give him even a hint as to his current state of mind. It had only been his waning good luck that had hidden his mini-breakdown from the other, and he couldn’t afford to risk another in front of him.

Tony had been carting Rex around for most of the day at this point, he didn’t know why he kept dragging the little robot dog around, but he felt as if he was planning on cutting the thread preemptively. He couldn’t deal with yet another sword of Damocles hanging over his head, as it was if the ones he was waiting for all fell at once Tony was pretty sure he’d be turned into proverbial mince meat.

As he entered the entry-hall Tony remembered why he’d been hiding out with Jarvis in the first place. Obie and Howard were there, shaking hands in a congratulatory fashion over something or other. Tony attempted to back up, but Obie spotted him and called him over,
“Tony! My boy! You never did show us what you had there.”

Tony barely managed to suppress his instinctive shoulder hunch, it was bad enough that Howard was there, let alone Obie too. His brief respite, if a panic-attack over a record could be called a respite, was over. Tony was only grateful that he was nowhere near anything that was actually important he wasn’t sure he could trust himself to keep anything from the pair at the moment.

Howard snarled out at him,

“Well Tony, aren’t you going to show your old man what you’ve built?”

Swallowing back the insult that wanted to work it’s way out of his throat Tony attempted to play the scene out as it had in his fuzzy memories, though Obie’s presence had already changed things. He heard himself say,

“It’s for you.”

He thrust the pathetic little dog out at Howard, watching in detached fascination as Howard’s face flickered through revulsion, greed and jealousy before settling firmly into rage.

Howard snatched the little robot roughly out of Tony’s hands, startling a cry from him; irrationally he tried to pull the little thing back to himself. Now that the scene was playing out he didn’t want it to happen. He couldn’t put himself through that again.

Unfortunately Tony was six, not the sinewy forty-six he had been, Howard easily pulled the robot further away. He cursorily inspected it, expression morphing into outright jealousy as the little dog nuzzled at his palm affectionately before rasping a metallic tongue over his fingers. The little dog whimpered as his clutch tightened around its belly, if it were a real animal it would have been in genuine distress. The little robot was wriggling as if attempting to escape his grasp, the realistic response seemed to enrage Howard. He raised it above his head before throwing it to the ground viciously.

Despite the hard hard marble of the floor the little dog was still operating, it was outright yelping now, the noise distressingly realistic, little limbs wriggling helplessly in the air. Tony felt like he really was six all over again, he was desperately trying to get past Howard to rescue his robot, he’d betrayed the pathetic little beast in the worst possible way, he was an awful human being. A monster. The distant part of him that was always watching rationally noted that Obie’s expression had once
again regained that calculating cast to it, Tony could practically see the dollar signs flashing in the man’s eyes.

Attracted by the shouting several members of staff gathered at the foot of the stairs, the entire situation had spiralled out of control in a way that Tony couldn’t possibly have predicted.

“Pathetic! Do you hear me? Pathetic! Stark’s shouldn’t be wasting their time building toys, you should be making something worthwhile.”

Howard backhanded Tony across the face, he’d had far worse sparring, but somehow the blow pushed him down to his knees.

“I don’t need to be dealing with this nonsense! Showing me up in front of my business partner like this, how dare you!?”

Howard raised his boot over the still whimpering form of the small robot dog. Something inside Tony snapped, but in a very controlled manner. Acting as his adult self would, rather than feigning the six-year-old he appeared to be, he pulled himself up and threatened,

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you. Soon you’ll be embarrassing yourself in front of your business partner.” Tony added suggestive emphasis to the word partner noting with relish the way Howard’s face purpled.

“Really boy? And how on earth would I manage that?”

“You’ll recognise it when you hear it, a sort of high pitched whining noise, like a bunny rabbit.” He paused for emphasis, “And you’ll be the one making it.”

The implied sexual innuendo pushed Howard over the edge into incoherent rage, Tony grinned his grin with far too many teeth. Howard stomped. A loud crack echoed through the room, followed by a long high whimper of pain.

The pathetic little dog wasn’t intact; it really hadn’t been worth the effort to reinforce it to withstand Howard’s viciousness, Tony never wanted to see the bloody thing again, it brought back far too much pain. But it had fulfilled its purpose beautifully; a large 6-inch spike had driven itself up through Howard’s foot.
Perfect, the adamantium was *perfect*.

Tony’s grin grew impossibly wider, he admitted to himself that his actions may have verged on sociopathic, but he thought the bastard deserved it. It wasn’t innocent little Tony’s fault that one of the vertical reinforcing joists through the central unit was that much stronger than the rest of the chassis was it? He wasn’t to know that this metal that looked so much like low-carbon steel was in fact nothing of the sort… After all Howard never sorted through the scraps he threw out properly.

Howard attempted to lunge for Tony, Tony danced back laughing mockingly. Howard on the other hand paled several shades as he put pressure on his injured foot, the squeaking noise made a reappearance.

Distantly Tony realised that Obie and the rest of the staff were still in the room with him, his entire focus had narrowed down to Howard, and his robot, now in hundreds of broken pieces.

Whilst Tony was still feeling strangely detached from everything Jarvis materialised out of nowhere, barking orders to the gathered staff with terrifying efficiency, he managed to usher Obie out of the mansion before phoning for Dr Grabby-Hands.

Thankfully Tony’s expression of no-doubt terrifying vindictiveness seemed to frighten Dr Constantine away from him, he was glad, he wasn’t sure he’d have been able to cope with another steaming helping of shite piled onto his already heaping plate.

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The discreet family doctor was called in to treat a serious injury for the second time in as many weeks, though for once he was treating Stark the Elder rather than Stark the Younger.

Obadiah had seemed strangely unconcerned by the blood and the chaos, and Tony had looked worryingy blank when he’d first arrived on the scene. Edwin’s heart had ached for his charge when he’d spotted the catalyst for the latest shouting match, Rex, the little robot puppy was a sad lifeless looking piece of dented metal, innards scattered across the marble entryway.

Edwin wasn’t entirely convinced that this turn of events didn’t frighten the dickens out of him. As he’d rushed about sorting out the mess, screaming orders at the utterly useless idiots Howard thought formed a decent household staff he’d spotted the look of all too vicious triumph on Tony’s face when
the boy had finally unfrozen. The expression had been terrifying on such a young child.

The latest item for the ever-growing list might possibly be the most alarming one yet. Edwin really didn’t like the shape the puzzle was beginning to form.

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Howard had been holed up in his room after the humiliation that he’d dealt himself with Rex, though being fair he was also under orders to keep all weight off his foot. Tony thought the best thing about the whole situation was the way his father kept shooting him suspicious looks, he had no way to prove that Tony had done it on purpose, but he clearly remembered the taunts that Tony had shot out at him beforehand.

Thankfully Ana had already agreed to Tony’s suggestion, so his attempts at relearning self-defence weren’t hampered by the events in the entry hall. Tony was sure that Jarvis had been having second thoughts about this plan ever since the tin-dog incident yesterday. Tony had caught the man shooting him contemplative looks whenever he’d thought he wasn’t looking.

The sheer amount of the mansion that was sitting empty and neglected had once again played in Tony’s favour. Jarvis had quietly commandeered one of the many empty halls for Tony’s use, the man had chosen well. The ubiquitous brown wainscoting looked warm in the summer sunlight, wooden floor gleaming in the bright beams of light shining though the tall floor to ceiling windows that overlooked the leafy wooded area of the gardens.

Tony looked at Jarvis questioningly as they entered the huge empty hall, the older man had been annoyingly secretive again, facial expression full of secretive mischief. It was rather disconcerting to see that expression on someone else’s face for once. The multi-story room had been transformed; the floor was covered in crash mats, the pungent smell of rubber and old sweat warring with mansion’s usual odour of floor polish and wax.

Jarvis lead Tony around to the huge bay window in the far corner of the hall, standing there previously hidden by the corner Ana grinned sharp and deadly and lovely.

“Hello again Tony dear.”

Jarvis was looking far too smug, expression somehow anticipatory.
“Hi Ana” he said warily, her grin had far too many edges to it.

Tony looked up at Jarvis feeling as if he might be being ganged up on. Jarvis contributed,

“Ana will be here to keep an eye on things for both of us.”

“Cool.” Tony agreed automatically, he had wanted this after all.

Ana’s grin morphed into a smirk.

Eyeing the expression on Ana’s face Tony swallowed, suddenly his plan didn’t seem nearly so smart, he was going to be cheesed. (Like creaming but it lasts longer.)

“So Tones, ready to start on some warm-ups?”

Tony decided to roll with it, he grinned back, sharp and mean.

“Sure thing Ana. What kind of thing are you thinking of teaching me?”

Ana started to run down a list as she warmed up, Tony automatically followed his own warm-up routine, noting with some surprise that some aspects of it were now far easier and others far more difficult than he was used to.

“Basic holds and escapes, nerve clusters to hit, how to block, how to hit, that sort of thing.”

His usual pectoral stretches and crunches felt ridiculously gentle, Tony had a moment of utter body dysphoria when he realised that all of the scar tissue from the arc-reactor and the permanently reduced lung capacity had vanished. Flexibility that he’d resigned himself to having lost years ago had suddenly returned with a vengeance. He wasn’t entirely sure why that hadn’t sunk in before, he’d been living with the day in day out realities of a twenty percent loss of lung capacity for over a decade now. How on earth hadn’t he noticed that earlier?

Tony was utterly caught up in the realisation that it was gone, well and truly gone. Even after the arc-
reactor removal, only made possible by the judicious use of a heavily neutered version of Killian’s Extremis virus, Tony’s chest had been full of scar tissue, large chunks of his lungs irrevocably gone, his heart permanently pushed aside by the reactor casing.

By the time he’d been forced to use Extremis-proper during the build-up to Than-The Titan’s invasion regular exercise of this sort had become a luxury that he couldn’t afford to –hah- exercise. Christ no wonder it hadn’t really registered, he’d been living like this for months, in a healthy body, and he hadn’t had the chance to stop and smell the roses.

Ana was staring at him in puzzled concern, Tony realised that he’d stopped moving entirely as the realisation had struck. He tried to play it off with a quip,

“Help me Obi Wan Kenobi, you’re my only hope.”

Tony realised his mistake when both Ana and Jarvis gave him puzzled looks. Christ, Star Wars didn’t even exist yet. He focussed back on the here and now and grinned daggers at Ana,

“Shall we get started then?”

She surprised him by bantering back,

“I can see we’re going to get along like a house on fire, there may be no survivors.”

Tony found himself grinning viciously back up at her, eyes sparking in delight as he realised that she wouldn’t be holding back just because he was apparently a child.

“Yeah,” he shot back relying on tasteless humour as he always did when nervous, “Like the poor bastards in the Killing Fields who went up against the Khmer Rouge.”

Tony was so caught up in being grateful for his suddenly improved mood that he completely missed the significant looks Ana and Jarvis shot each other.
Edwin didn’t know what to make of the apparent non sequiturs his charge had dropped, he thought that they might be cultural references but he didn’t recognise either phrase. He catalogued Tony’s sudden look of guilt when the boy seemed to realise that he’d let something slip that he shouldn’t have. Edwin supposed it was yet another item for his list.

He wondered why Tony had frozen halfway through the warm-up exercises, the boy’s face had seemed to pale with some sort of realisation, but he’d started moving again before he could ask what was wrong.

Ana’s face had taken on a contemplative cast when Tony had started with the nervous chatter, morphing to one of outright disbelief for a moment when the second incomprehensible statement dropped from his lips. His wife recovered her calm quickly, smoothing over her face to a professional mask as she went about correcting Tony’s basic stance, and positioning.

Edwin as always was utterly enamoured by the cool efficiency of his darling wife’s movements when she was in this frame of mind, though he noted that she seemed to be prodding at Tony far less often than she’d done with Edwin himself when he’d first been learning.

Unfortunately he was called away as the session began winding down, this time by a member of his skelton-crew. It seemed that some idiot on Howard’s staff had decided that the floor polish would make a good substitute for silver polish. For god’s sake, if it was the same idiot as last time he would personally fire the fool with great relish.

Grumbling internally Tony rolled back up from the sparring mat for what felt like the umpteenth time. He was worse at this than he’d ever been, even compared to when he’d been learning for the basics for the very first time. Ironically he thought it was his previous experience at hand-to-hand combat that was tripping him up.

Tony had never been a slouch, despite what the Avengers had all seemed to think. He was a weapons designer for fucks sake, he more than knew his way around a gun, had to know how the equipment behaved if he had a hope of improving the designs. Tony was secretly glad his team had never taken him seriously in that respect, he wasn’t sure he could take how they’d inevitably start looking at him if it came out how well he could shoot – and why.

In terms of hand to hand combat he’d had basic self-defence courses from bodyguards when the
kidnappings had gotten too frequent, regular sparring sessions with Rhodey, boxing with Happy, and even a few SAS courses that Peggy and the Commandos had organised on his behalf.

Before everything had gone to hell, back when they’d been a fami- before Sokovia Tony had had plenty of opportunity to improve his skills with the rest of the team. Sparring with Nat and Clint, learning all the ways to be sneaky, to use an opponents own strength and pride against them. Then had been working out how to hold his own against demigods and super-soldiers, or rather how to roll with the blows until he could get to weaponry that would at least enable him to fight back. Even Bruce had taught him a few tricks, decades living on the run from an incredibly long list of covert organisations had taught the apparently peaceable man a thing or three.

For f**k’s sake he’d even gotten along well enough with Gamora that she’d deigned to show him a few things. He should be better than this.

Though he had no muscle memory built up he kept automatically trying to pull off moves that he couldn’t actually allow himself to follow through on, he had to constantly rethink his moves so that he wouldn’t reveal the level of skill that he’d actually had. However he wasn’t sure he needed to bother, his new build, his lack of weight, of muscle tone, all of these things were constantly tripping him up.

Jarvis was looking at him pityingly. It was sickening. Ana was watching thoughtfully from the corner of the room as he ran through the latest painfully basic punch sequence.

The one move Tony had proved to have any success with that session was Jarvis’ signature move, the Raging Turtle. Tony was utterly disheartened by the time Ana called time on their session; he didn’t think he’d ever had a more unproductive workout since before Afghanistan.

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Ana genuinely didn’t know what to make of Tony, from the moment he’d started his complex warm-ups without prompting the boy hadn’t been at all what she’d been expecting. Edwin had warned her, but the full extent of the mystery surrounding his charge hadn’t been conveyed despite her husband’s best efforts.

She’d been content to go along with Tony’s nervous banter, since it seemed to comfort the boy, when he’d dropped a conversational bomb. She’d been utterly shocked when Tony had casually dropped an international secret into the conversation as though it were public knowledge, she wasn’t sure she’d been able to keep the gobsmacked expression off her face, how on earth the boy knew about the shitstorm going down in Cambodia, when SHIELD had only just started being able to
smuggle agents in let alone get refugees out she had no idea.

It had taken all of her training to focus back on the task at hand, and begin the process of testing and teaching the boy, when all she’d wanted to do was pin him to the mat and demand he tell her everything that he knew and how.

She’d eventually decided that Howard must have let something slip, she’d thought that the co-founder of SHIELD would be more careful than that, he of all people should understand the importance of keeping secrets from those he loved. Apparently not.

Just watching Tony run through the warm-up routine had provided another mystery, they were a relatively complex set of moves, a sequence that most non-combatants would probably have had to warm-up for. She supposed the posh-school Howard shipped him off to might be responsible, but it was suspect. Ana’s professional eye had noted that something about his balance seemed off, and that he was holding his torso strangely rigidly, as though guarding an old injury. Ana would need to correct that tendency before they could continue. She decided that she’d focus on teaching him the basics of swings, how to hit properly without telegraphing the movement. It would have the handy side effect of forcing him to flex the areas of his chest that he seemed determined to hold still.

Ana noted that Tony kept catching himself halfway through many of the moves, in many ways he seemed to be a natural, so she wasn’t sure what the reason was for this alarming uncertainty that he tended to lapse into unchecked.

Unfortunately Edwin was called away towards the end of their session, so she had to wait to bring up the topic with her husband. It was frustrating being married to Howard Stark’s butler, no matter how much the pair of them owed the infuriating man. Now that Ana had seen Tony for herself she understood her husband’s worry all too well, there was certainly a mystery surrounding the young Stark heir.

She decided that she’d need to make some more observations of her own before bringing up her suspicions with Edwin, she didn’t want to put herself at risk of confirmation bias by hearing too many of his opinions on the matter before she could draw her own conclusions.

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Gently pushing the young woman, the newest member of his reliable skeleton crew, aside Edwin took over mopping the small dining room, he didn’t want her to get into trouble for having the misfortune to do her job near the volatile masters of the household.
Howard and Maria were standing far closer together than he’d seen them in a while, heads bent close together in the light of the French windows. The couple were silhouetted by the bright pink glow of the summer sunset, if Edwin didn’t know better he’d have thought the image a romantic one.

“No Howard, he’s far too young.”

“It’ll stop him from being such a little sissy boy Maria.”

“Howard no, don’t send our bambino away.”

“Maria.” Howard ground out, tone somehow threatening. Maria pointedly shifted her heeled foot closer to Howard’s heavily bandaged and splinted one, he paled slightly but didn’t back down.

“He’s far too young Howard. Far far too young.” Seeing the look on her husband’s face her voice sped up stubbornness shining through, “If you weren’t so drunk all of the time.”

Howard’s facial expression turned black at the reprimand.

“If he wasn’t so bloody irritating this wouldn’t be necessary. But it is. Necessary. This isn’t a discussion Maria, we’re sending the boy away to learn and that’s the end of it. Lord knows this house isn’t any sort of place to raise a child.”

Edwin discreetly slipped away unwilling to listen to the rest of the conversation, with a sinking feeling he realised that the greater part of him actually agreed with Howard on this. The mansion was no place to raise a child.

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Tony was beginning to regret his suggestion about sparring, it was taking all of his concentration not to slip and carry through on a move that his six-year-old self would have absolutely no right to know. He really shouldn’t have allowed his drugged-brain to make conversation, he’d managed to trap himself in long daily sessions that took up far too much of his time, and took far too much mental effort not to completely blow everything out of the water.
Still at least the utter exhaustion meant that he had little time to work himself into a panic every evening, it was nice to be able to drop off to sleep without having to worry about nightmares. Though it did have the unfortunate side effect of taking away the time he’d set aside to attempt Phase I of WTF-is-this-crap-really-magic plan.

After a week of daily sessions with little progress to speak of Ana had suggested that Tony try out a form of movement meditation, specifically dance katas. She’d explained that she thought the forms were similar enough to complex katas that it might help him to get acquainted with the way his body worked and moved without violating the basic principles of martial arts.

After sitting through her patient explanation last week, and only managing not to roll his eyes by a great force of will as she very precisely enunciated how she’d teach him the very basics first, and only once proof was had of competence and black belts were earned were katas allowed, Tony was quick to agree to the plan, regardless of the loss of dignity. He knew he wasn’t doing as well as he should be at this point, since unlike Ana he knew that he’d been through all of this before.

Ana had proven to be an extremely skilled practitioner of martial arts. As Tony had suspected, she was far more capable in this area of expertise than her husband and Jarvis was already formidable.

It was a relief to finally be able to let himself move without thinking about it too much, the dance katas were complex enough and unfamiliar enough that Tony had to focus on getting the moves right. Every step of the sequence formed a complicated design requiring enough concentration that he soon forgot to second-guess his every move. The relief was enough to unwind the great knot of tension he’d been carrying around all week. He no longer had to hold back and let himself go, moves flowing fluidly for the first time since he’d started this little exercise in futility. Though if he was being honest with himself Tony wasn’t entirely convinced that he’d actually be able to follow through on half of the combat stances he kept accidentally settling into.

Nodding in satisfaction Ana stepped back to watch Tony practice, it seemed that she’d been correct in her assumptions. Remove Tony’s thoughts and second thoughts from the process and he rapidly picked things up. The boy needed to learn to trust his own body, though Ana had certainly noticed that some of the stances that he tended to drop into automatically before double guessing himself had very interesting implications.

She thought that some of the positions had vague similarities to the fluid moves her assad contacts tended to use. However there was enough there that was different about the stances that Tony fell into that it was difficult to recognise what the forms might actually have been originally.
He’d gradually loosened up the stiff hold he had on his upper torso over the course of the week, the dance forms helping him to learn the full extent of the flexibility that he possessed. Ana wondered about that, why on earth had he held himself so rigidly when in so many other respects he was suspiciously good at this?

Ana resolved to have a word with Edwin at the end of this session, knowing her husband he had a whole list of similar observations that he’d been keeping to himself. He was a perpetual worrier, and they did say that a problem solved was a problem halved, and that two heads were better than one.

Once the session ended Ana carefully watched Tony retreat down the hall before broaching the topic with Edwin,

“Tony’s certainly seems to know what he’s doing.”

Unfortunately her husband wasn’t his usual perceptive self,

“Hmm.” He murmured back distractedly.

“Edwin dear?”

“Yes?”

Ana resisted the urge to huff, it was undignified, even if they were husband and wife, and he was acting the epitome of head in the clouds male. She cut to the chase,

“Edwin darling, what is it?”

“Oh,” fortunately for Ana’s sanity he didn’t pretend to misunderstand her, “I overheard Howard and Maria discussing boarding schools.”

Ana couldn’t contain her dismayed gasp, Edwin continued doggedly,

“Well, Howard telling Maria that they were sending Tony to one at any rate.”
“Oh Edwin, do you think we can do something to stop him?” Ana paused, “That hateful man, isn’t it enough for him that his own son is terrified of him, to send him away from his own home too…”

Ana trailed off into speechlessness, Edwin shot her a guilty look before admitting slowly,

“Perhaps the school really would be for the best darling.”

Ana shot him a look of displeased contempt,

“What?! Do you want the poor boy to be turned out from his own home because of his selfish father?!”

Edwin seemed to find a sense of inner resolve, visibly tilting his chin up before replying lowly,

“I think home is where you have to feel safe, if it isn’t safe it isn’t home. Can you honestly say that Tony thinks of this place as a home?”

“Oh Edwin – don’t you dare play philosophy with me, it’s the only home he’s ever known. Of course the poor boy does. How do you think Tony will react if he thinks we condone what Howard’s been doing?” Edwin opened his mouth, she continued on grimly, “Which he will, if he learns we didn’t fight this for him.”

Edwin refused dignify her with a response, Ana shot her husband a look of disgust before deciding not to bring up her earlier thoughts with him. If he was willing to send the poor boy away without even discussing it with him, then what would he do if he knew that Ana had some worrying suspicions about Tony’s level of combat training?

No, whilst she had no idea where Tony had learnt to fight like that she refused to betray the dear boy’s secret to a man who was willing to throw him to the wolves. Ana understood that the so-called innocence of children was a nonexistent concept dreamed up by adults who really should know better. She’d seen the cruelty of children first hand back in Hungary, when the Jews were the targets for being different. Tony was already an isolated child at the school he attended now, how on earth would the young genius cope as the new boy at a boarding school?
Tony took advantage of the relatively low-key training session that afternoon to go and check on the coal cellar. He knew that something wasn’t quite right between the couple given the heated glares they kept sending each other, but he’d been willing to take advantage. Between the Jarvises constant presence and the fact that Howard had been back for three weeks checking in on the progress of his nanotube filament was difficult. The furnace had been running constantly for a whole month now, whilst the process he’d jury rigged was much much more efficient than the original set-up Windle & co. had discovered, Tony wasn’t sure there’d be a useful amount of nanotube fibre to play with.

Tony snuck down to the coal cellar, donning his protective gear, he opened the door with some trepidation unsure of what he’d find.

The spool of nanotube fibre was overflowing. Christ, if anything he’d been a bit too successful. Calling it a job well done, Tony began the laborious process of shutting the automated furnace systems off. Once he’d checked that everything with the fibre was as it seemed he’d dismantle the jury-rigged furnace. He could always build it again, and better, it wasn’t worth the risk that someone would stumble across it and work out what he’d done.

He wasn’t sure how he was going to get this stuff out of here – the spool was huge, and contaminated with asbestos-like shards of loose nanotubes. He’d need to transport it to his workshop undetected to wash it off, and start weaving it into something useful.

The cloth he’d get out of this stuff would be stronger and lighter than Kevlar. Or perhaps he’d settle for some rope, or garrotte wire, that was always useful.

Tony resolved that he’d sneak back to the coal cellar in the evening when there wasn’t anybody around.

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Tony took to the dance meditations with enthusiasm; something about focussing entirely on keeping his stances correct without the fear of discovery stilled the constant thrum of thoughts and second thoughts that flowed through his brain. He genuinely had to concentrate on keeping his balance, and maintaining the positions of his limbs, if it weren’t for the fact that the process took up too much of his attention Tony would be tempted to replace his standard meditation attempts with this new technique.

He noticed that Ana and Jarvis still seemed to be having an ongoing argument about something, there was a distinct tension between the couple, though Tony knew better than to ask.
His routine had settled into a tenuously comfortable, but exhausting pattern. He’d wear himself out sparring during the day, then collapse into the oblivion of sleep. Tony was aware that it wasn’t healthy, or necessarily safe given that Than-The Titan might spring out of nowhere at any moment, but he was grateful for the opportunity to push everything aside and just allow himself to focus on the here and now.

Whilst a small niggling part of him was always, always aware that Ana and Jarvis might well be figments of his imagination, or worse his jailers, it was ridiculously comforting to just let himself soak up their company and affection.

Unfortunately Tony hadn’t been able to achieve a decent trance state since the night Howard had returned, something in the chaotic turn of his thoughts prevented him from being able to detach himself enough to even begin to think about attempting to solve his current dilemma without falling into a flashback of some description.

By the fifth time he’d gotten caught back on that hateful rock in space, staring down at the accusatory corpses of his frien- the founding members of the Avengers, he’d given up. Just being here, in the mansion, with his ersatz parents, and the ersatz Jarvises was torture enough, there was no point adding to it.

The second option to carrying out Phase II of Tony’s plan was looking more and more attractive with every day caught in this strange holding pattern. If he couldn’t damage the simulation enough to break it, then maybe he could take the alternate route out.

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Tony didn’t have the freedom to hide in his new workshop as often as he’d like, however it was another of Jarvises Sundays off, and Howard was still gods knew where in New York after his latest argument with Maria over who-knew-what, he’d have hours to himself today. Breathing out a sigh of relief as he slipped inside the ex-squash court Tony allowed himself to relax slightly, he had successfully avoided Howard ever since the incident with Rex. However he knew that the other boot would drop, and soon if past experience was anything to judge by.

Tony had been working on several projects simultaneously, as well as the nanotube fibre he’d been trying to decide if he could risk building himself something with genuine offensive capabilities. He thought that even in the 70s he’d be able to build himself a repulsor gauntlet in his sleep. The controls would have to be analogue, the gaunlet would likely be a bulkier than any model he’d previously put together, and he didn’t have access to the nanotech that had made the recent models so easy to take with him everywhere disguised as a wristwatch, but the repulsor tech itself? Childs
In the meantime Tony was making do with working out just how far he could push current computer tech. Seventies-grade chips weren’t great, but they did allow Tony to play with novel solutions to several display issues, he’d jury rigged a colour TV-set to the heap of components he’d put together, unwilling to use analogue dials. With some industrious rewiring, and several hours of frantic binary compiling Tony had a computer operating system that was vaguely reminiscent of the stuff from the late-90s boom in personal computing. The computer vaguely reminded him of those hideously colourful Applemacs, the TV-casing acted as a self-contained unit for both the computer itself and the display.

Tony would have been vaguely ashamed of the similarities, however the chips he was working with had less than a tenth of the power of the 90s home computers, so he’d had to be economical with the complexity of the coding. As it was he’d need to be extremely careful with the basic OS that he’d quickly written out, the software used several computer languages that didn’t actually exist yet.

Whilst the chips he was making do with weren’t very powerful, Tony had been able to set up a subroutine in the base code of the little computer that monitored radio transmissions worldwide for keywords such as Hydra and The Winter Soldier. Tony had forgotten more than most people would ever know about past tech, but he was quickly catching up again. He’d managed to piggyback on several incredibly insecure and patchy government spy-systems, whilst the thing was no where near as comprehensive a system as JARVIS had been it would have to do until he actually managed to put together some resources of his own to work with.

The whole thing was protected by several layers of encryption, the firewalls and security software actually took up more space on the woefully underpowered chipsets than the operating software itself, but Tony was taking no chances.

He hadn’t been able to resist adding a digital-style clock to the top of the thing; in lieu of his usual digital output Tony had scrounged together some Soviet kit from the depths of Howard’s shop. The Nixie Tubes allowed him to have a clock display reminiscent of an early digital wristwatch, the crudely elegant solution amused him every time he spotted it. They doubled as a handy kill-switch, smash the small case containing the delicate glass tubes and the chips inside the computer casing would fry wiping all trace of the programming they’d once contained.

Tony had been taking baby steps towards building an offensive object, he’d eventually managed to find a slightly battered chair made from ebony in a dark corner of the mansion. It had been an absolute bugger to break down without wasting anything, but Tony had eventually gotten the pieces back to his shop.

Between the wood the chair provided, and the results of his other trips to strange corners of the
mansion he thought he might have a chance to create something genuinely useful out of the remaining shards of adamantium.

He was under no illusions that he’d be able to do anything further to work the metal, as it was it had been a minor miracle that he’d been able to calibrate the laser precisely enough to find the frequency needed to cut it into pieces along pre-existing faults. However it should be possible to mount the shards in other materials.

Tony had slowly been sequestering away the basic tools and materials he needed to hide his own forge, it would be no good for any complex metallurgy, but would definitely be more than adequate for the basic work of pouring molten metal for sandcasting and possibly with some finagling on his part some actual anvil work.

He’d managed to split the arm rests of the previously bulky chair into decently symmetrical knife-scales, the dark dense wood was heavy enough that Tony thought he might end up with some nicely balanced daggers to play with.

Two of the adamantium shards were long and wide enough that they could happily take a significant section of their length disappearing between the two pieces of wood that would make up the handles without any loss of practicality. Tony wasn’t sure that he’d be able to bond any metal to the pre-existing shards, so it was quite likely that the daggers wouldn’t have any guards to speak of, but he thought that overall the idea was workable.

The third shard was an extremely narrow little piece, a smaller mirror to the jagged edge Howard had stepped on, and Tony thought it might just make a decent stiletto with some careful planning on his part.

Tony admitted to himself that his plans for weaponry weren’t exactly living up to his old Merchant of Death reputation, but frankly he’d been purposefully diverting the deadly schematics that seemed to just pop-up out of nowhere for long enough that it was getting tiring.

He didn’t want Than-The Titan to get his hands on any Stark-grade weapons schematics, but he did want to find out if he’d be allowed to build something genuinely dangerous. The daggers seemed like a nice little baby-step in the right direction. If he was allowed to finish his schemes for these little packages of death, then he might start putting together the parts for one of the later Stark semi-automatics. Much as Tony had vowed to never let SI produce and sell weaponry ever again, he’d made no such vow when it came to items for his own personal use.
Edwin made the phone call twirling the phone cord impatiently around one bony finger as the line rang on. Whilst Ana and he still couldn’t see eye to eye over the boarding school topic he was determined to prepare. He was calling up an old friend; he hoped his fellow Brit would be able to help him. Biting his lip to stifle his grin Edwin mentally estimated how much money was left over in the household expenses account that Howard had left for the duration of Tony’s care that summer, whilst SI really wasn’t doing well at the moment Howard had no idea what things actually cost in the real world – not any more. Normally Edwin wouldn’t dream of taking advantage of that fact, but this was in the name of a good cause.

“Yello? Adamson Antiquities?” the slow laconic drawl of the clerk sounded over the phone.

“Hi, is Ben there?”

“No man, but I can get him on the line?”

“Sure, I’ll wait.”

There was a loud click and a buzz as the line operator connected the call.

“Hello! Ben? Hi! I need a favour, and I’ve got a budget of $500 to play with.”

“Hello Ed.” Ben’s droll voice sounded both amused and resigned.

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Staring down at the huge spool of nanotube filament resting in the centre of his workshop Tony realised that he didn’t have enough of the nanotube to make a huge amount of cloth. Running some quick calculations he realised he could either weave half a child-sized shirt (as much use as a marzipan dildo) or make several lengths of rope and thread. At least he didn’t need to put together a loom or anything too time consuming, whilst cloth weaving was fairly simple when compared to some of the processes he was used to overseeing, it would be incredibly time consuming to set up and produce.

Eventually he settled on making a bracelet similar in style to those “survivor” bracelets that had
become fashionable after the animal abusing ass Bear Grylls (what the hell kind of name was that? It sounded like a statement of intent) had made them popular. The chunky black bracelet looked like a strange bangle, but could be unwound to form several hundred metres worth of thin rope. It would probably be extremely uncomfortable to climb up or down, it was so thin, but Tony was more than confident that it could take a huge amount of weight.

He’d ended up with enough fibre left over to make that garrotte wire he’d been half-jokingly thinking about. Tony took to habitually wearing several lengths of it threaded through whatever shirt and pants he was wearing that day. If his future-kidnappers (he was under no illusions that he’d avoid attempts this time around, given how frequently it had happened last time) were serious enough to strip him nude, then he was in trouble and had more important things to worry about.

The brilliant thing about the fibre was that it wouldn’t show up on any scans. It wasn’t metal, it wasn’t even tech, in it’s processed state it was exactly what it looked like, even on a microscopic level (well alright not down to the scales an electron-microscope managed but still), woven fibre. Harmless right?

Tony had also made significant progress on setting the adamantium shards into the handles he’d planned. Tony had decided to cap the handles with metal, as well as use metal pins to stop the shards from working their way out of the wood. The daggers wouldn’t be as useful for combat as say a custom made piece of military equipment, however the opportunity to have an adamantium blade in his possession that could slice through nearly anything was too good to pass up.

The only dagger that was giving him any trouble at this point was the stiletto, the two larger daggers both had fairly large, and most importantly blunt ends that would happily sit within the encasing wood without working their way free. The stiletto on the other hand was a sharp shard of metal at both ends, just as likely to cut the wielder as the person they were attempting to hurt.

If the adamantium shard wasn’t so likely to cut it’s way through the handle and his hand if he left it Tony would have been tempted to simply embed the thing in the smallest ebony knife-scales and call it a day.

Unable to solve the situation satisfactorily with the tools at hand Tony took to secreting the two larger daggers about his person, whilst concealing the third needle-like shard of adamantium in the sole of his shoe. The positioning reminded him uncomfortably of what he’d done to Howard, so he religiously made sure the thing was angled just so. It wouldn’t do to slice his own foot off if he got careless, but it might prove a useful object in a pinch.

The fact that he’d successfully manufactured several genuinely dangerous objects at this point didn’t escape him. However since knives generally weren’t capable of doing too much damage to the surrounding environment he didn’t really think they counted for too much.
The music room was achingly silent, Maria sitting ghost-like at the grand piano in her pale nightdress unmoving. She looked achingly frail, as if a strong breeze might blow her over at any moment. Her long elegant fingers were resting unmoving on the keys of the piano, the rigor she was holding them in making her hands look nearly skeletal.

Maria was having one of her bad days, Tony skirted the edge of the room he knew it was selfish but he didn’t want to have to deal with this possible illusion of his mother having one of her episodes. She could be terrifyingly down on days like this, from his position by the door Tony could see the overlarge glass of gin resting on the polished wooden top of the piano, nearly empty bottle sitting forlornly next to it. From the looks of it Maria hadn’t bothered with a mixer, not even a token bottle of tonic water from the drinks cabinet.

He must have made a noise, Maria turned lightning quick, and effectively trapped him there with the power of her stare. Tony found himself unwillingly walking towards her, she grabbed his upper arm as soon as he was in reach, grip steely.

At this distance he could see the crazed light in her eyes, she was having a very bad day.

“Oh my bambino we’re sending you away.”

“Mum?” Tony asked, puzzled, he couldn’t quite grasp why the information upset her so much. Then again, he’d been feeling… Off emotionally for weeks now, ever since he’d managed to persuade Howard to humiliate himself in front of Obie, perhaps even before then if he was being brutally honest.

In his own distraction he’d allowed his mom to spiral down, completely missing the narrow window of opportunity to bolster her mood for long enough to at least help her get into bed. The grip around his arm tightened painfully, Tony was shocked when he saw the macara stained tear-tracks running down her face,

“Away away away.”

Maria was rocking back and forth on the piano-stool, the very embodiment of misery.
Tony couldn’t stand it any longer, tearing himself from her grip he fled the moonlit room. Dashing as fast as he could away from Maria into the furthest depths of the mansion.

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As he fled down the hall to the basement Tony had a hell of a time keeping himself calm, something about seeing his mother so painfully distraught had shattered his own fragile veneer of calm. He knew he wasn’t behaving rationally, he couldn’t afford to be caught anywhere near this section of the mansion, yet he kept going. Tony was taking a hell of a risk he knew, it was one thing sneaking into Howard’s shop when he was away, another entirely when he was in the house. He wasn’t sure when it had happened, but Tony found that he was clutching the needle-like shard of adamantium in one hand like a talisman.

Fortunately years as Iron Man, and an Avenger had made him far better at evasive covert movement than he had any right to be. Especially given that many of the others had still thought of him as a useless civvie outside of the suit, he’d never been up to the level of superspys, gods and monsters, but Tony was perfectly capable of taking down teams of trained soldiers without the suit. Or at least he had been. His attempts at training with Ana and Jarvis had shown him that he was currently incapable of fending off one grown adult who wasn’t even trying to hurt him.

Tony dreaded to think what would happen if Howard caught him down here, his face was still blotchy from the blow that had felled him nearly a month ago. Then again getting killed in this simulation was sort-of the goal he was aiming for right now, so perhaps it wouldn’t be such a bad thing after all. Though Tony would prefer not to add yet another Howard-related complex to his already far-too-long list.

What he wanted, more than anything in the world, was a drink. The world came into focus when viewed from the bottom of a bottle, but Tony knew from bitter experience that one drink tended to arrive in many different containers.

As Tony cautiously made his way further into his father’s shop he automatically catalogued the half-assembled weaponry and schematics he passed into deadly, non-lethal and not-immediately lethal columns. A large part of his brain automatically started improving upon the schematics and designs, despite the fact that he’d been designing better in his sleep for decades.

He needed to balance this carefully, make the self-inflicted damage look accidental, not purposeful, but equally not something that would get him banned from the workshop outright. He didn’t want Jarvis to worry, or his jailers to think he was suicidal and up the security measures. Though that countermeasure at least would let him know one way or another.
Squashing down the mild guilt at framing his father Tony looked around the workshop for a way to make it seem as if the incident was due to Howard’s carelessness. Gods knew he’d gotten hurt often enough at that man’s hands that another workshop incident under the man’s belt would barely register.

As he cautiously shifted a heavy looking piece of equipment a sudden movement in the corner of his eye startled him. Tony jumped heavy load forgotten, and registered that the new cleaning girl was improbably mopping the entryway to his father’s shop. Something about his actions seemed to upset her, Tony registered a hot wetness running down his leg.

Looking down at the gushing blood Tony felt a distant sort of horror.

He’d miscalculated.

As his eyes fluttered closed Tony heard the beating of wings.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for the continued interest in this story! All of the messages about kudos, bookmarks and comments have been very welcome and have kept me writing.

Once again this story is unbetaed so all mistakes are my own.

The next chapter should be coming quicker than this one did, much more of it is finalised at this stage, and it's been easier to hash out so far.

Though frankly from it's length I suspect you should be able to tell why this one took so long! Several scenes needed including that I'd initially planned on skimming over altogether, but I was determined to get this section of the story done no matter how long this chapter ended up.

With the upcoming chapter we're about to ease into the beginnings of one of the plot-heavy sections of the story - so I do hope this latest set-up chapter has held up!
Time May Change Me, But I Can't Trace Time

Chapter Summary

Tony begins to accept the truth.

Chapter Notes

Apologies that this one has taken so long, a key scene just wasn't working despite several rewrites, tbh I'm still not 100% happy with it, but I figured if I didn't post this now it would never be done.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 4: Time may change me, but I can’t trace time

Tony resisted the urge to faint through the stubborn force of sheer bloody mindedness, his vision was already going at the edges, tunnelling alarmingly. However he’d become hyperaware of his surroundings, it was as if his body, realising that it had only minutes left, had decided to record everything it could in as much detail as possible. The wood grain of the worktop he’d managed to pin himself against was suddenly engrossing, fine patterns he’d never noticed before drawing his attention inexorably.

A heavy, and above all pointy, prop shaft had crashed to the ground tip first when the piece of machinery he’d dropped had twisted as it crashed to the worktop. Thankfully the bench was solid enough to withstand the force of all that metal slamming into it, sadly Tony’s leg wasn’t. The tip of the shaft had speared through his leg on its path to the floor; it looked like he was going to have that familiar scar through his thigh after all.

He was pretty well pinned in place like one of those insects that budding psychopaths tended to kill and collect, all the while exclaiming about the beauty of nature as they reached for the killing jar and the net. Aware that his mental processes were scattering in strange directions even for him, Tony tried to focus on the here and now, not the fascinating wood grain but the important stuff.

He blearily twisted his head around to peer at the cause of his predicament. The cleaning girl strode towards him blonde hair gleaming in the harsh fluorescent lighting. All trace of her previous cleaner’s shuffle had gone, replaced by the familiar, but in this context utterly terrifying, gait that had
been the hallmark of assassins like Natasha and Gamorra.

Clenching his hand around the shard of adamantium barely noticing that his grip was becoming slick as it sliced into his fingers with ease, Tony was grateful that he’d managed to keep a hold of it. Tony tried to brace himself for the upcoming confrontation. His stomach lurch when he spotted the scars around the woman’s wrist; he had even less of a chance than he’d thought he had. His odds had decreased from a 9.5% success rate, to a 0.3% success rate. She was a Red Room operative.

The blonde ducked down as Tony automatically moved to try and stab her, she almost casually knocked his arm aside; he missed and sliced deeply into the prop shaft instead. The spike of agony as the shaft momentarily shifted whitened out his vision. When Tony managed to concentrate on the here and now again he was surprised to find that she was carefully examining the wound, a look of concern creasing her brow.

So she probably wasn’t here to kill him.

That thought sent another flash of panic through him and he scrabbled to grab one of the daggers. She in turn pulled his wrists together with one hand, effectively pinning him even further. She efficiently tied his hands together with a zip-tie that she’d produced from somewhere in her uniform, his even more vulnerable position sent another spike of panic through him and he tried ineffectually to get free, scrabbling at the worktop as she hooked the make-shift cuffs around the table leg so that he was unable to move. Unfortunately all of the adrenaline was taking its toll. Despite the large metal rod still plugging both the entry and exit wounds, a sizeable puddle of blood had formed on the concrete floor where he lay awkwardly slumped on the workbench.

Tony found himself examining the play of the fluorescent lighting on her shining golden hair, the play of the light was mesmerising. He was utterly unprepared when she carefully braced the prop shaft with her leg, and yanked the shard of adamantium out of it. It must have taken quite a bit of force, but the shaft barely shifted.

It didn’t matter though, a severe jolt of pain flashed through him at even that minute change in position, making his vision blur even further. He desperately tried to keep his grip on consciousness, however whether he liked it or not he could tell that he was going to go under soon.

He tensed preparing to try to fight her off somehow bracing himself to dislocate his thumb to escape, or more likely for his death when she realised that he was more trouble than her mission was worth. Instead Tony was surprised when she started to slice through the shaft just above where it poked out of his thigh pushing the heavy shaft to the side where it clattered harmlessly to the floor. When she repeated the process with the bloodied end of the shaft his leg collapsed from underneath him as the painful support was removed.
Task apparently achieved and seemed to be looking around for something to tie the wound off with, settling on a dubiously clean rag on another bench. He grunted at the sudden pressure, but the discomfort was further proof that she intended to take him alive. Desperate to gain himself some time Tony tried to distract her,

“Who are you?” He croaked

“The Black Widow.”

The final rush of adrenaline at that revelation undid him, heart-pumping blood he couldn’t afford to lose out of the wound in his leg.

Just as he finally succumbed and slipped into the black bliss of oblivion there was a loud crash, a shouted exclamation and a flash of purple followed by a blur of grey and green.

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As he slumped to the sticky floor the world faded to shades of grey, everything was tinged with the blue edge that he’d learnt to associate with infinity. The Red Room operative was frozen in action, hovering surreally in mid kick. An unknown man in an expensively cut suit was similarly frozen, looming over her imposingly despite the pair of them being of a height.

Tony stared up at his strangely handsome face, he was familiar, but he couldn’t place it. It didn’t matter anyway, not now, not any more. He felt himself slipping further away from his physical shell.

A figure approached from behind him, despite the solid presence of the workbench he was somehow still propped against. He hadn’t noticed her before; it was the goth from earlier. The whole situation was utterly bizarre.

Looking up at her Tony felt a sort of peace and knowledge overcome him. She was familiar in a way he hadn’t noticed the last time he’d seen her. He got to his feet, leaving his body behind. As the world faded to unreality, his surroundings becoming somehow thin, he was overcome with a degree of calm knowledge that he’d never possessed in life.
His injuries had been silenced, immaterial matters of the flesh, Tony realised that that answered that question. He was dead. She was Death. Huh. The other boot had finally dropped it was a relief. So he really had travelled back in time, how about that?

The room around him faded away completely, replaced with a starry sky, well an utterly overwhelming view of stars and galaxies and planes that would have been brain warping had he still been connected to his physical body. Tony realised that he was looking up at the whole terrifyingly vast breadth of creation, the endlessness of the universe spread out before him.

Tony was standing in the middle of a desert that stretched out forever as far as the eye could see, black sand crunching underneath his bare feet. He rubbed at his beard contemplatively wondering what direction he should set off in.

Tony realised with a mild jolt of surprise that his body here was his own adult self, the long-removed arc reactor was casting it’s familiar pale white-blue light over his surroundings, and whilst he certainly wasn’t as tall as the two metre tall woman looming above him, flickering between a skeleton in a robe and her kinder, more gothy appearance, he certainly wasn’t a shrimp of a child anymore either.

Suddenly, just there where nothing had been before, was a wizened tree, it looked dead, bare, only the wood remained. It’s trunk and branches so twisted and gnarled that it leaned over at nearly a 90-degree angle, so that it somehow resembled a gallows. Around him the wind howled, and a multitude of ravens took to the sky. He’d have been startled if he’d still possessed the body to produce hormones and adrenaline. But he merely stared up at the murder of corvids with detached curiosity.

Unheeded She reached down towards him in the matter of fact manner that a parent takes with a child when rubbing a spot of dirt off their cheek with a damp handkerchief, her finger reached into his chest.

As Tony woke up gasping, he thought he heard a distant gust of wind.

“Don’t make me have to do that again.”

The memory of the dream slipped through his fingertips, running out between his metaphorical clenched hands as sand did when you attempted to clutch at it. Though the lingering certainty about just when he was somehow remained.
The chaos that had been carrying on around him unheeded seemed to come to an end, he only really noticed it was over because of the sudden cessation of noise. Between the still pressing issue of the blood loss and his lingering distraction, Tony didn’t really notice until a concerned pair of brown eyes were staring down at him,

“Really Mr Stark – I can’t leave you alone for a moment can I?”

The voice was incredibly familiar, but no it couldn’t be could it? Tony finally slipped into blessed sleep, nagging sense of loss following him down into his dreams.

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The Ancient One blinked in consternation as the little dot of Potential flashed out of existence in the mandala pattern. She’d only just gotten used to it’s presence, hadn’t even begun to track it down to a hemisphere let alone a continent and it had been wiped out??

The blues, oranges and greens that seemed to emanate from that little blob withered before her eyes, grey creeping along the colourful tendrils radiating out from the void where the spark of Possibility had been.

The Ancient One had thought that the swirling colours were sickening, the lifeless grey was far far worse. The hole left by the dot of the potential seemed to widen before her eyes, sucking the surrounding colourful sand into it inexorably like a plughole.

She desperately called up spell after spell trying to undo the damage being wrought to no avail, each delicate mystical matrix flared and died in front of her as the quantum manipulations failed to find anything to grasp on to. The mandala chamber was lit up by the dim glow of the many crumbling rune arrays that did absolutely nothing to stop that encroaching grey. As she began to panic at the possible ramifications there was a sudden blinding flare of blue-purple tinged light.

Blinking back the white spots in her vision, The Ancient One immediately searched out the source. Predictably, impossibly, the spot of Potential was back the swirls of colour surrounding it stronger than ever.

She wondered what on shemo-gorath that meant.
The Ancient One got back to the laborious process of attempting to track the little dot of potential down, peering through time in a bid to locate it in the real world. Her task was proving extremely difficult without the usual mystical signs and portents to provide clues. Beyond it’s obvious existence in the mandala pattern there was no sign of it in the universe at large, and peering into alternate realities had thus far yielded no clues either. So narrowing down the search to something smaller than just “Earth, Sol 3” was proving ridiculously fiddly. However what she’d just witnessed proved beyond a doubt that it was crucial that she found whoever was at the source.

She sighed, resisting the urge to rub at her eyes, the after effects of the dazzle was beginning to give her a headache. The Ancient One decided to go and check in on her apprentice, young Karl Mordo should have finished the latest exercise she’d given him to practice his fine control by now, she did hope that he’d understood the lesson she’d been trying to impart. He’d brought up too many alarming theories in their discussions lately, the ripples caused by time travel tended to grow uncontrollably until suddenly there was a tidal wave of change rolling down the stream towards you with no possible way to stem the tide. She shook her head, that dizzying flash of energy must have been stronger than she thought if she was thinking of the Butterfly Effect in watery terms.

She’d always thought that the time is a river analogy was dangerously inaccurate, if it were possible to easily travel back and forth in time without changing everything people would do it all the time. Then again people had, until they’d understood the consequences of what they were doing. They always forgot about quantum, it was always bloody quantum.

The Ancient One called up the mystical matrix that would allow her to transport herself back to the living quarters of the monastery, fingers dancing through the complex runic symbols rapidly. In a maelstrom of orange light she vanished.

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Tony woke up and took stock, all of his appendages felt as if they were still present and correct, and there were no aches and pains. That registered. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been truly pain free, even since he’d woken up as a six year old. And besides shouldn’t he be bleeding out right now? He cautiously cracked open his eyes and stared at the unfamiliar ceiling; there was a strange hum in the air. He hated asking this question, it was so cliché. He’d been through far too many kidnappings for this not to be routine by now, but still, some questions had to be asked,

“Where am I?” he said, and then he added “this time.”

“Well done! Mr Stark”, a horribly familiar voice behind him said, “consciousness to sarcasm in five seconds.”
Tony shot upright at the horribly horribly familiar voice, or at least he tried to. He ended up slumping back to the pallet midway through, forced down by sudden dizziness and an invisible hand gently but firmly pressed against his chest.

The voice continued in the same carefree supercilious tone,

“'I healed your leg by the way.'”

“Thanks.” Tony bit out, he had noticed.

He cautiously poked at the hole in his pants anyway; white scar tissue was visible where before there’d been a gory metal-filled hole.

“However the bloodloss is still in effect, so do try not to exert yourself too much.”

“What do you want?”

The other man affected an injured look,

“This meeting should be beneficial for both of us.”

“How?”

“You are Tony Stark yes?” Tony didn’t resist the urge to roll his eyes, despite the lack of armour to hide his facial expression behind, “I’ve been looking everywhere for you. And believe me, my definition of everywhere is somewhat broader than yours Mr Stark.”

“You’d be surprised.” Tony muttered bitterly whilst trying not to let his sense of panic show on his face he hated that he was an absolute twerp right now. Even that playing field had been tilted in the other’s favour now. The older man seemed to spot his feelings nonetheless, if the condescending smile was anything to go by.

“It’s most fortunate that I found you when I did Tony, a few minutes later and you’d have been
dead."

"What. Do. You. Want?"

"For us to help each other of course."

"Where’s your armour?"

"Oh that old thing? As you can see I’m a new man."

"Yeah, last I checked your face was too horrible for human eyes to see."

"I got better."

"What do you want Doom?"

Tony glared daggers up at the older man, which reminded him of something that he’d shamefully forgotten about in all of that chaos. Hand slipping to the small of his back Tony grabbed the item concealed there, leapt down from the pallet and ran at Doom, adamantium knife extended.

Doom smiled that infuriating smile, which faltered as the adamantium managed to dig it’s way a few inches into the mystical shield he’d obviously pre-prepared. Doom flung out his hand, another invisible wave of force pushing Tony back across the room.

Tony ended up slumped against the pallet, slightly dazed by the sudden change in position. He was still mentally cursing his six-year-old self’s lack of physical training when Doom shot out pleasantly,

"If you’ve quite gotten that out of your system, let’s try that again shall we?"

He sheathed the dagger, yanked himself upright from the pallet and faced the source of the voice. It seemed Doom wasn’t looking to kill him at the moment, at least not right away.
Now that he had the time to really *look* Tony stared in disbelief at the surprisingly handsome face. He recognised him of course, had seen the photos of the man before the mask, but still. Pushing aside the disturbing train of thought he fell back on anger, always a useful emotion in situations like these,

“What do you want? You did this didn’t you? Change me back!”

“Me? Nothing!”

The older man affected a hurt look; Tony didn’t believe it for a second. Doom continued in a more serious tone of voice,

“I really do want to help you Tony.”

“Yeah right.”

“Really I do. We worked well together at the End if you’d care to remember.”

Tony flushed with shame at that gently worded barb. He hated to admit it but old Doomy was right. It had just been so hard to *think* lately. Pushing down the wave of terror at the implications of that thought Tony fell back on the cold business like tone that he’d been forced to rely on so much during the run up to Than- The Titan’s invasion.

“Alright, explain.”

Doom shot Tony an annoyed look, which nearly had Tony backing up in preparation, before he seemed to catch himself and started speaking.

“At the moment you used the Infinity Gauntlet you were caught up in what we in the field would call a Major Cosmological Event.”

“I *didn’t* use the Gauntlet.” Tony protested, “That would be just about the worst idea ever. Can you imagine, me? Mr Irresponsible, using the source of absolute power? They already say all that power’s gone to my head, what the hell do you think would happen if I somehow ended up omnipotent.”
Doom merely stared at him mildly, before explaining,

“You didn’t *wield* the Gauntlet, true enough, however you did use it’s power to erase Thanos” Tony winced as Doom said the name out loud, “from existence. Even though it was through a crude form of controlled backlash.”

Tony stared at him blankly, willing the other man to get to the point, or better yet stop playing his perpetual game of silly buggers. Still grinning that tiny infuriating grin the other man continued,

“In effect the universe you were inhabiting ended at the very moment you entered the void between the d-branes of existence.”

Tony didn’t want to believe it; he clung to a last desperate hope,

“So I’ve jumped universes? Is there any way to send me back?”

“Um, *no* Mr Stark, you misunderstand me, at the instant that your universe was being rewritten, there was a major Incident” Tony could hear the capitalisation, “on a multiversal scale. Instead of an alternative universe branching off as usually occurs in these cases your original brane unravelled completely. I believe you’d just crossed into the null-space created by the gauntlet’s backlash when The Incursion struck. You are in effect a refugee from your universe, a lone survivor. It was destroyed.”

Tony’s heart dropped. Okay, he conceded, he didn’t really want to go back. But to know that it wasn’t an option anymore was depressing. Doom murmured under his breath at a volume Tony was sure he wasn’t supposed to hear,

“Alongside an oodleplex of oodleplexes of others.”

Tony didn’t want to believe what he was hearing, but it was too late. Something about Doom’s words held true. His brain had taken the new data and was running the math, it checked out as a highly probable explanation given everything that he’d seen. Tony shuddered as he remembered the yawning void of Nothing that had been expanding outwards the last time he’d seen it.
There was a significant pause before the really disturbingly handsome man continued in a puzzled tone,

“I’m not entirely sure how you managed it to be honest.”

Tony didn’t trust Doom one jot, but, he knew him, he was a snake, but a familiar one. Ironically their long history as enemies made him trustworthy in a very untrustworthy way. He wouldn’t bother lying to you when it would be so much more fun to viciously tell you the unvarnished truth.

Tony picked at the loose thread in the tale the other man was weaving,

“Wait a minute why do you want to help me? And how do you know so much? If you’re not from my universe, and my Doom is dead alongside everyone else, how the hell do you know so much about me?”

“Ah well, Doom, I mean I managed to escape the Incursions.” Tony noted the word’s repetition and catalogued it for later, Doom had slipped up there, “I managed to watch everything. In effect I am your Doom.“

Tony knew there were things Doom wasn’t saying, there always were. He didn’t trust this newly chatty version of Doom, with his well-tailored suit, and rakish scar. Where was the cackling, the crazed monologues about getting revenge on Richards? (Not that the infuriating man didn’t deserve it, Tony just wished Doom wouldn’t cause so much collateral damage in his constant quest for vengeance.) Where had the referring to himself in the third person gone?

Tony knew that a few hours ago this confrontation would have gone very differently, but something inside him was telling him that this was true and that he should listen. Tony was aware that it could be Doom using his mojo on him, but again something told him that it was nothing to do with the other man and that he’d glimpsed a truth somewhere along the line.

Doom seemed to take Tony’s silence as a signal to try and explain further,

“Effectively you’ve time travelled. Only you really haven’t”

“Patronising, much?”
Tony shot back heatedly.

Tony had always resented the assumed intellectual superiority that both Richards and Doom seemed to wear about themselves like a cloak, it grated, Tony himself had always tried not to rub his genius in unless he knew the other person really really well, or just genuinely loathed the person he was talking to. Genius tended to disturb people. It had been a harsh lesson, one that had been learnt with tears and blood.

“Well, you know your basic multiversal theory yes?”

“Well, ignoring the technical side of things about d-branes rubbing against each other, and quantum strings wrapped up inside each other…” Doom tailed off as he caught Tony’s darkening expression, “Remember the old-trouser leg of time theory?”

“Every decision creating a parallel world? Sure, why not?”

“Well your decision to annihilate Thanos created a new past, one where Thanos hadn’t existed.”

Tony still felt a thrill of apprehension every time Thanos was mentioned, the urge not to say, or even think his name still ingrained.

“Unravelling my old universe to make this one?”

“No! No.” Doom continued in a placating tone, “That universe was wiped out in its entirety by The
Incursion. This one is a completely new reality where Thanos never was.”

“Oh that’s a comfort.” Tony muttered under his breath, unfortunately it really was given the other option.

“Where you currently are, right now, is the universe you created, the one where Thanos never existed.”

“How did I end up stuck here as a six year old then? By rights I should have been wiped out with the Mad Titan.”

“Really Mr Stark, I know you’re not this stupid usually. Think about it. What did you see as the void took you? What were the Infinity Gems doing?”

Tony bristled automatically, before considering the question, it had been so very difficult to think clearly lately. As if there was something stopping him at every turn- blinking away the haze of red, Tony remembered.

Flashing, orange and blue and green.

Oh.

Oh.

Time and space and soul.

He’d effectively sent his soul back in time.

Fuck.

How could he have been so stupid? It was so obvious. How hadn’t he seen?

Basically he’d time travelled.
Tony decided to ignore the technicalities about destroying and creating universes for now. He could sit down and try to work through the math later from the sparse information Doom had provided.

Actually, in truth Tony was trying really hard not to think about how their last ditch plan had somehow only saved him of all people, effectively filling his ledger with so much blood he didn’t have a hope of trying to make amends.

Tony became aware that his usual quiet spin of science, math and schematics had been completely subverted by the knotty problem of just what had happened that day on the battlefield. Very carefully setting the whirl of numbers running through chaos theory, Gravitons, Higgs Boson interference, quantum mechanics and the butterfly effect aside, he stared at Doom searchingly. Probing the other man’s facial expression for any hint of deceit.

Despite the lack of his habitual mask the older man had an excellent poker face, however Tony was sure the Infinity Gems being in play had complicated matters. He’d deal with that later, once this bout of terror had settled down. Tony didn’t think he could face the idea that everyone he’d known had been wiped out by his hand, even though he’d seen most of them fall at the end beside him.

Doom interrupted the stream of thoughts with a complete non sequitur; it was as if he knew that Tony was spiralling down into the deep well of his thoughts.

“I was so disappointed to see that you hadn’t been keeping up with your attempts to access your full potential.”

“What?” Tony snapped both relieved that he hadn’t had a chance to get onto the litany of the dead, and irritated that the other man seemed to be staring at him knowingly, dare he think it, sympathetically.

“Access magic.”

Tony glared up at Doom at that, how had the other man known?

“Stay out of my head!”
“I assure you Mr Stark I’d never be so impolite as to break past those firewalls of yours.”

Tony was surprised by the news that they were still there, Extremis certainly wasn’t.

“Besides,” Doom continued in a musing tone, “They’re so deeply ingrained into your psyche I’m really not sure what tearing them down would do to you.”

Tony knew that the other man was trying to be reassuring, it never worked his idea of morality was so warped, even when compared to Tony’s own that his idea of reassuring was more often than not utterly disturbing. Doom continued in the same unaffected tone of voice,

“No, the smell of it is all over you. And anyone with a hint of magical finesse the whole realm over felt that ripple you sent out the other day. Though Surtur alone knows what you did, it had a very peculiar flavour to it.”

“Wait what?” Tony gaped at him, “I did magic?”

“Of course. Do shut your mouth Mr Stark, that gaping fish expression does not suit you in the slightest.”

Tony shut his mouth with a click, and resumed his mistrustful glare. Unfortunately it bounced off the back of Doom’s head. Doom had already started walking off, opening a door that Tony hadn’t seen before and disappearing into the space beyond.

“Come with me.”

Tony ended up trotting along in the revealed corridor after him, not for the first time cursing his ridiculous return to childhood. He was vaguely thankful that Doom hadn’t brought it up, the other man was probably aware that it was a sore point. Doom was being surprisingly tactful all things considered.

“Where are we again?”

“My own private residence, in a pocket universe so don’t get any silly ideas about ‘escaping’”
sarcasm dripped, Tony could practically hear the quotation marks, “you aren’t a prisoner Mr Stark.”

Tony genuinely couldn’t tell whether Doom was still being sarcastic or not, he decided not to ask. He was too bone-weary to deal with Doom’s usual brand of nonsense, trickery, bullshit and magic. He only hoped that Doom’s apparent good mood would last, and that the other man wouldn’t take the opportunity to kill him.

“Why are you bothering with housecalls then? If what you’re implying is true, surely you’ve got far bigger fish to fry than little old me?”

Doom shot him an amused grin, before strolling off, the bastard.

Tony followed Doom down a spiral staircase into the depths of wherever they were, the perpetual hum was getting louder the further they descended. Tony was startled when they walked past of patch of wall into which the Seal of the Vishanti had been carved, Strange had explained to him once that the symbol was purely protective and couldn’t be used for offensive purposes. Tony had been sure that Doomsy would have used something more, well, evil.

Pressing his hand to a seemingly blank patch of the stonework that lit up under his fingertips Doom led the way through the hidden doorway to his lab.

The pair entered the space in silence, Tony unwilling to further test the other man’s temper when he was 1) defenceless without his armour and 2) defenceless because he was a shrimp of a child again.

Tony stared up suspiciously at the huge cylindrical piece of towering machinery that dominated most of the metal-lined room; it was wreathed in a blue haze and seemed to be the source of the bone resonating hum.

Tony watched as Doom walked over to a sturdy looking case, casually strolling through the unnerving haze as if it wasn’t even there. Tony followed reluctantly, relieved when the haze didn’t turn him into a frog or something equally humiliating. Doom ran his hand over the case almost lovingly, before unlocking it to reveal an unearthly golden glow.

Doom passed over a nastily familiar object, Tony didn’t want to touch it with his bare skin, he hated magic. The nasty thing was actually making his skin crawl that was new he’d only ever been able to spot magic by it’s effects before. Tony stared down at the impossibly whole Wand of Watoomb and gulped.
“Is that?”

“Yes, and no.” Doom gave him that infuriating little grin again, “It isn’t Doctor Strange’s Wand of Watoomb if that’s what you’re asking, it was mine.”

“Where did you find it?”

“Would it surprise you to learn that Earth is at an interdimensional junction, as well as a multiversal crossroads? In short it’s the centre of a hub of mystical energy, and sometimes things fall through the gaps. Things that shouldn’t be here, that don’t follow, and often break the laws of physics that our universe abides by.”

The response was automatic he couldn’t help it,

“What, like Torchwood?”

Doom gave him a politely puzzled look.

Tony resisted the urge to laugh in his face and continued,

“Alright Captain Harkness, do tell.”

Doom sighed in exasperation before starting,

“Earth resides on a thin patch of the multiverse. The interdimensional barriers are thin here, on every Earth, in every multiverse.” Again Doom muttered under his breath “Or at least they were.” Again Tony wasn’t sure if Doom was talking louder than he should be because of the lack of a mask, or if his own hearing was better than it had any right to be. He decided not to bring it up, any advantage against this man wasn’t to be sniffed at.

Despite his knowledge of interdimensional travel via Yggdrasil, gleaned from first Thor, then Loki, Tony raised an eyebrow in mild disbelief,
“You’re talking as though the Earth resides at a fixed address in the universe, despite the hurtling at thousands of miles an hour around a sun, that is itself hurtling at thousands of miles an hour around a black hole, that in itself is hurtling away from everything else at the same rate the universe is expanding.”

“In an astronomical sense you’re correct, however in the quantum realm Earth very much has a fixed abode.”

Tony stared at Doom in blatant mistrust; he couldn’t quite bring himself to accept the worldview the other man was pushing, despite the way it made a horrible sort of sense given everything that had gone on in the past few years.

At the very least it would explain the existence of the Einstein-Rosen bridges, Tony and Doctor Foster had worked through the theory together, and had a working model if only they could find the materials to channel a power source as physics defying as the one powering the Bifrost. Even Tony’s arc-reactors with their insane power outputs and ridiculous Starkanium-fueled efficiency hadn’t quite branched into the physics warping fuckery that was needed to maintain stable control of the wormholes created.

“As a gesture of goodwill I’m going to leave this with you.”

Unbelievably, ridiculously, Doom passed the Wand of Watoomb over, clearly expecting Tony to reach out and take it.

Tony stared at the man, he found that he was pulling that face an awful lot around him. He didn’t want to accept it, didn’t trust that the thing wouldn’t turn him inside out and spit him out again. Didn’t trust Doom not to use it this as something to hold Tony beholden over forever, and yet the man had such a sincere look on his face.

Still staring in utter distrust Tony gingerly reached out and took it.

Nothing happened.

The dam broke,
“Why the hell do you want to give this to me? Surely I’m the worst pair of hands to put it in. I’m still not even sure I believe in magic. How am I supposed to protect it if someone comes looking for it?”

“Taking a page out of your book I’ve surrounded it with a bubble of zero point energy, as well as my own brand of mystical suppressant field. People won’t know to look for it.”

Looking closer Tony could see a collar of some sort wrapped around one of the twin demon heads, he wryly thought that he recognised one of his arc reactors. He peered more closely, it was one of his miniature reactors he could see the Stark Industries logo embossed on the casing. Only slightly mollified Tony asked,

“And what if they do?”

“Well I’m hoping that by the time that question arises you will have learnt enough to defend yourself. And if not, well you’ve always proven adept at surviving these sorts of incidents in the past.”

Tony glowered up at Doom at the cavalier attitude to his safety, of course the other man was giving it to him so he’d attract attention and end up dead. Knowing full well that he was in no position to refuse the poisoned chalice, Tony threw another spoke in the wheel in a vain attempt to get out of the trap that was closing in around him.

“Well where exactly am I supposed to keep it? The back of my sock draw? In case you hadn’t noticed I don’t exactly have a secure facility to house it in, and Strange isn’t around yet to dump it on.”

For a moment there Tony thought that he caught a flash of hurt cross Doom’s face at the mention of Strange, he dismissed the idea, he must have imagined it. Why on earth would Doom of all people care what he thought?

Doom seemed to mull something over before replying,

“Oh, very well Tony,” seeing Tony’s look at being referred to so familiarly he amended himself quickly, “Mr Stark.”

Mr Stark was worse, much worse, Tony pulled a face.
“Tony, now keep in mind that if I do this, only I or someone with the power of say a Sorcerer Supreme will be able to undo it.”

Despite the horror that his previous statement implied Doom matter of factly reached out for the wand and shut his eyes. The thing shrunk before Tony’s eyes, until it was the size of a keyring, in fact it was a keyring, there was a small chain dangling off of one end and everything. The suppressant ring now formed a physical circle of grey metal around the length of the wand. It looked rather like a tacky piece of tat that you could pick up on any street corner in the tourist centres of any major city the world over.

“I don’t think many people will be able to recognise the Wand of Watoomb for what it is in this form.”

“What did you do?”

“Politely asked the wand to hide the majority of its essence in a pocket universe until it was called on again, it agreed.”

Tony eyed the innocuous looking trinket suspiciously, he hated magic and he really didn’t want to be responsible for anything to do with it. However Doom was right, out of Tony and Doom, Tony trusted himself (marginally) more.

Gritting his teeth Tony reached out and took the thing, hastily pocketing it when it didn’t turn him inside out.

“And now I think it’s about time I sent you home.” Doom grinned, “You are a growing boy after all.”

Tony growled at him, despite the fact that it was true the jibe incensed him.

“Oh, by the way I sent the young woman to the other side of the planet, North Korea to be precise. I do know how you hero types feel about unnecessary deaths.”

Tony suspected that even in that woman’s case death wasn’t necessarily off the menu given Doom’s
choice of location,

“I think I might have made an exception in her case,” Tony grumbled “She was a Black Widow.”

“Ah, well I could still kill her if you’d like?”

“No! No. Thank you but no.” Tony belatedly remembered that he was dealing with Doom here, not another Avenger. He had to keep reminding himself of all of the betrayals, he’d pulled this trick far too many times before for Tony to fall for it again, whilst they’d worked well together in months running up to The End, that had been out of sheer necessity. Just because it had been, well, nice, didn’t mean Doom wouldn’t turn around and try to stick a knife in his back, again.

“I think you should leave now Mr Stark.”

“Well I would have left as soon as I woke up if I had any clue how to.” The words ‘get away from you.’ lay heavy in the air unspoken between them.

Doom shot Tony yet another infuriating look, this one knowing. Tony reflected that his tone there had been a bit too honest.

“I see.” The other man’s expression hardened minutely, a brief frown of concentration creasing his face, “Very well. You should go before you outstay your welcome.”

The world flared purple for a moment before dissolving into jagged shards of nonsense that his senses gave up trying to interpret.

Tony reappeared in the blood-strewn workshop, jagged glass-like shards of reality spitting him out onto solid ground. For a disorienting moment the world was entirely comprised of a whirling kaleidoscope of colour, and Tony felt as if he were standing on the edge of an abyss staring into something fathomless and deep. Horribly Tony was distantly aware that it might very well be staring back, with a worrying amount of effort he wrenched himself away from the bizarre vision and tried to focus back on the real world.
The sensation faded by increments, Tony realised that the area wasn’t quite as he’d left it. Spotting the stiletto-like shard of adamantium lying casually on the workbench Tony hastily squirreled it away in his shoe. Sitting next to it on the worktop looking innocently untouched was the lump of heavy equipment that had pinned him.

Well except for the prop-shaft, which had mysteriously vanished altogether, though given the state it had been in last time Tony had seen it that was probably a good thing. The prop-shaft had been in three separate pieces one of which had been running clean through his thigh.

Though now that he was clear headed he found himself wondering just how Doom had dealt with the problem. He dismissed it as unimportant; Howard might put down a missing prop-shaft to forgetfulness, a piece of machinery mysteriously sliced into several pieces however would probably be noticed.

Say what you like about the man, Doom was thorough, and he’d managed to orchestrate everything perfectly. Tony wasn’t entirely sure how he felt about their confrontation; well, more Doom talking at him and Tony having to listen due to circumstance. He was still waiting for the other shoe to drop, Doom had pulled this trick far too many times for him to even contemplate trusting him, and yet, they had worked well together.

Tony hurriedly mopped up the blood casually dumping the rag in an acidic waste bottle, and tried to put back the items strewn around the shop back where he remembered them being. Typically Doom had left him with a mess to clean up. Tony couldn’t quite remember how they’d ended up scattered everywhere, he must have passed out for a moment. Tony relied on his eidetic memory to help him put everything away, however he was aware that even his memory was probably no match for Howard’s chaotic lack of organisation.

He snuck back towards the music room, keeping to the shadows out of paranoia so that he could get back to an explainable area of the mansion in case Howard found him.

Maria was still exactly where he’d left her, despite the fact that it was nearing the wee hours of the morning if the sickly pre-dawn light beginning to ease it’s way across the night’s sky was any indication.

It was odd, the entire world looked utterly unchanged. And yet Tony’s perspective of it had irrevocably shifted. He stared up at the few stars bright enough to still be visible in the pre-dawn gloom with a new sense of wonder. Somehow he was alive, he should use this borrowed time to do something positive with his life, and not waste Yinsen’s sacrifice.
Tony was unsure if he should approach his mother or not, despite how unwell she’d seemed earlier. Maria still had that mother’s preternatural ability to sense when something was wrong with her child, though her responses didn’t always fall within the normal range expected of a caring parent.

Nerves still jangling discordantly Tony decided he’d risk it. It would be better to help his mother before Howard found her, or Jarvis had to deal with her. Fortunately Maria didn’t seem to notice anything was amiss she was still too caught up in the dilemma in her own mind to offer much resistance as he gently took her by the hand and lead her to bed before running off to his room.

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Edwin smiled in surprise when Tony shot him a dazzlingly bright grin at breakfast that morning before eagerly tucking in. Whatever had been going on with Tony lately appeared to have resolved itself, well whatever had been going on as well as his post-illness personality changes. Edwin wasn’t sure if this sudden sunny disposition was another puzzle piece or not, but he made a note of it as he finished frying their eggs on the stove.

Tony’s suddenly improved mood had a knock-on effect, Ana had noticed that he suddenly seemed slightly more at ease in his own body, as if he’d finally gotten over whatever mental block that had been throwing his centre of balance off so much. He was still apparently off-centre, but he was suddenly far closer to finding it than he’d ever been before. Even Edwin had noticed actually, and whilst he was a passable practitioner he was no expert like his darling wife.

It was good to see Tony being cheerful again, he’d been slowly descending into a dark mood that neither Ana nor himself knew how to broach, though of course Edwin was still keeping a close eye on his young charge.

The puzzle he’d been putting together was on hold for now, he had the vague notion that he was missing the key piece to the puzzle, that if he could just find the final piece everything would come into focus. But well, he just couldn’t think of a rational explanation for all of the sudden changes.

The fever was out, yes it had gotten high, but not that high. And besides Tony seemed to be smarter than ever if some of the gadgets Edwin had spotted were any indication.

There hadn’t been any incidents that could have triggered anything, well ok – there had been recently, but they had all taken place well after the changes had occurred.
Edwin knew that he was going about all of this the wrong way, and he was uncomfortably aware that he was running out of time to solve this mystery. As soon as Tony went off to whichever school Howard settled on the personality changes would probably come thick and fast, given how much social interaction his young charge was going to encounter, and how infrequent school holidays were.

Tony spent the next couple of days in a pleasant daze too caught up in the realisation that everything he was seeing really was his reality now to pay much attention to anything else.

His sparring sessions with Ana and Jarvis were proving remarkably unproductive, and yet somehow he just couldn’t bring himself to care, too caught up with re-examining everything he could see, the summer light giving everything a warm glow.

Whilst it was still a dark and forlorn excuse for a home the mansion was his childhood home not a nastily accurate recreation, and it was bustling with a life that he’d never really noticed before. Yes the mansion was still the site of many of his worst memories, and yet, the place was also home to most of his happier ones too.

He kept catching himself reminiscing about cooking sessions with Jarvis, and the slowly improving relationship that he and Maria had shared. Whilst a child had no place understanding and comforting an adult with very adult problems, Tony had been a genius, and he’d grown up with a genius’ speed too. He and Maria had gotten on once he’d understood that she really did love him, and care, just that she had bad days, as well as good. The addition of his adult understanding of just what living with Howard must be doing to her had only made him realise just how much she must have sacrificed to protect him from his father over the years.

He resolved to try to regain that closeness that they’d shared towards the end of his teenaged years a few years early. She’d always been ready with a sympathetic ear, and a useful word or even a moralistic story when she’d been well enough. But it had taken until his was nearly into adulthood the first time around to realise just how much that effort cost her. Tony thought that it was nigh on time that he tried to return the favour.

(He shuddered at the remembrance of dark dark bruises in the shape of fingers on her arms, he did not want to think about that last fight he’d had with her about fucking Howard of all people just before she’d taken that car journey.)

Shutting his eyes Tony forcibly redirected his thoughts towards something less self-destructive, it
wouldn’t do to dwell on that. He’d only just managed to find himself some semblance of peace over the guilt of that day, and then… And then had come Zemo, and Barnes and Steve, lying to his face even as the video played out and ripped the world out from under him. No.

Tony wanted to get started on his plans for a repulsor gauntlet akin to the miniaturised wristwatch version that he’d taken to wearing at all times back home- in the future, he’d been purposefully redirecting the spin of schematics in his mind for weeks now. Terrified by the vague notion that Thanos would somehow get ahold of the deadly designs that his mind often automatically came up with.

Now that he had confirmation that reality really was reality, and that his mental firewalls were somehow still intact, Tony thought that he’d better get started on putting together some of the tech he’d need to make a difference in the world. Though for now some method of self-defence for when the inevitable kidnapping attempt was made would do.

Of course the constant weight of the miniaturised wand of Watoomb in his pocket made for quite a distraction from his intent to get started on actually working out a thorough game-plan for what he wanted to do next.

Every time he was alone Tony caught himself patting his pocket to make sure that it was still there, though his natural distrust of all things magical meant he didn’t go so far as take it out to look at. Tony didn’t want to actually touch the thing with his skin any more than absolutely necessary, it was bad enough that he was carrying it around every day in his pocket.

Tony found it within himself to try to put up with Maria’s ever-changeable moods despite his own current inability to have much control over his. The pair spent hours together in the forest-scene wallpapered music room playing duets and silly little ditties together on the grand piano.

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Edwin frowned in consternation; his staff was missing a member that morning. He wouldn’t have been too concerned, but it was the third day in a row with no explanation, and she had been reliable up until this week. Edwin was in the main hall using the phone on the side-table, trying in vain to contact the woman when Howard stormed past, he had a face like thunder.

“Where’s the boy?”
“Why Howard?” Edwin asked nervously, worried for his charge’s safety.

“He’s been in my workshop. Things have been moved around, the brat should know better. I’m going to make sure that he knows that.”

“Actually Howard I think I may have an explanation. But you won’t like it.”

“Well?”

“A member of the household staff is missing, it’s been half a week now.”

Howard’s face froze. He rapidly turned around and marched off in the direction of his study.

“Howard?”

“I need to make a phone call.”

Jarvis opened his mouth to point out that he was standing right next to a phone,

“On the secure line!”

Howard shouted out, waving his hand in dismissal as he strolled down the hall. Edwin very nearly smiled; his employer had almost sounded like his old self in that moment. However he caught himself, that would be inappropriate, Edwin was aware that the situation they faced was probably a serious one.

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Edwin sighed in concern, that woman had infiltrated their lives far too easily. She’d passed all of their background checks, been the perfect employee, discreet, competent. And then she’d broken into Howard’s workshop, probably stolen secrets and vanished. There wasn’t much evidence of her tampering, but Howard was adamant that something was “off” in his workshop and the complete disappearance of the woman had been suspicious.
According to Ana when the woman’s flat had been searched a secret stash of weaponry as well as evidence of known Red Room contact methods had been found, apparently it was more advanced that the old typewriter trick, but definitely a method known to SHIELD.

As a result the mansion was now crawling with agents, Edwin was well aware that they were SHIELD. He wanted to disapprove of the way that Howard had managed to bring his work home with him in yet another new and intrusive way, however he knew that this whole situation was his fault. He’d invited her into their lives, opened their home to this, this spy.

Edwin had been able to keep Tony away from the worst of the chaos, fortunately Ana being around had played to their favour, she’d been able to keep Tony occupied with sparring in their discreetly chosen hall. If his charge noticed anything off about the sudden increase in sparring time he didn’t say anything. Edwin wondered where on earth Tony’s usual insatiable curiosity had gone, the boy’s own utter lack of any real reaction to the latest incident was another subtly terrifying piece of the puzzle. He’d been so sure that Tony had been getting over whatever it was, but obviously he’d been wrong.

An agent was speaking to his employer,

“I don’t know what to say sir, she passed all of our background checks.”

Edwin felt somewhat reassured at that, the near miss hadn’t been entirely his fault but he’d much rather the situation hadn’t occurred in the first place.

After several hours of tidying up what seemed like fruitless busywork from the agents as they turned the entire house upside down Edwin had just about had enough. From the discussions he’d overheard so far nothing significant was actually missing, oh Howard was kicking up a stink about a few pieces of equipment, but why the spy would be interested in standard lab-ware was beyond Edwin. Indeed, he rather thought, given how discreet she’d been, that the woman had probably made off after photographing every document in the house.

To make matters worse Edwin was sure Howard hadn’t actually been inside several of the areas that had been thoroughly turned over in years, let alone done any work there. But he understood the necessity, much as he hated it.

He’d had to tiptoe around them whilst putting together lunch for both the family and the invading suits. Edwin had been dismayed when he’d gone to find something in the small staff kitchen that he
and Tony habitually shared, they’d turned it upside down. Edwin had found that they’d mixed up all of the flours when they’d sieved them for lord knew what, and scattered rice and spices all over the counter. Not to mention that they’d clogged the sink. Just what did they think they’d find in this area of the mansion? The staff kitchen didn’t contain anything sensitive for goodness sake.

Given Edwin’s previous culinary disasters in Howard’s presence he wouldn’t usually be playing chef, however the rest of the staff, chef and Edwin’s cleaning crew included, were busy being questioned in the main hall.

As he handed out the basic repast he’d prepared for everyone, Edwin overheard a snippet of a particularly troll-like agent interrogating the household staff as he walked past,

“Own up! I know you did it, own up!”

A thinner agent stepped out from behind the behemoth of a man, he was somehow weasel-esque, his ill-advised pencil moustache somehow adding to the impression of sly rodenty malice.

In a low level tone of voice that was calm yet somehow threatened with the utter certainty that what was said would absolutely be carried out he started,

“If the person responsible for assisting this corporate spy in this… catastrophic example of corporate sabotage doesn’t own up I will personally ensure that all of you will be imprisoned without trial indefinitely.”

Edwin was impressed that SHIELD had had the foresight to pin the problem on a rival firm digging for SI secrets rather than the more dangerous truth. However he rather thought the threat would hold more weight if the agent in question didn’t give off such a furtive air, one got the impression as he walked through the hall that he was somehow sidling forwards. A difficult task, but one he somehow managed.

Fortunately before the idiot could do any lasting damage the double doors opened dramatically, silhouetting a figure in the bright sunlight. Edwin was surprised when Captain Nick Fury had stridden in looking just like his namesake; the other man was furious.

“Oh hell no! Howard man, tell me I did not get called in from an operation in Cambodia to deal with a possible espionage attempt from your own staff.”
Edwin struggled to keep the amused grin off of his face, it was pretty hilarious watching his employer gape like a fish as the younger man reamed into him. One of the waiters wasn’t so lucky, his sniggers earning him a harsh glare from the eyepatched agent.

“Howard for fuck’s sake man, get your house in order!”

Howard glared at Fury, Edwin admired the agent’s chutzpah, for all that Fury technically ranked lower on the SHIELD pecking order than Stark he was staring down the Executive Director with nary a blink. There was a damned good reason the young black man had risen so quickly through the ranks of the Agency, making Captain barely a decade after the Civil Rights Act had been put into place. According to Ana he was on the verge of promotion to Colonel a couple more successful missions under his belt and he’d have a position significantly higher ranking than field-handler for a small team. Edwin was uncomfortably aware of just how remarkable the young man’s rise through the agency hierarchy had been, as remarkable as Peggy Carter’s a couple of decades before in fact, complete with similar levels of resistance. If anything the young man’s earlier operations in Europe had helped his case there, whilst racism was definitely still a persistent issue throughout the western world anyone willing to help give aid on the East/West border with little regard for his own welfare was welcomed.

Within moment’s Fury had dismissed both the household staff and the would-be interrogator. He took over the running of the whole operation with an ease that told Edwin that he would be perfectly suited to a role with more power.

Staff interviews were to be held one on one with Fury’s personally selected agents, primarily a competent if bland looking young man with an attitude eerily similar to the one Agent Sousa had held all those years ago.

With the situation firmly in hand Edwin felt it was safe to trail along behind Howard and Fury, discreetly listening in on their heated discussion in the sideroom Fury had dragged the shorter man into. Acknowledging him with a sharp nod of his head Fury got started,

“Without the edge your tech gives us, or SI’s money funding the operations the government really shouldn’t know about SHIELD would be dead in the water. Do you understand what would happen if your designs got out there again? You thought the nonsense with your formula was bad?”

Howard opened his mouth to reply with something that was no-doubt sarcastic, Fury interrupted him before he could even get started,

“It’s the cold war you fool, that tech is probably halfway around the world by now. Do you want the
world to suffer, think of it man, a world where the lunatics too insane not to press the button, like motherfucking Pol Pot, are able to run around unchecked!”

Edwin was impressed, what the rant lacked in clarity Fury more than made up for in sheer momentum. He’d managed to successfully steamroll Howard, a man who always had something to say for himself. Edwin had a feeling that within a few years the promising agent would be absolutely terrifying.

“Howard, man… You need better security protocols than this. Fuck me, how are you so damned incompetent at this, you’re the executive head of SHIELD! You could have lost Maria and Tony to her, she had the run of your house for weeks… How are you so cold about this man. I mean fuck me.”

Howard puffed up puce again, before seeming to think better of it from the look on Fury’s face. Instead after the dawning panic that the moment of contemplation brought, his face took on a sly considering caste that Edwin was immediately deeply suspicious of. Fury on the other hand was not yet finished with his rant.

“You know I’m going to have to go all over this motherfucking house with a fine toothed comb. You owe me one man.”

Edwin discreetly slipped away, determined to check in on the way the other agents were treating his staff. Whilst Edwin was definitely taking advantage of being the unseen and unheard help, he was incredibly angry at Howard’s cavalier attitude to his only child’s safety. It was clear from the expression on Howard’s face that the other man hadn’t even considered the possibility of his family being hurt until Fury had brought it up in an incredibly blunt manner.

That evening as Howard and Maria sat down to dinner together in the cold but beautiful formal dining room Edwin felt a distant sense of unease. Unfortunately the staff were still being vetted by the SHIELD agents, interviews running late into the night, so Edwin was playing cook, waiter and butler to the couple.
He’d decided to play safe with the menu, quickly rustling up a few dishes that he’d prepared countless times before, such as a simplified version of the apple torte that both Ana and Tony adored so much.

Fortunately Tony had been pretty thoroughly exhausted by the workout Ana had given him that afternoon so was already tucked up safely in bed, Edwin smiled softly, his charge had almost dozed off into his soup.

Edwin was beginning to think that his sense of impending trouble had just been over-sensitive alarm bells ringing in the suspiciously quiet aftermath of whatever it was Tony had been going through lately. He’d just gone to the kitchen to fetch the after-dinner coffee, relief that neither Howard nor Maria were going to start anything streaming off of him in waves.

Of course the relief had been short-lived and ill-advised. When he returned to the room coffee tray in hand, Howard and Maria were sat huddled together at one end of the long table muttering furiously at each other as if the conversation were too important to waste over shouted words.

As Edwin drew closer to their end of the table he could make out Maria saying flatly,

“No Howard no. I tried to break the news to him but I couldn’t. Don’t send him away.”

Howard smirked in triumph, Edwin had seen the look on the man’s face in the boardroom often enough to recognise it.

“See Maria, the mansion just isn’t safe. At least at the school the security will be more than good enough to stop our little boy from being kidnapped.”

Maria sighed damply, her entire posture slumping to one of defeat. Even her pearls seemed to sag,

“Yes Howard, I see your point. I do wish it wasn’t necessary.”

Edwin was surprised, he’d thought that Howard was going to carry out his plan regardless of Maria’s thoughts on the matter, but it seemed that he’d used her own fear for her son’s safety against her and acquired her reluctant consent after all.
He supposed Maria’s behaviour lately had persuaded Howard that his life would probably be easier if she agreed to the plan, Edwin had been sure that Howard had actually already been phoning boarding schools recently if the school prospectuses he’d tidied around in Howard’s study meant anything. Whilst the methods were dubious at best, Edwin actually thought that Howard was doing the right thing by his boy for once, Tony would be far better off at the school than in the mansion.

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After enduring Maria’s clingy pampering all morning Tony snuck away to his shop. Thankfully the agents had mostly cleared out the night before. Much as he loved his mother, had missed her with an ache that never quite went away, Tony couldn’t quite bring himself to accept another whole day of her current slightly smothering brand of affection. Not when he knew it was likely borne of mental frailty rather than actual love.

Tony had been thanking his lucky stars that he’d had the foresight to clear away the nanotube set-up all week. He hadn’t had the freedom to go and double-check that he’d cleared the coal cellar completely, but from the lack of suspicious looks he thought he’d gotten away with it.

Between his mother’s attentions, the hoarde of government suits and Ana keeping a steely eye on him Tony hadn’t really had the time or the space to do much of anything for the last few days. It had been dispiriting having to act like an actual six year old, when it was the very last thing he’d wanted to do. He’d wanted to immediately get started on building himself some worthwhile tech now that the ever-looming threat of Thanos (Hah he could think the name as much as he wanted now – Thanos, Thanos Thanos!) was confirmed as over.

However Tony had not wanted to catch SHIELD’s attention. Tony had learnt the hard way not to trust the non-Hydra agents, let alone the tainted agency as a whole. He’d sworn to sit down and think about what Doom had told him when he was actually given the time to do just that.

Tony gulped as he spotted Nick Fury of all people examining something in his squash-court cum lab. He tried to back out of the room, regardless of the shouting in the back of his head demanding that he march over there and rip Fury a new one for daring to touch his tech again. That dangerous mess with the helicarriers hadn’t happened yet. Might never happen.

Unfortunately Fury’s preternatural ability to sense when Tony was up to no good seemed to be intact, the older man’s head whipped around. Tony gulped, he was a young man in this era giving him yet another moment of cognitive dissonance, made stronger somehow by the fact that the eyepatch was still present and correct. However the scars were livid, somehow fresh looking, almost sore.
Tony refocused on the workbench Fury had been poking at and resisted the urge to let the panic show on his face, instead affecting paparazzi carefree air no.6 (The Twelve for Twelve calendar edition). Fury had been poking at the equipment he’d been slowly scavenging with an eye to cobbling together an analogue repulsor.

After the initial flood of panic had passed Tony felt a flood of relief, he’d not started on anything yet on that bench. The lack of small enough servos had been giving him enough trouble that the thing was still in the planning phase. To Fury it would be a random pile of junk that an overly curious six-year-old had stolen, nothing important. Thanking his lucky stars, or rather his hard-won paranoia that he’d been trying so very hard not to even think about repulsor tech let alone make any lest Thanos steal the ability, Tony quickly glanced around to try and see if he’d left out anything else that would make “The Spy” suspicious.

Tony felt his gaze inexorably trying to draw itself to the overpowered computer in the distant corner, but he forced himself to look into the middle distance six inches to the left of Fury’s head. He could not allow that sneaky bastard to get a hold of any of that software, or to even get a sniff of what computers were actually capable of. Tony dreaded to think how Fury and SHIELD would misuse that information against the general public let alone what the hidden HYDRA network that was bound to start growing in strength soon would attempt.

To Fury’s credit he crouched down to Tony’s level in a manner that completely bypassed condescending and fell into the realm of matter of fact,

“Hello Anthony, I’m not sure if you remember me, my name is Nick.”

Tony was surprised, he hadn’t remembered anything about Fury being around when he was a kid. But apparently this visit wasn’t as unusual as he’d thought. Huh.

“I’m a friend of your godmother’s, she asked me to keep an eye on you in her stead.”

“Aunty Peggy?”

It just slipped out, he hadn’t meant to say anything.

“Yes Aunty Peggy.”
The look on Fury’s face was warm, had Fury ever looked at him warmly back in the – the future? Tony wasn’t sure, but this development was going to have him re-examining every single interaction he could remember having with the older man. Starting with trying to see if he could dig up any more misty childhood memories.

“So fucking Howard didn’t bother to tell you about me, eh?”

Tony almost laughed when he realised that young-Fury hadn’t yet learnt how to regulate his facial expressions, or even how to keep his language appropriate for his audience. The momentary look of surreptitious guilt was absolutely hilarious with the eye patch. Fury’s face settled into one closer to his habitually angry expression, Tony instinctively hunched away.

If anything it made Fury look even angrier, and Tony realised with some shock that it wasn’t actually directed at him for once from the exaggerated open-palmed backing up the far taller man was doing. Though he was clearly trying to hide the emotion from him, somehow Tony suspected that the anger was closer to the surface than it usually was. Though he wasn’t entirely sure what the source of the emotion actually was, he dismissed it as unimportant right now, it was probably something to do with spying.

Still it was useful to pick up these emotional tells, the more blatant facial expressions adding to his internal book of Fury-facial expressions and what they meant. If the other signs weren’t there he would have been able to tell from the vein throbbing at Fury’s temple that the other man was far angrier than he was letting on. As it was the man’s brow was ever so slightly lowered, and his mouth had a grim set to it. At least his years of learning how to read Fury-esque long after the older man had perfected his masks were going to make his life easier this time around.

Fury awkwardly patted Tony on the shoulder before seeming to decide that Tony had probably had enough physical affection for the time being and straightening up to apparently examine the workbench again.

“So, what are you building son?”

Tony distracted by trying to read what the man’s body language was telling him had to think for a moment, unprepared for the unexpected interest.

“Oh, um.” Tony came up with something on the spot, “Well, Dad broke my puppy.”
“Wait, wait. Hold up. Your Dad broke your fucking dog?”

Fury’s voice had taken on a far too familiar incredulously angry tone.

Tony hurriedly backed away from the far taller man, panicking at the too familiar angry glare. Fury seemed to pale under his eye patch, backing away again exaggeratedly. It was only the unfamiliar look of concerned worry on the other man’s face that got through to him, some part of his mind still intently analysing body language and facial expressions. Tony rapidly backtracked, trying to play off his panic as something childish, and keep his explanation within childish parameters. He babbled out.

“Yeah, I mean I built him, and then Dad got angry and said he was rubbish and a waste of time and he broke him, and he hurt his foot.”

Fury tilted his head as he parsed Tony’s meaning, and failed.

“Your Dad broke your dogs foot??”

Clearly he hadn’t had much experience in speaking Tonyease yet. Huh. Which implied that he had had experience in the future. And yet Tony had no memory of the man, except for a possible sighting at the funeral.

“No!” Tony was aware that he was making things worse, Fury’s lone visible eye was twitching, “My dog broke my Dad’s foot.”

“Where the hell is that damned dog?! Is it alright? Don’t say it’s been put down.”

Tony felt vaguely cheered by this surprising show of loyalty from Fury,

“Oh, no, not as such. It’s here.”

Tony gestured to its remains on the improvised workbench directly behind Fury, subtly redirecting him away from the more sensitive objects that lay out in the shop.
Fury seemed to deflate when he saw the pitiful remains, some of the righteous anger draining out of him. Sadly Howard had “confiscated” the adamantium shard by dint of hobbling off with it in his foot in all of the chaos when Dr Creep had come in to treat him, but the shattered remains of Rex made for an impressive display of filial destruction. Despite the choked feeling the sad parts gave him every time he’d looked at them Tony hadn’t been able to bring himself to part with them when Jarvis had thoughtfully presented him with the remains “in case you wanted to have a go at fixing him.” The indentation from Howard’s trademark custom-made rubber soled patents with the heavy duty treads was clear as day in the remains of the robotic dog’s fairing.

“So that’s why he had that limp.”

Fury mused rubbing at his chin, he shot Tony a shrewd glare, it wasn’t quite up to his old steel-boiling intensity but it still had Tony quailing inside for all that he refused to show it. Fury seemed to see something that he liked, he sighed and rubbed at the eyepatch reflexively, voice softening,

“Old man Stark giving you a hard time son?”

“You could say that.”

Tony hazarded cautiously, unsure of the turn the conversation had taken.

“I’ve been neglecting my promise to Peggy.” Fury muttered, again Tony was surprised that he’d caught something that he probably wasn’t supposed to be able to hear. He was beginning to think that a few things had lingered from his time with Extremis.

“Well son, I can’t say I approve of your father’s parenting methods. I’m sure you built yourself a damn fine dog.” Fury struggled for words for a moment staring down blankly at the remains of Rex, before seeming to come to a decision, “but he’s your Dad.”

Tony felt shattered, the desperate fluttering hope that perhaps things would turn out differently this time around winked out. The light at the end of the tunnel had turned out to be a train.

“However that doesn’t mean I can’t have a word in his ear.”
Fury shot him a quick grin, there and gone again in a moment. Tony stared up at the older (currently younger mentally, and wasn’t that a brain melting shocker) man in disbelief. Even this far more open version of Fury had proven impossible to get a bead on.

“I’ve got my eye on you.”

Fury’s parting shot had Tony dropping the piece of Rex’s circuitry that he’d been half-heartedly fiddling with in déjà-vu induced shock.

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Things moved on apace when the agents left after concluding that nothing important had actually been taken. Though as Edwin had suspected there was no telling what documents the spy had copied, the following day the whole damned lot was shipped off to SHIELD for forensic testing with yet another swarm of agents, Howard in tow.

Some equipment had initially been thought missing, but Fury had stated casually that he’d found it with no further explanation, and left taking his agents with him, but not before a final parting shot at Howard’s expense,

“Could you please keep a better eye on your shit, Howard seriously? You’d lose your own head if it weren’t nailed on and I’ve got better things to do than supervising this bunch of idiots because I’m the only senior agent who can stand you.”

Howard had glared at that,

“I’ll have you know that SHIELD relies on my tech.”

“Yes I know. It’s terrifying. From what I’ve seen you don’t know how to organise a bum-raping in a barracks.”

Fury nonchalantly strode out after that rather tasteless departing statement, pointedly walking off in the opposite direction to the rest of the agents. Edwin had his suspicions about just where Nick Fury had found the missing equipment but if the agent wasn’t saying anything then neither was Edwin.
Thanking his lucky stars that the days of agent-induced chaos were over, the damned fools had been trudging around the mansion for almost a week, Edwin spent the day bracing himself for the news that he’d have to break to Tony. Maria had taken him aside and asked him to do the deed, apparently she’d tried and failed to tell her son about the plans for his schooling last week. Edwin wished that she hadn’t, he had some idea of how the conversation might have gone.

However Howard had confirmed with some anger that the boy was to be sent off to an extremely exclusive boarding school at the end of the month. Apparently Tony had finally healed up enough for Howard’s reputation, but the school had taken some fiscal persuading to take in a student after the start of term.

Despite their earlier arguments on the matter even Ana had agreed that it would probably be safer for Tony if he were away from the mansion for the time being. Between Howard’s increasingly erratic behaviour and their inability to keep snakes out of their nest Ana had conceded that it was better for everyone if Tony was kept away from the epicentre of the chaos.

Edwin’s brows pinched as he remembered the heated discussion of a couple of evening’s ago; it had been Edwin’s turn to cook and he’d been glad of it. Ana had looked exhausted, actually she’d been tired quite a lot lately, and Edwin was trying to do everything he could to make her home life easier. He knew it wasn’t an easy life she’d chosen for herself at SHIELD. His adventures gallivanting about with Peggy fighting spies, criminals and science experiments gone wrong certainly hadn’t suited his temperament.

It had been a cold night for the beginning of autumn, or fall as they called it over here in America, and Edwin had taken advantage of that in his choice of food. Whilst he’d sworn off of the culinary experimentation, one too many burnt soufflés seeing to that, he’d done his best to cook his dear wife something comforting for the dreaded conversation. He’d prepared them both sólet for dinner and they were polishing off their Flóðni for dessert when Edwin had finally dared to broach the subject.

“Ana dear really, don’t you see that Tony would be safer away from this place?”

Ana’s eyes had flashed for a moment before she sighed, her thin shoulders slumping in defeat,

“Fine.” Her tone was flat, answer almost rote as if she’d been rehearsing it all day, Edwin suspected that she somehow already knew that Howard had made his decision and it was only a matter of when now, not if, “Yes darling, I know it makes sense. I don’t think Tony’s going to take this very well though.”
“Yes dear, in that at least I think I agree with you.”

“Damn it all – if only we could take the poor dear in. You *know* he isn’t going to take this well.”

“Either way we *don’t* get a say darling.” Edwin had pointed out gently, waiting calmly for his darling wife to wind herself down from her understandable anger.

The couple had stared at each other over their shared kitchen table, before sighing in unison and turning back to the pudding that now sat heavy in their stomach’s like the leaden feeling in their hearts.

Shaking himself out of the recollection of the discussion that had taken place only a couple of days ago Edwin focussed on preparing the dinner he was going to use to help soften the blow when he broke the news to Tony.

Maria was out at one of the many functions in New York that she held for her foundation, even at the deepest depths of one of her depressive spells the woman had an impressive drive when it came to her charity work. Howard was presumably still at SHIELD supervising the agents as they analysed his paperwork. Howard’s understandable paranoia about his tech falling into the wrong hands actually made his actions forgivable in this instance.

Thankfully his years of trying and failing to cook culinary masterpieces for Ana had turned him into a competent, if not particularly good at improvising, cook. Perhaps due to his own subconscious desire for a slice of home Edwin had prepared a roast chicken with all the trimmings, stuffing, gravy, parsnips, roast potatoes, cabbage, carrots – the full works, as well as bread and butter pudding, which was currently warming up in the oven. (He was saving the much loved apple-torte recipe for Tony’s last evening at home, it had been with some chagrin that he’d realised that Tony, as well as Ana adored the dish. For all that the actions of putting it together had long since become rote, it was still a fussy dessert to do well.)

Tony crept into the small kitchen right on time, body language radiating the skittishness that Edwin had thought had finally been easing away. Tony had spent much of the past week wandering around with a thoughtful look on his face, as if he’d come to a realisation about whatever it was that had been making him act so secretly. More than once Edwin had caught the boy staring at something in the mansion as if he’d never seen it before, that strange nostalgic moue twisting his face.

The latest change to Tony’s behaviour was almost as abrupt as the previous one had been, though this time Edwin thought that it was probably a change for the better. Tony had still been jumpy, with haunted eyes staring out of a young face, but he’d seemed more settled somehow in the past couple
of days.

Edwin really hoped that the news he’d have to break wouldn’t undo all of that forward progress, he let Tony devour his dessert before gently passing on the news.

“Tony.”

“Yes Jarvis?”

Something in his tone must have gotten through to his charge, Tony’s huge brown eyes were wary and suspicious. Edwin’s heart nearly broke, not again. He steeled himself,

“Now that you’re well enough you know that you’ll be going back to school soon.”

“Yes?”

Tony’s tone was puzzled, as if Edwin was pointing out that water was wet, or something equally obvious.

“Well, Howard and Maria, and actually me too. We all think that your current school is holding you back.”

Tony’s eyes narrowed, Edwin hurriedly continued,

“So you’ll be going to a better school.”

“Okay”

Edwin blinked,

“What do you mean – Okay? Wait a minute, I haven’t told you everything. It’s a boarding school.”
The relief as he finally got the news out was stunning, Edwin waited with baited breath for the expected reaction.

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Yeah, it’s cool. No biggie.”

Edwin could only gape, he really hadn’t expected it to be this easy. At the very least he’d been expecting tears and snot, not to mention the distinct possibility of begging not to be sent away. This, this was unexpected. And possibly worrying, but he was so caught up in his own back and forthing emotions on the matter that he couldn’t begin to get past the shock of Tony’s own lack of emotion.

Tony slid back his kitchen stool,

“If that’s all, may I be excused?”

“Y-Yes.”

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Despite his new awareness of the worried looks the Jarvises kept shooting him the following week flew by, Tony found that he enjoyed the training sessions with Ana and Jarvis far more than he had been. Life seemed to have a new zing to it that had been lacking lately. He’d finally be far away enough from Howard’s watchful gaze soon to actually do something.

Unfortunately as a side effect to the Jarvises worry for him they seemed determined to spend Tony’s every waking moment in his company. Between his mother’s sudden interest in his welfare and the couple’s determination to keep him company Tony barely found the time to discretely close his workshop down. Let alone pack away the equipment and inventions that he thought he might get away with at the school.
Jarvis had tried so very hard to break the news to him gently, and was clearly taken aback by Tony’s casual acceptance, he’d obviously been expecting Tony to put up more of a fight. It had been all Tony could do not to laugh gleefully in the other man’s face, but he’d reigned in the impulse, knowing it would probably be misinterpreted as hysterical.

One particular example of a wasted day was when Ana and Jarvis dragged him out to New York zoo, even Maria had come along. They’d spent a perfectly charming day together looking at the animals. Tony would probably have enjoyed it immensely even as a precocious six year old who was beginning to understand that the only activity “Worth” doing was engineering, and even then only when it pertained to weapon’s manufacture.

As it was Tony looked at the animals and felt sick as a horribly familiar waft of decay washed out of the lion’s pen, the smell a lingering note of faecal matter and rotting flesh. It brought back too fresh memories of the stench that had wafted over the transduction barriers that were all that stood between them and Thanos’ armies, everything outside of their little haven had been decimated. Rotting corpses, human and animal all that was left of the ecosystem around their little fortress. Only the bacteria had thrived in the wasteland that Thanos had wrought. Tony remembered an expedition into New York for supplies, somehow the human corpses had been less terrible than the carcasses of the animals. He didn’t know why, maybe it was something to do with overexposure.

Fortunately Tony’s visceral reaction to seeing the animals had been misinterpreted as fear over going to the school, and they’d left for Central Park and ice cream. Tony had never been so glad of wilful adult blindness as he was in that moment. He didn’t know how he’d have been able to explain why the sight of some lions lounging in the sun had upset him so much.

As a going away present Jarvis bought tickets for all three of them, Ana, Tony and Jarvis, to go to the Isolar Tour Concert that was being held in Nassau Coliseum, New York.

Somehow Jarvis had gotten them ridiculously good tickets, very close to the stage. Tony felt as if he could reach out and touch the musicians they were that close to the front.

The lights dimmed, concert hall going dark, before suddenly raising again, overhead spotlight highlighting the shirt-clad guitarist with his back to the audience teasing the guitar strings into releasing wails of electric thrumming.

The overhead strobe lights began flickering with epilepsy inducing intensity, the spotlight highlighting the pianist all in white as he started playing a simple bass-line, the bass-player in an insane purple frockcoated and top-hatted outfit soon picked up the line. Denis Davis the drummer added his genius with the drums and the song began in earnest.
Tony recognised the opening refrain to Station to Station in the bass line of the guitar and the tortured strains of an electrical animal in pain being teased out of the guitar duo. The building thrum blasted out to a silent hall, the hushed kind of silence made from a vacuum of hundreds of ears all listening intently, sucking in all sound.

And suddenly there Bowie was. Tony forgot to breathe. The man’s sheer presence filling the hall completely. Bowie was standing there utterly still, a cold hard presence in the centre of the stage as the band played on, bright orange hair gleaming in the overhead spotlights. The tension was unbearable, the baseline building and building to nearly orgasmic levels. Tony found himself staring up at Bowie unblinking, unnerved by the unnatural stillness that the man was exuding.

Tony could feel the bass thrumming through his very bones.

Finally Bowie moved. A motionless statue springing to life in a shocking instant.

“The return of the Thin White Duke throwing darts in lovers eyes…” blasted out in a powerful baritone.

Finally.

It was nearly blissful. Hell it was blissful. Bowie hardly moved, but with a voice and a presence like that he didn’t need to. The man stood his ground in the centre of the stage occasionally raising an arm to gesture.

“The return of the Thin White Duke making sure white stains…”

The opening song trailed off and Tony spent the entirety of the remainder of the concert in raptures at the music, and the ridiculously charismatic presence that David Bowie presented. The man was dressed in a well-tailored waistcoat and trousers ensemble, clutching at a packet of Gitanes cigarettes that he secreted in his waistcoat pocket whenever he fished out a smoke with his long elegant fingers. Bowie’s occasional grin was infectious; he was clearly enjoying performing for the audience, possibly almost as much as the audience were enjoying watching him.

The energy in the concert was utterly electric, the duo-guitar players fantastic, and Bowie a somehow looming presence that utterly domintated the stage despite being dressed relatively demurely when compared to his fellow bandmembers outfits, especially the bass guitarist’s purple frockcoat and huge tophat. He was a surprisingly slight man, but somehow his presence expanded and filled the entire
room in a way that Tony hadn’t really felt before, except maybe when meeting the more powerful
demigods from Asgard.

Tony was ridiculously impressed when the drummer, Denis Davis, pulled-off a 10-minute long solo
in the middle of a dire apocalyptic song about the fall of Detroit complete with improvised lyrics that
sounded suspiciously like a forerunner of rap. He’d had no idea that percussion could be so fantastic.

By the time Tony left the concert that evening he’d gone from being a tentative new fan, having been
given most of his albums by Jarvis’ well meaning lack of understanding to a complete and utter
convert.

The trio left the concert flushed and happy, and Tony realised that he’d likely remember that evening
for the rest of his life. Tony kept humming bars from the songs they’d heard, Ana and Jarvis
occasionally joining in as they made the trek back to the car. The experience had been on a par with
the ACDC concert he and Rhodey had managed to score tickets for back when they’d still been at
MIT.

Tony realised that he was genuinely looking forward to finding out what he should do next. He
grinned up at the night sky from his position on top of Jarvis’ shoulders and let out an elated whoop.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who’s commented, bookmarked and given kudos! The little
messages that pop-up in my inbox letting me know that people like this thing really do
keep me writing.

AN wrt Infinity Gems – roughly going by the MCU-verse colours we’ve seen so far
here, I believe Stephen Strange is going to be the owner of the time gem, which looks
green from the spoilers we’ve had so far, space seems to be the blue tesseract, and soul I
admit was a guess based on what colours were left...

As always this story isn't beta read, so please do feel free to point out any issues that you
spot. (And if anyone wants to offer to help there it would be extremely welcome, I
realised during the struggles with this chapter that it really would be incredibly helpful
having someone to sound things out/check things over with!)

The next chapter should be up far faster than this one - since I literally ended up splitting
this one in two as it was getting to unwieldy to edit.

Gah! Really intrigued by both the MCU and the comics right now... Amanda
Armstrong! That Doctor Strange trailer! From the sounds of it the MCU is going to go
all out on the mind bending quantum multiverse aspects of the comics, I can't wait, but
I'm also dreading seeing how far off the mark this story is going to end up!
Will You See, That I'm Scared and I'm Lonely?

Chapter Summary

School.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 5: Will you see, that I’m scared and I’m lonely?

Gulping down his nerves as the car drove down the long gravel drive Tony peered up at the forbidding sight of the school that was home to many of his more unpleasant memories. He squared his shoulders; Stark men are made of iron. He’d survived this once before, he’d be able to breeze it this time around. Somehow the large stone walled buildings seemed smaller than he remembered, despite their impressive bulk and tall windows built to intimidate.

He resisted the urge to sigh it would only worry Jarvis, and the older man had already been shooting him worried looks throughout the whole journey. At least Ty wasn’t due to show up for another year, if he hurried perhaps he wouldn’t need to face the psychopathic monster at all. Of course that meant that Hammer was around somewhere, the little weasel had been packed off to boarding school even earlier than Tony had been. Tony wasn’t sure if he sympathised more with Hammer or Hammer’s parents on that one, the sleaze ball was utterly repulsive, had been even as a snotty child.

Sadly when the day had finally dawned Maria had been in no state to go with Tony on the long drive to the school, the effort of keeping him away from the worst of Howard’s moods had clearly worn her down over the past couple of weeks. He hadn’t been too surprised but it was disappointing. Tony had been relieved when he’d realised that Howard wasn’t even going to try to put on a show of being a halfway decent father for the public eye, choosing instead to spend the time putting out metaphorical fires at SI. Ana had regretfully gone back to work the morning after the concert, though not before teaching Tony a nerve cluster grip in case he had trouble with bullies. In the end only Jarvis had accompanied him on the long journey upstate.

The car-ride had been awkward, Jarvis clearly expecting Tony to be far more emotional about the situation than he actually was, during the first hour of the drive the older man had kept trying to reassure him before eventually succumbing to the inevitable and trailing off into an uncomfortable silence. Tony had briefly considered feigning the correct emotions, but quickly wrote off the idea; odds were good that his de facto guardian would spot the deception. The pair had sat quietly together in the thick atmosphere of the car both unable to breach the divide that had reappeared between them. Obviously he was going to miss the Jarveses, and Maria. It had been heartening in the past couple of weeks to actually understand on an emotional level that Maria really had cared even when
he was a young kid despite what his memories had told him. But in all truthfulness Tony had begun to grow tired of their well-meaning attempts to protect him from the adult world.

A tall nastily familiar figure was standing by the school doors. Tony briefly wondered how long she’d been waiting there. The car finally pulled up outside the large double doors, alongside the decorative lawn that the students were forbidden from walking on, Tony had fond memories of utterly destroying the pointless bit of landscaping during his final year there. (Though even in the space of his own head he felt the need to point out that it had actually been an accident.)

Tony clambered out of the car, and adulthood and propriety be damned, he ran around to the driver’s door before Jarvis had a chance to act all formal on him. Hugging Jarvis tightly he listened with only half an ear as the adults talked, peering in an uncertain mix of nostalgia and fear at his surroundings. Jarvis hugged Tony tightly one last time, whispering in his ear,

“Write to me if you need anything. And if you can, call me. Oh and remember, he’s called Ben, and you should ask for the password.”

“Okay. I’ll – I’ll miss you, and Ana.” Tony hesitated before adding gravely, “Take care of each other ok?”

Jarvis blinked in shock, and Tony allowed himself to be led away into the depths of the main building.

Not quite under her breath Mrs Kowalski who’d been watching their little display awkwardly muttered disapprovingly,

“Dropped off by the family butler!”

Tony’s face took on an incredibly mature expression,

“Take care of each other ok?”

Edwin didn’t know what to make of that, surely the boy should be more worried about his own welfare, not that of his caretakers? He hadn’t failed to notice that Tony hadn’t been paying a bit of
attention when the principal of the school had tried to introduce herself, not that the woman had seemed to notice. He got back into the rather discrete, by Howard’s standards at any rate, sedan that he’d driven up in, only just remembering to wave Tony inside through his mild daze of worry.

As he began the long journey back to the mansion and hopefully Ana, if her shift at work hadn’t unexpectedly overrun, Edwin began once again to mull over the puzzle that his young charge was presenting him with. He could kick himself; he really should have pushed the matter. Instead he’d spent much of the summer tiptoeing on eggshells around the young boy he should have been looking after.

Edwin resisted the urge to rub at his eyes, it wouldn’t help matters to be lax with his road safety on top of everything else that he’d let fall to the wayside this summer. He sighed, he’d been so close to working out what was wrong, but he’d allowed himself be convinced to let things lie by Tony’s patchy smiles and the young boy’s willingness to make an effort.

In reality of course that in itself was a sign of something, for all that the boy was in many ways far too adult for a child of all of six, he’d never before displayed the level of emotional awareness needed to recognise when a front was necessary for other people’s sakes.

What on earth had happened to Tony, what did it all mean? The vague outline of an idea that Edwin had thought he was so close to working out seemed further away than ever.

Edwin shook himself out of his disturbing train of thought when the car began to drift into the oncoming lane, only veering aside in time to avoid the truck coming the other way by a hair’s breadth.

He refocused on the road, and getting home safely to Ana, he could only hope that his young charge was going to do well at his new home away from home… Well Edwin hoped that the school would prove to become a home away from the poor excuse for a home that the mansion had always been.

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Tony trotted along behind the familiar presence of the school principal, his short legs taking three steps for every one that she took. For all that she ran a school the woman seemed to have no idea how to actually treat children, or short people.

Mrs Kowalski smiled a too wide smile, frog-like mouth stretching grotesquely, as her goitre wobbled
distractingly. Tony only knew her name because he remembered it from his first time here, she hadn’t even introduced herself yet. Ah no, she probably had when he hadn’t been paying attention earlier.

They paused outside of a door marked Principal’s Office. Tony resisted the urge to roll his eyes; the woman had been waiting outside the school at the main doors for who knew how long for him to turn up and she hadn’t even bothered to have everything she needed with her?

She flashed him another too wide smile, this time Tony recognised her nervousness for what it was, the woman was clearly as anxious about meeting him as he was about her. Tony tried not to stare too obviously, her perpetually flushed face was all the more bizarre for her obvious physical fitness, she wasn’t a large woman, and what Tony could see of her legs was muscular. Gods Tony had honestly thought that his childhood memories of the woman had warped her into a monstrous caricature of herself, apparently not.

Mrs Kowalski was rummaging through the paperwork on her desk, clearly searching for something. Tony took the opportunity to try and size her up, he wasn’t sure if he should trust his hazy recollections of her. Or to put it another way, he wasn’t sure he should trust the perspective of his child self.

Still, somehow despite the clearly accurate memories of her slightly frightening appearance, she seemed more human with his newer perspective. She was obviously nervous, and trying to make a good first impression on him, for all that for the foreseeable future she had him by the metaphorical short and curlies.

Tony silently chastised himself, he shouldn’t let his patchy memories taint his opinion of this woman just yet, he should try to judge her for her own merits. Tony noted the frown lines, and the harsh set to her mouth. She’d had reason for grief then, or perhaps she really was just angry, or it could even be an example of resting bitch face. He almost snorted at the internet slang, before he pulled himself together and made himself look more closely. Besides the incredibly distracting, and utterly out of place goitre, she looked like she hadn’t had reason to smile a lot lately, though crows feet did indicate that she had at some point.

He admitted to himself that his kid-self’s memories that focussed so inexorably on her goitre rather than her personality was less than helpful. He had no idea if she was cruel or kind, likely to go out of her way to stop bullying or turn a blind eye.

His memories of the school during that first unpleasant year were hazy at best, full of misery and emotion over his parent’s choice to abandon him there, rather than any real information about what the school-situation was actually like. Everything after that was tainted; his memories of the place almost happy, he’d have called the recollection rose tinted if not for the instinctual shudder and
mental shying away that Ty’s involvement immediately summoned.

In his distraction Tony hadn’t noticed that Mrs Kowalski had finished rifling through her desk, she was smiling down at him in what she probably thought was a benign teacherly fashion, though truthfully it just made her look worried,

“Let’s show you to your room then. I’m sure you’ll like it Tony, it’s a nice airy double, on the top floor of your block. It’s got a good view of the lake, and I’m sure your new roommate will love the company.”

Tony just barely resisted the urge to roll his eyes, she couldn’t have done that without him? Tony followed her down corridors that were somehow unfamiliar despite the years he’d spent at the school. It seemed that even with a brain like his the memory really did play tricks. The corridors that he’d always remembered with a warm tinge looked cold in the early fall sunlight.

“I’ll let you get settled in here this morning Tony, and come and collect you for lunch, okay?”

The porter who’d been discreetly following the pair around dropped off Tony’s luggage with visible relief. Tony didn’t blame the man, the jury-rigged TV/computer was amongst the possessions that he’d brought with him and that thing weighed an absolute ton. After directing the man to dump the computer on the floor Tony moved to start unpacking the few other things he’d bothered to bring with him, clothes, scavenged parts and tools mostly, and then actually started paying attention to his surroundings.

Tony backed away in horror as he saw the state of the room he was supposed to be sharing. Apparently his roommate was obsessive over the half-way demarcation in the room; they’d already left their mark on the small-shared space, and it took up precisely half of the room.

Tony wasn’t sure yet if this was the same roomie he’d had the first time around or not, he honestly couldn’t remember much about them beyond a seething ball of anger, resentment and guilt.

Gods he hoped that feeling wasn’t a harbinger of things to come. He really didn’t want to have to watch his back in the space that he was supposed to sleep in. His sleeping patterns were haphazard enough as it was.

The room had a pretty standard, if relatively luxurious dorm layout, everything mirrored for both occupants. Two single beds pushed against opposite walls, two wardrobes, two desks, two sets of
bookshelves and cupboards.

Tony was already desperately looking forward to being old enough to be assigned his own private room. Younger boys had to share; boys at high-school level received their own space.

The only problem was his roomies half of the room was an absolute disaster zone, the floor wasn’t littered with clothes or anything obvious like that. The school had strict rules about the state rooms were to be left in after all. No the spine-crawling disgust came from a far more subtle source than that.

With a horrible sinking feeling Tony thought he might know precisely why looking at the other half of the room made his skin crawl. He knew that idiosyncratic approach to filing and organisation all too well. His palms itched with the desire to fix the disgusting affront to organisation and common sense.

“Helloooo! Antffhhhhony!”

The voice, with its particular way of pronouncing his name confirmed all of his worst fears.

Suppressing a reflexive shudder at the memories of betrayal, Vanko, corporate sabotage, murder attempts and worst of all exposing the nature of his and Ty’s relationship to the press, hasn’t happened yet, hasn’t happened yet, hasn’t happened yet.

Tony turned around to meet his new roommate, Justin Hammer.

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Tony frowned as he was led into a side office filled with blocks, abacuses and other educational toys. Lunch with Mrs Kowalski had been, educational.

Apparently he’d forgotten a few things, Westchester Academy For Privileged Boys made all students take several aptitude exams upon acceptance so that they could be placed in lessons that were suited to their intelligence levels and temperaments. (Tony snorted at the lack of political correctness used in the terminology, clearly the 70s hadn’t gotten past the hateful “No Irish, No Coloureds, No Dogs” stage yet.)
Mrs Kowalski dumped him outside a secluded little office before bustling off to do principally things.

“Hello Anthony! You can call me Mr Leekie.”

“It’s Tony.”

Tony disliked the man immediately. In truth he was surprised he hadn’t remembered him, he was memorable enough; tall and balding, obvious comb-over doing nothing to hide the shiny dome of his head, especially with the carefully teased over strands of hair constantly slipping into his face like that. The man was lanky, stick insect-like, the overall effect was like a lollypop that had been sucked on for too long. His false friendliness set Tony’s teeth on edge.

At that moment Leekie passed over a colourful little red disk of sugar on a stick, it was almost as if he’d known. Tony suspiciously accepted the candy and looked questioningly up at the surprisingly young man.

“Now Tony, I want you to work your way through as many of these papers as you can manage. Feel free to stop whenever you want, though do try your best to get as far as you can.”

Surprised by the almost modern approach to encouraging educational helpfulness Tony blinked at the man. Tony was sat down at that, and given a pen and a thick stack of worksheets.

“These papers will determine who your classmates will be, so it really is important that you give this your best shot.”

Tony tried not to scoff at that earnest little pep talk; he suspected that this afternoon was going to be painfully boring. The small piece of sickly candy lay ignored on the desk.

He doodled his way through what he recognised as logic tests, idly sketching a schematic for an improved water filtration system over one of the test papers. It morphed into the schematics for an improved coffee machine. Gods he missed coffee, so much it made his teeth ache. He belatedly finished with the pile and coughed.
Leekie looked like he’d swallowed something unexpected; Tony had thought that the tests were rather boring, though from the frown on Mr Leekie’s face he clearly hadn’t thought so.

“How should he answer here, truthfully relative to his actual age, or truthfully relative to his body’s age?

“Leekie coughed and reached for yet another pile of papers, for some reason he’d started to sweat nervously, the additional dampness making his comb over give up the ghost entirely and flop fully into his face as he reached down into the cabinet.
Tony stifled a bark of a laugh, he was being cruel in his observations he knew, but something about the man reminded him far too much of Obadiah for his comfort. Probably something to do with the forced joviality, even though he knew on a rational level that it almost certainly came from a different source.

He somewhat gleefully noted that they were onto the “hard” stuff now. Tony hummed a few bars of You Shook Me All Night Long as he solved the problems, the questions were a mixture of high school level logic, calculus, science, and literacy tests.

Of course given that he was mentally a 40-something year old, multi-doctorate holding, Fortune 500 CEO Tony still found the questions pathetically easy, but at least they weren’t insultingly low-bar. Well, they wouldn’t be insulting if he were anyone else.

Still humming Tony cheerfully tossed the pile back over, misjudging the throw entirely with his still too-short arms; he ended up spilling the pile out over the desk instead. Flushing in embarrassment and no little shame Tony cringed, expecting Leekie to react as almost all men in his life had – with anger and violence.

Leekie misinterpreted his actions completely,

“There, there Tony – There’s no shame if they’re too hard. It’s alright.”

He gathered the papers together and started checking the answers against his swot sheet, he paled slightly as he realised that once again the answers were correct.

He got up from the desk, and walked around it to talk to Tony, this time crouching down to his level at the table, rather than looming unnervingly over him.

“Tony there’s only two more sets of tests I have that I can give you. I’ll need to phone Mrs Kowakski to get permission but when she sees your results I think she’ll allow it. For now you can play with these games.”

Tony recognised the “games” as a 3D form of IQ test often given to recalcitrant children and people who had trouble with language comprehension, huh. The school must be costing Howard more than just a pretty-penny, Tony had been sure those things hadn’t really come into use until the late eighties. Still it would be something relatively harmless to do with the time he supposed.
They were even easier than he’d remembered this sort of thing being, it seemed that years of manipulating three-dimensional holographic schematics and piloting the Iron Man suits had improved his already excellent spatial awareness immensely. He ended up completing every test in the box long before Freaky Leekie returned with Mrs Kowalski in tow.

He’d returned to doodling schematics, notations all in the unique, and heavily encrypted shorthand of a language that only he and JARVIS had shared, and had amassed quite a pile of paper when the door finally opened. Leekie gave Mrs Kowalski a significant look at the sight of the neatly lined up row of solved IQ tests.

“How long did it take you to do that Anthony?” Mrs Kowalski asked, sickly sweet saccharine lacing her voice.

“Dunno.” Tony replied purposefully vague, he’d been told he behaved like a five year old often enough. He might as well act his apparent age now.

He leisurely finished adding an e-curve to the corner of his current schematic. Some things from extremis had remained with him, his control over the accuracy of his drawings was one of them.

In an undertone Leekie was whispering to Mrs Kowalski,

“Either way he completed all of them. In well under the allotted time, that indicates an IQ of at least 180 – but you know as well as I do that IQ gets increasingly inaccurate at anything approaching 150. But well given that I was gone for a little over 30 minutes, and he’s had the time to do all of that.” He indicated the technical drawings, “We should give him the more accurate tests and maybe try him out on the college entry exams.”

That surprised Tony, he’d thought Leekie was creepy and freaky, and had perhaps unfairly categorised him in his head in the same place reserved for business rivals, corporate spies, and psychologists.

Mrs Kowalski smiled tightly, something unreadable in her expression.

“Very well Mr Leekie. If you think it’s necessary I won’t argue, student welfare is your purview after all.”
With great ceremony Leekie pulled out a set of keys as large as his fist and unlocked a door Tony hadn’t paid much attention to. He disappeared inside to the rustling of paper, the door clearly led to a storage cupboard, probably used to house the school exams.

After several minutes of awkward silence, and pointedly not meeting Mrs Kowalski’s eyes, Tony was relieved when sneaky Leekie emerged triumphantly clutching several sets of papers to his chest.

In his nervousness Tony had disassembled the pen without any conscious input from his brain, using the spring as a launching mechanism for the otherwise ignored lollypop. The wrapper had been sacrificed for a crude aerofoil, and the hard candy itself had ended up in pieces scattered around the table, the remaining jagged edges still connected to the stick used as fins and as a counterweight.

With a lollypop, a pen and some paper Tony had, whilst entirely ignoring what his hands were actually doing, made a scale model of one of the more recent space worthy aeroplanes.

At Leekie’s triumphant reappearance Tony accidentally launched the miniature space vehicle, face reddening as it sailed to the far side of the room, embedding itself in a gap in the bookcase.

“Oops.”

Mrs Kowalski’s mouth was open as if to reprimand him, but Leekie stopped her eyes gleaming.

“Well done Tony! A nice little paper plane, that one travelled very far.” Spotting Mrs Kowalski’s disapproving look he continued hastily, “Ah – but you aren’t supposed to make projectiles like that Tony. You could have had someone’s eye out.”

Dumping the heap of papers on his desk Leekie strolled over to the bookcase on the far side of the room, and plucked the tiny fructose-based vehicle from its landing site. Something on Leekie’s face made Tony think that he seemed to recognise that it wasn’t just your standard paper plane, but he said nothing more about it.

“Well Tony, we’d already been asked to carry out an IQ test. So this first set of papers is an application form for a more accurate set of papers that we’ll have to send away to have verified. Mrs Kowalski, an external adjudicator and myself will all have to be present when you take the questions. This next set is a MENSA application form, and finally we’ve got some mock SAT exams for you to cut your teeth on whilst we organise all of this with your legal guardian.”
Tony casually filled in the paperwork after carefully checking the small print, decades as the CEO of one of the largest corporations on the planet had long since ingrained the practice of checking everything he signed in him. (There was a reason it took him so long to get back to Pepper whenever she gave him a small mountain of already carefully vetted paperwork after all.)

Paperwork dealt with, and ignoring the strange looks the two adults were shooting him, Tony matter of factly moved onto filling in the SAT practice papers.

He was honestly disappointed by how easy they were, the only aspect that tripped him up was trying to remember how much of the science he knew wasn’t actually common knowledge yet.

Tony ignored the whispered phone call going on in the background, it was taking quite a lot of concentration to remember just how out of date, or rather how far ahead? His knowledge actually was. The rest of his thought processes taken in tamping down the cynical urge to wonder whether Howard would actually bother signing the permission forms for such a complicated set of events.

Mr Leekie nodded in satisfaction, before noting something down in the folder on his desk, presumably Tony’s.

“I think it’s fairly obvious which class you’re going to be placed in. You’ll be going into the advanced class for your year group.”

Mrs Kowalski seemed to feel the need to interject there, speaking in an unintentionally condescending tone,

“Where you’ll have the option of choosing which qualifications you take here from an international list of recognised examinations.” Tony mused bemusedly that if he had been an actual kid the spiel would have been utterly lost on him, “Anthony we want you to be able to get into any university world-wide, if that means taking the Japanese or European tests then so be it. Whilst America has many of the best universities in the world, we like our students to have options, and as a school that takes in International Students we are prepared to go the extra mile for every single pupil.”

She beamed down at him, Tony stared up at her blankly. The poor woman had clearly thought that her little speech was inspirational, and whilst Tony conceded that the spiel might work on the parents, the woman really needed to work on her child-wrangling skills.

Leekie shot Mrs Kowalski a look before taking over,
“Once the more accurate IQ-test arrives you may end up being placed again. But we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

“Okay.”

“Well then!” Mrs Kowalski said, in that too-bright tone reserved for children, old people and the terminally stupid, “It’s too late to join classes now, so I’ll let you get settled in with your roommate and you can join Mr Smythe’s class tomorrow.”

“Might as well go and watch Hurt Locker the musical.” Tony muttered to himself, looking forward to spending the time with the Hammer brat with dread.

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Edwin was trying not to worry about Tony, but he couldn’t help it. The boy had left with a veritable cloud of worry floating over his head. Ana clearly noticed his distraction that evening, for once taking over cooking duties without complaint.

He shot his wife a grateful smile as she laid down the steaming plate of paprikash in front of him, it seemed that Autumn had finally begun to make itself known. The weather had changed from the warm sunny temperance he’d gotten used to into a downpour halfway through the long drive back to the mansion temperature dropping noticeably.

The weather had seemed to him to reflect his mood, though of course he knew that it was a flight of fancy. Edwin wondered how Tony was doing on his first day. He hoped his young charge was getting on well with the other students.

Ana reached out and grasped his hand, giving him a tired smile; Edwin smiled back at her and resumed eating the stew. He knew she was just as worried as he was, it wasn’t fair to have his head off in the clouds like this. Besides, given the arrangement he’d come to with the school he’d be sure to hear if anything happened to his erstwhile charge.

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Tony’s first night at Westchester Academy For Privileged Boys wasn’t exactly what you’d call pleasant. He entered the large canteen and almost winced at the smell of hundreds of damp bodies,
teenaged male bodies at that. The whole room was filled with a fugue of bad cooking and wet-dog, to put it politely. Still, Tony supposed, at least he wasn’t one of the people who’d been out in it, it was pouring down with rain outside.

He ended up spending the evening meal sat alone in the communal canteen, isolated at the end of one of the long tables a noticeable gap between him and his nearest neighbour, the stares of the other pupils prickling uncomfortably on the back of his neck. He knew he was the new boy, but did the other kids have to make it so damned obvious?

The canteen was strangely old-fashioned, six long rows of wooden tables arranged in parallel underneath the perpendicular raised platform and table where the teachers sat surveying the students below them.

The slop that passed for food at the canteen left something to be desired, despite the fact that Tony really wasn’t a fussy eater. Years as Iron Man, and Tony Stark, engineering genius who often forgot to eat were it not for the strange algae-based meal-equivalent smoothies JARVIS insisted he drink, still didn’t prepare him for the stew full of unknowable lumps that he didn’t want to think too hard about. The slop appeared to be primarily comprised of gristle, turnip, and grease. He steadily worked his way through the meal made up of turnip and meat full of mysterious tubes that would put hair on his chest, if the hair already on the meat was anything to judge by, with the steady yet rapid pace of one too used to being denied meals, and rushed out of the room as soon as permission was given for the students to leave.

When he got back to his room Hammer was already there, no wonder he’d had no familiar faces at dinner. Tony pulled a face at that disturbing thought, Hammer as a familiar face, albeit a hated one. He almost caught himself wondering about just why the other boy was locked away in their room when he should have been eating, Tony suspiciously eyed the layout of his belongings on his side of the room, however the precisely chaotic layout complete with traps taught to him by Nat hadn’t actually changed. He caught a glimpse of puffy red-eyes before he forced himself to get on with things and ignore the evil little spawn.

Tony went about his evening routine, brushing his teeth and unpacking the last of the items he’d brought with him. The other boy wanted to talk to him despite his best efforts. Tony did his best not to be overtly rude to the other boy, but he just kept chattering on oblivious to Tony’s increasing discomfort.

“How was your first day?”

Tony had a mouthful of toothpaste at that awkwardly timed question.
“Do you like our room?”

Tony had been about to leave the room to find the communal bathroom on their corridor, and he’d been forced to nod hastily before retreating in embarrassed silence.

“What do you think of the bed?”

Tony had just about managed to settle under the covers and had been about to shut his eyes and attempt to actually sleep.

“The food here’s horrible isn’t it?”

Tony had been on the verge of dozing off at that one.

“Leekie is weird.”

The lights were out, and Tony desperately wanted the other boy to Shut. Up.

“Tony do you like—“

Tony turned an affixed Hammer with a glare that would have seared a hole through Cap’s shield. Despite the darkness Hammer seemed to feel the intensity of it. Good.

“I’m tired. I think I want to go to sleep now. Good Night.”

“Oh, oh, Okay. Goodnight Tony. I hope your first day was okay. I know my first day was awful, Mr Leekie —“

Whatever Hammer had been about to say next was cut off by Tony giving up and slamming the door of their shared washroom. The tiny room held a sink and a mirror and not much else, but it was a welcome reprieve from the communal bathing and toilets that would comprise his time here.
Tony leaned against the sink, stared at his too short reflection and mused to himself, well, that wasn’t completely terrible. Tony ended up lingering in the small room until he was sure that Hammer had finally gone to sleep, before he slipped back into the main room and under his sheets.

As soon as school rules allowed Tony was out of his room the following morning and in the head teacher’s office. He’d taken care not to wake Justin, not wanting a repeat of the previous evening’s interminable game of twenty questions.

“I want to move rooms.”

Mrs Kowalski looked taken aback,

“Whyever would you want to do that? I thought there was a lot of chemistry between you and Justin.”

“Yeah well there’s a lot of chemistry in Chernobyl.” Tony muttered bitterly in response, for once uncaring about the scientific inaccuracy of the statement. He was sure Brucie-Bear would have raised an eyebrow at him about that one.

Mrs Kowalski blinked,

“What?”

Tony pointedly didn’t say, ‘Oh sorry hasn’t happened yet.’ Instead he settled for mumbling out, “Nothing” before hurriedly beating out a retreat from her office. In a distant sort of a way he was aware that he was the problem, not Hammer. After all the other boy was six, he’d probably merely been trying to be friendly, in the infuriating manner of children everywhere. For gods sake, he’d been able to put up with Harley for all of those years, cohabiting with Hammer who apparently had yet learnt how to manipulate should be easy in comparison right?

Tony uneasily made his way down to the canteen, dreading what the morning would bring.
At breakfast Tony attempted small talk, a social skill he’d never been any good at. It was why he always dropped obscure pop-culture references left, right and centre. It generally wasn’t good form to dazzle other people with science, the only other topic he felt comfortable with, and so he dazzled them with the more acceptable cultural references.

He turned to Hammer, who unfortunately seemed to be all too happy to have someone to sit with, Tony had tried to make himself inconspicuous but the other boy had sought him out veering unerringly towards his spot in the corner.

“So what did you think of Baldermort?”

Tony could have kicked himself, even in the present day people would have struggled with that reference, let alone now in the seventies. Hammer turned an utterly puzzled face to him.

“What?”

“Leekie?”

“Oh!” Hammer seemed to brighten at that, “He’s alright I suppose, but it’s his fault I’m in the special class.“

Tony double-took,

“What???”

“You know? The krelboynes?” At Tony’s continuing blank look, Hammer rolled his eyes and clarified as if the strange slang was the most obvious thing in the world, “For the nerds and the dweebs?”

“Oh.”
Understanding dawned like a mushroom cloud, bright and terrifying with fucktons of fallout. Christ, Tony hadn’t really considered the degree of hazing he’d be in for as a small-for-his-age (alright, just downright small, he was short, he got it) child-genius in a society where smart was shunned.

Tony stared unseeing at the grey unappetising goop the school canteen deemed to be porridge, puzzling over how to navigate the social minefield that was a school hierarchy without screwing up his plans to get out of here as quickly as possible. Before too long his six-year-old’s appetite raised it’s head and he got back to eating. It wasn’t a moment too soon, just as he got to the bottom of the bowl the bell tolled and the canteen started clearing out as the mass of students headed to their classes.

Tony followed Hammer’s lead with a sinking heart, he sincerely hoped that what Hammer was implying about the social system at the school wasn’t accurate. But in that at least Tony was willing to concede that his future business rival had always been a canny judge, or at least he had been, will be. Gods the tenses of his situation were getting confusing.

Tony found himself inspecting the classroom with distaste; it was filled with the evidence of a disconcerting mixture of woefully old-fashioned and painfully modern teaching ideals. The neat rows of individual desk/chair combos all facing the teacher’s large mahogany desk harkened back to Tony’s memories of a rather authoritarian approaches to discipline and teaching, and yet… The walls were covered in childish drawings, with large displays about Egyptians and Trigonometry taking up a large proportion of the content.

As well as the expected old-fashioned equipment, there were surprising areas to the large room, at the back of the room in a discrete corner a carpeted area littered with cushions surrounding an adult sized chair standing throne-like in the centre told that this school still believed in the rather old-fashioned idea of story time. The opposite back corner contained what looked suspiciously like a play area more suited for a kindergarten, complete with a large tray full of sand.

The teacher was standing at the front of the class, clearly waiting for the students to file in. The thin ascetic man was clearly keeping an eye out for Tony, his eyes lit up as soon as he spotted him, he gestured authoritatively for Tony to stand with him at the front of the room as the rest of the children filed inside.

“We’ve got a latecomer joining us today class, allow me to introduce Anthony Stark.”

The man looked at the class expectantly. They all droned out resentfully,
“Hello Anthony.”

“Tony, I’m Mr Smythe and I’ll be your teacher for the duration of your career here.”

Tony resisted the urge to glare up at the thin man in the ill-fitting tweed jacket; did he really have to make a big deal of this?

“Well? Introduce yourself Anthony.”

Tony decided to roll with it, he’d faced the press when they were hungry for blood, how hard could this be?

“Hi. I’m Tony, as Mr Smythe over there may have already mentioned it once or twice.”

There were a couple of quiet nervous chuckles from the very back of the classroom. Tony tried to remember if corporal punishment was still allowed at schools. He had a sinking feeling that it was. Luckily Smythe seemed oblivious to the sarcasm in Tony’s voice.

“Why don’t you tell us a bit about yourself? Likes, dislikes…”

“I like Black Sabbath, ACDC and Engineering, I dislike.” Tony tried to think of the seventies equivalent of Justin Bieber and gave up, “uh, Abba?” His choice in band didn’t earn the laughter he’d been hoping for, but rather one or two glares from his audience. Oops. Tony carefully side-eyed Smythe, running through the risk-benefit ratios in his head, and finding the outcome acceptable, he smoothly let out, “And overbearing authority figures.”

Smythe narrowed his eyes at Tony, Tony knew that he’d just about gotten away with it, this time.

Tony’s first class at Westchester Academy for Privileged Boys was painful, Mr Smythe wasn’t a bad sort, he obviously cared that his students learnt whilst he was trying to teach them. And despite Tony’s fears, he didn’t seem all that inclined to use the cane that had loomed like a treacherous iceberg in the fog of Tony’s early memories. However he wasn’t prepared for Tony’s particular brand of genius, let alone the foreknowledge that he’d brought with him to the seventies.
Within twenty minutes of the first lesson of the day starting Tony ended up bored out of his skull. He’d started out dutifully copying down the painfully simple mathematics Smythe was apparently teaching to the gifted students in Tony’s year group, but his attention had wandered as soon as he realised just how basic the problems were. It seemed that despite the tests he’d taken yesterday he was being taught the same inane drivel as all of the other children in his year group – though perhaps at an accelerated rate.

Pretty soon Tony’s notebook had been filled with his jottings, still in the encrypted language that he and JARVIS, and later FRIDAY had shared. He’d been trying to make progress on his servo/actuator problem he’d been having with his plans for a discrete repulsor gauntlet, but the escapades of the squirrels in the trees outside of the classroom window had distracted Tony. The distraction had escalated when watching one squirrel make a laws-of-physics defying jump to the neighbouring tree, which had gotten Tony wondering yet again about the different rules of physics that seemed to govern Asgardian and later Xandar’s science.

After a few minutes of fruitless fiddling with beautiful, yet ultimately uselessly elegant formulae to try and narrow down whether or not the apparent physical constants of the universe really were different when Asgardians were around to mess with them, Tony had ended up compiling a matrix to compare and contrast the data that he had to try and brute force his way to a solution, it wasn’t pretty, since he didn’t have access to definitive data one way or another so he was stuck using approximations. But it was a way to pass the time that probably wouldn’t result in him accidentally inventing someone else’s patent thirty odd years early.

Tony was horribly aware that he’d gotten lucky with the schematics that he’d drawn in Leekie’s office, he didn’t think he’d included anything world-changing in the detailed designs for that coffee-maker. Or at least he hoped that he hadn’t One could never tell when ideas for weapons of mass destruction of unrivalled destructive power popped up alongside designs for more efficient rechargeable motors, software ideas, and a possible way to make something throb and pulse. Likely meaning he’d have Pepper filing the patent on the world’s most satisfying custom rabbit, whilst simultaneously hiding away the schematics for a weapon with the destructive power of a nuclear bomb, and a new gaming engine to wow the nerds out there.

It wasn’t that Tony wasn’t trying to blend in, fit in as well as someone with 40-odd years of future scientific knowledge crammed into his head could, but well the lesson really was insultingly basic, and the teacher seemed to have an uncanny knack for spotting when someone wasn’t giving him their entire attention. As such Smythe immediately tried to call Tony out on it.

Of course Tony didn’t respond kindly to being treated that way, and the entire situation escalated rapidly,
“Well Mr Stark can you answer the question?”

“Uh. Sorry, what?”

Mr Smythe sighed theatrically,

“The question on the board. Really Tony, daydreaming already? It’s your first day. Do at least try to make an effort. Do you want to be dropped down a grade?”

The man let that last question hang in the air like a threat. Tony was unimpressed; he’d been threatened by children with a better grasp of scale. The man had already wasted what he thought of as his trump card on an incident this petty, it meant that Tony could probably damned near get away with murder.

“Oh,” Tony hastily decided not to call the man on it, he wasn’t actively trying to make enemies here. He glanced at the math problem scratched on the chalkboard in a scrawl nearly as illegible as his own, “Sure.”

“Come and give it a go then.” Mr Smythe smiled nastily gesturing that Tony should take the chalk. He was smiling that special teacher’s smile, reserved for teachers and spouses, the one that says, “I know you’re in trouble, you know you’re in trouble, let’s see you dig your way out of this one ey sonny boy?”

Tony walked up to the front of the class full of desks, gave the math problem a cursory check and dutifully filled in the answer. Before pausing, and correcting the problem so that you’d get the correct numerical answer no matter what the inputs were. He passed the chalk back over and turned to go back to his seat.

“Wait a minute boy, did I say you could sit back down?”

“No.” Mr Smythe glared stonily, “Sir.”

Snide Smythe turned and started reading through Tony’s answer. Tony hadn’t bothered to show any of his working, merely jotted the solution to the algebraic formulae down on the blackboard before hastily scribbling a more efficient line of equations underneath in revision.
It wasn’t lost on Tony that half of the class was staring nastily at Smythe, and the other half at Tony. It seemed that this little incident was to be their entertainment for the morning, and depending on how this panned out he was probably going to be infamous one way or the other.

It took a moment, but Smythe finally seemed to understand what he was looking at. He paled and looked down at Tony in mild disbelief.

“Tony?”

“Yes Mr Smythe?”

“How easy did you find that problem?”

“I dunno.”

Smythe glared,

“Pretty easy?” Tony tried out for size.

Smythe’s next words left him reeling, the lanky man coolly instructed, not a hint of emotion in his voice to give Tony a clue as to his motive,

“Tony collect your books and wait outside in the corridor please. You’re disrupting my lesson.”

Tony shot the man a nasty glare before he stomped outside.

Tony waited in the corridor anxiously, he hadn’t meant to provoke Smythe, really he hadn’t. Tony
wanted to get out of here as quickly as possible, not get himself in trouble on the very first day.

Dammit. This was no way to prove that he was responsible.

Fortunately for Tony’s state of mind Cheeky Leekie strode by at that moment, and double took comically as he spotted him.

He stared down at Tony quizzically, Tony stared blankly back, letting none of his embarrassment show in his steady gaze. Leekie immediately knocked on the classroom door, and entered before a reply could be heard.

Tony stared at the closed door, sweat beading on the back of his neck.

After what seemed like a lifetime, but was probably only a few minutes Leekie came back out of the classroom Smythe in tow.

“What do you mean he was disrupting your lesson?”

“Well he wasn’t paying attention.”

“Tony?”

“Yesir?”

“What were you doing to earn Mr Smythe’s ire?”

Tony desperately tried to read the situation, he wasn’t entirely sure what was going on here but it wasn’t going at all how he’d thought it would.

“Well I was watching the squirrels…” Tony tailed off when he realised that Leekie was thumbing through his little foolscap schoolbook, full of the schematics and notes about Asgardians that Tony had been compiling earlier.
“Yes?”

“And then I answered the question on the board.”

“And?”

“And then I got sent outside.”

Shamefully Tony felt his face flush, never show them your belly, Stark Men are made of Iron. He repeated the mantra in his head waiting for his fate to befall him.

To his shock Leekie sent Smythe a cool look.

“Mr Smythe, you were warned that your treatment of the upper years would not be tolerated with the younger children. The only reason you were given the advanced grade 1 class was due to your experience with more advanced topics. You were supposed to be teaching the children to enjoy learning. We talked about this.”

Smythe was glaring daggers, alternating his target between Leekie and Tony, clearly not quite sure who to blame for this dressing down. Tony was taken aback by the show of internal school politics.

“I’ll be taking this incident to Mrs Kowalski, Harold.”

Smythe was looking at Leekie aghast.

“Surely not?”

Leekie ignored the question,

“Get back to teaching your class.” He started strolling away from Smythe’s classroom in clear dismissal. Leekie looked back clearly surprised, in a softer tone of voice he said “Come on Tony,
we’ve got work to do.”

The rest of the morning passed in a whirlwind of paperwork. After a quick discussion in the principal’s office, during which Mrs Kowalski stared down worriedly at him the whole time, Leekie had produced the end of year exams for grade 1 and made Tony sit them.

Of course Tony found the papers pathetically simplistic, advanced class or not. Leekie sent him off for recess, as soon as the papers were filled out with a reminder to go straight back to Mrs Kowalski’s office after the lunch break rather than to go to class.

He was around the corner from the canteen when the gang cornered him. It wasn’t exactly a secluded spot. However there weren’t any teachers around that Tony could see.

Tony had been at the school for nearly a full day, he was honestly surprised that this little gang hadn’t cornered him sooner. He’d been expecting it. It was almost a relief that the long-awaited confrontation was finally going to take place.

The only pseudo-ally Tony had acquired thus far amongst his group of “peers” was Justin Fucking Hammer of all people. Tony had to violently push down his visceral gut reaction of revulsion towards the boy with every interaction. He knew it was unfair, hell if he was being honest with himself he always had, it wasn’t Hamm-Justin’s fault that he’d been as poorly socialised as Tony himself had been.

Tony had been horrified the evening before, when he’d managed to push down the automatic visceral hatred and actually look at the boy he shared his room with.

Justin genuinely wanted to be his friend, and he’d been crying. In their room. Alone. There was no guile or malice there. The boy really wanted to be friends with him. The shame that flushed through him ran hot and strong.

He knew with the rationality that distance bought him that Justin had only been trying to help him all those years ago. On an emotional level, he still hated Hammer with the fury of a thousand suns, Ty had always encouraged the enmity between them, Tony knew it was just another of Ty’s methods of isolating him. He knew it. Yet the majority of him didn’t believe it, couldn’t believe it. Still railed against the very idea that Ty had been doing anything more than taking care of him, correcting his
behaviour when he’d been bad for them, stopping Tony from doing anything that would bring shame.

Tony wouldn’t, couldn’t, forgive the way Hammer had revealed the truth of Ty’s relationship with Tony to the whole world. Hamm-Justin’s shouts about abuse, beatings and coercion flashed through his mind unbidden. Even decades later the utter humiliation of that reveal in front of Obie, the world’s press, Hammer trying to rip his too-large sunglasses off his face, face burning with remembered shame Tony forced down the memories.

He really needed to focus on the here and now, before this little situation got too far out of hand.

The gang, and that’s precisely what they were a gang, was almost entirely comprised of boys in the older years. Their bodies nearing adulthood, though their mental and social development still had a long-way to go.

They were the type of young men, that if they had been born to a lower social order, people would have called them criminals and thugs, and likely would have taken a different route home, let alone cross the street, to avoid them.

As it was these young men were the so-called cream of society. They’d risen to the top by dint of birthright, and status. Tony tried not to let his disgust show, they liked to say that cream floated to the top, well so does the scum (and he’d know, he himself was scum).

Live in the type of property these boy’s fathers rented out and you were near automatically labelled a criminal, but own the slums people lived in and it made you a member of the Great and the Good and got you invited to the type of party that only the elite could afford. Tony had spent much of his life undermining bastards like this, using the Maria Stark foundation, and SI’s own cash to raise the areas they’d once slum-lorded over up.

His lip curled.

The other boys, perhaps sensing the danger they were in looked nervous, they’d lost the excited jittery edge they’d had moments before, and now just looked nervous.

The leader of the pack was made of sterner stuff than his lackeys, malice clear in his eyes. The well-built young blonde sauntered towards Tony, overpowering ego clear in every line of his body. He swaggered over and loomed in what he probably thought was an intimidating manner.
Being fair to the boy it might have been, but Tony had never been a tall-man, and he’d been loomed over by the very best. At most the boy in front of him looked like an overeager youngster trying to prove his worth a few years too early. Tony really wasn’t impressed.

He glared up at the idiot attempting to, what, give him neck ache? Tony scoffed out-loud, the older boy looked worried by this, this clearly wasn’t how it was supposed to go at all.

Tony grinned board-meeting grin no. 6 up at them – the Patrick Bateman edition, a mix of slick city shark and pure psychopathic glee. His eyes lit up with unholy fire, if anyone with the right eyes to see were to look at him in that moment they’d think him a man with a demon on his shoulder, only instead of the usual angel on the other there’d just be another demon, egging the other one on.

“Hi, I’m Tony Stark. And you are?”

He offered his hand.

The butch boy in front of him was clearly terminally stupid, instead of backing up, as the rest of his ridiculously large gang were not so subtly doing he grinned maliciously and reached out, clearly intending to do some small evil with his newly acquired testosterone fuelled strength.

The powerful electric jolt that froze all of the muscles in his arm into immobility as soon as he touched Tony’s palm put paid to that little idea.

Whilst Tony was still struggling with the servo-issue in his repulsor plan, he wasn’t stupid. He’d managed to hastily throw together a far more effective version of the little electric-shock delivering devices that he’d used to protect his trunk at this awful place the first time around. Forty odd years of experience meant he now knew how to lock the offending party’s muscles into place without the risk of death that came with the so-called nonlethal tasers overused by the police in his era, as well as how to miniaturise the device enough that it fit nicely into the band of his wristwatch. It really had been child’s-play.

The lackeys had varying responses to seeing their leader double over clutching desperately at his right arm, which had spasmed into an immobile claw.

Half of the group evaporated into the larger population of the playground in the way that mobs denied entertainment tend to. The other half immediately took threatening moves forward. Tony
swallowed and tried not to look nervous. Showing weakness would only attract more trouble.

Fortunately, the leader’s obvious distress had drawn its own crowd, in the Brownian motion of the mob, the geeks, dweebs, freaks, loners and basically anyone who wasn’t in the in-crowd had drifted subtly closer as the incident began to play out.

After all there wasn’t much to do for entertainment around here, and seeing someone, anyone who wasn’t them get it from the pack was worth watching. Of course it was even more entertaining when the loathed bullies became the bullied themselves.

The large pack of senior-year students was beginning to look rather small in the face of the eerily quiet children surrounding them. Tony knew that his position rested on a knife-edge, events could still tip in their favour far too readily for his peace of mind.

Fortunately he knew how to play a crowd. Knew how to do threatening, even without the suit he had plenty of experience there. Without letting go of the stricken pack-leader Tony sauntered half a step-forward wicked grin clear on his lips.

Half of the pack again melted away.

There were only six of them now as opposed to the braying mob numbering in the thirties when they’d cornered him. The rest of the onlookers were still eerily quiet, clearly waiting to see which way the incident would turn before taking sides.

Tony knew viscerally that the loser would at the very least end up in the nurses office.

The, well, presumably the second in command stepped forward menacingly. He was clearly a jock, his broad shoulders and football jersey spoke of that clear enough. Where the leader of the gang was actually slyly intelligent in that malicious low-level rodenty way that all bullies of his sort had to be, his second was a wall of pure muscle.

Tony tried not to let the nerves show, he was performing to the crowd now, his natural environment. At least this audience wasn’t actively baying for his blood. Not this time.

For all that he was literally carrying several tricks up his sleeve Tony was painfully aware that he couldn’t afford to let the situation play out like this for much longer. He was six, the other boy had
the body of a military man. Hell, he probably was a military cadet.

Tony grinned another selection from his catalogue of shark’s grins, this one no.13: The Trickster – “Isn’t this a laugh?” variant. He wanted to unnerv the opponent without alienating the audience, a tricky balance to pull-off. Fortunately he was an old hand at this game.

He took another confident half a step forward, posture radiating that he had not a care in the world. The remainder of the gang of older-boys were all looking nervous, they clearly weren’t the brains of the group, they’d all melted away when the tide had begun to turn against them.

Tony raised an eyebrow sardonically at the second-in-command.

“Well?”

“Huh?”

“What do you want?”

Though clearly nervous, things really weren’t meant to go this way his opponent responded in a horribly unshakeable fashion.

“To teach you your place you little fag!”

Again Tony smiled unnervingly.

“Is that so?” he mused, “Ok then.” Tony spread his arms in a show of nonchalance. “Teach me.”

The older boy lashed out with his fists, Tony released the stricken leader, confident that his arm would need at least another twenty minutes before it unclenched from it’s claw, and ducked under the clumsy swing.

For all that Tony lacked strength and bulk he didn’t lack for speed, or training.
He nimbly climbed the mountain of a boy in front of him and deftly jammed the electric shock device at the target - the nerve cluster that Ana had taught him about, making the mountain of a boy yowl in pain as everything from the shoulder down spasmed. As well as his arm the entire right side of the boy’s torso was contorted inwards giving him the temporary impression of having suffered a permanent life altering injury.

Tony jumped down from his perch on the other’s shoulders and looked questioningly at the pitiful remains of the gang ranged in front of him. They all backed away slowly, as the playground proto-mob slowly began to jeer.

He smiled in triumph, he hadn’t even had to attempt to use any of his actual skills to do that. He’d be able to pass that off, truthfully, as something his butler’s wife had taught him combined with his own cleverness.

It was a win-win situation as far as he was concerned. He’d marked himself out as too much effort for the hazers, but not-actually-scary to his peers. Or at least he hoped he’d managed to walk that line.

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The combined furore of getting kicked out of Sly Smythe’s class on his first day with the way he’d utterly trounced the so-called popular kids had the kids in his year shooting him a mixture of admiring and fearful looks.

Tony had a feeling that rumours were running rampant, he suspected the gossip would have it that he’d beaten up 12 guys and a dog by the evening.

Unfortunately for all that he’d been sent out to get lunch he was supposed to report in to Mrs Kowalski as soon as he managed to get himself something to eat.

He dutifully joined the end of the queue and accepted the mysterious slop masquerading as food before trudging off in the direction of her office.

To his surprise, and mounting horror, Mrs Kowalski looked almost happy to see him there rather than upset. He had a sinking feeling that he knew which way this meeting was going.
From the cool look Smythe kept giving him over her shoulder Tony really began to hope that he wouldn’t be forced to take anymore classes under the man’s tutelage. Perhaps the probable direction of the upcoming discussion wouldn’t be so awful after all.

Leekie rushed in a few minutes later, apologising for being late.

“So sorry, there was a bit of an incident in the corridor – young Misters Cord and Taggert were causing quite a commotion – I sent the boys to the nurse’s office.”

“Now that we’re all here.” Smythe said archly.

Leekie either didn’t notice or chose to ignore the tone of voice,

“Yes, let’s get started.”

Smythe sneered down at Tony, affecting an aloof air that didn’t quite mask his – what contempt? Tony didn’t think so, he’d have been comparing the man to Snape but he didn’t read any specific irrational hatred there. If he had to guess he’d say it was closer to misanthropy, the man seemed to genuinely dislike everyone around him. Including the staff members that he should have counted as peers. Smythe shot Mrs Kowalski a look that Tony had trouble interpreting, before seeming to decide he had to start the session. Heaving a put upon sigh the skinny man asked,

“Well Anthony? What do you have to say for yourself?”

Tony looked up at the teacher in genuine puzzlement. He hadn’t really been doing much wrong. Not really. He felt a little like Harry Potter in that first potions lesson for a moment (What? He’d read the books – he was comfortable enough in his manliness to admit that out loud. In fact he’d done so, to Pepper’s consternation when all of that fuss about teaching black magic had been doing the rounds in the press. He’d even been given tickets to the film premiers on the basis of that very public backing, the only part of the films he’d enjoyed was Alan Rickman’s portrayal of the aforementioned Professor, somehow the novels had a (hah) spark of magic that the film adaptations lacked.) Painfully aware that he’d spaced out for a moment there Tony dragged his thoughts back to the present, only to find Smythe downright glaring at him. Oops.

“Well – sorry. Well. Um. I answered the question on the board? I’m sorry I got distracted by the squirrels.” Tony tried. When that didn’t seem to soften Smythe’s harsh look he continued, “Only
they were so. Well I was trying to work out if they were breaking Einstein’s law’s of conservation. It was obvious the old models of thermodynamics weren’t going to do much there – the estimates of Gibb’s Free Energy values I was getting were ridiculous. So I swapped to the four-dimensional model. And….”

He trailed off at the incredulous looks he was receiving. Damn. It looked like he’d gone too far, of course that was the highly edited sequence of events that he’d thought he’d be safe in sharing. Since all of that had happened within the first couple of minutes and he’d moved onto Asgardian and Xandu physical traits, but still, he hadn’t done anything that was beyond current scientific knowledge there. What was the problem?

Tony found himself glancing between the three adults nervously, trying to find some clue about how he should be behaving. Mrs Kowalski was looking between her three visitors clearly trying to get a read on the situation. Tony found himself rethinking his opinion of her, she was clearly smart enough to let things play out a little before she made a snap judgement. Hah, unlike a certain “Captain” of his acquaintance. It was down to Smythe and Leekie then. Both men seemed taken aback. Where Smythe looked grudgingly thoughtful, Leekie was fidgeting with suppressed energy.

“Am I in trouble?”

It slipped out, he hadn’t meant to say anything so childish, and yet, sat there, in the small child-sized chair, being loomed at by three adults. Well. He hadn’t felt so small in years.

Smythe opened his mouth, but Leekie got in first,

“No! No Anthony no, of course not. In fact, Mr Smythe was remiss in failing to explain just why he removed you from his class during first period.”

Smythe seemed to be on the verge of interrupting,

“Wasn’t he?” Leekie gritted out, in that unique manner that adult’s use when trying not to show to children that they are in fact having an argument.

Smythe glared daggers but said,

“Yes.” And to the man’s credit, the next sentence was unprompted, “And I apologise. I meant to
follow you out shortly so I could take you to Mr Leekie’s office, but young Mr Tobias had an accident with the paste.” Smythe’s face twisted in remembered displeasure.

Tony looked unbelieving between the two of them. He almost said ‘And you couldn’t have told me that earlier???’ But stopped himself, whilst he’d have gotten away with far worse as Tony Fucking Stark, genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist. For now he was stuck in the role of young Anthony Stark, son of Howard, the weapons manufacturer. Yet to prove himself to be anyone of worth, hah, that’s if he’d ever proven to be of value to anyone beyond what he could bankroll.

“Yes, well now that that’s out of the way.” Mrs Kowalski’s saccharine tones cut through the silence, “Let’s discuss moving you up a grade shall we?”

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Hammer was yammering at him excitedly when he got into their shared room much later that afternoon, incessantly asking questions about how he knew the answer to the question Smythe had given him, did he get in trouble, how he’d managed to beat up Ed Cord, was he a soldier, could he teach Justi-Hammer how to do that?

Tony shot his old rival a hateful glare and slammed the washroom door in his face.

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By the end of the first week any dubious progress that Tony had made with his defeat of Cord on the social front was undone by his academic progress. The speed at which he climbed through the grades alienated all of his would-be peers. By the end of the first week Tony had been bumped up by four grades. The pattern of moving up nearly a grade-a-day would have continued but Mrs Kowalski had put her foot down. She’d declared the entire situation ridiculous, and wouldn’t allow any more class changes until the official aptitude test results and IQ scores came in.

Being fair to the woman it was clear that she meant well. From what he’d overheard of the furiously whispered discussion she’d been having with Leekie she’d been attempting to preserve his childhood. Ironic really. No one had cared enough to do that for him the first time around, and now that he was actually an adult people kept crawling out of the woodwork, trying to hold him back to keep him safe. The irony was astounding. Tony had to admit, the circumstances were pretty unusual, even though he’d been a genius the first time around and moved up through the educational system at a ridiculous rate he hadn’t actually tested out of education within the first month of arriving at the
school. Which he was at a distinct risk of doing this time around.

The situation was unfortunate, but for now Tony had no say in the matter. According to Leekie the official Mensa testing and IQ adjudicators would be around at the end of the month, which had been the event that he and Mrs Kowalski had ended up compromising on.

Since Tony’s presence in any class had turned out to be unnecessarily disruptive, though not through any malice on his part, more due to the sheer, slightly aggressive, disbelief from the teachers that he could possibly answer the questions that they set him to trip him up when they caught his attention wandering. Tony had ended up morosely filling out the school’s internal exams under the watchful gaze of Creepy Leekie. At least at this rate he’d probably be able to test out of the school system fairly soon even with all of the coddling he was suddenly receiving.

Tony hadn’t been able to bear the heartbroken looks Hammer had been shooting him ever since he’d been bumped up that first class, Tony was horribly aware that the other boy had been looking forward to finally having someone else to talk to. Truth be told Tony was relieved that he’d been able to dodge that bullet. He still couldn’t bring himself to look the boy in the eye, let alone hold a civil conversation with him.

It was taking all of his experience at managing to sleep in a cave surrounded by people who’s idea of an entertaining hobby was to make him wish he were dead night after night to manage to shut his eyes every evening next to Justin Fucking Hammer.

Tony blearily rubbed his eyes as he hastily filled out what felt like the millionth test paper. If Leekie kept his word he’d be able to jump up to whatever grade he managed to pass the exam for, though of course Leekie wasn’t exactly aware that Tony had prior experience in that arena.

Still the other man hadn’t struck him as stupid, despite the ridiculous things he’d done to his hair, he was probably well aware that Tony’s result would get Mrs Kowalski’s hackles raised again and seemed prepared to face her. He’d certainly stared down Mr Smythe readily enough that first day, and Tony still inwardly thought that the skinny man was an ass who liked throwing his power around far too much for someone who was supposed to be educating children. But he hadn’t had the misfortune of having to deal with him again, so in all he thought it was a win.

He refocused on the eighth grade test paper in front of him and got on with answering the inane questions. The sooner he got this done the sooner he could get out of here.

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Fortunately midway through the second week of his time at the school Tony had relief from the tedious boredom of sitting in Freaky Leekie’s office day after day in the form of an extracurricular activity for him, and him alone. Jarvis had organised for Tony to have a private “personal safety” tutor teach him at the school twice a week, after lesson-hours were over. His beloved butler had gone behind Howard’s back, paying for the man out of his own pocket.

He’d told Tony that the man was an old friend of his and Peggy’s from their time setting up SSR/SHIELD offices in England, apparently he was an ex-SAS officer, name redacted from all of his old files, including the SHIELD ones. Tony was to check for the code phrase upon meeting him to verify his identity.

Jarvis had Okayed it all with the school by pointing out that Tony was a kidnapping risk, being the son of one of America’s major weapons manufacturers. Tony had kissed the man when he’d told him the plan. The school, and therefore the wider world, thought that the man was merely teaching Tony how to escape from dangerous situations, when in reality he was going to be teaching him some of his own skills.

So it was a surprise when the man actually turned up, he was tall, lanky and beaky. The first thing Tony noticed about him was his nose, it dominated the man’s whole face. Front on it was roughly proportional, straight and thin with large nostrils, but from the side it dominated the man’s whole profile. Intelligent green-gold eyes peered down at him from above that nose; Tony had the uncomfortable feeling he was being closely assessed.

Tony belatedly remembered to check for the code phrase, the man winked, actually winked at him.

“The significant owl hoots in the night.”

“Hooray hooray for the spinsters sister’s daughter. Nice to meet you Tony Stark.”

He drawled in a deep English baritone, sticking out a strong, long-fingered hand for him to shake. Somehow there was nothing patronising in the action, unlike the behaviour of the majority of the adult’s he’d met since he’d awoken in this time zone.

Tony gripped the other man’s hand, noting how it both dwarfed his ridiculously, and the strange pattern of calluses on the palm, so different to patterns that he himself had borne for most of his life from the metalworking that he’d carried out in his shop.
“ Couldn’t you find something easier to remember, like I dunno, swordfish?”

He grumbled in a bid to cover up his momentary surprise. From the way the older man ignored the comment Tony had the uncomfortable feeling that the attempt hadn’t worked.

“My name is Ben Adams, please call me Ben. Let’s check what level you’re at, and then we can work out between us what style I think suits you the best, and whether I should be teaching you.”

“Wait what, what do you mean if you should be teaching me?”

“Well, in the unlikely event that I don’t know the discipline in question, we’ll have to find someone else who does. I may be one of the best martial arts teachers in the business, but I’m also self-confident enough to give referrals when I have to.”

The next few hours were one of the hardest training sessions of Tony’s life, and he was including the sparring sessions with Nat that had ended in fractured bones in that list. He ran laps, demonstrated safe falling, and attempted to defend himself from a far larger and stronger opponent who knew what he was doing, unlike that oaf he’d encountered on the playground. He ended up on the crash mats again and again and again.

Ben made him demonstrate the dance-katas Ana had taught him, clucking his tongue whenever Tony made a move he particularly disapproved of. Unpleasantly the most difficult trial was saved to last, Ben taught him a series of fluid moves that he was expected to repeat perfectly, every mistake in posture and position was corrected. He was made to hold each pose for a minute before dropping it, restarting the routine from scratch with every error, and there were a lot of errors.

Suffice it to say by the end of the first half of the session Tony was sore and more than a little grouchy.

“Well…” Ben drawled out, Tony looked up at him from his position sprawled out on the mats, “You aren’t the worst I’ve ever seen.”

Tony held his breath in trepidation, this didn’t sound good.

“There’s obviously something tripping you up, you keep second guessing your own actions. You’re far too up in your own head Kid.”
Tony opened his mouth to say something but was cut off

“I mean if I didn’t know better,” there was a strange tone to his voice that implied the opposite to that statement was true, Ben’s tone dropped to a far darker, threatening growl, old, old eyes stared down at Tony out of a young face, “I’d say you were fighting a combination of being somehow unfamiliar with your own body, and trying to unlearn decades of discipline and training.”

Ben levelled Tony with a shrewd look, his expression brightening, the feeling of being assessed by a being far older and more powerful than himself left suddenly, leaving Tony reeling at the abrupt shift.

“But that’s impossible right? I mean you’re what – five, six?”

Tony nodded rapidly in relief, before realising that there was a question in all of that,

“Uh – six, sir, I mean Ben.”

“See? That there, you had to think about your answer. No six year old should have to sit there working out how old they are.”

Ben’s gaze sharpened as he uttered the next sentence, “In fact most six year olds can tell you down to the week how old they are.”

Ben levelled him with a piercing glare, green-gold eyes seeming to cut through him like a laser.

“So Tony. How old are you, really?”

Tony didn’t know how to reply to that question. It was true he didn’t actually know how old his body currently was, it just wasn’t something that seemed important enough to keep track of. Something in him insisted that he should keep his status a secret, and it wasn’t just the fear of being locked in a padded room into a permanent self-hug suit. Pressing as that concern was. Ben seemed to take his hesitance as confirmation.
“Fine, don’t answer me, well, at least you’re not a Black Sky, that’s something to be grateful for.”

Tony caught himself just in time, he’d almost blurted out, ‘What like Elektra?’ But fortunately he’d managed to keep quiet. Whilst he wasn’t sure if she’d even be born with all of the changes to history that he’d apparently made there was no way he was going to give up her secret like that.

Tony realised he’d been silent for too long, which Ben had apparently taken as not just confirmation but a confession that his theory was true.

“Look Kid, don’t worry about it. We’ve all got secrets we don’t want told. I won’t tell if you won’t ok?”

Tony nodded.

“Now back to the business of me teaching you how to fight. I assume you already know quite a lot of theory? At least up here?”

Tony refocused on the here and now in time to see Ben tapping his temple in demonstration.

“That move you keep doing with your hands for instance – pointing your palm out like that. Bloody useless move if you ask me, but your body clearly doesn’t seem to think so.”

Tony resisted the urge to flinch. He was too used to fighting in the amour, even now, after a decade’s worth of unarmed combat training with some of the best fighters in the world, arguably the galaxy.

“So – we’re going to be doing a bit of re-education.”

Ben looked as if he’d just caught himself saying something distasteful, expression blackening. Tony decided to ignore it,

“Is that what we’re going to call it?” Tony sighed out. Ben’s expression sharpened.

“Who taught you?”

“Uh – well Ana and Jarvis.”
“No, not that shite you just showed me. The stuff you were trying not to show me. Who taught you?”

“My driver?”

It was a truth.

Ben huffed, and knelt on his haunches.

“Look Kid, you and I both know – “

“Okay. Okokok. But you won’t believe me.”

“Try me.”

“Ninja superspy, acrobat superspy, super soldier, demigod, not actually a medical doctor, plain old soldier, a king, a thief, an android…”

Tony trailed off at the raised eyebrow, it wasn’t as he’d initially thought disbelief, but annoyance. A sign of a rapidly fraying temper.

“Specifics. I need specifics.”

“Won’t help.”

“Try me.”

Something in Ben’s voice made Tony’s shaky control snap, he spitefully spat out a list of names that he knew there was no way on earth the other man would recognise, not here and now nearly 40 years too early.

Tony immediately regretted the outburst; like Captain Taggart he wanted an Omega 13 device to enable him to clap his own hands over his mouth. Ben’s response surprised him, not outright disbelief or concern for his sanity but actual consideration.

Ben heaved a frustrated huff, large nostrils flaring with the force of his exhale.

“Fine. Okay. I see your point, I only recognised about 5 of those names, and I’m pretty sure the deity I’m thinking of isn’t the one you are, given that last I saw of him an angry mob had burned down his temple with him locked inside then strung up the charred remains of his corpse for all the world to see.”

Tony gaped up at him.

“What? You think I don’t know things?” Ben shot at him, completely misinterpreting the reason for Tony’s expression, “The Widow programme has been around for decades, everyone’s heard of Captain Bloody America, the foolhardy idiot boyscout. “The invective was spat as though Ben wanted to use something stronger, “Thor, and the Black Panther – both obscure legends that have more than a little basis in fact. I’ve walked through Wakanda a few times, even lived there once or twice. And of course I’ve met Gamora.”

Tony resisted the urge to ask just how the hell Ben had met Gamora, let alone when Ben had had the time to do all of that, he looked like a young man. But Tony himself was proof that looks could be deceiving. Just as Ben had said that he wouldn’t press too much Tony supposed that he owed the other man in turn.

“Ever meet anyone called Stick?”

Tony stared up at him blankly.

“What?”
“Hah! Nothing nothing, don’t worry.”

Ben smiled wickedly, rubbing the palms of his hands together a vicious spark in his eyes.

“Right then. Now that we’ve got the introductions over and done with.”

Before he’d finished the sentence Ben lashed out with his leg, forcing Tony to jump back or be knocked down. Tony glared up at him, Ben was looking down at him expression aloof, only the sparkle of humour in his ever-changing eyes gave away that the attack was meant to teach. Tony huffed out a breath and dropped into the Wushu stance that he’d picked up from the instructor that had given both himself and Happy self-defence lessons for years.

Ben raised an assessing brow, before dropping back into his own defensive stance, one that Tony didn’t recognise from any discipline, even vaguely. Tony got the feeling that Ben at least was going to be the one teacher who wouldn’t try to hold him back, if anything he might try to push him too hard. He was almost looking forward to it.

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Tony was relieved when he got back to the room he shared with Hammer that evening to find the other boy already curled up in bed facing the wall and breathing deeply. He didn’t think he’d have been able to put up a polite front to the little shit’s questioning after the utter disaster that his meeting with Ben had been.

He still couldn’t quite believe that he’d told Ben what he had. The other man had riled and poked and aggravated until it had all just spilled out of him in a torrent of what he’d thought had been nastily specific and therefore utterly useless information. Unfortunately the other man did actually have some clue about the wider-universe, somehow. It should have been impossible, and yet he’d stood there with such a look of understanding in his old, old eyes.

Tony angrily worked his way through his evening ablutions before throwing himself down onto the lumpen school mattress and drifting off into an exhausted sleep.

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It had only taken Tony four days to whizz through all of the internal exams that the school possessed. And even then he’d have probably gotten through them in half that time, but Geeky Leekie had kept insisting that he take breaks and rest his eyes.

As a result Tony was awkwardly spending his days holed up in the school library reading whatever caught his fancy.

At first the librarian had been suspicious, but the explanatory note from both Leekie and Mrs Kowalski had mollified her. It helped that Leekie had turned up a couple of hours into his first lonely morning there to check in on him, the man’s loud outrage that he hadn’t been allowed access to books that were “at your level” had quickly persuaded the librarian that giving him free reign was the path of least resistance given how much shushing she’d been forced to do at the earnest man.

Tony had started off browsing the classics, he’d not reread them in years. Tony had whiled away a pleasant day rereading the greek classics, and Plato’s rather unromantic ideas about The Origin of Love. However the next morning he’d come across a painfully familiar tome that had him on the verge of a flashback, it was the Compendium of Roman History from which he and Ty had chosen their pompous nicknames for each other all those years ago. He’d almost toppled over the trolley of books for shelving in his haste to get away from the thing.

Tony had avoided that section of the library from then on, instead sticking to relearning just what contemporary science actually was in the 1970s. It was mind-numbingly dull, but at least it didn’t bring back memories he’d rather remained buried, and it would help him not to irrevocably alter the course of human history for the worse.

The scientific tomes only highlighted the loneliness of his situation, apart from Hammer, who still insisted on sitting with him during recess for who-knew-what-reason that Tony couldn’t fathom the rest of the student population was giving him a wide berth. It was clear by now that Tony had overdone it when he’d stood up to the hazing gang, he might have gotten away with it if he’d been in any one class for long enough to attempt to befriend people, but at the rate he’d moved up the grades before being hidden away in here like an embarrassment. Well. That was never going to happen.

After the third day of the mind-numbing boredom of rereading topics that he already knew inside out and in more detail than these pathetic books could ever match, even the university level texts for the older students, Tony had had enough. He thought that he’d been unusually patient with that project, but then again, when he did seriously start in on a project he usually didn’t stop until he’d at the very least finished the first prototype or theory.

Tony rubbed at his tired eyes and started wandering through the stacks, for a school library it was surprisingly thorough. He thought he spotted a copy of Farenheit 451, hadn’t a school actually banned that one around this time? He almost reached for it when he recognised what section he was
in and froze.

Fiction.

Sci-Fi and Fantasy.

Sci-Fi and *Fantasy*.

Fantasy.

Swords and Spells.

Magic.

He should really try and find something about magic, and well ok, whilst Tolkein probably didn’t have it at all right, he’d based his ideas off of folklore hadn’t he?

Tony’s mind started whirring through the possibilities, memories of the snippets of conversation he’d had with Doom, Loki and Strange playing in his mind. Hrmph. Doom. Gods he hated that man. The next time he saw him, and he was under no illusions that there wouldn’t be a next time, he was going to tell him just how much. Arrogant bastard.

Tony pulled himself back on track. Ok. Whilst Tony accepted that many scientific models weren’t complete enough to explain magic in it’s entirety, not after he’d witnessed things that not only broke the laws of physics but gleefully tore them apart, stole their clothes, and mailed their shit covered remains back to their mourning spouse, he was constantly frustrated by how vague the explanations he got from practitioners were.

Perhaps he’d be able to find a book with some sort of theory.

Where had Strange said he trained again? Tibet right? And yet Loki had been all about runes where Strange had been all about mysticism and chakras. Hads’n Loki and Strange had that argument about who had more right to call themselves supreme? With Loki saying something scathing about how Invoking other people’s power hardly counted? Hrm. And where did Doom fit into all of this, the
sneaky bastard didn’t subscribe to either school did he? He always explained everything as if it was science, even when it really was the absolutely ridiculous mindfuckery that came with magic. And what about Wanda? Her infinity stone granted probability powers were clearly magic, and yet she never so much as muttered an incantation.

The librarian raised an eyebrow and pursed her lips at the frenzied activity, as Tony frantically searched the stacks, piling books on the desk in the corner that he’d claimed as his. (Good vantage point of the two exits, far enough from the Librarian that she couldn’t snoop at what he was reading, but close enough to her that none of the other students could actually do anything to him.)

Tony ransacked the myths section, folklore, history, fairytales, folksongs, ancient history, anything that he thought might contain a snippet of a clue. By the time he was satisfied that he had enough information to get started the table was nigh on groaning under the weight. Covered in precarious piles of books.

Since he couldn’t get along with any of the so-called magical theories that the mages he’d known had espoused he was going to have to get started on one his own.

Pulling over an empty foolscap notepad and the closest book: The Pre-Celtic Peoples of Britain and their culture, Tony got started.

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Tony was alarmed by the thoughtful expression on Ben’s face, given what had happened last session he felt that he had every right to feel wary.

“The discipline I want to teach you is so old it doesn’t have a name.”

Tony was tempted to scoff at the transparent attempt to impress him, but something in Ben’s tone stopped him.

“Now, brace yourself I know you’ll find this suggestion odd.”

Tony started up at Ben disbelievingly, the man had somehow wrangled a significant proportion of his secrets out of him in the space of a few short hours, and he expected an exercise suggestion to surprise him?
I also want to teach you how to use a sword. Now unfortunately we’ll need to wait a little while for the practice swords to get here, I didn’t expect to be teaching you anything about using a blade.”

“Wha-?”

Despite the long run-up the other man had taken Tony found himself gaping stupidly up at Ben, he peered up at the old eyes in the young face, a paradox that matched the face he saw in the mirror every morning, the older man was perfectly serious.

“And I want you to take up fencing as your option sport here.”

“Fenci- But won’t that be confusing? Isn’t fencing all about scoring points?”

“Exactly. I want to see how you cope with the confusion, give you a new level of cognitive dissonance to work through. If you can do it for this, then perhaps you’ll be able to integrate what you already know with what I’ll be teaching you. There’ll be hope for you yet.”

“Okay Inigo.”

Ben shot him a look before they got on with the hand to hand techniques, they spent a couple of hours working on getting Tony used to his own body before moving onto very slowly going through moves that Ben described as the “basics”. Tony had to admit that he was impressed. He didn’t recognise the style at all, not even in the vague sense of “oh that’s the one everyone at SHIELD uses, or that’s the one Rhody uses, and that’s the damned silly one that martial arts guy we fired tried to make me do.” It didn’t seem to be based in anything that he’d come across, though being fair Tony knew that he was no expert. Hand to hand had never been his area of expertise, it was why he’d built and stuck to the suit after all.

However he hadn’t been lying about his multitude of teachers, and Tony could tell that some of these downright dirty fighting moves he was being carefully walked through would be damned effective in future when he was tall enough to actually face adults. From the looks of it Ben was part of the “anything is a weapon” school of thought, Tony approved.

Not that Ben hadn’t accounted for his current stature, a lot of the moves relied on using the other person’s momentum against them – cleverly positioning yourself so that you could flip the other person with surprisingly little effort.
Tony only hoped that this time around the extra effort he was putting in would make him a less attractive target in the future, he’d always hated the assumption that separating him from the suit would render him useless.

Tony was relieved when the appointment for the external IQ tests finally came around. The progress he was making in the library towards putting together his own magical theory from the multiple ridiculously separate folklores and myths of the world was painfully slow, and he’d been in need of a break for the past week.

Tony thought that there might be some underlying universal law there, but damned if he could see what it actually was through all of the mystical mumbo-jumbo. Tony had somewhat telling memories of Loki and Strange bickering over “Strange’s ritual-bound underdeveloped nonsense” as Loki had put it, and Strange puffing up in indignation, before he’d backed away from the argument.

If anything Tony would have been tempted to compare the ridiculous sets of rules without any logical explanation akin to the methodology behind the biological sciences. When Tony had quietly started picking up his medical degrees he’d been horrified at the sheer amount of “this does this because” vague hand-wavey explanations that had had no real explanation at all. Though he’d taken pains never to say so out loud, he was quietly of the opinion that the so-called wet sciences weren’t real science at all, but a sadistic form of torture dreamt up by bored professors and grad students. It would certainly explain all of the dubiously run experiments that had given science such a bad rep in the 60s. Of course Tony had never dared to mention this theory to Brucie-bear or Helen. He’d valued his skin too much.

Tony was beginning to wonder if he was facing a similar situation with magic, that the information contained within the tomes and passed from magician to magician only scratched the surface of what was really going on utterly missing the fundamental principles that lay underneath the complex processes dancing on the surface. He’d certainly been relieved when Helen had walked him through her particular speciality, to find that there were people marrying the physical sciences with the biological – uniting the fundamental principles with the squishy mess that medicine forced all of it’s disciples to learn by rote.

Perhaps he was facing a similar situation here?

Whilst sorting through the knotty problem of trying to find out if there actually was a universal magical theory was akin to the kind of challenge that he relished in the scientific sphere, the vague and often conflicting information contained within the books he had access to was genuinely
maddening. At least the biology hadn’t conflicted with itself, much. The change of pace supplied by the day of the test really was a welcome relief.

A man and a woman in bland grey suits were both waiting for him in Leekie’s office when he tentatively stuck his head around the door. Hell everything about the pair was bland, he’d have suspected them of being government suits, but they lacked the telltale bulge of a holster, or the gait.

The woman, a brunette, smiled down at him nervously clearly unused to dealing with children she held out her hand for him to shake. Which he did, cautiously. The man, a blonde with cold blue-green eyes that reminded him of Stev- Tony forced himself to look away, instead meeting Leekie’s worried gaze.

“Ah Tony – you’re here! Good. Good. We’ll get started soon.”

“Yes” Said the blonde, “If you’ll just hand over any calculators, watches etc. on your person we’ll begin.”

Tony shot the man a look, he knew it was unfair, but well, he disliked him already.

“I’m not giving you my watch.”

Leekie gave Tony an upset look,

“Tony? Don’t you want to know where you’ll be placed?”

“Sure. But he’s not getting his hands on my watch. He might break it.”

Tony played the petulant child for all that he was worth, he could not risk anyone spotting the tech he’d already integrated into the thing, glorified joke zapper or not. It didn’t help that Tony had used the lessons he’d learnt when he’d re-engineered Nat’s Widow’s Stings for her to great effect. Her Widow’s Bite had already been at the cutting edge of taser tech before he’d gotten his hands on them, and that had been in the 21st century.

He could see that that rather pathetic argument wasn’t going to wash with the adults, he whispered
out fearfully,

“My dad made it for me.”

Before allowing his eyes to water with the force of the pent up emotions his current insane situation had him in. Save it, use it; take it out when it’s useful. But cage it, keep it back, control it, don’t let the beast control you. Ironically he’d learnt that coping method from Bruce and Natasha – he’d wondered if they’d realised how similar their approaches to their emotions were? He somehow doubted it. Still, it seemed to have worked, Leekie was looking taken aback, Tony felt mildly guilty, but he couldn’t afford to let the tech out of his sight, who knew what would happen if it got out there?

“Oh. How about a compromise?” The adjudicators were looking incredulous, as if they couldn’t believe that Leekie would stoop to negotiating with a child, rather than just giving him a belt around the ear.

Tony looked up at Leekie through damp eyes,

“We’ll leave it here on my desk. You’ll be able to see it at all times, however it’s face will be pointed at the wall, and you won’t be able to read it. Is that ok?”

The question seemed rhetorical, more like Leekie was stating to the adjudicators that this was how it was going to go down. Tony felt his respect for the man grow, grudgingly.

Mild dilemma dealt with the adjudicators got on with the boring business of stating the rules, time limits, blah, blah, blah. Tony managed to listen with half an ear, which he felt was an achievement given how dull their explanations had been.

After all of that build-up Tony found the official IQ testing session utterly underwhelming. He’d at least hoped for difficult puzzles to work through, but he filled out the examination paper with very little difficulty. If anything he’d been suspicious that he’d been given an “easy” paper because he looked like a child, but from the incredulous expressions on the adjudicators faces that wasn’t the case. Huh.

Fortunately for Tony’s sanity there were 3D puzzles to play with as he waited, these were more difficult than the ones that lined Leekie’s office, but not significantly so. He’d ended up twiddling his thumbs as the woman sealed up the test papers in envelopes, whilst her colleague had stared at him agape, leaving Tony fidgeting uncomfortably.
The small group dispersed from Leekie’s office, and Tony slunk off to the canteen to face the silences and the stares from the other students.

Tony edged his way cautiously into the exercise salle, he didn’t want Ben to surprise attack him the way he had last time. Tony was brought up short by the sight inside, he eyed the large medieval looking weapon with utter disbelief, he didn’t think he’d be able to lift the bloody thing now. As an adult it would have been easy enough but he was a tiny sproglet, and the sword was taller than he was. Ben caught the look Tony was shooting at the massive sword he was casually twirling in the middle of the hall and smirked.

“If I had my way I’d be training you every day rather than twice a week, but for now this will have to do. We’ll alternate the sessions, first half swordplay, second half unarmed and vice versa.”

Tony just stared up at the beaky man questioningly.

“Oh don’t look at me like that, eventually you will be using broadswords, bastards, katanas, everything so you won’t get caught out against an opponent using an unfamiliar style. For now however…”

Ben trailed off, moving over to a chest that Tony hadn’t spotted. Tony backed off wearily, he still didn’t trust the older man, for all that he trusted Jarvis’s judgement. Ben seemed to be thinking about something, mind a million miles away, eyes distant before he lifted whatever it was out of the chest.

The sword he lifted out was unfamiliarly shaped; whilst the blade was straight the cutting edges had a strange pear-shaped curve. It vaguely reminded him of the silly glowing blue sword that Frodo had hefted around; Rhodey had loved those films for some reason. Tony had only really liked the “They’re taking the Hobbit’s to Isengard” meme that he’d hacked Rhodey’s then-Nokia to play a midi-version of.

“I want you to run laps around the school grounds every day for now.”

Tony gaped again, this time in annoyed disbelief.
“For the first week, one lap a day, the second week two laps, the third week three laps.” Ben grinned evilly, “Well, you get the idea.”

Tony stared at him in sullen silence, for once every inch the six year old he resembled. Ben continued, unaware of, or rather, uncaring of the glare he was on the receiving end of.

“We’ll start you off with this basic short sword, at the moment I’m not sure you’d be able to lift anything with a decent length to it.”

“Ok then Inigo, let’s get started.”

Ben noticed the nickname but said nothing; rather he perfunctorily handed over the strangely shaped sword. It was much shorter than the intimidating broadsword that he’d vanished somewhere, already twirling the matching twin in his left hand. Great. Not only was his teacher far more experienced at this than he was, he was clearly going to do this the hard way from the casual ambidexterity he was displaying.

Tony cautiously accepted the strange looking sword cautiously, not trusting Ben not to suddenly attack him. The other man merely raised his eyebrow.

“Well? How does it feel?”

Tony hefted the heavy thing, trying to get a feel for it. He examined the strange shape of the blade, noted the utter lack of any sort of guard.

“Feels more like a double-edged machete than a sword.”

“Hah!” Ben looked satisfied with his response, “Good. I thought you might notice that. Yes, fighting with these is closer to knife fighting than swordplay. Should give you an advantage against all sorts of opponents, you’ll be able to trip people up with this one. It’ll get you used to getting in close to your enemy, don’t let them use their longer reach against you.”

Tony would have said something sarcastic there, but, well, Ben had a valid point. He was a kid now, and he’d never be tall.

Ben had them go through a strange set of warm-ups that Tony had a nasty feeling would become
second nature eventually, though for now they had him winded.

The swordplay lesson was surprisingly compelling, unlike the previous lessons he’d had with Ana and Jarvis an awful lot of what Ben was teaching him was utterly new. The stances and footwork required for swordplay were completely different to the kind of thing he’d picked up from Nat and Gamora about knife fighting.

Though of course Ben had noticed the knife-fighting techniques he’d almost fallen back on, raised an eyebrow, and seemed to decide to incorporate that into their lessons too. Well, Tony mused ruefully, at least those daggers probably wouldn’t ever be used against him now.

Tony had been surprised by how little martial-art finesse was actually incorporated into the techniques that Ben was teaching him, whilst a lot of the things he’d learnt over the years had been based in martial arts he’d also been taught by a hodge-podge of soldiers and fighters. Tony thought he could tell the difference between techniques based in artistry, and stuff purely designed to kill the other person as quickly as possible.

The techniques he was being walked through were deadly, no flair or excessive movement for the sake of aesthetics, just teaching the skill of how to stick the pointy end of the sword where the other person really hoped it wouldn’t go.

“So how old is this – uh, style?”

Ben merely gave him an enigmatic smile in response,

“Patience my young Padawan.” Tony muttered under his breath.

“I know that tone of voice, even though I don’t get the reference.”

“Oh you will Obi Wan, you will.”

The lesson seemed to be even more difficult after that.

During the warm-down Ben shot him a searching look, before coming out with yet another non
sequitur that struck him for six.

“I think you should tell Ed.”

Tony didn’t pretend not to know what “it” Ben was referring to. He bought himself a moment by wiping down his face and neck with a towel before giving a half-hearted attempt at deflection,

“What. Who?”

“Ed. Edwin.”

Tony’s face must have shown his disbelief. He bit out,

“It would only upset him.”

Ben’s reply was rapid and far too knowing,

“Not knowing is hurting him far more, believe me.”

Ben’s response knocked the wind out of him in a way all of the physical exertion hadn’t quite managed. Tony shot out a biting reply, offense his only defence against the unexpected and unwanted emotional advice.

“Why? Have you told him your great secret Obi Wan?”

Ben shot him the same look he gave him every time Tony made a reference to something that he either didn’t recognise, or worse clearly did, and thought that Tony shouldn’t. He was staring into space again lost in his own mind, the taller man refocused on the here and now. Stared down at Tony, and seemed to come to a decision. Ben took a deep breath, released it through his nose and changed.

Tony stared in puzzled confusion at Ben’s stance, he’d suddenly, in the space of a breath, transformed. His stance, his gait, everything about the man screamed teenager. He swaggered around
the room, everything about him broadcasting that he was an over-eager young idiot chomping at the bit to prove that he was an adult when in reality nothing was further from the truth.

In another moment Ben changed again, this time he read as an older middle-aged man, dignified and self-assured as only those used to having their opinions held in high regard could be. The rapid-fire changes were disconcerting. The next moment Ben had a competent no-nonsense military air that screamed eager young army recruit desperate to prove that he really was capable of following orders.

Tony rapidly grasped what Ben was alluding to, and felt stupid. He’d been strolling around for weeks now with the gait of a self-assured middle aged business tycoon, and a superhero to boot. Shit.

Ben changed again, this time everything about the man screamed that he was a child trapped in a grown-man’s body. Eyes narrowing in concentration Tony tried to spot and analyse just exactly what it was that Ben was doing differently with every transformation. The telltale headachy tingle that he was beginning to recognise as magic definitely wasn’t present, and Ben wasn’t exactly showing shape shifting abilities, no nothing so obvious.

Ben changed again, back to the competent twenty or thirty-something year old ex-military man. Tony blinked. This was going to take a while he could tell, but it was probably vital that he picked up the skill.

Tony’s lesson with Ben overran by a good hour that evening, pushing him out past evening curfew. He was grateful for the olive branch however, and practiced the springy childish gait Ben had showed him all the way back to his room.

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It was with no little fanfare that Tony was admitted to the senior high-school class. By this point he’d technically missed the first two months of the official term so had immediately been given a ton of paperwork to get through. Of course he managed to fill that out in record time, much to Leekie’s consternation.

Tony had heard terrifying things about the two teachers that ran the advanced college-prep classes, well as terrifying as school gossip would have it anyway. Rumour had it that Mr D’Eath had fought in both the second world war, and volunteered to join the conscripted soldiers in Vietnam. Apparently the man had come back wrong, broken, and with an unfortunate habit of staring into space silently for long stretches before coming back to the here and now in a rage. Tony had had flashes of an empty-eyed Christopher Walken at that piece of information. Mr D’Eath had apparently
sat deathly (hah) quiet in the back corner of a lesson as the kids ran riot, before snapping and throwing a chair at a pupil’s head. Whilst the news was alarming, a teacher suffering from PTSD really wasn’t the worst thing Tony had thought would come up during his time at the pretentious private school.

Mr D’Eath’s co-teacher was a far more worrying prospect Ms Ramesh’s (Do you think she’s divorced? Tony had rolled his eyes at that one, the seventies really were a different planet) reputation had been exaggerated to nearly mythical proportions. Apparently the young asian woman was an evil shrew (Do you think she’s bitter because she hasn’t got a husband?) who loved nothing more than assigning truly spiteful amounts of homework (It’s cos she’s a damned alien, she love’s nothing more than torturing decent American boys with her stupid work). Tony personally thought her whole reputation was ridiculous, but he was willing to wait until he met her before he made his own judgement. Though he had to admit, he liked her already.

Tony had fuzzy memories that D’Eath had left the school with a veritable cloud over his head about a year before he’d been bumped up to the advanced college-prep class, as for Ms Ramesh, he didn’t think he’d ever come across her the first time around. He’d have probably remembered if he had, given how much of an oddity she seemed to be treated as by the students. He wondered what had happened to her.

After all of the build-up, anticipation and Leekie-induced paperwork, the actual first physical lesson with the senior advanced class turned out to be a bit of an anticlimax. Fortunately, or not Tony mused, depended on your point of view, his first class with the seniors was helmed by Mr D’Eath, the man had coolly and quickly directed him to an empty seat at the end of the front row that was obviously supposed to be his and gotten on with his lesson plan.

As he sat down Tony spotted Edwin Cord smiling evilly at him from the row behind his and his heart sank. He should have realised that the other boy was the right age to be in the senior classes, and he definitely seemed the spiteful type.

Despite the tension making his shoulders clench uncomfortably nothing untoward happened during that first lesson. Whilst the other seniors eyed him with a mixture of suspicion, derision and curiosity no one actually did anything under D’Eath’s stern but distant gaze.

D’Eath’s teaching style was actually fairly interesting, though Tony did notice that he exhibited the same thousand yard stare that Ben sometimes displayed. Unfortunately the lesson itself was a rather dull set of numbers about American history. Something Tony had barely managed to remember for his exams the first time around, this time at least the facts and figures were mostly relevant to him. Though he’d never admitted it to anyone, even Rhodey, once he’d decided to become Iron Man he’d actually spent quite a while memorising the tactical details of past battles. Which in turn meant he’d actually absorbed quite a bit of this boring stuff by osmosis.
Tony was silently thanking his lucky stars for that, whilst he’d managed to general knowledge his way through the school’s internal exams, he wasn’t so sure it would be that easy when it came to sitting for actual qualifications. He swallowed when he realised that a year might actually be too short a time to get around to memorising all of the truly random shit that the education systems thought that kids needed to know. He would fly through the science and mathematics without breaking a sweat. Hell, he knew more about the classics and ancient history than he had any right to thanks to Ty- no he wouldn’t think about that, and he could just write something about the actual future for the English assignments. Ok. Okokok. He was fine. He could do this. A year was plenty of time. Right? After all, he’d coded Dum-E and U in far less than that. And he’d been off his head and drunk for most of that month.

Thankfully no one seemed to notice his mini panic attack during first period that day, and he’d hurried off to the first decent science class he was likely to have at Westchester Academy for Privileged Boys with remarkably little trouble.

Frankly that first science class was a massive disappointment. D’Eath proved to be a competent if dull science teacher. His history class had been far more interesting. The lesson had involved titrating manganese to check the concentration of some other solution with a tiny amount of inorganic chemistry theory about Redox’s that Tony could do in his sleep. Tony admitted to himself that he hadn’t paid as much attention to the class as he probably should have, but well, much as he knew that it made sense to know how to do things the old fashioned way – titration wasn’t a great method. It relied far too much on a steady hand and accurate readings from a rather crude set-up. That and whilst he’d forgotten more science than most people would ever know, he was aware that the molecular theories being taught in these lessons were fundamentally flawed in that lies-we-tell-to-children way that always made him livid, even though he couldn’t actually think of a better solution to the educational problem.

Still Tony was heartened when he spotted the far cleaner lab-space semi-hidden next door, he wasn’t entirely sure why the senior college prep class apparently didn’t have access to the room, given that they were supposedly the most scientifically knowledgeable set of students in the entire school. But he hoped he’d be able to finagle his way into gaining permission to use the space soon.

By the end of his first day in the senior year Tony had concluded that the only thing the advanced class was good for was the possibility of relatively easy access to a workshop with far more equipment than the cobbled together scraps and broken tools he’d managed to scrounge from Howard back at the house. Admittedly said scraps were often well in advance of current technological progress, but working equipment, and sources of materials, such as metals of guaranteed compositions really wasn’t to be sniffed at.

He strolled back towards the room that he still had the misfortune to share with Hammer deep in thought, Tony was this close to access to a space that was just about clean enough to produce those silicone wafers he’d pinched all of that equipment for. If he could only convince the school to let him have access that was.
He almost froze when he realised that he’d spent the day so focussed on not drawing unwanted attention to himself academically that he’d completely forgotten to maintain the childish stance that Ben had not-so-subtly shown him. An older student walked into his back and glared down at him as he shoved his way past. Tony hurried towards his room.

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The next couple of days passed quietly, D’Eath proved himself more than capable of controlling a class of unruly teenagers, so despite the looks that Cord kept sending him nothing untoward actually happened at any point.

He was surprised when the hour of scheduled self-study on Wednesday afternoons was subjugated, Leekie arrived and dragged Tony away to a mixture of puzzled looks and malicious tittering from Tony’s new classmates. It turned out that whilst Tony was technically a member of the senior year, well, Leekie still thought that he should be subject to the same “welfare” sessions as his actual age mates. Leekie sat Tony down in the large, messy hall that made up the younger-years communal area and told him that it was the monthly letter writing day.

Tony had to admit that he was secretly relieved at this turn of events, he hadn’t been looking forward to fending for himself amongst the much larger teens with no adult supervision. From the irritatingly knowing look on Leekie’s face that had been the precise reason he’d been pulled from the “class”.

Tony realised that he had to be careful about how he addressed his monthly letters to his “family” on letter writing day, he pointedly chose not to repeat his behaviour of the first timeline, there was no point in writing to Howard. Tony wasn’t even sure if the old bastard had ever even read the hundreds of letters he’d sent begging to come home and promising to be good.

Instead Tony dutifully rattled off the same style of quick letter that he’d already been sending to Maria every week, on the off chance that she was sober enough to care, and spent the majority of the time composing a far more thoughtful note to “Auntie Ana and Uncle Edwin” addressed to their small house rather than the mansion. The majority of him was embarrassed by the phrasing, used by necessity, unless the kids had permission for pen pals they were only allowed to write to family, but a small part of him adored that he could call them family even if it was a pretence.

He had tried to persuade Ben to act as a go-between for them, but the older man had refused outright, stating that he was a teacher not a courier. Tony would have pressed the issue, but the hunted expression on the other man’s face had stopped him. For now Tony was stuck with using the official channels to contact the Jarvises, since the only letters the children were allowed to post without any form of adult intervention were to their parents.
Tony finally found out what that other lab-space was for during his first class with the infamous Ms Ramesh. She was in charge of the supervised open-study sessions that the advanced class were to take, as well as the advanced science, mathematics and English classes – that not all members of the class actually had the required grades to attend.

Unfortunately Tony’s first “open” lab session with Ms Ramesh was infuriating, though it really wasn’t the woman’s fault - actually Tony found that he rather appreciated her dry humour and witty teaching style. The problem lay with the equipment at the school, whilst it was excellent for a facility of its type it was still far below the standard that Tony was used to having easy access too. Hell much of it was well below the level of the items he’d managed to scrounge from Howard’s cast-offs.

Ms Ramesh seemed to spot Tony’s dismay almost immediately; as soon as she finished dealing with whatever the tall-blonde skinny kid had been vehemently complaining about she made a beeline for the lab-bay that Tony had been assigned to.

“Mr Stark – What seems to be the problem?”

“Uh – well, you see, um that is.”

Ms Ramesh raised an eyebrow at Tony’s stuttering attempt at an explanation and looked at him with an expression so reminiscent of Pepper’s whenever she was truly exasperated him that he was rendered momentarily speechless.

Tony took a breath and tried again,

“I was hoping to try and make some silicone wafers using the Czochralski Process to find out what different impurities would do to it’s semiconductor properties Ms Ramesh.”

He rattled out the explanation in one long gulp of words. To her credit Ms Ramesh seemed to follow his explanation.

“And you can’t see anything that would help you do that?”
“Well I’ve got a vat that should be able to produce the stable temperatures required Ms Ramesh, but I can’t see anything here that would keep it ticking over at the required temperatures safely.”

“Hmm. Well I can order in the silicon and impurity metals if you’re certain this is the self-guided project you wish to carry out this year Anthony.”

“It’s Tony.” He shot out near automatically, only remembering her position of authority over him when it was too late to be polite. He winced and peered up at her.

Thankfully unlike Smythe, and indeed most of the teachers at the school that he’d encountered as he’d made his rapid ascent through the grades Ms Ramesh seemed to take both his intelligence, and overall lack of demure politeness in her stride.

“Well Tony, I do have the authority to order the materials needed for student projects. Are you certain this is the field of study you wish to pursue this year? And may I take a look at the container in question? I think we have just the thing to keep your project running safely, but I’ll need to see the vat you intend to use to make sure.”

“S-sure. Uh I mean yes of course. I’ll go and get it now?”

“Yes, just let me give you a permission slip.”

Tony rushed through the school grounds, making the distance far more quickly than he’d have managed before Ben had set him his daily running task, grabbed the vat from the hated shared dorm room and hurried back to the lab. Ms Ramesh tutted approvingly at the vat when Tony presented it to her.

“Very well Tony. Write me a brief, give me your theory, hypothesis, and methodology. I expect no less than 3,000 words and you know I’m giving you a low wordcount there – this is just a proof that you have a viable project.”

“Yes Ms-“

“And –“ Ms Ramesh interrupted, “I’ll get on with ordering the materials your project requires. I’m
very interested in seeing the results you get young Mr Stark. I haven’t had a student present me with such an interesting idea in years.”

The woman who had previously seemed so calm and distant cracked an enthusiastic grin at him before hurrying off to help a student who had managed to overheat the still he was working on. The distillation tube was whistling alarmingly.

Since Tony found the so-called Advanced College Prep Class for his new year group laughably easy, a fact that the teachers had noticed within a couple of days, he spent much of the next week drafting the proposal for his project.

Ms Ramesh had been quietly impressed by the academic tone of the hurriedly scribbled down proposal. Tony hadn’t the nerve to point out that he could have done it in his sleep, and had actually written the thing when he’d been supposed to be paying attention to D’Eath’s deathly boring classes on the more basic science required for college/university entry.

He’d been allowed to use the open-lab time the whole group shared to set up his small project in one of the more unusual unused bays in the lab. The benches in this corner were built into the heavy stone of the building itself, actually part of the masonry that made up the outer wall. Ms Ramesh had reckoned that between the expensive automated fire system fitted in the lab, the stone bench, and the careful repositioning of all of the flammable furniture so that it was as far from Tony’s superheated vat as possible, should be enough of a safety measure to stop the whole building from burning down.

As such the heavy drum for the Czochralski dip process was duly set up in a discreet corner to quiet approval of Ms Ramesh.

Tony found that he genuinely liked the quietly competent woman, she could shut up the entire (sometimes unruly) advanced college prep class with nothing more than a cold look, a feat that not even Mr D’Eath with his fearsome reputation for explosive outbursts could manage. For all that the petite woman, who’s fashion sense seemed to alternate between 70’s lapelled brown suits with the requisite flares and the traditional sari, looked a softy Tony could tell that she must have done something impressive to so cow the group of thirty or so hormonal teenagers that made up his fellow classmates.

Tony felt that he could come to genuinely enjoy the lessons with Ms Ramesh, whilst the science contained within her lessons was still somewhat rudimentary to his jaded eyes she didn’t try to stifle free-thought or interesting ideas. Yes the laws of physics were the laws of physics, however she encouraged the kind of problem solving approach that the Ivy League and other similar establishments would lap up. Tony could tell that the formidable woman had more than earned her coveted position teaching some of the “easiest” to teach children in the school.
Especially once the realisation had set in that she’d done so as an Indian woman, with a distinct Punjabi accent in the bad old days of seventies America.

During his perfectly legitimate, thanks to Ben, explorations of the school’s grounds Tony had been keeping an eye out for a spot that he could claim as his own. The school had large isolated grounds, as well as the tennis courts, and playing fields the school buildings were surrounded by plenty of greenery.

Despite this relative isolation Tony didn’t think there’d been any more kidnapping attempts there than at any other residence he’d ever stayed at. The security at these upstate schools was infamously tight. With the kind of money the parents were paying to put their boys through schooling here, the elitist establishment could afford high walls and expensive security, both staff and other more automated measures that weren’t commonplace in this era.

The dorms for the older boys were the closest to the lake, but still far away enough to discourage attempts to swim there unsupervised.

Things were finally settling down enough that Tony felt assured enough to indulge in a little bit of rule bending. It was a Saturday, so he had the afternoon to himself after the mandatory self-study session they’d all had that morning.

After much scouting around the school grounds Tony had decided that the large oak midway between the dorms and the far side of the lake was probably the best spot to attempt outdoor meditation sessions. It was in clear view of both the dorms and one of the security outhouses, but far away enough from both to discourage the casual onlooker from thinking of joining him.

He settled down cross-legged under the tree, the leaves a beautiful dappled orange. It was warm for autumn, but the weather would soon turn, and he’d be forced to try this indoors. He hoped Hamm-Justin wasn’t too light a sleeper.

Tony found it far easier to settle into the meditative state then on his previous attempts, the weight that had been lifted from his shoulders when it had finally been confirmed that the other shoe wasn’t going to drop, that this whole situation for better or for worse was his reality from now on had been huge. He was vaguely annoyed with himself that he hadn’t found, or rather, made the time to do this earlier. However he was trying now – and uneasy feelings about Doom’s little chat or no he’d
decided that meditating regularly seemed to have more benefits than drawbacks. After all the practice had helped him to survive his time at the mansion when he’d thought that he was going mad.

Dropping down into a trance with ease Tony finally allowed himself to think on subjects that he hadn’t dared contemplate when he’d thought this whole situation was a trap. The near constant tick of schematics was somehow relaxed, he found himself redesigning the basic MRI, there had to be a way to play with the detail that nuclear magnetic resonance provided, without yanking all of the metal out of the patient’s body.

He almost laughed out loud when he realised how simple the solution was, delta radiation would do nicely.

Tony allowed the schematics to come as they would, whilst one weight had been lifted, another was beginning to settle, and he wasn’t sure he wanted to face the reality of it just yet.

The gentle sound of wind through the leaves of the tree, and the rustle of the grass had him contemplating the aerodynamics of most recent commercial jet that SI had produced. He mentally tweaked the numbers so that the plane was aerially unstable, more inline with the ridiculous manoeuvrability of a fighter jet than a 747.

Amused by the results, Tony readjusted the numbers to make the plane more comfortable for the passengers, before following through on that thought. He played with the alloys of the turbine blades, replacing the nickel-based superalloys with something lighter, a vibranium starkanium alloy core would help improve engine efficiency tenfold allowing him to replace the bulky fuelled jets with kid-glove versions of repulsor engines that were closer to hybrids than anything else (Tony had learnt his lesson about handing out that technology with the mess SHIELD had created with the Helicarriers). He continued pushing the running temperatures of the engines ever higher above the melting point of the metal by tweaking the internal cooling systems in the turbine blades. If he could just up the efficiency of the engines, the plane would be able to carry less fuel on board, and the passenger cabin could be enlarged giving the option of more legroom.

Tony had to admit he was still extremely leery of letting anyone get a hold of his repulsor tech after what SHIELD-cum-Hydra had attempted to do with it so he was unwilling to plug the incredibly efficient systems into anything commercial quite yet. Though he did concede that the global warming crisis that had been looming probably wouldn’t be quite so pressing if he actually started changing things like that for the better sooner rather than later.

Once he’d utterly redesigned the latest Starkjet he eventually bowed to the inevitable and turned his thoughts onto more serious matters. Somewhere out there a tiny Clint Barton had just turned one, elsewhere Nat was already several years into her red room indoctrination and vivisection, Tony was painfully aware that she was older than she looked, a side effect of the re-engineered version of the
serum she’d been forcibly altered with, Bruce was currently subject to the tender mercies of his father, a man whose parenting style rivalled that of Tony’s own, and Cap was currently a Capsicle.

Many of the later additions to the Avengers team weren’t even born yet, though Tony was probably going to do his damndest to help Sokovia in every way possible. Tony honestly wasn’t sure if he’d be able to do anything to help Barnes even if he could find the man, but he’d have to keep an eye on the date if he was seriously going to contemplate this plan of action. Shamefully he didn’t know enough about Sam to even know if there was anything he should be looking out for. Tony caught himself with a mental start.

He wasn’t sure he had the right to try to change anything for any of them. Did he dare attempt to play god in the manner that he’d so often been accused of? Would his teammates want him to fundamentally alter the very events that made them themselves, or would they have wanted him to leave well enough alone?

What about Jessica, Tony knew that she at least would definitely want him to stop Kilgrave from ever crossing her path, and she wouldn’t care how he did it. That act would be undeniably of the good, but selfishly Tony would miss Jessica, she wouldn’t be Jessica without the experiences that made her into her beautifully cynical, sarcastic self. And what of Frank’s family? Or Matt’s accident? Tony knew that Daredevil wouldn’t give up the good fight, but would he even be able to fight without the enhanced senses his loss of sight had afforded him?

A few years ago the answer would have been obvious, the alternative unthinkable. However Tony was far more wary now, he’d had attempts to seriously genuinely selflessly (or so he’d thought) help people blow up in his face more than once, did he honestly want to be responsible for another Ultron?

Wincing at that thought Tony wondered if he even had the right to try to build himself another AI, what if they turned out like Ultron? JARVIS and FRIDAY could have been lucky flukes, the rest of the world had been predicting HAL’s, Skynet’s and GLaDOS’s left right and centre, who was he to argue?

But wouldn’t Quill have honestly preferred to spend his childhood on Earth rather than living under the constant threat of being eaten by his captors? But if he hadn’t ended up on the other side of the galaxy what on earth would have happened to Xandar, or even Earth? But then again Thanos wasn’t around anymore to push events forward… What about Gamora, would her home planet be ok now without the Mad Titan there to destroy it? Or would something else step in to fill that power vacuum? Would Loki just continue falling into the void forever without Thanos there to catch him in the worst way imaginable?

Tony realised that he’d already irrevocably changed the timeline for billions of people, he’d already
played god for better or for worse. Would it be madness to try to continue to do so? Tony was under no illusions that his moral compass hadn’t corroded with misuse long ago, needle rusted into immobility by decades of disuse.

He didn’t have the right to try and make a decision for any of them, much as he wished otherwise.

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Whilst Tony had been given permission to set-up his Czochralski dip equipment in one corner of the lab, the conditions in here weren’t nearly as clean as he’d have liked. Hell he’d need a multi-million dollar cleanroom in order to be clean enough, but the secluded corner was still miles ahead of the dusty ex-squash court that he’d commandeered at the mansion.

With luck Tony would soon have access to the wafers that he needed to build himself some working servos that were small enough not to weigh as much as he did.

Whilst waiting for the drum to get up to the correct temperature Tony was impatiently inspecting every inch of the lab for equipment, tools and (unfortunately) dangers that he’d need to keep an eye-on. Despite the fact that this lab was only open to a very few advanced honours students, there were still causes for alarm, such as the black stain on the ceiling directly above the distillation set-up in the far corner. It seemed despite the narrowly avoided incident last week someone had turned the heat on without opening any of the valves if the scorch marks were anything to go by.

The lab technician was keeping a wary eye on him from across the floor space, under the guise of making up the chemical batches for classes. Tony sighed, he’d hoped that Ms Ramesh would be supervising every session. But she only sat in on every other, having to split her time between the two sessions reserved for the College Prep group. For all that this lab was owned by a very exclusive, extremely expensive private school, it was still a school lab. The suspicious, likely under qualified technician glowering at him with barely concealed contempt highlighted that issue. There was no way he’d be able to actually do anything useful here, he’d had free-er reign with the high-tech scraps he’d been making do with in his squash court-cum-lab.

Still Ms Ramesh had promised help, and this was only the control run of his test with supposedly pure-Si. He should be able to get results soon, whether or not they’d be of practical use was another matter.

It was just a happy bonus that the apparent complexity of the project seemed to impress the teachers in charge of college applications. D’Eath had been sending him appraising looks the other day instead of his usual blank stare, and Ms Ramesh had been quietly approving in their lessons.
Tony sighed, he should not be happy at the pitiful progress he’d made towards putting something, *anything*, useful together. He’d gotten so used to that damned automated manufacturing bay he’d installed in the Malibu house, that now that he truly had to do everything from absolute scratch he was driving himself insane with the wait.

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Tony’s nightmares had become an issue, the soaring relief that there was no other shoe to drop had gradually faded away, leaving behind his usual broken shards and jagged edges.

It all came to a head a month into Michaelmas (the school’s snobbish and unnecessarily archaic name for Fall) term, Tony supposed he was lucky that he’d passed most of the first half of term before they started up again.

Of course Justin had noticed, how couldn’t he? Tony’s night terrors were often silent, he’d learnt a long time ago not to make a noise when pain happened, of whatever sort, however the newest set of world-ending troubles had managed to frighten sounds out of him.

“Tony?”

Justin’s worried voice was startlingly loud in the darkness, the boy was whispering, but he hadn’t yet learnt to be quiet when doing so. As such it was more the hissed whisper, where the person spoke at their usual volume somehow convinced that the rest of the room couldn’t hear them despite the fixed grins as they heard every “whispered” insult.

Once he’d recovered from the sensation of having his heart in his mouth Tony hissed back,

“Yeah Hammer?”

“Are- Are you alright?”

“Yes, of course.”
“Only, if you want I can go get Miss Kowalski.”

“No! No. Thank you.”

Tony turned his back on Hammer, unable to stomach the fact that he’d thanked the worm.

“Go back to sleep Justin, I’m sorry I woke you.”

“No Tony that’s not what I meant – I’m sorry, I was worrie-“

“Goodnight Justin.”

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Tony still hadn’t found anyone acceptable to sit next to in the canteen, he’d been the new boy for a whole month and a half, you’d think the cooties, or whatever they’d called them in the seventies would have worn off by now.

He was avoiding Hammer. He hadn’t been able to look the little shit in the eye that morning, let alone accept the poor excuse for comfort that the other boy’s unwanted company provided at breakfast.

Hammer had clearly gotten the message and left Tony sitting by himself after one glance at his face, Tony had pretended not to notice the suspicious wetness in the other boy’s eyes as he stolidly worked his way through his plate of cold toast.

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Despite the lack of attention Tony ended up paying in Mr D’Eath’s classes he was getting through the work at a pace that outstripped even that of the boy placed second in the class, Cord naturally.

He’d effectively tested out of everything up to and including freshman, sophomore and senior highschool level on the school’s internal exams within the space of a month. And even that had felt
like painfully slow progress to his adult brain more used to working on complex energy solutions and aerodynamics equations whilst attempting to solve the Einstein-Rosen bridge problem at the same time.

Unfortunately the international qualifications that he’d elected to sign up for had set examination dates, there was no skipping ahead – at least until Summer term came around. Or at least that was the line the school was feeding him.

Tony had a feeling that they didn’t want to face the scandal of the Stark heir only attending their institution for half a term before leaving.

Luckily Mr D’Eath seemed to realise that it was a waste of time attempting to teach Tony anything scientific, Tony would usually spend the lessons sat in the back of the room, half paying attention for appearance’s sake (he was still more than capable of multitasking after all) whilst drawing up schematics. (Carefully vetted before he drew them out, mostly they were utterly mundane in nature, ways to make household appliances more efficient, cheaper to manufacture, less energy intensive.)

Thankfully the school was actually a far better institution than kid-Tony had given it credit for all those years ago. At the end of every lesson the schematics were locked away in a box, that only Tony and 1 staff member had the key for. Tony was due a visit by the school’s on-call patent attorney after Christmas. It was going to be a long wait. The law firm was employed to represent the students rather than the school or their parents. Whilst Tony had remembered this detail, there was a reason he’d been able to fund himself through the degrees at Cambridge that Howard hadn’t wanted him to take after all, he’d forgotten how geared towards the kids welfare the whole system had actually been.

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Tony stared down at the sabotaged drum in dismay, there were unknowable lumps floating in the liquid Si mix, as well as a film of something oily floating on the surface, that had obviously been poured into the molten mix to contaminate it.

He felt like crying.

But no, Stark men are made of iron. Never show them weakness, strut.

Tony straightened his spine and went to fetch the technician who was theoretically in charge of the
It was frustrating, attempting to explain just how damaging the contaminants were to the delicate equipment, he just couldn’t make the man understand. His face had slowly closed off in belligerence as Tony had gotten more vehement about how bad the damage was.

Eventually Tony got upset enough that Ms Ramesh and Leekie were called in.

Fortunately for Tony’s continued sanity both Ms Ramesh and Leekie grasped the situation far more quickly than either of the staff members in the science lab.

Allowing some of the enraged panic to show through Tony decided to play the man for all that he was worth,

“Someone destroyed m- my D-D-Da-Dad’s equipemtn. He’s going to be so-s-so-so mad.”

Leekie, and Ms Ramesh both paled at that statement. Howard Stark’s ruthless business practices were near legendary. Even to a pair of schoolteachers.

Leekie seemed to come to some sort of decision,

“Don’t worry Tony, we’ll pay for a new one.”

Leekie glared daggers at the lab technician when the other man appeared to be about to open his mouth to object,

“Won’t we?”

Tony was swept away in Ms Ramesh’s competent wake the petite woman talking matter-of-factly in a way that he found comforting.

“Don’t worry young Mr Stark, I will personally see to the order. We may even be able to repair this vat, and then you’d have two set-ups at once. Which would give you the opportunity to broaden the
In the lead up to Halloween Hammer’s usual low-level irritant gratingness picked up a level. The kid was practically vibrating with excitement and it was only midway through October, there weren’t even any decorations up in the school. And yet Hammer’s sickeningly willing to spend money parents had somehow sent him a large “Care-Package” if a padded envelope full of tooth-rot could be called a care package full of Halloween candy.

The six year old had exercised the expected level of self-restraint and eaten the majority of the sugary purple and orange candies that very evening – resulting in an even more unpleasant night than usual for Tony, when on top of the usual nightmare induced insomnia, Hammer had woken him with loud retching noises into their shared sink.

In a surprise show of generosity, or perhaps chagrin, Hammer offered up his last bag of candy the next morning in the canteen; a huge bag of candy corn. Tony had been unwilling to accept the gift, but the crestfallen look on the other boy’s face had stayed his hand and he’d reluctantly accepted.

Tony felt vaguely guilty about the way the other boy’s face lit up at his none-too-graceful reception of the present-cum-peace offering.

The rest of the month passed in the usual whirl of martial arts training, swordplay and keeping his head down that passed for an academic career at Westchester Academy for Privileged Boys.

Whilst the bullies gave him a wide-berth during recess that didn’t prevent the constant attempts to put him down during classes from the rest of the advanced college-prep class, or do much to heal the cost in time and morale that the destruction of his dip-chamber had resulted in.

However Tony was grateful for the chance to settle back into a semi-comfortable routine of self-directed research. Admittedly it was the kind of boring work that SI had thrived in dumping on his lap, though this time it was even more mind-numbing than usual. Tony hadn’t remembered schoolwork being quite this mind-numbingly slow the first time around but he supposed he hadn’t already done it all the first time around.
He settled himself into a lotus position, grateful that he was still in the flexible body of a child to whom this position came easily, and tried out the breathing exercises. His arms still ached lowly from the swordplay lesson he’d had with Ben earlier. Ben was a harsh taskmaster, but Tony had to admit he was learning quickly. The fencing classes that were due to start at the beginning of November were probably going to be a bit of a joke in comparison.

It was a warm night for this time of the year, the still air positively balmy.

Tony followed his usual routine of allowing his mind to drift where it would, his musings about Samhain and ancient religions had him pondering Norse mythology, and the inner workings of Einstein-Rosen bridges. He knew that the Bifrost had been repaired, to a certain value of repaired-the thing had been functional, but Odin had still been forced to expend a huge amount of Dark Energy every time he wished to send a citizen of his somewhere.

Although part of Tony regretted that he’d never gotten around to the promised work on the Bifrost, the greater part of him was extremely grateful that the control-freak Odin hadn’t had the opportunity to push his agenda onto the other “Realms” as the Asgardian’s called them.

Tony ran over the calculations for the Bifrost with a jaded eye, he knew that he and Jane Foster had perfected the numbers years ago. Of course being only mere mortals they hadn’t been allowed to go anywhere near the inner workings of the mythical rainbow bridge. In hindsight Tony was glad, he didn’t want to be the one responsible for giving a megalomaniac like Odin access to nearly absolute power with impunity.

Tony was horribly aware that it was nearly entirely Odin’s fault that “Midgard” as the jingoistic Asgardians insisted on calling it (Despite their own name for their home-planet essentially translating to Earth, as every world’s own name for their planet did) was a relative backwater in the galaxy. Ignored and shunned by equal measures, except as a source of human pets/slaves.

By rights Earth should have been at the centre of a trading hub, given that the planet was at the very hub of an interdimensional crossroads. However Odin’s rule with an iron fist, lacking the velvet glove, had meant that the Nine Realms as the bastard called them were relatively isolated from the galaxy at large, interdimensional “relations” instigated by those given permission to use Yggdrasil notwithstanding.

Tony wanted to spit on the bastard’s grave, but he was still alive here and now, and he had to remind himself not to think about the evil idiot too hard in case he called down Heimdall’s unwanted attention.
Something about his thoughts regarding space-time must have triggered a reaction. Despite the fact that he’d run through similar internal debates time and again before there was something different that evening. Tony didn’t want to admit that he was buying into this mystical mumbo-jumbo, but the barriers between the worlds felt somehow thinner on this night. Even to a mind as new to all of this as his was.

Once again Tony was somehow aware of the turn of the earth. The sensation was exhilarating, and terrifying. He could see it all, to steal a phrase from Doctor Who, all that is, all that was, and all that ever could be. The sensation was utterly overwhelming, though in a very different way to the more familiar sensation of insignificance in the face of the wonder that was the universe, it was more that he was part of everything, and everything in turn was a part of him.

Tony peered blindly up at the sky, somehow seeing the great span of the galaxy far clearer mentally than he’d ever been able to with the naked eye. The milky way was breathtaking from this perspective, he could almost see that the sky was teeming with life, some planets pulsing almost as brightly as the reality bending energy emanating from the very stars.

Huh – the part of his mind that was forever looking at the world through an analytical lens noticed that the patterns emanating from the stars perfectly matched the recently confirmed gravitational wave theory that Einstein had been espousing. Whilst the shimmer surrounding the planets, well, there was a familiar pattern there, but Tony wasn’t sure he wanted to admit to it – even to himself… It looked eerily similar to the patterns Van Gogh had been so convinced lit up the night sky. Tony desperately hoped that he hadn’t just unlocked some form of synaesthesia – that would be an absolute bugger to work his way through.

Later when Tony attempted to verbalise the sensation to Ben he ended up tailing off into stunned silence, even the memory of this …breakthrough, if that’s what you could call this confusion, utterly awe inspiring. Despite the way that it brought up more questions than answers.

Chapter End Notes

By way of an apology for the radio silence for the entirety of August/September I’ve posted a far bigger chunk of the school year than I’d initially intended here. Sorry guys! August was pretty hectic real-life wise and most of September was spent attempting to get back into the swing of editing my own work. (The actual writing is proving to be the easier part of this so far I’ve got to admit)a
Soo what did you guys think of all the new people? I hope all of the minor OCs haven't annoyed, but as far as I can tell there isn't that much fleshing out of Tony's early years beyond the information about Howard, Jarvis and Ty.

As always this story is unbetaed, so do feel free to point out any mistakes/problems that you spot. (To the lovely individual who offered to beta - I'm sorry I couldn't get in touch with you!)

And again thank you for all of the comments, kudos and bookmarks! And thank you for your patience. The reaction to this thing has really surprised me.
I Feel Like A Group Of One

Chapter Summary

School.

Chapter Notes

Thanks again everyone for the amazing response to this overly verbose tale!

A quick note on child-Tony's achievements as stated in black and white in the opening five minutes of Iron Man, if anyone would care to pause the blu-ray as I obsessively did and actually read the articles. To be honest I was long-expecting someone to express disbelief at kid-Tony's achievements, but not quite as impolitely as the eventual comment I received.

At age 4 he built his first circuit board, at age 6 he built and tuned up his first V8 engine (not an easy feat), at 16 he built Dum-E and U at MIT, earning himself first place in the annual MIT robotics prize for what is stated to be the fourth time in a row. Meaning that he was at MIT from, at the latest, the age of 12. The timeline gets slightly muddy after that, he takes over as CEO of SI at 21 making him one of the youngest Fortune 500 CEOs ever. However it's implied that his parents December 1991 murder occurred earlier than his 21st leaving Obadiah in charge for long enough to gain a taste for it. So... 1970 may actually be too early a birthdate for MCU Tony despite the official date probably being the 29th of May 1970 by the MCU's reckoning.

Child MCU Tony was precocious, I'm not attributing fan-squee nonsense to the character, he was a child genius, and it's there in black and white as part of the MCU. It's likely the reason for adult MCU-Tony's utter social ineptitude and perceived arrogance, he was always a child moving in the adult world and never learnt the skills needed to get on in life.

This story involves adult-Tony mind and soul reliving his past life and mistakes. I'm really not sure how I could make that premise clearer this point but it seems I'd failed to make that obvious.

Apologies for the minor information dump, but apparently it was necessary.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 6: I Feel Like A Group of One

The next few weeks passed in a blur of activity, the academic year seeming to finally hit its stride in a torrent of frustratingly time-consuming schoolwork (albeit work that he was fully capable of completing in his sleep). Tony felt as if he was making his way towards blending in – well as much
blending in as a Stark ever managed. Emotionally however Tony was caught up in the horribly familiar cycle of uncertainty, guilt fuelled insomnia, and nightmares that had filled much of his adult life. Tony was aware that the bags under his eyes were deepening by the day. It wasn’t just the infuriating Hammer scion shooting him worried glances anymore, Cliquey Leekie had noticed, and even the usually collected Ms Ramesh had shot him a concerned look during their most recent lesson. Ben of course hadn’t deigned to comment, the man somehow always managed to be contrary.

Despite the lack of punishment for whoever had sabotaged his silicon vat Tony was making good progress on his self-regulated scientific work in the school’s eyes. Tony wasn’t entirely sure what it was he was doing that impressed everyone so much, but Tony was definitely the apple of Ms Ramesh’s eye. As such word about the harsh discipline she dealt out to anyone attempting to mess with Tony during her sessions was an excellent deterrent to the more unpleasant members of the senior class. Cord especially would no longer meet his eyes any more, choosing to resentfully direct his conversation towards the linoleum floor instead.

Whilst the reputation was embarrassing, at least the attempts at bullying had mostly tailed off, well; it could also be something to do with his own reactions to any attempts made against him. Between his sneering contemptuous response to any overt threat (seriously, these children literally had nothing on any of the people he’d mixed with during his adult life, and he included his friends on that list) and the news that had by now gotten around about Tony’s little zappy eveners meant that Tony was being left well alone.

Unfortunately that included the children that Tony had once hoped to befriend. He was once again years younger than, and years ahead of his so-called peers, and his actual age-mates all seemed terrified of him. Well apart from Hammer. And he didn’t count.

The utter lack of communication from home really didn’t help; perhaps naively Tony had thought that things might be different this time around. However much to his disappointment nothing at all had turned up for him during the postal rounds in the mornings. He’d been at the school for a little over a month and a half, Tony had honestly hope-no he shouldn’t have expected anything different. Since when did a Stark ever deserve sympathy from anyone else?

To Tony’s shame Hamme- Justin had noticed, and once again awkwardly shared some of the booty he’d gained from his overly-willing-to-shower-their-son-in-candy parents. The sugary crap was really beginning to pile up in the bottom of his trunk; Tony genuinely didn’t know what to do with it all. He’d lost his sweet tooth during the palladium debacle, and hadn’t yet re-learnt how to eat more than the bare minimum needed to stay healthy; the habit to ration long since ingrained during Thanos’ occupation.
The latest in a series of delays in acquiring a replacement dip vat had Tony in an even fouler mood by the time November proper had fully rolled around, the other students were beginning to truly avoid him on top of the usual age-gap induced shunning. Tony didn’t want to admit to himself that he was being unfair to Hamm-Justin, but well, he’d snapped at him over breakfast that morning over something incredibly trivial. (Loudly and snidely demanding that the other boy stop chattering about idiotic nonsense. An act he immediately regretted given the stinking hypocrisy of it, not that Hammer would have been able to spot it.) Still, Tony had something else to distract himself with today, he was willing to forgive himself for his pettiness.

As he made his way down to the gym with the rest of his classmates Tony bitterly reflected on how things had been going lately in this strange version of reality that he found himself inhabiting. His morning run had been excruciating - Tony hadn’t been able to carry out his usual practice of whiling away the mindless exercise by working through his usual schematics, instead having to focus on keeping his footing on the newly treacherous ground. Ben’s training regime increments had meant that Tony genuinely was getting fitter, he was sure that he was less winded after their sessions together nowadays. However that was little comfort when Tony was up to 7 laps around the school grounds (amounting to just over 12km) over frost encrusted slippery grass and hard frozen earth in the freezing winter pre-dawn, his breath crystallising in the air.

He had to admit that he needed to get his emotions under control, Tony was painfully aware that it wasn’t just Hammer bearing the brunt of his sleep-deprived temper these days. Tony had very nearly snapped at Mr D’Eath during a painfully biased history lesson declaring the US the centre of the world, luckily the man had barely noticed through his own haze of self-hate. However Tony dreaded to think what the consequences would have been if he’d acted that way towards any other staff member.

Tony trailed into the gym room reluctantly. Somehow he wasn’t surprised that the school rules meant that he was to be a member of the beginners group in his actual age group rather than de-facto senior year group that he was actually a member of. Though Tony had to admit that that was probably a good thing, but of course Hammer had signed up for one of the fencing classes as soon as Tony had let slip that he had to take it.

The hall was surprisingly full; Tony gulped, for once forgetting to maintain the façade of iron that he’d carried around with him all his life. The group was taken from Tony’s entire year group rather than the gifted pupils that he’d gotten used to seeing around the place. Tony glanced around and finally spotted the instructor, a cynical looking man, tall, bulky and yet flexible. Whilst the man had the body of an American footballer, all bulky shoulders and a distinct lack of neck, he had a long thin face with a strong jaw and an assessing gaze underneath those ginger eyebrows of his. Somehow he reminded Tony of Ste-.
As the children shuffled into the room the teacher, Mr La Guerta (Tony noted the surname with mild surprise, the man was pale enough that he probably burned at the first hint of sun) instructed them to line up by size, tallest to shortest. Tony was unsurprised by both the fact that he was the smallest child in the room, and the utter lack of care for the children’s self-esteem. He’d been expecting more of this sort of thing actually, given that he was in the school system in the seventies.

Fortunately despite his fears Tony wasn’t in the same class as Hammer, Tony was in the epee class, Hammer was learning foil. Tony had chosen epee since it sounded the closest to the actual combat training Ben had been giving him from the sparse information the leaflets they’d been provided with to help them to choose an option sport. Tony had been sorely tempted by tennis, but from the serious manner Ben had taken when “suggesting” he take up fencing Tony knew that it wasn’t really an option.

Tony eyed the protective equipment laid out on one side of the room dubiously; the padded suits wouldn’t do much good against an actual cutting edge. He guiltily double-checked that his daggers were all securely sequestered in their usual sheaves and hiding spots. Unfortunately Tony’s watch was stuck in the locker outside, school rules dictating that such things be removed to prevent glass going everywhere if it got smashed. Luckily Tony had been able to pass off his black “bracelet” as a wrist warmer, he already felt naked without the lengths of garrotte wire.

Whilst Ben had definitely noticed the presence of at least the two actual daggers, he hadn’t said anything about them. And Tony wasn’t about to stop wearing his actual protection whilst learning how to play a stupid sport; he’d already had to give up too many of his fallbacks. Tony thought that Ben had only noticed the knives because he hadn’t yet learnt how to conceal his own uncomfortable knowledge that they were there – but given the approving looks Ben had been shooting in the direction of their hiding places lately Tony had a feeling that Ben either agreed with his decision to keep them on him, or had noticed that he was making more of an effort to make his gait and footwork seem natural.

Tony only hoped that all of that effort would pay off during these lessons. It wouldn’t do to be found out during his option sport class of all places. Tony dreaded to think what Howard would do if he managed to get himself expelled. He dutifully shrugged on the padded protective gear and strangely shaped leather and plastic cups of the under-armour, completely forgetting to feign ignorance at how all of the archaic-to-his-eyes equipment slotted together. Tony only realised his mistake when he looked up to see all of the other students in the room still struggling to fit the groin-cup, let alone shrug on and resize the chest piece. He furtively hoped no one had noticed his mysterious competence with the protective gear.

Tony had no such luck; the instructor strode over and loudly congratulated Tony,

“Well done on a rare show of competence Mr Stark!”
A meaty paw clapped down onto his shoulder almost making Tony’s knees buckle with the downward force of it. The rest of the class looked on with a mixture of resentful envy and open curiosity. Tony gulped.

“Why don’t you be my first assistant demonstrator in class today Anthony?”

“It’s Tony.”

Tony mumbled out in response, in that moment truly the sullen six-year-old. Somehow Tony knew that it wasn’t really a question, he spent the next few minutes stewing in his own anxieties as the class painfully struggled their collective way into the slightly smelly protective gear.

Mr La Guerta beamed down at Tony with exaggerated friendliness; it was even more off-putting than Weepy Leekie’s brand of forced cheer. Phys Ed teachers always had that air around them, at least where Tony was concerned. Tony tried not to look nervous but he wasn’t sure he succeeded.

“The first thing I’ll be teaching you all is how to properly warm up.”

Tony almost let out a great whoop of relief,

“Tony here will help me demonstrate how to stretch properly so that you don’t pull anything during practice.”

Tony risked a glance at La Guerta’s eyes at the strange emphasis on his name there, but saw nothing more than friendly helpfulness in the blue orbs.

La Guerta ran through a painfully basic warm-up and stretching routine, which he made Tony copy. Tony made sure not to copy the moves too perfectly, adding a stumble that he wasn’t entirely sure passed muster in an attempt to feign the natural clumsiness that some children possess.

The next moment Tony genuinely did stumble, he’d been over-thinking his movements again, something Ben had only just begun to successfully wean him away from. Some of the group tittered mockingly at that, Tony did his best to keep his face blank only realising afterwards that that in itself was a tell.
Thankfully for his sanity La Guerta allowed him to rejoin the ranks of his classmates, Tony gratefully slipped back into the larger group shuffling his way into the centre of the mass of students so he wouldn’t be called on again.

La Guerta clapped his hands together, rubbing them theatrically,

“Now that we’re all warmed up I’ll begin demonstrating the proper safety and etiquette of handling an epee. Remember. Safety tip or no, these are offensive weapons. If I catch any of you pointing your swords at each other without permission, even in jest, there will be severe consequences.”

Tony was impressed by the sudden turn into deadly seriousness, from the scared looks on the faces of his classmates the point had been made and received. Whoever this La Guerta was he clearly knew how to handle a crowd.

The next lesson was a rather pointless bit of snobby sportsmanship by Tony’s estimation, but he supposed it was a sport, not… actual fighting to the death.

La Guerta strode into the central area of the room, and fluidly demonstrated a complicated set of moves that he called a salute. A salute. They then proceeded to waste half of the damned lesson making sure everyone had this useless bit of faux nicety down pat.

Despite his only partially put-on reluctant pupil act Tony paid rapt attention when La Guerta finally began demonstrating some basic forms. After half an hour’s worth of lecture on the proper etiquette for beginning and ending a match, and another lecture on the many and numerous offenses that would have the students expelled from the class permanently. Well, it was a relief to actually begin learning something halfway useful. Tony’s impression of the sport thus far was that it was a silly little game with far too many rules about fair play for it’s own good.

At a glance the opening form seemed simple enough, a basic stance to start a match from, however Tony found that he kept falling back into bad habits, dropping directly into the unfortunate, and painfully useless combo of the Wushu unarmed stance, and the starting stance of the mysterious sword form that Ben was in the process teaching him. Tony had a sinking feeling that he understood exactly why Ben had set him this little assignment.

Fortunately for Tony his inability to correctly drop into such a basic form seemed well within the bell-curve for the class, only earning him a surprisingly gentle correction on the stance from La Guerta as he walked around the hall assessing each of his pupils.
“Well done Tony, that’s a good try. But if you drop your left foot back like this…”

At that La Guerta gently nudged Tony’s foot back a couple of inches,

“I think you’ll find you’re much more stable, and you’ll find it easier to move.”

Tony resisted the urge to go limp with relief, which would utterly undo the progress he’d made towards holding the correct posture and form. Albeit progress painfully helped by La Guerta’s careful verbal prodding, and eventual manhandling… Damn he could really see why Ben had decided he had to take this class. Tony had honestly thought that the out-of-the-blue suggestion was a new and painful way for his erratic teacher to slyly poke fun at him.

Instead the lesson was more immediate, and even more important than the dig at becoming overconfident that Tony had assumed was being emphasised. Tony attempted to relax into the stance now that he had it, committing the thing to memory.

Tony was grateful for the other students’ clumsiness, on his next walk by La Guerta seemed impressed that Tony had managed to hold the form.

Tony’s redoubled attention had him automatically assessing the first move that La Guerta was deigning to show them. It was deceptively elegant. He gulped and redoubled his attention to the painfully simple swing that La Guerta was demonstrating at a speed that more resembled the Chinese practice of Qigong, than any martial art Tony had ever seen. And yet, Tony could tell already that the move was different enough to what he was used to that both picking it up, and defending against it would be an uphill struggle.

Ben’s point had been made for him, and the man wasn’t even there to gloat.

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“So how was your first epee class?”

Ben’s eyes were sparkling with poorly suppressed mischief; Tony knew that he already had a very good idea.
“Guess.”

“I don’t have to guess, I know.”

Tony glared up at the older man, unfortunately the angle meant that he ended up looking straight up Ben’s nostrils and the effect was ruined. Ben continued, looking far too amused,

“You over-thought everything and ended up tripping over your own feet.”

“…Yes.”

“And…” Ben paused for effect drawing out the revelation with relish, “You almost stabbed yourself with your own sword.”

Tony’s glare intensified, making Ben cackle with laughter.

“Hey! I wasn’t that bad.”

“But it was bad, yes?”

“…Yes…”

“Good. Then I’ll introduce you to another discipline. It’s good practice to begin with multiple styles early.”

“Wait, what?!”

“Well. Ok, not good practice as such, but I think you at least will benefit from the experience.”
Tony heaved a dramatic sigh, he’d picked up the habit around Ben lately, he couldn’t for the life of him think why,

“…Yes Obi Wan.”

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Justin sniffled and scrubbed at his eyes in a vain attempt to stop himself from crying.

The young boy was in his usual hiding spot – the crawl space above the senior year’s rec room, in actuality a space that had once been designed to be a sound engineers control booth when the rec room had been a performance space before the school had refurbished, and moved the theatre to a far larger, purpose built space.

The room had been half-heartedly converted into a supply cupboard, and subsequently forgotten about in the way of small claustrophobic rooms in old buildings the world over.

It – It wasn’t fair. He’d thought he’d finally be able to make friends at the school; it was so lonely all by himself back home. He’d been so happy, to finally have the chance to make friends with real people and not the staff that his parents paid for.

But, but – he was too clever. He was a nerd. No one wanted to be friends with the kid at the top of the Krelboyne class. No one. Justin had wished he wasn’t so smart. He’d even tried getting answers wrong on purpose, but it hadn’t helped. Everyone else had just laughed at him so he’d given up on that plan.

And then, and then. Tony had come. And he was awesome and amazing. And Justin really wanted to be friends with him. But. He didn’t like Justin. Not one bit. But. Tony was nice. He wasn’t mean. Or, he wasn’t mean nearly as much as everyone else, and he hadn’t pushed Justin around, or told him that they couldn’t be friends, or taken his stuff.

Only, now Justin wished he was cleverer. Next to Tony Justin was stupid. He wasn’t smart enough to be friends with Tony. He had to prove that he was smart enough to be friends with him, and then maybe Tony would smile back at him.
Tony had been surprised to find that he had the dorm room to himself that evening. As always staring at Hammer’s side of the room made his skin crawl, Hammer’s idea of a filing system really did make him grimace with distaste. He supposed that Hammer’s classes had overrun, or that Tony’s had under run. Tony had to admit that he had been relieved to find out that he wouldn’t be in the same beginner’s fencing group as Justin. Tony honestly hadn’t been sure that he’d have been able to not run the little shite through with his epee if the boy behaved how he thought he would and insist on becoming partners – special blunt tip or no.

He was sitting crosslegged on the floor at the foot of his bed, sorting through the trunk that contained the more sensitive items Tony had brought with him to the school. Well for a given value of more sensitive, at one end of the trunk the LPs Jarvis had bought for him were wedged safely against the flat end wall of the oversized box. Most of the rest of the trunk was stuffed full of the clothes and books he’d brought with him, as well as the oversized tape reels he’d been forced to bring with him in lieu of the tiny solid state memory drives he was used to carting around.

Tony was using the opportunity to check through the Hydra/SHIELD wavescans that his little computer had been automatically running. It was a good thing he’d set the thing up to save in only the most basic format, efficient programming or no the computer had been nearing its memory capacity with its woefully underpowered chips and minute hard drive.

Tony was happily sorting through the data he’d illicitly acquired, and copying anything that looked out of the ordinary, important or not, onto the tape reels. The work was slow going, but it was better than contemplating what was going on at home, he’d known that his mum was unlikely to reply to his letters. And Tony hadn’t even bothered to write to Howard… But well, Tony had hoped that the Jarvises would write more often this time around, and… He had a sinking feeling he knew why there was nothing but silence on that front.

As Tony rummaged through the trunk for another tape reel – he was already running out, he really needed to rethink this storage system – Tony’s hand encountered something hard and cold. His fingers automatically tightened around the object and Tony pulled it out blinking in consternation as the miniaturised Wicked Wand of Watoomb came into view, twin demon heads grinning grotesquely up at him from within the annulling ring.

Tony stared transfixed at the flickering play of light seeming to come from just under the surface of the wand. Christ. He’d almost forgotten that he’d had it. Despite his sarcastic words to Doom he had essentially stuffed it in the back of his sock draw and forgotten all about it. As if in response to his attention the dull orange embers brightened briefly to an intense golden glow – making Tony startle and drop the hateful thing back into the depths of his trunk.

He hastily reburied the accusing glow under a pile of dirty socks and got back on with clearing
precious hard disk space.


The Ancient One peered into the future, this time using the chamber that contained the Eye of Agamotto – and its projections of the Earths. Once again she found herself drawn to that scene in New York; her future with the helicopter, the lightning and… the snow.

Not for the first time she ruefully appreciated the fact that as a magic user of some skill and power she was privy to the moment of her death. For the most part it was a bonus, definitely a bonus, many a sorcerer had gone off happily to the next great adventure having emptied their liquor cabinet and racked up mountains of debt secure in the knowledge that they’d never have to pay it off.

Many magic users were capable of remembering forwards, it was a skill. People on the whole were skilled at manipulating time, wasting it, saving it, killing it, gaining it, and losing it. 20/20 vision in hindsight was easy, in foresight more difficult but not impossible. Mages could generally see the outline of their possible futures stretching out ahead of them, and though they didn’t often speak of it, it was this very ability to feel the universe and all of its potential thrumming around you that made it possible to do what they did.

Ignoring the additional help that Relics and rituals provided, most magic boiled down to selecting the future with the outcome that you desired from the list of infinite possibilities ranged out before you and allowing your mind to slip into the desired time stream. Of course they didn’t teach it quite that way, it was an easy thing to understand once you were already there, but getting to that point of self-knowledge was the difficult bit.

Of course there was also the difficulty about just where all of that power came from, for the most part the school of thought taught at Karma-Taj was that drawing the power from parallel dimensions and invoking greater powers was the key. (Though terribly the Ancient One was aware that they were going to have to rewrite the phrasing there sooner or later, the more scientifically minded novices lately had pointed out that dimensions were a property of spacetime rather than a parallel plane of existence. The Ancient One had been able to fall back on an old mathematical argument about higher dimensional spaces to argue the point, but she could tell that like the Issaician models of magic before hers that they were going to need a rewrite.) Of course you could draw the energy from other sources, such as the surrounding environment, or even your own life energy. Though these tactics were more risky, if you weren’t concentrating you could accidentally drain the life out of anything that was unlucky enough to be in the vicinity, or if using yourself as the source… Well a brain embolism was usually the first symptom of overdoing it.

When asked what magic was, most of the younger novices at Karma-Taj went on at length about quantum, and the units of magic smaller than the thaum, which had previously been thought to be the
smallest discrete unit of magic – found to be some very strange particles indeed with several different flavours.

The more hidebound members of the order espoused the importance of ritual, properly dribbled candles and obeying the natural order.

And then there were those who didn’t feel the need to put the feeling into words, secretly thinking to themselves that the universe couldn’t make it’s bloody mind up about what it wanted to happen and that it only took the right kind of mind with the right kind of perspective to nudge things into place.

The three sanctums and the central monastery at Kathmandu were responsible for making sure that the right things happened. Not the good things, or the things that they especially desired, but the right things. The order ensured that tomorrow followed today, and yesterday came before tomorrow. And frankly, with the sheer amount of temporal chaos caused by nearly 8 billion humans going about their daily lives, the Ancient One thought that they were doing pretty well when no one noticed the odd missing hour caused by the near daily incursions into the mundane realm.

The Ancient One sighed, she could feel the press of the years upon her, drawing on the power of the dark dimension or no, the role of the Sorcerer Supreme was a taxing one. She only wished that she could say for sure which candidate was the candidate.

Kaecilius with his great natural talent, fiery temperament and all too understandable motives for fighting the fight? To her consternation she could see darkness shrouding his future, but since his future was so tied up with her own fate on that snowy day, The Ancient One had no idea what his destiny held. Dear Master Drumm, with his uncertain future flickering disconcertingly between the darkness of oblivion and potential, not to mention his well-known proclivities? Mordo? Dear, hidebound Mordo? So caught up in following the rules and strictures of their teachings that he’d yet to catch on that there were times that exceptions had to be made? Master Wong? Who was so caught up in the mystic that he’d lost touch with the very people they were trying to protect?

Or even the others? This Strange who she could tell was just as tangled up in the events of her death as Kaecilius? Poor crippled Pangborn? Or… The Unknown Potential? Whose power was shot through with streaks that reminded her disturbingly of the power of the very Infinity Stone she was using to enhance her ability to remember the future?

Not for the first time she wished that she could see beyond her death, but where previously there were streams of possibility, remembered futures, after the day with the snow there was just a blank - the possible futures leading up to the moment itself frustratingly misty and unclear. The number of potential routes to that all too final destination overwhelming in their variety.
Whilst The Ancient One could tell that this day with the lightning and the snow was still years distant, in the long terms of her lifetime it was but a breath away.

She shook herself out of her musings on the nature of magecraft and concentrated on the projections the Eye of Agamotto was casting. The Ancient One felt that she was having more luck narrowing down the location of the Potential than she’d had in the mandala chamber, though of course the mandala was the more sensitive method. By their very nature using one of the Infinity Stones to find one individual was akin to cracking a walnut with a jackhammer.

The Ancient One thought that she could see a flicker of something in the region of the New York Sanctum. It was hard to tell though, ironically the great protective nets woven by the triad of Sanctorums overwhelming almost every other mystical signature on the five-dimensional map… However, no she was sure, there really was a flicker.

She was going to have to go to 177A Bleecker Street, Master Drumm would be upset by the unexpected visit. The relics always seemed to flock to her.

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Tony successfully avoided Hammer’s attentions that morning by dint of reading the broadsheet papers, that were strictly speaking, laid out for the benefit of the teachers and the senior students. Though of course Tony supposed that he was technically in the senior year himself, so he had every right to be perusing.

He was attempting to re-familiarise himself with past or rather current affairs, Tony had noted with some surprise that the Trask Trials were due to take place later that year. Tony was familiar with the name – Trask Industries were one of many that SI had absorbed in the 90s when he’d expanded the company. But he honestly couldn’t remember reading about anything like this in the dossier that he’d skimmed about the smaller firm.

Trask himself was up before congress for selling state secrets, an event that had apparently been long drawn out by the classified nature of the materials involved, and the well-connected Trask’s lawyers tying the prosecution up in a mess of red tape.

From the sounds of it there’d been some big incident involving Nixon and … a football stadium a couple of years ago. Tony blinked down at the black and white photo in consternation, ok, sure he’d been a child. But he didn’t think he’d have been oblivious enough to miss this surely? A whole damned football stadium somehow upping sticks and landing on top of the White House???
Not for the first time Tony wished that he were free to move about as he pleased, trapped as he was as a six-year-old he was limited to using the resources available at the school. And excellent as they were for a facility of its type, the library didn’t exactly have a news archive.

Tony squirreled the relevant pages of the paper away in his book bag and made a mental note about finding out more information about the history in this place. It seemed that his mere arrival had had more of an impact on events than he’d anticipated. Tony was sure a football stadium landing on top of the White House would have been in every history textbook in the world if it had happened back home.

Wouldn’t it?

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Tony’s attempts to find out if this Trask business was as big a deal as it seemed were stymied by the sheer amount of busywork the teachers were assigning.

Even Ms Ramesh had gotten in on it, it seemed senior year at Westchester Academy was taken incredibly seriously by the staff. For all that it counted for very little in terms of his final grades, given that this was the seventies after all, Tony had a veritable mountain of coursework to get through before the Christmas holidays.

Whilst the work was boring, verging on insulting at times, it still took time.

Tony’s lonely sessions in the library had now warped from frustrating research to mind numbing repetitive drivel. The tech classes especially felt archaic and pointless given how far CAD/CAM technology had moved on since this time.

Even so Tony did manage to find one short paragraph about the Cuban Missile Crisis/Paris Conference/Washington Hero incidents in the latest modern history textbook that the school had acquired all listed under the header Mutants. Apparently “Mutants” were an ever-growing concern in this strange new reality that Tony was rapidly beginning to understand was his now for better or for worse.

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The first of the lessons integrating the new swordplay style were eye-opening, the teacher-student duo had now swapped to alternating lessons of hand to hand combat and swordplay, Tony wasn’t sure yet if he liked this new set-up any better than the old one. The swords that Ben produced from his bag of mysteries were even more exotic in appearance than the glorified knives that they’d used for the first half of the swordplay session. The objects that Ben pulled out of his nondescript duffle looked more like sickles than any sword Tony had ever imagined.

Tony eyed the gleaming objects dubiously. Somehow he didn’t think over analysing his movements due to a painful similarity to another disparate style was going to be a problem this time.

“What the hell are we going to do with those? Harvest wheat?”

Ben smiled beatifically down at him; he had a smile that transformed his face. It would be attractive if Tony didn’t see the mischief glinting in his eyes.

“Why we try to kill each other with them of course.”

Tony eyed Ben cautiously, whilst he was almost certain that Ben had used those words for effect, he was only almost certain. Not sure. Tony took a cautious step back. The move seemed to please the older man.

“Good! You are learning after all.”

Tony glared, Ben’s grin impossibly grew even wider Tony had the fleeting impression that he was like the Cheshire cat with a smile like that.

“Well then – this sword is called a Khopesh. Don’t go around telling people we’re using these, as far as the rest of the world is concerned I’m teaching you basic self-defence here.”

“Yes, yes I’m not a child.”

Ben merely raised an eyebrow at that slip. Tony was unfathomably grateful, which had him flushing with angry shame.
Without further ado Ben flashed through a rapid and deadly looking set of moves with the sword, the style was initially flashy, all intimidation and flair, before his expression changed and his movement became more economical, about dealing death rather than instilling awe and fear.

Aside from the deadly unpredictability that came with their shape, a trait that Tony dearly hoped they’d lose with familiarity, the reach on these blades was far greater than the shorter swords that Tony had gotten used to using – more akin to the elongated reach of the epee that Tony was still struggling to take full advantage of in his classes with La Guerta.

Somehow Tony could tell that this was going to be a steep learning curve, he was almost looking forward to it given that the rest of his days were taken up with mind numbing drudgery.

Tony resented the coursework, even the previously quiet and peaceful sessions in the library were now filled with avoidance tactics and ducking away from loud braying teenaged boys. Tony knew that his mood was descending into blackness, even Ms Ramesh’s calm aura and cool efficiency were beginning to grate. Tony felt as though the work he was doing were progressing at a snail’s pace.

To make matters worse Cord had redoubled his efforts to be sneaky and underhanded in his attempts to get his own back. Ms Ramesh’s calm competence brooked no trouble, but D’Eath’s more… hands-off approach to teaching meant that Tony often had to keep half-an-eye on Cord and his lackey’s whilst attempting to look like he was paying attention to the man’s history lessons.

Tony was in no doubt about just who it was that had sabotaged his drum, but of course he had no proof only his suspicions. Tony didn’t bother to bring his suspicions to a member of staff there was no point. Unfortunately this was another thing that he had plenty of experience with – what was the point in persecuting the bullies, he was a Stark, his dad would pay for it, and later he would pay for it. After all Starks could more than afford it.

Despite his fears La Guerta proved to be a surprisingly patient man, oh he ruled the class with an iron fist, he had to when he was in charge of a group of 20 children all armed with edged weapons. But the man somehow made the time to go around each class and check in on how each and every student was progressing.
To his shame Tony wasn’t progressing any faster than any of the other kids in the class. Hell, he was in the bottom half of the group he knew it.

It turned out that La Guerta was another Vietnam-war veteran, Tony was beginning to wonder just how many of them Mrs Kowalski had employed. Unlike D’Eath’s haunted visage La Guerta had come out of the other side of the grim experience determined to continue to make a difference and had chosen to teach children how to look after themselves.

Once Tony had learnt of the man’s background he’d been utterly surprised that La Guerta seemed to be the picture of perfect health, as far as Tony knew it wasn’t just the PTSD the veterans had to be scared of – but the side effects of the toxic allotropes of the Agent Orange that had liberally doused the battlefields, well, the whole country really.

Tony eventually found out that the man had been a Sergeant, leading his troop to safety when so many caught in the same situation behind enemy lines had perished. Tony grudgingly came to respect the man, if he could put on a friendly and helpful façade in the face of all of those experiences then what right did Tony have to wallow in his own past?

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Thanksgiving came and went with depressingly little news from the mansion, aka none whatsoever. Tony wasn’t too surprised, beyond the minimum necessary to appease the press he hadn’t remembered the holiday ever being that big a deal in the Stark household. Howard had always claimed that anything he had to be grateful for he’d made for himself, and Maria, well she’d grown up in Italy. Hell, the Jarvises were British and Hungarian both.

Tony vaguely remembered Jarvis complaining about celebrating “idiotic stupidity that meant they packed several hundred shoes and no food” and the difficulty in successfully deep-frying a turkey, “the only way to make that damnedly dry monstrosity of a bird even vaguely edible”.

The time continued to pass in a blur of busywork, swordplay and loneliness. Tony thought that he was slowly getting better at the actual swordplay, though of course Ben was keeping his own opinions close to his chest. At least, with the introduction of the curved Khopesh swords the knife-like swordplay with the shorter almost pear shaped blades was finally making some sort of sense, with Tony finally learning how to take advantage of his shorter stature, much to Ben’s approval. Alas the lessons with La Guerta were continuing painfully as ever, Tony was just about managing to keep pace with the class, but barely given the way that his over thinking habit had seemingly transferred from Ben’s lessons to the Epee sessions.
The schoolwork continued to be pitifully easy, even the so-called college-prep level classes, and SAT mock test sessions were dull dull dull. The only real source of difficulty in the lessons was, as ever, Tony’s future knowledge. However the sheer amount of time he’d been spending in the library meant that he was improving there too – Tony’s work was coming back with fewer red ink comments about fiction, and even more tick marks than ever.

Of course Tony’s “antisocial” tendencies, as Leekie oh so carefully put it hadn’t gone unnoticed. Peaky Leekie had pulled Tony aside one excruciating afternoon and enquired worriedly about whether or not he’d managed to make any friends yet.

“Tony, is everything going well? I that is to say, we, can’t help but notice how little you’re interacting with the other students your own age. Or rather, well, that is to say, the other students really.”

Tony gazed up into Leekie’s concerned eyes and saw nothing but warmth and worry there. He immediately raised his mental shields, distrustful of the apparent offer of help. In Tony’s experience there was no such thing as a freely offered helping hand, there was always a catch, a price to pay. And as things stood Tony was unwilling to pay it – he had too much to do, too many things to catch up on and deal with as it was then to go around creating debts for himself that would only come back to bite him on the ass later.

Weepy Leekie seemed to take Tony’s mistrustful silence as a cue to continue,

“Is there anything the matter Tony?”

Tony’s response was a nonverbal grunt of dismissal,

“No problems at home, anything like that?”

Another grunt.

“Is the schoolwork challenging enough?”

Another grunt. Of course it wasn’t, but Tony wasn’t going to willingly add to his workload, Leekie’s expression fell as he realised that Tony was unlikely to be forthcoming any time soon.
“Well, I’m here if you ever need anyone to talk to Tony. And I’m sure plenty other members of staff would be willing to help. I’m sure your classmates would welcome your company.”

The conversation dragged on, and went about as well as can be expected when a well-meaning but clueless adult attempts to intervene on a child’s behalf in a situation, that as an outsider, they can only really make worse not better.

The worst thing was Tony would probably have welcomed the intervention the first time around, but now? As an adult? He could only look on in bitter contempt as he wondered where on earth this concern had been when he actually was all of six years old.

“You’re not alone Tony.”

By the time Leekie seemed to give up on getting him to open up Tony was grouchy and bored. He’d even resorted to willingly playing with the new IQ puzzles that Leekie seemed to have acquired since the last time he’d been inside the man’s hatefully cheerful office.

Leekie worriedly patted his hand gently on Tony’s shoulder, before passing over a vile-green disc of a lollipop and sending him on his way.

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The Christmas season snuck up on the school subtly, Tony first noticed that something was off when the tinsel appeared absolutely everywhere followed shortly by an oversized, yet somehow still sad tree in the main entry hall. A whole raft of smaller, even more sorrowful looking ferns appeared in the entryways of most of the other school buildings – even the guard post that overlooked Tony’s spot by the lake had one, albeit a small plastic example that totalled two feet.

The guard - Mr Reid, who turned out to be yet another Vietnam war veteran – had taken to bringing out a small mug of hot cocoa for Tony whenever he spotted him sitting under the tree for any length of time. Whilst he’d initially been annoyed by the constant intrusions to his attempts to meditate, Tony grew to welcome their short chats – and the warmth of the chocolate as the days grew colder and more bitter.

Reid was often to be found attempting to cajole D’Eath into being more sociable, usually roping La Guerta into his schemes. Tony admired the man’s efforts now that he was aware that they existed,
but he thought that they were doomed to fail. D’Eath was too… Comfortable in the rut he’d ground for himself. Too caught up being bitter about the unjust war that he’d been conscripted into to even attempt to welcome the help that was being offered.

Tony swallowed around the now tasteless mouthful of chocolate, the sweet reconstituted milk turned sour in his mouth, Tony could have just been describing himself there. This meditation session had warped into a mind-walk of a different kind. Then again perhaps this introspection was more productive than the utter frustration than the attempts to reliably access magic had become. Tony was still no closer to understanding why sometimes he managed to touch something, and at other times, such as the past couple of months he’d managed absolutely nothing at all.

Tony sipped at his rapidly cooling milk and stared out at the icy expanse of the lake, breath forming visible clouds in the air in front of him. This process was proving horribly frustrating, he had no one to teach him. Oh he’d skirted around the topic with Ben, given the breadth and depth of the older man’s knowledge Tony had thought that perhaps he’d be of more than some help here too. But either Tony’s hints had been too opaque or Ben was being deliberately obtuse, and no help had been offered thus far. Well beyond an interesting anecdote about the pre-Islamic Bedouin tribes, that Tony couldn’t quite parse as fact, fiction or myth. Though Tony recalled that Ben had given him a more serious than usual look down the length of his long nose.

Tony had to admit that he was unsurprised, but also depressed by the fact that his only regular companionship were once again, a security guard, and an individual paid to mind him. Still matters should improve soon, Ms Ramesh had confirmed that the replacement drum was due to arrive in January, so Tony should finally be able to catch a break from the fruitless busywork that was taking up so much of his time. Or at least that’s what he told himself whilst staring blankly over the frosted school grounds, Tony was trying to take this situation a day at a time. But… Time, time was stretching out before him like an endless desert.

Wasn’t this the dream? If only I knew then what I know now? Only that wasn’t the trick, was it. The key to happiness was; if only I didn’t know now, what I didn’t know then. Not this, this living hell of reliving past mistakes and interacting with ghosts day in day out all the while wondering why the hell he’d been the one to be given this opportunity… or curse.

Tony huffed out another visible breath and gave up the meditation session as a bad job poorly done. He clambered to his feet on the frost-slick ground and trudged over to return the mug to Mr Reid.

Perhaps he could find something useful in the library, thus far he’d learnt an awful lot about folklore the world over though nothing that had proved usable. Tony now needed to find primers on the myths of the shining ones, the sidhe and unsaelie, cold iron (what exactly was cold iron as opposed to just iron?), The Furies, coyote, anansi, djinn, Wisahkhea, Old Man Coyote, the shinigami, the tanuki (Tony had boggled at what they supposedly did with their testicles) and innumerable other mystical world theories. Tony had a sinking feeling that all of these myths were true, and none of
them were. Given how both Loki’s and Strange’s seemingly inimical brands of magic had both worked, Tony was beginning to wonder if perhaps it was all true to everyone who was a practitioner.

That is to say, maybe… Maybe magic operated on belief, behaving exactly as the wielder believed it would. He snorted to himself; in that case maybe he should just pick up a stick and wave it around spouting dog-latin. Nodding at Mr Reid companionably Tony started making his way over to the library, somehow he doubted it, it couldn’t possibly be that easy. Could it?

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The Christmas Holidays were a painful reminder that even with his closer relationship with the Jarvises all was not well at home. December came and went with no acknowledgement from his family, either by blood, or by choice. Truthfully Tony hadn’t expected any different, but he’d hoped, and it hurt.

He’d spent much of the first half of the holidays avoiding the small handful of other children left at the school, mostly surly teenagers from the upper years. However Hammer was one of the very few kids from the lower years in the same situation.

School rules, or rather Leekie had stipulated that the younger students at least, weren’t to be left entirely to themselves. There weren’t enough staff members left at the school to constantly supervise the small sad group of thirty or so kids of all ages and abilities – Tony suspected that only the truly lonely members of staff volunteered to stay behind for the full length of the Christmas break. Somehow Tony wasn’t at all surprised when he found out that D’Eath, Leekie and Smythe were the three members of the teaching staff that chose to remain for the duration of the holidays.

As such whilst the teens were more or less free to do as they pleased the younger students, Tony included, were trapped in a “buddy” system. And, as Tony’s luck was utterly unwavering in this respect, Tony’s assigned buddy was Hammer.

The three weeks spent in forced close proximity opened Tony’s adult-eyes to just how damaged Hamm-Justin truly was. Even at this age. Whilst he’d done his very best not to notice during term time, it was painfully obvious with this near-constant contact that Hamm-Justin was a sensitive child, who probably cried to himself in hidden corners. With the enforced close contact Tony couldn’t deny it any longer - the other boy’s eyes were puffy suspiciously often.

Tony resolved to make more of an effort with his roomie, Tony’s feelings towards him truly weren’t the boy’s fault, not yet anyway. He spent the entirety of the holiday making a concerted effort not to
Ham-Justin’s response truly shamed him; the boy had a sunny personality underneath all of that social awkwardness. Just a little kindness had the other boy showing Tony all of his secret haunts around the school grounds, including several secluded spots around the perimeter that Tony doubted he’d have ever have bothered discovered for himself.

Tony found himself guiltily putting up with Ham-Justin’s near-constant chatter with far more grace than he’d have ever given himself credit for. The other boy was giving him a veritable goldmine of information about the school in return, and whilst he didn’t want to admit it, something about the boy’s behaviour reminded him of the most awkward of his children. There was something of Dum-E in Ha-Justin’s inept but endearing attempts to be helpful and kind.

The pair spent their days exploring the icy school grounds, avoiding the older children where possible and teaming up for the inevitable snowball fights when it wasn’t. Although Tony had to spend an unfortunate amount of time persuading Hamme-Justin that going out on the now-frozen lake was an incredibly bad idea, overall he had a horrible feeling that he was warming to the younger boy.

When Christmas Day came Tony was utterly unsurprised that he didn’t receive any presents, or even a card. Sadly he wasn’t the only child not to do so, but he was by far the youngest.

Christmas lunch was an obligatory chore that all of the students who were trapped at the school were forced to endure. The meal was awkward and hesitant, full of lengthy periods of silence interspersed with moments of forced cheer as the few members of staff who’d remained to look after the borders attempted to alleviate the glum atmosphere that had settled over the children like a cloak in the past couple of days.

Justin surprised and shamed him with his awkward and hesitant attempts at kindness, he insisted that they share his gifts. The other boy was forever making such an effort with him that Tony couldn’t find it in him to refuse. The pair of them spent Christmas afternoon gorging on a tin of Belgian chocolates together in their shared room.

Justin smiled stickily at him through a mouthful of chocolate, unsurprisingly the other boy actually liked the nougat ones, which was just fine with Tony and his secret appreciation for chocolate-coated “Turkish Delight” ironically made from pork gelatine, sickly with pink dye, and rose flavouring.

It was a moment of sticky revelation; Tony had been having a lot of those lately. Tony felt utterly ashamed of the way he’d been treating Justin these past few weeks, he knew he wouldn’t be
able to solve his issues with the other overnight, but he resolved that he’d make the effort. After all, the other boy had constantly been giving him, second, third, fourth and even twenty-fifth chances all this time, and Tony hadn’t even noticed.

Ben declaring that he had a present for him during their next session surprised Tony. Given his snorting dismissal of the concept of Christmas as a worthwhile reason to celebrate Tony had assumed that Ben was part of the group that somewhat understandably ignored the holiday in its entirety, especially given his insistence that they keep up their lessons during the festive period. The older man smugly passed over a large parcel wrapped in brown paper, Tony genuinely didn’t know what to say or think about that.

Well, he didn’t until he opened it,

“You shouldn’t have.”

A gleaming example of the blacksmith’s art lay there in the velvet-lined wooden case, the deadly looking length of steel glinting up at Tony with malice aforethought.

“It’s no trouble. Well, actually it was a lot of trouble finding a bastard – well you modern idiots with your modern terms call them hand and a half swords now, but well I think it will suit your style.”

“No. Really, you shouldn’t have. It’s taller than I am.”

“You’ll grow into it.”

“I wouldn’t bet on that if I were you.”

Despite his sniping Tony tentatively reached down to caress the wrapping on the handle, he’d thought that it was leather at first, but it turned out to be twisted metal cord, wound tightly around the hilt. The cross guards were simple, yet Tony already recognised that the slight tilt to the shape could be used to catch an opponent’s sword if the wielder was skilled enough.
He’d never really thought much about knives and other edged weapons beyond sending SI the specs for lighter, stronger more durable metallurgical combinations, well, until he’d become an Avenger. When he’d started to personally design the daggers and combat knives that the superspy duo relied so heavily upon.

Tony recognised that the gleaming length of death that lay before him was a work of art. He gathered up the courage and gingerly hefted the thing out of the box. His six-year-old frame could barely manage the weight sadly and he almost overbalanced completely, but he could tell that it was excellently balanced with a fine edge. This wasn’t the kind of sword that relied on sheer weight to plough its way through armour despite being as sharp as a blunt butter knife, no this sword was for slicing.

Examining the edge he noticed a subtle curve to the blade that had looked straight at a first glance, it wasn’t obvious but the blade had a gentler version of the curve that the short-swords Ben had been using to teach him possessed.

He looked up at Ben through his lashes, the other man merely looked incredibly smug, his sphinx-like grin betraying little but satisfaction at a job well done.

“Good. I’m glad you like it.” A pause, and then the penny dropped, “We’ll begin training with it tonight.”

Tony gawped at him, Ben was insane!

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Tony had crashed onto his lumpy mattress burying his face in his somewhat flat pillow, uncaring that he was still in his sweaty workout clothes. Everything ached, he was exhausted. Somehow, and against all common sense, even his hair ached. He’d been on the verge of passing into a dreamless (if somewhat smelly) sleep when a shy cough disturbed him,

“What?”

He asked grumpily, tone just shy of completely dismissive.

“Um, here it’s for you.”
Tony grudgingly rolled onto his back and peered up at Hammer peevishly.

Justin shyly passed Tony a familiar square shape, wrapped in garish orange and green paper. Tony gaped embarrassed; he hadn’t thought to get anything for the other boy.

Justin seemed to feel the need to explain again,

“It’s for you.”

Tony managed to push a quiet “thank you” out past lips and a tongue that had suddenly turned to rubber. He didn’t know what to say to this not really. Rhodey had always been so good at steamrolling right over any embarrassment Tony might have had at being the son of a multimillionaire, yet being unable to reciprocate with presents. And later, well he hadn’t really had any friends to give presents to. Pepper, for all that they’d grown to love each other, not in love, he’d later realised but love, somehow didn’t count, not when she’d literally seen him at his lowest and still hadn’t left.

Doing his best not to tear the paper, everything about the flat parcel precious Tony carefully revealed the record waiting underneath the garish gift-wrap.

He almost burst into shocked laughter, but held himself back just in time. If Hamm-Justin was anything like Tony, and Tony knew in his heart of hearts that he really really was, then the other boy would be upset if he thought that he was laughing at him. And nothing could be further from the truth.

The revealed record was Young Americans, by David Bowie.

It seemed that Justin had definitely noticed that Mr Bowie made up the majority of Tony’s small but precious collection of vinyl. The nasty little voice that followed him around constantly whenever Justin was in the vicinity wondered just when the little sneak had looked inside his trunk. Tony swallowed down his immediate suspicious reaction when he saw the trembling lips and suspiciously bright eyes of the other boy,

“Don’t? Don’t you like it?”
Tony looked up surprised,

“No Justin”, the other boy’s face fell, “I love it.”

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Edwin peered worriedly down at the pale form of his sleeping wife. She’d been unwell so often lately. But he’d been terrified when she’d simply been so fatigued in the lead up to Christmas that she’d barely been able to get out of bed in the mornings.

It had come to a head the day before Christmas Eve when she’d literally been unable to make herself get up, and ever since Edwin had rushed to be back by her bedside at every possible moment.

Ana looked thin, stretched and worn out. Edwin had put it down to overwork – the SSR, sorry, SHIELD had been busy lately. Resources stretched over too many conflicts, each one with it’s own distinct threat to America and the greater world.

Edwin wished that he hadn’t been so blind. There was clearly something very wrong.

He was determined that Ana would go to the doctor as soon as the appointment could be made. He’d nearly lost her once, he wasn’t going to let something as mundane as an illness take her from him, not after everything they’d been through together.

Of course Edwin had made everything worse by snapping at Howard earlier that day, but his old employer hadn’t responded how Edwin feared he would. Instead of the violent anger Edwin had been expecting Howard’s expression had immediately dropped into grave concern.

“What’s wrong Jarv?”

“I’m so sorry Mr Stark, Ana is unwell I – I’ll. I’m sorry.”

Howard had taken one look at Edwin’s face, clapped a hand on his shoulder and all but shoved him out of the door.
Edwin had been surprised, and humbled by the level of concern that Howard had suddenly shown towards himself and Ana. Howard had insisted that Edwin could take as much paid-leave as he needed. Edwin honestly couldn’t remember feeling this level of fond exasperation with his employer, except possibly when the man had brought Bernard Stark into their lives. Edwin smiled ruefully, for all that he’d forgotten why, there had been a damned good reason he’d stayed in the man’s employ for all of these years.

He stroked Ana’s silvered hair, still showing it’s strawberry tones where Edwin’s had succumbed to greys years ago. She’d always seemed so strong, capable and healthy. He’d honestly thought that Ana was just overworked. Edwin bit down on the urge to apologise to his sleeping wife for the umpteenth time, he’d probably only wake her, Ana needed the recuperation time, and Edwin could do without adding to his reasons for feeling guilty.

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“Ok Velma Kelly – if you say so. I’ll make sure not to stay at the Hotel Cicero any time soon.”

“You know…” Ben mused, seemingly talking to himself, “A nice young lad like you really shouldn’t be referencing a very adult musical that hasn’t had a run that he’d actually be allowed inside.”

Tony winced at the slip. He’d thought he’d been doing better at keeping his references in check.

“At least it wasn’t wrong this time?”

He asked in a hopeful voice

“No…” Ben mused playfully, “Not wrong. Just wildly inappropriate for a six year old.”

Ben sighed, before continuing,

“Well. If you don’t want to be doing the Cell Block Tango and all that Jazz I suggest you get back on with the lesson.”
Tony grinned in chagrin and got back on with the motions of the katas Ben was walking him through. Well, Ben never called them katas, nothing so pretentious as that.

This week during their hand-to-hand session they were focussing on the usefulness of elbows as weapons, they were hard, bony and relatively pointy parts of the human anatomy, useful for jamming into throats, kidneys and other squishy bits. However like all joints elbows were a risky choice of weapon, Ben was teaching him the finer points of avoiding damage whilst dealing out the maximum amount of pain.

It helped that Ben was so willing to act as a crash test dummy in these classes, Tony often wondered how the older man wasn’t a giant walking bruise with the amount of punishment he was willing to put his body through.

In their previous practice bout Tony had accidentally rammed the hilt of his brand new sword straight into Ben’s nose, instead of reacting with anger Ben had merely continued the move he’d been making, blood gushing everywhere. He’d taken Tony by surprise and landed him flat on his back, again. Maybe he should try out the turtle of fury moves that Jarvis had taught him.

Ben had then proceeded to calmly explain to him, whilst covered in gore, that stopping because he’d thought he’d hurt his opponent was the exact opposite of the point of this exercise.

Tony did think that he was making progress, at least better progress than in his epee class but he hated that everything was taking so long.

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New year’s rolled around and there was still no news from the Jarvises. Tony dreaded the arrival of the letter, he was a genius afterall, and though he didn’t remember the exact dates of Ana’s illness he could more than put two and two together.

Tony’s obsession with working out whether or not he could afford to attempt to alter the timeline deliberately had taken on a new sharper edge. Whilst he’d been a child whilst all of this happened the first time around Tony still remembered precisely what the diagnosis had been, once they’d finally found one after several sets of conflicting opinions from multiple medical professionals.

Tony had to admit, even if he somehow convinced first Jarvis, and then the doctors to listen to him
the diagnosis was a grim one. Even in the era he’d just arrived from ovarian cancer had been a killer. And of course Ana’s diagnosis had been delayed by all of the scarring she’d previously sustained helping his father…

Throughout the course of the holiday Tony’s resolve hardened into something resembling the steel that he’d been known for throughout his adult life. Ana, and Edwin, deserved all of the help that he could give them.

As the short holiday came to an end Tony thanked the gods he didn’t believe in that Hammer, or Hammer’s parents at least were rich. The boy had taken his newfound role as Tony’s friend extremely seriously, and as such declared that they needed to improve their shared room. The first evidence of this new situation had appeared that morning. Sitting on top of the unwrapped parcel in the centre of their shared room was an RCA cassette, a VHS tape of The Man Who Fell To Earth. Justin had gleefully asked his parents for both the film and a VCR machine, and his parents, whilst sociopathically little shits just like Tony’s own, at least liked to splash their cash about in lieu of actual parenting.

Tony peered at the cassette in poorly disguised wonder, he honestly had no idea how Justin had even heard about the thing, Tony certainly hadn’t been aware that there was a movie. Justin snatched the cassette from his unresisting hand and excitedly inserted it into the clunky loading tray of the VCR machine.

The machine in question was a glorious example of seventies analogue engineering, a massive, ridiculously oversized box, with a top loading compartment for the tape. Which looked utterly tiny when compared to the (oversized) cathode ray TV casing that Tony had brought with him.

In a show of foresight Tony had left the 70s era ports well alone, so his computer, to the casual observer at least still looked (mostly) like a standard TV-set. The nixie tubes were a source of some puzzlement, though thankfully even now months later Justin still claimed that he liked the warm orange glow they gave off at night.

Fortunately the monitor would be able to receive the signal the shiny new VCR player gave out just fine. Justin and Tony had the means to play the illicit little cassette, it was rated 18, and apparently Justin’s parents had had to import it from the UK for him. Something about the US version of the film being shorter.

Glancing sidelong at Hamm-Justin Tony pressed play the satisfyingly clunky play button on the
machine, it was probably rated as highly as it was for a reason, for all that films tended to decrease in rating as they aged and social mores changed Tony remembered (or rather had been aware of in this time) Bowie’s reputation for pushing boundaries.

The boys settled in to watch the flickering images in their shared dormroom, sat side by side on the marginally less lumpen of the two mattresses. The somewhat clichéd choice of opening music (Holst’s Mars) almost had Tony snorting derisively but he stopped himself just in time. Ha-Justin would almost certainly be upset by that, the other boy was very sensitive to people disliking either him, or his belongings. It was something Tony was only just beginning to grasp the full extent of, and he had a nasty feeling that the personality trait had lasted well into the other’s adulthood – which would explain an awful lot about their interactions. Tony settled down to watch the film, mindful of Justin the whole time.

The themes of utter isolation practically leapt out of the screen from the very first shot of Bowie, somehow utterly adrift in the familiar, yet somehow utterly alien environment of America. Bowie made the most human alien. It hit horribly close to home. Like Tony Bowie’s character, Mr Newton was stuck in a world that he didn’t know or recognise, finding precious, commodities that everyone else took for granted, and unable to understand why everyone else thought he was the odd one.

The talk of Mr Newton having nine Basic Patents, and the amount that that level of advanced technology would be worth got Tony onto seriously scheming for the future. He didn’t have any cash right now to pay for a trustworthy lawyer of his own, but he needed to think about this, if things continued according to plan he wouldn’t be able to rely on the school attorneys for very long.

He might be able to build a whole new tech firm entirely independently from SI. He could push the tech industry forward by about 40 years easily, but did he have the right? Tony wasn’t just thinking of the technology that he himself had pioneered. The apparently wondrous instant film, and the strange metal golf balls that this movie used to replace LPs, had Tony wondering about CDs, MP3 files, solid state drives, digital cameras, mobile phones and tablet devices.

Tony snorted at the character of the lecherous old Professor who was somehow having sex with multiple voluptuous young students, but the metallurgist was an important character with an important point to make. If Tony pursued his ideas too quickly, people like him would become suspicious. And if dubiously academic academics with no real motive could help to upturn a multinational corporation, and it had actually happened outside of fiction, Tony dreaded to think what an organisation like SHIELD could do with the proper motivation.

The films themes of economic instability caused by that level of technological advancement, that quickly… Well Tony was aware that it was all too possible. Even at his own natural rate of inventing, there’d been tech that he’d felt the need to keep back. Even with the enmity between Pepper and he, his CEO had often agreed with him.
Christ the parallels between himself and Newton were piling up horribly, the descent into alcoholism, the way Newton eschewed New York in favour of a more out of the way part of the world, even building himself a mansion within a large plot of private otherwise empty land, and moving much of his companies R&D division with him.

He was utterly taken aback when Try To Remember blasted out of the little flickering TV-set; that was his and his mom’s song. The film’s use of the song, beautiful white horse running for the sheer joy of it, a family together, colours heightened and saturated, yet fading to a melancholy empty desert, somehow matched his own melancholy and faded memories of the song.

Throughout the film he was surprised by how, it simultaneously felt ridiculously modern, and yet incredibly (hah) of the seventies. He grinned at this Newton’s ability to follow several TV-shows simultaneously, it was a talent Tony also possessed, but he didn’t like to advertise it, people already thought he was enough of a freak as it was. The scene where Newton ended up shouting at the multiple TV-feeds to “get out of my mind, leave my mind alone!” reminded Tony uncomfortably of those early months when he’d lost control of extremis. The informational overload was as close a representation of the sensation as he’d ever seen. There was a damned good reason he generally favoured loud, concentration absorbing, hard rock.

The ferrety lawyer, Farnsworth’s defenestration nearly had Tony flashing back to his own trip out of a window when Loki had abused his tower’s arc reactor, but he pushed the image down with some effort. Not in front of Hammer. Besides he shouldn’t be focussing on that, it was selfish, it wasn’t Loki’s fault, that had all been Thanos’ doing.

Tony chuckled when he recognised the hideous forest-print wallpaper in Bowie’s improbable, yet somehow terrifyingly realistic, hotel room/prison, for all that it was apparently the height of seventies chic it looked just as bad on tape as it did in the mansion.

The vivisection carried out on Newton was painfully close to the fate Tony had managed to prevent for the other Avengers when he’d worked to undermine Ross, if less obviously horrific.

By the time the film ended on a broken and disenfranchised Newton sitting drunkenly in a bar Tony had become completely unaware of his surroundings, he wasn’t entirely sure if what he’d just watched was a work of genius, an absolute masterpiece, or the worst thing he’d ever seen. On several levels the film made no sense whatsoever, but on several others Tony felt that once again the themes that Roeg and Bowie had touched upon came far too close to his own emotional state.

Tony too was a human alien, left utterly adrift in a world that wasn’t his own, amongst people that couldn’t even attempt to understand him, nor he them. Of course if he thought about it too closely, Tony was aware in a distant way, that that had nearly always been the case for him. He’d never fit. Too clever for his peers, too young for the adults, hell he’d been too clever by three quarters for the
adults as well.

It really hadn’t improved when he’d reached adulthood either, he knew he didn’t know how to have a human relationship, didn’t understand the emotional back and forth’s that underpinned almost all human interaction. He honestly didn’t know why Rhodey put up with him, he’d scored his best only friend that SI-Liaison job so that he’d have a reason to stay.

Even Newton’s love life reflected his own, the one human woman that he’d managed to find a connection of any sort to, the initial confused interactions, the brief period of domestic bliss, then he first drove her to stress with his inability to communicate, and then away from him entirely. Pepper hadn’t quite pissed herself in fear of him, but the utter terror he’d read in her eyes when she’d found out that Sokovia was all his fault…

Newton’s utter inability to mould his own way of thinking to match those of the people around him, the inability to slow down, explain to people who should understand and have his back already. Yeah Tony found that he had far far too much in common with this character, especially now that he was literally a man out of time.

By the time the film rolled to an end Tony was utterly pulled into the character’s sense of utter desolation and loneliness. He was horribly aware that whilst he was utterly adrift in this world, like Mr Newton the world he’d just left had been utterly doomed, he had no home to return to.

Gradually remembering that he’d just watched an adult film full of adult themes and adult scenes with a six-year-old Tony guiltily wondered what Justin had made of the whole experience. Whilst Tony had been captivated by the sheer tragedy of the plot, and themes of isolation, greed and corporate espionage he wasn’t sure there was much there to hold an actual six-year-old’s interest, not to mention the fact that there were several graphic depictions of sex, and that full-frontal nudity shot of Bowie with an equally naked woman. He somewhat unwillingly turned his head to face Justin.

Tony could read Hammer’s face like an open book, a short one at that, that he’d memorised years ago, Justin on the other hand was a different beast entirely. The other boy was staring at him glassy eyed.

“Ham-Justin?”

Justin practically squeeéd at Tony like a Japanese fan girl at a convention (and he should know, he’d met, and bedded, more than his fair-share of them, well pre-Afghanistan at least), Justin glomped Tony. Christ he’d accidentally helped invent the attack hug thirty years early. As Tony caught his breath Justin eased up, eyes shining Justin squeaked out.
“David Bowie! He’s so! He’s so!”

Tony groaned internally, he recognised a fan-crush when he saw one, he’d been on the receiving end of them often enough. The cynical jaded adult in him pointed out that Hamm-Justin possibly being gay might have caused a few issues for the boy at home; their parent’s generation really hadn’t been the most understanding about this sort of thing. And Tony had just been personally responsible for introducing the boy to one of The Gay Icons. Crap.

He turned to Justin and did the only thing he could think of,

“How about we grab some of his records and listen to them together?”

The boys crept into the senior’s lounge, shared LP stack in hand. Technically Tony had every right to be there, just not at this time of night.

As well as Tony’s own small but precious collection they had a selection of albums that Hammer had been hiding somewhere in the tragedy that was his organisational system.

Tony had to admit that he was intrigued by what kind of music Ham-Justin would have liked as a child.

Tony inspected the communal LP deck with distaste, he carefully put aside the copy of Wish You Were Here someone had forgotten on the deck, slipping the delicate vinyl into the sleeve that depicted two men shaking hands, one of whom was on fire. Whilst he could probably afford them, Tony didn’t want to make himself any more enemies than were absolutely necessary this time around. He casually whipped out a miniature microscope that he’d cobbled together in the advanced labs to inspect the cartridge head. Surprisingly the needle looked nearly new.

Ah right, now he remembered; last week one of the older boys had earned himself a terms worth of detentions when he’d spilt a beer on the deck whilst a record had been on the turntable, he supposed this was either the replacement needle, or a replacement deck.

Fortunately for the boys’ attempts at secrecy Tony was no stranger to carrying out minor electrical adjustments on the fly, Tony stripped down and rewired two sets of headphones so that they were both slaved to the same audio jack from the deck.
With their combined strength the two boys pushed together two of the squishy brown armchairs that littered the room, creating a mini-nest of sorts for themselves.

Ha-Justin insisted that they should both listen to Young Americans first. Tony agreed with only mild reluctance, he was nearly as excited by the prospect of new Bowie music as the new-superfan beside him.

Fortunately the master didn’t disappoint. The first song, apparently about a young American woman’s life, though Tony could tell there was more to it, could only be described as a masterpiece. Though Tony was surprised by the fact that the man was working in yet another new musical genre, so far there’d been glam rock, rock, and eurosound and now it was soul.

The pair of boys lay side by side in the little nest they’d built for themselves, sleepily enjoying the music. The whole album was a glorious laid back sound-scape, though unfortunately it’s easy-listening qualities were proving mildly soporific to the two six year olds who were both out well past their bedtimes.

The final song was a blast of surprising noise though,

“Fame!”

Tony startled out of his mild doze at that, paying attention to the lyrics again. Christ, he’d been right, Bowie really did understand the cost of living in the public eye.

“Fame, what you get is no tomorrow.”

Tony snorted in agreement with that line, and listened enraptured to the rest of the song, he was startled by the ending – an impressive, though probably synthed, run down three octaves worth of Bowie repeating Fame until the song faded away.

Despite their earlier sleepiness, Justin insisted that they play one of his album’s next,

“Honestly Tony, you’ll love it. You’ll see – uh hear.”
Tony was thoroughly surprised by Hammer’s choice of album, he pulled out a Deep Purple record, Machine Head. It was far closer to the Hard Rock that Tony tended to favour than anything he’d have expected from the Hammer heir. The boy shyly admitted that his babysitter, a man who from his description, sounded suspiciously like Otto out of The Simpsons, had given it to him.

Tony didn’t need much persuading to put the LP on, though he did take care to make sure the volume wasn’t turned up too high, just in case the album really was that much louder than the one they’d just listened to. Whilst Deep Purple weren’t AC/DC, or Black Sabbath, they were definitely up there with the greats of the genre, and loud to boot.

He smiled as the familiar tune blasted out on the headphones. Justin was bopping along to the music enthusiastically, slowly inching the chairs apart from each other in his excitement.

By unanimous vote the boys immediately turned the LP over to side two, as the unmistakable riff from Smoke on the Water thrummed out over their headsets Tony smiled up at the ceiling. He thought he could just about work out how to be, if not actual friends, friendly acquaintances, with this version of Justin Hammer after all.

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The holiday concluded with Justin showing Tony his final hidden spot in the school grounds, Tony had to admit it was a hidden gem. Due to it’s past usage as a sound booth the room had it’s own private hallway and entrance, as well as a second emergency exit via a hatch in the ceiling and a pull-down stepladder.

And well, H-Justin had shown him the forgotten room above the common area that they could use as a hidey-hole if the need arose. Tony wasn’t completely oblivious, he realised how big a deal this probably was to the other boy.

Something in him shifted and felt lighter than it had in weeks. Tony found it easier to make small talk with Mr Reid, and even managed a convincing smile for Sneaky Leekie when the perpetually interfering blitherer asked how he was.

Ben noticed Tony’s mood shift during their next sparring lesson. He commented on it just as the spar was heating up, spearing Tony’s attention so completely that he managed to rapidly catch him in a headlock,
“Good. You’re less caught up in your own head.”

Tony could only tap out in response. After a long moment of discomfort Ben eased up and let him go, massaging his neck Tony glared up at Ben who merely looked down at him coolly.

“You still need to learn to ignore these distractions Tony.”

Ben’s tone was chiding, Tony felt his face reddening, he was aware that he still wasn’t much good at sparring. Ben seemed to read his mind,

“No. No – your technique is fine. But you need to learn to stop that brain of yours from becoming a liability in a fight.”

Ben poked Tony in the centre of his forehead in demonstration Tony glared up at him, rubbing at the sore spot.

“Fine. I get it.” Tony paused considering before, “Well… Maybe you could help me there.”

Tony didn’t bother to try for subtle, with Ben there was no point.

“Yes?”

“Well, I’ve got a meeting with the school’s patent lawyer coming up. And I know I need an adult chaperone for the first meeting. Um… I don’t want it to be a member of staff… And well – I’m not even sure if some of my ideas are even safe to give to the public.”

“And you want me there?”

Ben looked incredulous, and distrustful.

“Well… Yeah.” Tony saw the even more dubious look on Ben’s long face, “Alright, no not really.
But you’re better than one of the teachers. And… Well… Jarvis trusts you.”

‘And I trust Jarvis’ passed between them.

Ben cast a considering eye over Tony,

“What’s in it for me, and what’s the catch?”

“Um… My undying gratitude?”

“Nice try.”

“Um… Well I’d like you to look over the designs and tell me if there’s anything you think I shouldn’t put out there.”

Ben looked deeply contemplative

“…And in turn, you actually get to look at my designs.”

Tony could almost see the automatic scoff, before Ben reined it back,

“Why on earth are you trusting me with this? You don’t know me from —heh— Adam.”

“Like I said, Jarvis trusts you.” Tony paused for effect, “Besides, do you honestly think I’d show you anything actually worth stealing?”

This startled a laugh out of Ben,

“Fine Kid, I’ll do it. But it’ll cost you.”
“What?”

“Well… If these designs of yours are worth anything near what you seem to think they are, how’s 5 percent of all profits.”

The response was automatic, Tony didn’t even have to think about it,

“Please! 0.5 percent.”

“Three.”

“One.”

“Two.”

“Deal.”

Tony and Ben shook on it.

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Tony felt around inside his mouth with a probing tongue in horrified fascination. He hadn’t remembered this being so… disgusting. He had a wobbly tooth, he could feel the pulp underneath. He wasn’t actually all that squeamish; in his line of work he’d long since outgrown that tendency – both lines of work both the weapons manufacturing and the superheroing business.

…But, he’d seen that cross-section of a child’s skull at the Smithsonian. And right now, that was his skull. Somehow it was a genuinely squicky thought.

Still, from the looks of it he’d already lost a few baby teeth, so it wouldn’t be too bad, right?
Of course Hamme- Justin noticed his distraction that morning and asked him about it in that utterly guileless way of his, Tony could see why Justin had been a bit of a tag-along, there was just something pathetic about the boy - a sort of helpless hopelessness that didn’t inspire protective feelings but instead anger and the desire to break something.

To the right sort of mind Justin was a target, and Tony had to admit, after years of Ty’s grooming, that he’d possessed the right sort of mind.

Shaking himself into the present just in time to notice Ham- Justin’s face beginning to fall Tony forced himself to reply to Justin’s attempts at a friendly overture with an equal amount of childish innocence.

“I’ve got a wobbly tooth.”

“Oh coooool!”

Tony was taken aback by Justin’s reaction,

“What?”

“The tooth fairy will give you a dollar when it comes out!”

“Oh.”

Tony had to admit that he was surprised that Hammer was excited by the prospect of a dollar, when his parents regularly sent him gifts worth hundreds of dollars. Still money was money he supposed. In that at least he suspected that his and Justin’s upbringings had been identical.

“Has it gone all dangly yet?”

Tony struggled not to inhale his porridge at that accidental double-entendre from the six year old, he choked down his current mouthful at turned to Justin unheeding of the grotesque sight his half-full mouth must have presented.
“What?!”

“You know – the fun bit!”

Tony tried to keep his breathing even; a six year old shouldn’t be finding this discussion so hilarious, but well…

“Ham- Justin what on earth are you talking about?”

“You know – when you can get your tongue right inside the tooth, and it’s gone all hollow, and it’s only hanging on by a teeny string?”

“Oh.”

Tony lost his appetite for his porridge at that rather graphic description. It seemed young boys universally had a fascination for all things unpleasant. Whilst Tony did have an iron stomach when it came to gore, he preferred not to add to the list of things he dreamt about unnecessarily.

“No. It’s just a bit bendy at the moment.”

“Tony? Are you ok? You’ve gone pale.”

“Yeah – yeah, I’m good, thanks Justin.”

Tony had forgotten about that particular aspect of losing a tooth – of late whenever he’d lost teeth it was because they’d been knocked out of his head rather than the long slow drawn out process that Ha-Justin was relishing so much.

The two boys spent much of the rest of the day together, Justin endeavouring to distract Tony from his tooth issue with loud music, and later attempting to further disguise the sound booth. Tony had to admit the none-to-subtle plan worked.
The final week of the Christmas holiday was spent in a whirl of sharing music, exploring previously inaccessible sections of the school together and - once Tony remembered that they actually existed – working their way steadily though a carefully rationed stash of candy, including an oversized bag full of half-melted candy corn that had been lounging at the bottom of his trunk since before Halloween.

Charles Xavier frowned as he felt it again, that itch on the edge of his consciousness. He’d been feeling that strange sensation on and off for months now, and never once managed to get to Cerebro quickly enough to pinpoint it. Not for the first time he cursed the painfully bulky and awkward chair and everything that it stood for.

It… It felt horribly like Logan’s mind had that terrible, wonderful week in 1973. But it couldn’t be could it? No it wasn’t the same at all, and yet something about the mind niggled like a sore tooth, his mental tongue wanted to probe it.

Damn, he really had been thinking about this for too long; Charles knew that he wouldn’t have thought up a truly disgusting metaphor like that in a normal frame of mind.

He wheeled his chair outside as quickly as he could, scratching wryly at his hair, it was thinning rapidly despite the fact that he’d stopped using Hank’s nerve serum. Charles stared at the newly hidden entrance to Cerebro, he wasn’t sure exactly what he was looking for, but he hoped that he’d know it when he saw it.

Charles knew whoever or whatever was causing that constant sense of discordant jangling was probably close by it was unlikely that the signal would be quite this irritating if they were in another county.

Then again telepathy wasn’t the most predictable of masters.

The first week of January term loomed and with it the first parcel Tony had ever received at the school. It appeared in the final weekend before lessons started, and was huge and unwieldy. It’s appearance in the canteen during the weekly post-afternoons created quite a stir amongst Tony’s the small group of students that had trickled back to the school before term started.

Tony had been utterly taken aback at its arrival. He’d never received anything before, and it was
huge. It really was a sizeable box, the staff member on duty, (Sneaky Smythe of course who else?) when it appeared had had to escort it and Tony back to his room. Tony would never have been able to lift it, let alone carry it to the lower-year dorms. Inside was a selection of wrapped parcels, a letter and LP from Jarvis and Ana, with large instructions to read the letter first. The contents of the note were both explanatory and heartbreaking. Jarvis apologised for missing Christmas, explaining that Ana had been feeling poorly, from what Tony had found out years later an extreme understatement given that she’d been hospitalised for months during that first bought of weakness, but that she was slightly better now. Tony had been dreading this news ever since he’d put two and two together over the summer. This was the beginning of the mysterious illness that had claimed her when he was at MIT.

My Dearest Tony,

Apologies about the rather quick note, Ana has taken poorly and I’ve been looking after her.

I’m so sorry that you couldn’t come home for Christmas Tony, but my dear boy with things the way they are at the mansion believe me you’re better off at school with other children your own age.

I do hope this note finds you well, Ana and I both miss you, and we’re looking forward to seeing you again when the summer holidays come around.

Enclosed are the presents that I should have posted to you before Christmas, and I’m truly sorry for the delay, but you’ll be pleased to know that Ana is feeling better now.

Take care,

Edwin Jarvis

Blinking back the tears, Tony attempted to stuff the letter away; he refused to cry in front of Smythe, especially over something so apparently trivial. On the other side of Jarvis’ hasty note was a rather longer letter in Ana’s elegant script, Tony pointedly read the entire letter. Jarvis and Ana had saved up and bought him a small portable turntable with built-in speakers, and the latest David Bowie album that had only just been released. As well as the presents from the Jarvises they’d also forwarded a small gift from Aunt Peggy, and a little something from that nice agent Captain – now Commander Fury. There was even a parcel attributed to “Mom” but somehow Tony saw Ana’s hand in it.
Smythe proved surprisingly helpful, he claimed that since it was a late Christmas present there was no need to follow the usual rules about parcels (usually supposedly limited to small sweets and allowance sized gifts so that the scholarship students wouldn’t be left out, though in practice this never happened) so long as Tony obeyed the more general rules about noise and lights out then the turntable was to be allowed.

Smythe even helped Tony do the heavy lifting, Tony had glared when the man had suggested that he should do the technical aspects too, and backed off.

Tony ran his hands reverently over the parcels, apart from the turntable everything was wrapped in gaudy paper. Aunt Peggy’s military neat wrapping, Jarvis’ butlery professionalism… And surprisingly Fury’s utter inability to form a neat looking parcel. Tony was somewhat taken aback that the man had obviously cared enough to send him something.

Tony neatly peeled the tape away from the small parcel Aunt Peggy had sent over, enclosed was a wooden case and another note,

Tony,

Edwin tells me he’s teaching you martial arts. I can’t wait to see how you take to his signature Tortoise of Fury move. I’ve sent you a little something that should help to that end.

Hope to see you soon. I’ve got plenty more spy stories to tell you my dear!

All my love,

Aunty Peggy

Tony cautiously opened the little wooden case and was surprised to see an extendable baton nestled inside right next to a chunky silver-coloured bracelet.

The baton was unexpected, it reminded Tony uncomfortably of Tasha’s signature style. Still, Aunty Peggy had sent it. Tony was determined to learn how to use it properly.

The bracelet was a bit more of a puzzle, until he realised that Aunty Peggy had probably asked Jarvis what he’d been doing lately, and Jarvis had likely told her about Tony’s black “bracelet”. Of course
once Tony started examining the thing he rapidly realised that it was one of her spy gadgets, though he couldn’t quite work out what it was actually supposed to do. The thing too old fashioned for him to parse the purpose of.

Fury’s …mud (and quite possibly blood) spattered package and note contained something wholly unexpected,

Tony,

It’s not quite a robot dog but if an old soldier judged you right I think you’ll like it.

If not, tell me next time we see each other and I’ll see if I can’t get you something better.

Yours,

Nick Fury

Tony blinked nonplussed at the note. Nick seemed to genuinely care, as he’d so often claimed in their interactions. He didn’t trust him, or it.

Nestled in the centre of the small package was a cassette player, it was no Sony Walkman, the thing was far too bulky for that, and besides it would be nearly a whole decade early if it had been. Whilst it looked utterly outdated to Tony’s 21st Century eyes it was right on the edge of modern tech in this era. Tony was touched. Fury must have somehow gotten hold of a prototype, it was just small enough that he could have conceivably clip the thing to his belt if he’d been an adult. However it still had the oh-so-essential record/copy functions that made these early “portable” players so oversized.

Tony had to admit that he was grateful for the thing – he’d be able to jury rig a vinyl to cassette recording system fairly easily.

The parcel accredited to Maria actually contained an item that she might just have sent, it was an 8-track cassette copy of the Fantasticks soundtrack complete with the song Try To Remember that the pair of them played so often together on the grand. Of course Tony had no way to actually play it, but the thought that had gone into the very nearly usable gift touched him.

It was either poor or good timing depending upon how you looked at it, Tony had just hidden
Peggy’s presents and placed the new Bowie album on the turntable with no little reverence when Hamm-Justin walked in. The other boy lit up at the sight of the turntable - before visibly checking his natural enthusiasm. Tony suppressed the urge to flinch in reaction to that body language, he cautiously nodded the boy over, and Ha-Justin bounded across to Tony’s side of the room, and the deck, face lit-up with joy at the implicit invitation.

They now shared a means to play records privately in their room together. Tony would actually be able to listen to the precious LPs that Jarvis had bought for him now.

Low matched Tony’s melancholy mood with nearly uncanny accuracy, it synced with the almost complete isolation he was feeling at the school, as well as cold desolation he was feeling at the news (Well, confirmation really) that Ana was unwell.

However the album wasn’t utterly desolate, Tony felt that there was a thread of hope… Or something like it running through the hour of sound.

Tony spent the time listening to the LP laid on his lumpy mattress staring up at the ceiling and reminiscing about good times spent with Ana, Jarvis and Aunt Peggy.

Something about the piece had even stilled the usual multiple trains of thought leaving him feeling mellow and calm, if not actually in a better mood than when he’d first plunked the disk onto the turntable.

The only schematic that continued to develop in a meaningful manner whilst listening to the album was a moot one considering that the means to produce it weren’t even a gleam in the inventors eye yet – said inventor probably being a child right now.

Tony was trying to work out if it was possible to integrate a non-newtonian liquid into a basic frame so that he could develop a lightweight alternative to the bulky, and above all heavy stab-proof and bullet-resistant jackets that police forces the world over were required to wear.

Tony had just about gotten together a viable theory about keeping the weight down when the strangely distant feeling LP cover caught his eye.

From one liquid with unusual properties and potential for military applications, as well as more socially minded ones, Tony’s thoughts meandered onto another. The orange cover of Low spun his mind onto the dull orange glow of Extremis, the almost malevolent gleam of the stuff adding an
unwelcome spike of anxiety to his thoughts.

Tony wasn’t surprised when the turn of his thoughts rapidly derailed from one red-headed woman that he was on the verge of losing to another, he had to admit that any thought about Extremis still triggered a painful helpless rage despite the fact that Pepper had survived the incident.

Tony ended up mentally rewriting the coding that he’d memorised years ago so that the payload the techno-organic virus delivered had even more offensive capabilities than the insane fusion driven temperature changes of the original unstable variant that mad Killian had enjoyed playing with so much. Instead of relying on fusion to produce fire Tony had produced a variant that ran on endothermic entropy changes, absorbing ambient energy from its surroundings. Theoretically anything above absolute zero would provide enough power to keep the recipient ticking over.

Tony had to admit that his thoughts had wandered when he caught himself wondering what Maya Hansen’s childhood had been like. It was moot, there was no fucking point in trying to perfect Extremis now, Tony wasn’t exactly going to encourage her if he ever saw her again, and he certainly wasn’t going to go anywhere near Killian’s mad schemes.

Thankfully the instrumental side of the LP calmed Tony’s thought processes down significantly from the worried turmoil that had returned with vengeance after the initial ebbing away, something about the gentle soundscape was utterly soothing.

Tony’s favourite new song of the night was a wordless piece, which wasn’t to say it was instrumental. It wasn’t, Bowie sang in a strange language, formless sounds slipping fluently off his tongue. The isolation clear in every syllable, for all that there was no actual linguistic communication to speak of.

It was only after the music stopped that Tony realised he’d fallen into a deep trance at the instigation of the atonal wordless music. He hoped that H- Justin hadn’t noticed anything weird going on there. He risked a glance at Justin, the other boy was dozing quietly, eyes blankly roving the threadbare rug that ran the length of the central area of the room.

Ham – Justin had sat quietly enough for the duration of the music, but it was obvious to Tony that the instrumental half of the album had bored the boy silly. Still he supposed he owed the boy some credit, Tony had damned near forgotten that he was there in the room with him.
Charles Xavier rubbed at his receding hairline, on the one hand less hair to comb, on the other more face to wash. Before settling back into his chair, and pulling on the cerebro headset. He’d felt something… Something strange, and nearby too.

There!

He automatically honed in on the mind shining like a beacon to his telepath’s senses, not the usual muted white glow of a norm or the blazing red of a mutant but something other. He had to know more.

Charles attempted to skim the surface thoughts of the fascinating mind that lay before him and was stymied by a wall of sheer noise. Even with the mechanical assistance that Cerebro provided, and the relatively short physical distance between himself and the other, the feedback was instantaneous and painful.

It has to be pointed out about Charles Xavier that he saw nothing wrong with his actions, that is to say, if it had been someone other than Charles Xavier carrying out these actions he would have thought that they were doing something wrong, but he saw nothing in he, Charles, carrying out the actions to cause alarm.

Usually Charles thought nothing of altering the flow of his thoughts to match those of the individual he was skimming, it was a near automatic response after all of these years and he barely thought about the slight twists, the hops and skips Charles’ mind took to sync with that of a strangers and slip past the natural mental defences that most people had erected without realising it.

Sometimes the sensation was joyous, sharing in the giddy exuberance of a six-year-old girl for instance was an innocent pleasure. Sometimes the experience left him feeling vaguely nauseous, such as that time he’d had to get into the mind of that priest in the Bronx, with the unfortunate predilection for teenaged boys. Charles pushed away the memory of that twisted mind with a grimace of distaste.

This mind however… This mind. He couldn’t keep up, what he’d initially taken for mental defences akin to the brutal coldness of Emma Frost’s particular brand of telepathy had really proven itself to be so much static. There was just so much information. Far too much to process let alone understand.

Most people thought in their native tongue, or tongues. It was usually the work of a moment to sync himself and slip inside, an uncanny “gift” with languages a pleasant side effect of his mental gift. This mind however, he caught glimpses of mathematics, unknowable symbols blinking past in no language that he’d ever encountered before, and multiple streams of pure information. So many streams of pure thought…
Charles tried once again to sync himself up with the mind, and was rewarded with a jolt of disorientation and hot pain that threatened to disconnect him from Cerebro dangerously. Charles hastily made a mental note of the mind in question, and in his case that phrase was more literal than it was for most, and reluctantly began the process of withdrawing from Cerebro.

In his haste to withdraw Charles missed the void of information that was hovering in close proximity to the fascinating puzzle in front of him. Charles hadn’t even managed to confirm whether or not this was a case like Logan’s. He wheeled himself up to the main levels of the house in resigned frustration.

It was only when Hank exclaimed in alarm at the sight of him that Charles realised that there was blood trickling from his nose and ears.

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Unfortunately at the end of that surprisingly peaceful weekend, another package of a sort arrived at the school. Tiberius Stone walked into Westchester Academy for Privileged Boys on the first teaching day of Spring Term, and was an instant hit with all of the other pupils.

Mrs Kowalski had walked nervously into the canteen at breakfast on the first day of term, Tony had cynically wondered what on earth the silly woman was so excited about, when he saw him. Strolling in behind her, and already pulling knowing faces in all the right places to make the other children laugh cruelly.

Tony sank down in his seat and tried not to let the memories overwhelm him.

Tyberius Stone, all of six-years-old in real terms and already pushing a thousand years old in terms of pure malice and evil.

The change in the school was near instant after that, it was either join him or become one of his victims. Tony wasn’t sure how he hadn’t noticed it the first time around. How had he missed this, the psychopathic behaviour had been there, visible for all to see from day one. It wasn’t something that Tony had induced by being Tony at all.

Despite being immediately placed into the so-called Krelboyne class with Hammer and the other unpopular dweebs Ty was an instant hit with Tony’s whole age group. If he actually gave a damn
about what the little shits thought about him Tony would be jealous. As it was he was impressed, Tony had remembered that Ty could control a crowd. After all, Tony himself had learnt his lessons the hard way there… But it was shocking to see how soon it had all started.

With his current levels of experience dealing with sociopaths and villains from all walks of life Tony could easily see underneath the mask, what he saw was terrifying. There was a coldness there, an emptiness. Oh he faked it well, even at this age, Ty had always been even better at wrapping the press around his little finger than Tony had been.

And yet, Tony could see the cracks in the mask. Whenever Ty thought that someone wasn’t looking he had this smug looking superior smile. Tony had a feeling that he knew what the problem was; Ty had always looked at things differently from everybody else. And one of the ways he viewed things differently, was that he viewed people as things.

Unfortunately Ty had seemed to take Tony’s apparent unaffectedness by his “charms” as a personal affront, a challenge. Despite the relatively few opportunities they had to interact, given their utterly separate schedules – Tony in the senior class, Ty in the Krelboynes - Ty seemed to start popping up absolutely everywhere.

Tony was just leaving Ms Ramesh’s study group session; the dip vat had been delayed yet again. They were planning an alternative source of study – Tony had half-heartedly suggested a study on the viscosity of non-newtonian fluids, mind still on the schematics for lightweight body-armour, which Ms Ramesh had jumped on with a surprising amount of enthusiasm considering how basic Tony thought the study was.

As such Tony was distracted with a whirl of science when he stepped out of the classroom he crashed straight into Ty. The larger boy grinned down at him meanly as Tony was sent sprawling to the floor by the force of the impact.

“What’s the matter you queer little faggot?”

Tony had to resist the urge to snort at that pitiful attempt to be insulting, especially given what he knew about adult Ty’s later inclinations, Ty hadn’t even managed to be threatening the larger boy’s whiny voice utterly undermining his attempts at menaces.

Tony levered himself up onto his elbows and made a point of looking comfortable where he was, it was a trick he’d learnt fighting innumerable ‘supervillains’,
“What’s the matter Caligula” Tony wasn’t able to resist a subtle jab that would have incensed his Ty, “afraid I’m going to replace Incitatus in your senate and actually do something useful, or worse do a Claudius?”

Tony shouldn’t have been surprised, but he was, when the jab clearly missed it’s target entirely and sailed straight over Ty’s head. Right, of course, he and Ty hadn’t read the Compendium of Roman History together, never would now. Damn. And it had been such a good jab.

Blinking in incomprehension Ty’s face rapidly recovered it’s belligerent cast,

“What’s the matter Tiny Tony?”

Ty’s singsong mocking voice had Tony rolling his eyes. Heaven help him, what the hell had he seen in the twit?

Levering himself up Tony made to walk away, Ty’s meaty paw clamped around his upper arm, without thinking Tony flinched violently and ended up with his back to the wall.

Ty looked satisfied by this reaction,

“Yeah, that’s right. You should be scared, pussy.”

If Tony hadn’t been struggling so hard to keep the flashbacks at bay he’d have found the crude insult hilarious if infuriating given his 21st Century attitude to these things. As it was he was grateful when Ty finally left seemingly satisfied with his intimidation attempt, allowing Tony to get his act together and scurry off in the opposite direction.

Unfortunately for Tony Cord and Taggart had witnessed the whole thing from Ms Ramesh’s lab, the new nickname had soon spread throughout the whole damned school.

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Edwin listened with some interest to the discussion that Howard and Maria were having that evening. Despite his continued worry about Ana’s health, well, she had insisted that he still take care
of the Stark’s business.

“After all”, she’d argued, “We can’t both be out of work when I’m stuck in here costing us both money.”

Edwin had had to concede the point, the bills for the hospital stay whilst the doctors tried to work out what was wrong were extortionate.

It transpired that Tony’s IQ tests had come back in, and the results were off the charts. From the way the psychiatrist that Howard had sent to the school with the tests explained it, there was below average, average, above average, smart, genius, and finally the latest category …super-genius.

Edwin had had to repress a snort at the faintly ridiculous category; Americans had such a way with naming things. Apparently the latest title was used to categorise individuals who weren’t just at the extreme end of the bell-curve, but warped the scale so much that the chart would need to become logarithmic just to fit the new data points on the same page.

Apparently Tony was in extremely select company in earning himself this new definition. According to the doctor, one such cohort lived right here in New York state, and had volunteered to mentor younger members of the small group should the need arise. The man had waived his right to anonymity, insisting that since he worked at a school anyway, a little bit of additional childcare wouldn’t make much of a difference to him.

Howard had grimaced at the name that was supplied to him however,

“Huh, seems my boy is a freak after all.”

Edwin wondered bemusedly what it was about the name Charles Xavier that had changed Howard’s demeanour from the unfamiliar one of a proud parent to his more usual angered disappointment. However he was heartened by the proud glow that suffused Maria’s features, Howard certainly hadn’t been making their lives any easier these past few months and Maria could certainly do with something to cheer her up.

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Leekie dragged Tony away from the first weekly-unsupervised session of free study time with his
own age group of the new term. Since it was letter writing day he was stuck here with Justin rather than at the supervised free sessions that he participated in with the college prep group. Tony had to admit that he was still grateful for the small kindness that Leekie had obviously been involved in though that feeling of goodwill was fading rapidly given the latest addition to their year.

Tony had spent the brief ten minutes that he’d been stuck in the session watching Ty’s interactions with the other kids in their year group in horrified fascination.

The cherubic blonde had quite a crowd of admirers gathered around his table, forced laughter echoing around the hall as Ty’s gaggle of cronies hung onto every word that he said.

It hadn’t escaped him that Justin was watching Ty’s interactions with their year-mates enviously, Tony honestly couldn’t see what Justin was so jealous of – Ty had them ensnared with fear, not respect or friendship.

Tony hadn’t resisted the urge to sneer in open contempt at Ty and his gaggle of hangers on when the crowd had all glanced over in their direction. Beside him he’d felt Justin shrink into himself, Tony had nudged him gently and offered a tentative grin,

“Hey, Justin.”

“Huh?”

“Thanks for the advice on the tooth.” Tony grinned widely, exaggeratedly enough that Justin could see the gap where the loose tooth had been, and by happy coincidence Ty could see Tony’s lack of reaction to whatever he was trying to do.

Tony could almost feel the hairs on the back of his neck singeing, Justin gave him a watery grin, all too aware of the malicious group at the other end of the hall.

Unfortunately for Tony’s peace of mind Leekie had chosen that moment to waltz into the hall and collect him, Tony only hoped that Smythe’s iron rod of classroom discipline extended to his frequent check-ins on his class.

As Leekie guided him to his office Tony couldn’t help but feel a twinge of guilt about leaving Justin alone like that. If he’d known that he was going to be called away he wouldn’t have riled Ty up so
much. Tony hoped that Justin would be ok.

When Leekie led Tony to the office Tony had to admit that he confused about what was going on.

“Now, Tony. I’m sure you’re curious about why I’ve asked you to come here.”

“Well, “

“Your session with the school patent lawyer is today.”

The penny dropped. Tony had forgotten all about it, despite making that deal with Ben, and the sheer length of time the pair of them had spent arguing over the designs. Tony had to admit he’d been worried that Leekie was going to try to give him another pep talk, he’d been dreading it caught up imagining what on earth Weepy Leekie had gotten himself worked up about this time.

Tony’s relief was short-lived, whilst attorney client confidentiality was one thing, the school required chaperones for the students’ first meetings with the lawyers. Looking around Tony was glad to see that the office in question was plain and small. Good. That would make things easier.

Wrapping his mask of petulant six-year-old tightly around himself Tony said,

“I want Ben.”

“I’m sorry what?”

Leekie looked taken aback by Tony’s sudden temper.

“I. Want. Ben.”

“Tony, Tony. Surely you can see that I’d be better able to see that your interests are adhered to?”
“I want Ben. He’s under my employ. You aren’t.”

Leekie looked almost upset by that, but Tony wasn’t about to let this mild twinge of guilt stop him. Jarvis trusted Ben with Tony’s life. Therefore Tony trusted Ben. At least, Tony trusted Ben to sit in on this first crucial meeting far more than a screw like Creepy Leekie. Ben and Tony had even signed a contract; Ben had raised an utterly unsurprised eyebrow at Tony’s ability to draw one up on the fly. Besides Tony trusted Ben to put an edged blade to his throat, he could count the number of people he trusted that much on one hand and still have fingers left over. Tony knew that Ben was the better choice.

Leekie sighed heavily and cleaned his glasses,

“Very well. You’re very lucky Tony, I know he is on school grounds today.”

Tony rolled his eyes obnoxiously, he’d made his own luck; Tony had pre-arranged this with Ben weeks ago. He’d just forgotten that today was, well today, given that Ty was around the place.

Leekie left to fetch Ben. Tony purposefully maintained the veneer of precocious six year old that had taken so long to cultivate. He had to balance this carefully, until he had access to the kind of funds needed to start hiring his own trusted people.

Well, he had to keep up the child-genius façade.

Tony and Ben had carefully gone through the designs that he’d thought might be OK to release to the public a few years early. There had been one memorable idea that Ben had vetoed altogether (Tony had included the working file for how to produce Brown Noise in a fit of pique. As the son of a weapon’s developer he’d come up with weapon designs from a young age the first time around, so why not a childishly effective weapon this time? But Ben had cited something about three monks on a boat and clammed up.)

Tony had otherwise been careful to tread the fine line between keeping the designs relatively harmless, whilst displaying enough inventive genius to hook the lawyers. For the time being he wished to be seen as the golden goose. Tony was going to have to milk that role for all that it was worth.

As such the slim file of designs that had accumulated in the lockbox of … well patent-lawyer bait, was a carefully erratic collection of ideas, the exact kind of thing that an idiot savant child would
come up with:

- The entirely novel coffee filtration system that he’d developed when he realised he had a flair for this sort of thing – and an accompanying doodle of a Starkbucks coffee shop, with his beard in place of the more usual mermaid logo. Tony had thought that this one was cheeky, but it had made Ben snort with laughter, and the design was entirely harmless so he’d left it in there.
- A set of chemical formulae for more reliable hi-resolution quick developing film, an old design that he’d fiddled with in the 90s when he’d gotten fed up of his polaroids fading after a couple of years. Of course the stuff had become defunct with the rise of digital photography, however for the time being the chemicals were harmless, and should net him a tidy sum.
- A low energy water collection/filtration system that should enable communities in arid regions to be able to gather hydration from more than just potentially contaminated groundwater… The exact kind of thing a naïve child would come up with after being assigned that world sociology assignment last month for instance.
- The logical conclusion to his non-newtonian fluid ideas were appended, Tony only hoped that the equipment that came out of this would help protect people the world over.
- A full schematic outline for a handheld gaming device, which coincidentally contained several basic patents for a flexible polymer semi-conductor screen, stable solid state memory, and… A far greener, and less likely to spontaneously combust variety of high-energy density battery that made lithium ions look like button cells.
- A much much more efficient design of jet engine, complete with a set of “theoretical” musings about how to produce a superalloy that would increase the operating temperature, and therefore the fuel efficiency.
- Another schematic for a handheld telecoms device, with an attached schematic for a handheld portable music device.

And finally…

- Tiny misaligned motors for purposefully producing vibrations… And an accompanying sketch of the devices installed in gaming devices, and to provide tactile feedback in remote control unit. In a discreet corner, in a seemingly different hand, was a final sketch of its potential filthy uses.

Tony eyed the lawyer suspiciously, whilst the designs were carefully harmless he didn’t want to lose them and have to start on this little project from scratch. It had taken him a while, a long while of carefully not writing things down, before he’d been able to come up with that short list of designs that matched his stringent criteria. The designs had to be 1) harmless, 2) entirely his own, and 3) not too far ahead of current tech.

Though of course that first confiscated coffee machine design had triggered this whole slightly mad scheme, Tony remembered that he’d managed to patent a few idea of his own once he’d gotten to the relative freedom of university. However that was still months, if not years off and Tony needed to start building a nest egg now.
Included in the pile of papers was the draft contract that he and Ben had drawn up together, with plenty of space for amendments and lawyery annotations.

The lawyer had been eyeing Tony whilst Tony had been eyeing him, Tony knew that the school employed the firm Landman and Zach to watch out for their student’s interests. Although the firm wouldn’t have been his first choice, Tony liked their reputation for putting their client’s interests first, even when it put them in a relatively awkward position. Of course he’d have to drop them for a more transparent firm in the future, but for now they would suit his purposes nicely.

Tony found the fact that he couldn’t push his designs out there incredibly frustrating, but for now he had to be content with drip-feeding ideas to the world. Whilst it wasn’t quite on a par with his green energy project that he’d had going back home, Tony thought that the jumps towards providing clean water for the world laid out in that little dossier would be a step in the right direction.

The lawyer grinned the grin of someone who was about to become very very rich, and knew it,

“Well Mr Stark, what would the terms of a potential contract with Landman and Zach be?”

Tony grinned his best shark’s grin back, the school had chosen well. The lawyer wasn’t putting on false airs or talking down to him, merely treating him like another client.

“It’s Tony please. Let’s get down to business.”

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By the end of the day Tony was very nervous about Justin’s welfare, Tony hurried out of D’Eath’s English Literature lesson on Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales in the original Old-English with as much haste as he could muster. Tony hadn’t seen him since he’d been dragged off to that lawyer meeting. It was a relief when he spotted the other boy in the canteen apparently none the worse for wear.

Tony nervously dropped his tray of mystery slop claiming to be bigoli in salsa next to Justin and cautiously took a bite. His taste buds were assaulted by salty fishy… crunchiness. Pasta wasn’t supposed to be crunchy. Was it? Even by his low standards this was borderline inedible, having delayed long enough he got on with the inevitable,

“Hey –Justin.”
“Hi Tony.”

H-Justin’s voice was timorous, somehow smaller than usual. The boy offered Tony a watery smile,

“What was the Krelboyne class like?”

“Aawful.”

Tony grimaced before cautiously giving H-Justin an awkward pat on the shoulder, he’d never been any good at this sort of thing.

“What happened?”

“Tiberius Stone.”

The name was spat out with all of the hatred a six-year-old could muster.

“What did he do?”

Gods, Tony wished he wasn’t so bad at this shit.

“He was better than me.”

“What-?”

“He was better than me.”

Tony gave Justin an utterly blank look; he wasn’t entirely sure what H-Justin was trying to get at. Justin huffed at him, before seeming to understand that Tony genuinely didn’t get it, somehow that
made it all come spilling out of the other boy in a long stream of words,

“I, I was trying so hard to be clever enough. I wanted to be good enough, so I could join the smart class like you. I, I, I mean I know I’m not clever. Or smart. Or f-funny. But you’re so nice about it. I thought if I could only be at the top of the Krelboyne class then maybe I’d be good enough.”

Tony was aghast,

“Justin – you are smart. That’s why you’re in the Krelboyne class. And that’s not why I’m friends with you anyway.”

Tony stumbled over the word friend, but he didn’t think Hammer noticed, “You’re… You’re the nice one. Not me. I’m not nice. You’ve been so…”

Tony struggled to find a word that a six year old would understand, he wasn’t entirely sure he managed it either, “patient.” Tony muttered out a bitter sentence, “More patient than I deserve.”

Justin sniffled seemingly mollified by Tony’s inept declaration, and wiped furiously at his eyes, trying to avoid looking at one particular corner of the large room.

Tony glanced over in the direction Hammer was avoiding, Ty was there surrounded by his rapidly acquired gang of followers and hangers-on. They were alternating between putting their heads together whispering and peering over in Tony and Justin’s direction maliciously.

Tony felt a cold icy fury overtake him,

“There was more wasn’t there.”

“Stone smashed my diorama for the science fair.”

“Oh.”

Tony hadn’t even been aware that there was a diorama, much less a science fair for the younger kids.
He side-eyed Justin guiltily,

“Just…”

“He smashed my volcano diorama! I hate him. He’s a bully. And Mr Smythe didn’t do anything!”

In lieu of finding anything appropriate to say Tony settled for squeezing Justin’s upper arm, and refocused on eating his extremely crunchy pasta. Tony was determined not to give Ty the satisfaction of a reaction but he knew that Justin had been targeted because of him.

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Despite all of the distractions that came with the start of the new term, not least of which was the unexpected and unwelcome early appearance from a certain Tiberius Stone, Tony spent much of the first half of January agonising over whether to try and point the doctors in the right direction with regards to Ana’s illness.

On the one hand Tony wasn’t sure that anyone would even listen to him, let alone act on his suggestions. But on the other it would be the height of selfishness to sit back and do nothing… Wouldn’t it? Or would the selfish thing be to attempt to change history? After all the history books were – would be – full of Tony Stark’s mistakes whilst he tried to make the world a better place.

Eventually it was Hammer of all people who convinced Tony to finally sit down and rattle off the note to the Jarvises suggesting that they check up on Ana’s ovarian health.

Justin, the irritatingly observant little shit that he was had noticed, and worried, over Tony’s even more obvious than usual insomnia.

Eventually with his persistent nagging gentle encouragement Tony worked up the courage to send off the letter that he’d been drafting and redrafting every letter day since he’d put two and two together about the date.

He only hoped that it made a difference. Tony really hated being six and powerless again, though even he had to admit the cute factor did up his ability to manipulate considerably.
After the absolute disaster of the classes before Christmas, and Ben’s less than sympathetic reaction to Tony’s misfortune, Tony looked forward to the latest of the weekly option-sport classes with dread.

Despite the level of training he’d received over the years from multiple instructors and Ben’s excellent tutelage in… well whatever the sword fighting disciplines he was teaching Tony were called, Tony was barely able to keep up with the lessons taught in the class.

Between the constant aforethought he had to put in not to accidentally fall back on Ben’s teachings, the constant need not to reveal his actual level of knowledge in martial arts, and the downright bloody stupid rules in this sport… Well.

To make matters worse Ben was of the opinion that Tony had chosen the easy option on that front, the rules for epee were apparently much, much more fluid than the other two fencing disciplines that the school offered. And from the arch look Ben had given him when the topic came up, Ben had clearly believed that Tony knew this when he’d chosen the sport rather than the more mundane reality that Tony had panicked and purposefully picked the option that sounded halfway useful.

Tony was painfully aware that he wouldn’t be finding this whole situation so upsetting, if it weren’t for Jarvis’ lack of response. In one of his many many letters Tony had asked Jarvis to help teach him fencing; he’d even gone so far as to admit that he was struggling. Something that should have had the man worried for him. And yet – apart from the worrying news about Ana’s health, silence. Tony had vague memories of Ana and Jarvis sparring together with long thin swords that with an adult’s hindsight had probably been epees.

He admitted to himself that he was being unreasonably selfish, Tony knew why Jarvis hadn’t replied to any of his letters. The note confirmed it. And the extravagant Christmas gift more than showed that the Jarvises cared. And yet… Tony resented the lack of a response.

Tony reluctantly filed into the class that had rapidly become his least liked, even taking into account the awful utter boredom that was the weekly general science class with D’Eath and the relatively mixed selection of talent the college prep group.

He struggled into the stale smelling padding and plastic protective armour, grimacing in distaste at the smell of rotting rubber and stale sweat. Tony looked up just in time to spot Ty grinning evilly over at him. Shit. What the fuck did he want?
Tony had done his absolute best to fly under Ty’s radar this time around, and yet somehow he’d still caught the asshole’s attention. Tony didn’t know how he’d done it he could only hope that the interest was a passing one.

Due to the added nerves about just what Ty had in store for him that day Tony did even more poorly in the lesson than he usually did. Even La Guerta’s usually amiable response to the students’ slow progress was overtaken with frustration,

“Come on Tony make an effort – what’s with you today? You’re normally much more focused than this.”

Tony bit down on his automatic sarcastic retort and instead nodded at the man in chastened acknowledgment. The tall ginger man gave Tony a serious look before moving on to showing one of the other children how to do a certain slashing move correctly so that it didn’t go anywhere near the face-guard.

Despite himself Tony kept stumbling over his own feet, and of course true to form Ty was quick to spot Tony’s clumsiness and latch on like a dog with a bone,

“Oh look, Tiny Tony’s such a klutz.”

The childish taunting brought Tony to his senses Ty wasn’t a threat. Not like this. Not yet.

He’d just about managed to focus fully on the lesson when Ty purposefully made his way over from his spot and started up again,

“Go on then – show me what you’ve got Stark.”

Tony glanced briefly his way and then got back on with practicing the move. Don’t give him the satisfaction.

“Oh well done, the little baby got it. Tiny Tony did it everyone!”
Tony resisted the urge to roll his eyes, for decades he went by the moniker the Merchant of Death. He hadn’t liked it, but it was what it was. Playground insults were… well, insulting.

“Boys stop it, I’ve had just about enough of you two today.”

Tony pointedly didn’t say, ‘but I didn’t do anything!’ but it was a close-run thing.

“I want you all to get into pairs.”

Of course Tony being who he was ended up being one of the stragglers with no willing partner. La Guerta started moving around the group pairing up the remaining kids at random.

“Standard bout form. Everyone gather round, gather round. I want you all to only use the moves I’ve been teaching you in these classes. That means no ‘improvisation’ Jenkins.”

His worry came to a head when just as Murphy’s Law predicted; Mr La Guerta paired Tony with Ty. The other boy grinned maliciously at him, clearly at home with the sword in a way that the other students simply weren’t. Tony pushed down the fear, the other boy was a child for god’s sake! He’d faced down supervillains and a multitude of aliens intent on the enslavement of, or failing that the outright destruction of the planet earth. Six year old Ty Stone wasn’t a threat.

Tony fidgeted nervously as he watched the current pair face-off against each other. The bouts were his most hated part of these lessons, fighting with an audience, trying desperately not to show his other skillset, and trying desperately not to shame himself. It was a difficult set of conflicting outcomes he had to manage here. Tony rarely felt as if he’d made a good account of himself, and Mr La Guerta’s too sympathetic smiles often had him grinding his teeth irrationally. Tony wasn’t bad at sparring dammit!

Fortunately for Tony’s sanity he and Ty weren’t made to wait for long, they were the third pair to fight in front of the others.

The pair of boys bowed at each other and began their match, Ty immediately started taunting Tony – in that particular whiny tone unique to children everywhere,

Tony made the salute by rote, noting that Ty’s form there at least was desultory.
“En garde!”

Tony fumbled with the heavy mesh mask before pulling it on over his head and tightening the straps. Tony had to admit all of the safety gear was some of his least-favoured aspects of this sport, he and Ben had made a point of carrying out their sparring in street clothes and be damned with the resultant bruises.

“I see you aren’t wearing your precious watch Anthony.”

Tony resisted the urge to roll his eyes, childish as the attempt was he needed to pay attention to what his feet were doing. He cast around desperately; typically La Guerta was on the other side of the damned room dealing with something in the crowd of murmuring boys.

Tony assumed the starting stance when he spotted La Guerta making his way back to the mat,

“Prest?”

Tony assumed the starting position; he noticed that Ty fell into place far more fluidly than he did. Typical.

“Allez!”

Ty feinted left, Tony saw the move for what it was, but Ty’s advanced level of sneakiness alarmed him. Had the other boy always been like this?

Tony had been seeing the evidence piling up, but still, it was difficult to believe the evidence of his own eyes… Not when it meant that H- Justin had been right about their relationship all along, and that… It had always been rotten. Tony swallowed, he owed Hammer an apology, not Justin, Hammer, Vanko’s stooge …And continuing in the vein of being totally honest with himself, Tony’s onetime best friend.

Tony gulped and refocused on the match, just in time to block a vicious swipe from Ty’s sword. He blinked, Tony was sure that move wasn’t legal. Was it? He couldn’t be sure. Tony cursed himself for his inattention.
Ty’s cherubic face was smiling wickedly.

“What’s wrong twerp – does Tiny Tony want a letter from mummy? Wha wha wha – no one ever writes to Tony. Poor baby.”

Tony blinked. More surprised than annoyed. How on earth had Ty known?

The fact that Ty had barely been at the damned school for a week and already was privy to the school gossip engine was irritating. Tony was perpetually out of the loop there, having to rely on H-Justin for most of it, and Ty already knew that Tony never got any letters?

Tony really couldn’t be fucked with this situation, if he’d actually been six perhaps he would have allowed Ty’s pathetic attempts at being a wit rile him up. As it was Tony was swallowing back the urge to mock the childishness of the insults.

Ty was a child. Tony… was a child.

They were children fighting with swords. For gods sake! Not for the first time Tony wished that he’d stuck with the tennis like last time, Tony was good at tennis. He was better than Ty at tennis…

Tony huffed out his frustration, if this were an actual no holds barred fight, well. Tony would probably win. Despite the fact that Ty was tall for this age, and Tony was, as ever, and oh so eloquently pointed out by his opponent, a squirt.

Ty was circling jabbing the tip of the epee in exploratory attacks, trying to find an opening. The match was rapidly devolving into pure viciousness, if it didn’t end soon Tony was worried about what he’d be forced to fall back on. Ty was by far the better fencer. But Tony knew he was the better fighter. If this were really a life or death situation he wouldn’t have hesitated to end the duel with a couple of the moves that Ben, or one of his numerous other teachers had taught him.

La Guerta was watching their match with an assessing eye, Tony knew that it wasn’t a coincidence that he’d paired them up. The ass probably thought that it was character building or some other dross.

Ty managed to score a hit with a quick jab whilst Tony was distracted, though, likely thanks to
Ben’s training, Tony just managed a counterattack leaving them even.

The bout timer was running out, and the only jabs being traded were Ty’s childish attempts at riling Tony up.

In the end Tony decided to finish it, he risked a quick glance, La Guerta was watching distractedly, the rather inept duo in the near-corner of the hall were doing something they shouldn’t be. And if Tony was any judge, he’d soon be distracted by the …yep. Good.

Tony whipped out a move that was almost certainly completely illegal. He didn’t care, he needed to show Ty that he wasn’t an easy target. Needed to prove to the bully and budding psychopath that he wasn’t prey.

Turning the epee as if it were one of the curved Khopesh was difficult; the balance was completely off, but not impossible. Whipping the sword around in an elegant, and unpredictable whirling flurry Tony rested the blunted tip at Ty’s throat, before casually knocking aside his opponent’s attempt at a counterattack and prodding in quick succession at Ty’s sternum, stomach, groin and knee.

Tony had proven his point. He’d made 5 hits. Ty was glaring murder at him, cold blue eyes glistening with hate, even as he dropped the sword with a heavy clunk and conceded the match.

La Guerta whirled around at the sudden clapping and jeering,

“Where are the salutes boys?”

Tony hastily whipped out a salute, as Ty fumbled for his fallen epee glowering all the while.

“Well done Tony, we’ll make a fencer of you yet!”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much everyone for the comments, kudos and bookmarks! Hell I just discovered the "subscriptions" tab - woah I didn't realise so many people were following this thing, thank you!
I hope this tale continues to amuse, though as always all mistakes are my own so feel free to point out any issues you spot. (Given how fed up I was of this chapter by the time I'd finally managed to edit it into shape, well I'm sure there are a few problems I've missed!) No idea how the etiquette works but if anyone is available to beta read please do let me know!

We're slowly beginning to work towards the first major timeline alteration that Tony will indulge in. It may have long-reaching consequences!

And apologies for the relatively huge gaps... Um if it's any consolation a lot of the time was spent writing distant future chapters... So there's a whole lot more of this thing hashed out than there was last time I updated.

...And a slightly random question for the lovely people on here - does anyone know what happened to CleanWhiteRoom's masterpieces? I.e. Force Over Distance, Mathematique et al? I was in the mood for their particular brand of mathematics, non-consensual genetic modification, and angst (and that description is definitely doing them a disservice...) And discovered that all of their works have vanished into the ether.

Actually if anyone has any suggestions for decent SGU fic I'd welcome them, though much as I don't like to throw stones given how fast and loose I'm playing with the MCU here, I'd prefer suggestions that aren't also Once Upon A Time x-overs where Belle literally wanders in from another fandom and miraculously fixes all of the crew's interpersonal relationships (nothing against that show, but it's never managed to raise a reaction other than Meh from me)

*Edit:* Er... Apologies about this, the next update will be delayed due to my ancient macbook finally dying. (It's displaying the macbook equivalent of the blue screen of death, and nothing I can do at this end has helped) The thing is going into the specialists, and I'm already kicking myself for the gap in between backups, because hey fanfic wasn't deemed essential enough to warrant yet another overnight session of HD cloning... Erm, so either way the next chapter will be unavoidably delayed, but hopefully the contents of the HD are still accessible.

*Edit 2:* The hard drive made it at least, but still trying to find out if the laptop is even worth fixing. So again apologies for the delay, still waiting on possessing a working computer with decent keyboard!
Because You're Young

Chapter Summary

Academic hold-ups from an unexpected source.

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delay... Initially caused by a certain exposition laden scene that I was struggling with, it was prolonged when my ancient macbook finally gave up the ghost and exhibited the dreaded blue screen of death.

In my defence this chapter is huge? I was determined not to split this thing up - but in hindsight perhaps I should have...

The next couple of chapters should be up a lot more quickly than this one. They're shorter for one!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 7: Because You’re Young

Tony sighed angrily as he glared at his red-rimmed eyes in the mirror; he revised his previous thought about the worst thing about being back in time. His pop culture references were all 40 years out of date – in the wrong direction! Everyone else was catching up with him! (As usual.) He should not be the one bending over backwards here. Everyone else was just slow. He wasn’t the problem. He wasn’t.

Star Wars hadn’t even happened yet. Kirk and McCoy were Star Trek, not Picard and Riker, or Sisko and Bashir, or even dare he say it Archer and T’Pol. (Or Taggart and Lazarus.) Not to mention that revealing his appreciation for the “geeky” sci-fi show had earned him both derision from the non-nerds, whilst his apparent lack of knowledge about the show had earned him scorn from the geeks.

He’d gotten blank looks for just about every reference he’d brought up, Blade Runner, and Stargate, Breaking Bad, Back to the Future, Bronies. Hell, even good old Dungeons and Dragons was still too obscure for most of the dweebs let alone the rest of his so-called schoolmates. His magic missile joke had sailed right over the collective heads of the Krelboynes, though that was probably a good thing in hindsight. (The joke had been the exact kind of rude that would make Cap’s all too familiar glare
It wasn’t just the cultural references, his entire vernacular was off, and he was using slang that didn’t exist yet. Phrases and colloquialisms, syntax and jargon. Tony hadn’t noticed the problem at the mansion, the Jarvises were both too polite (or should that be too out of touch with pop culture) to say anything about it and they were the only real company he’d had there.

Ben was trying his best to subtly coach him, but… Tony felt like tearing his hair out, every attempt he’d made to connect with his classmates was rebuffed with puzzled, confused and worst of all disdainful looks. He’d dealt with worse; he’d been swimming with corporate sharks for most of his life. He’d had the press sharks eating out of the palm of his hand long before he’d hit adulthood. He could deal with a bunch of school children, for chrisakes he was a 40-something year old man, he was above all of this.

Somehow his only friends at the whole damned school were Justin of all people, Mr Reid and Ben. Tony and Reid spent more time sharing silences than anything else, and as for Ben. Well, Tony only saw the older (younger? Somehow Tony didn’t think the other man was younger than him, even taking into account his own true age) man twice a week. Ben’s vernacular and frames of reference were as bizarre as his own, only the older man did a far better job of hiding it - Ben only seemed to let the phrases slip in Tony’s company. Tony was clever enough to spot that the older man was still trying to teach him how to blend in as he did.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t working quickly enough, kid-him hadn’t exactly had much exposure to pop-culture the first time around, not at this age.

The only kid who ever attempted to stick up for him was Justin, and whilst Tony was more than grateful, Justin wasn’t exactly winning any popularity contests either. Tony almost wished that Justin would stop, the poor kid was just painting a target on his own back, and Tony still hadn’t quite managed to get over the old irrational hatred, he knew he wasn’t being much of a friend in return. However, the other boy was so affection starved that he didn’t seem to notice, Tony was feeling a building sense of guilt there, he owed the other boy far more than what he felt able to give him. Tony knew he wasn’t giving enough back. And yet somehow H-Justin seemed content to take what he could give. The situation had left him feeling distinctly uncomfortable.

Painfully, and several years too late Tony was finally empathetic of just what Carol had been going through, when that damned implant of hers had been interacting in strange and unpleasant ways with the Kree DNA running through her blood; he felt strangely detached from everything and everyone. His attempts at meaningful interaction with other people never quite connecting, like two different operating systems trying and failing to communicate.

Of course, Tiberius Fucking Stone hadn’t helped at all, he’d started the whole thing by patronisingly
sneering at Tony in a voice perfectly pitched to carry across the entire canteen. Soon they’d gained a jostling crowd of snotty jeering schoolboys all of them asking Tony if he’d ever seen or heard this film or that artist.

Tony had tried not to rise to the bait of course, insofar as that was possible as the central focus of a baying group of vindictive boys. He’d squared his shoulders, straightened his spine and flashed his very best press grin.

Unfortunately, there was no intimidating this crowd into backing down. Not with Ty there, goading things on from the background. Tiberius had encouraged the mob, riling them up into a blood hungry frenzy without once lifting a finger and implicating himself. He’d always been good at that. Tony had just never spotted it until it was too late.

Tony hadn’t thrown the first punch, Ben and Ana had taught him better than that, he’d learnt the value of discretion. Besides even with his zappy-eveners he’d still felt hesitant to act against children as young as this prepubescent lot were. Tony had plenty of ways to defend himself from a mob that damn near filled the entire canteen, but nothing he felt happy to use against children that were as determined as this group without resorting to moves that were designed to maim. This was no test-the-new-boy initiation like the half-hearted mob he’d fended off on his first day.

Tony had once encouraged Bruce Banner to strut. He appreciated the irony now, a terrible privilege indeed.

Unfortunately, Justin had provided the spark that set the whole stinking tinder keg ablaze, the smaller boy had pushed his way through the jeering crowd of children and tried to protect Tony.

Tony had been so caught up in the feelings of guilt and shame that he hadn’t even seen who’d hit Justin, only that the younger boy was suddenly falling into a limp sprawl at his feet blood streaming from his nose.

Tony had seen red at that, the sight of the small child lying so still triggering his protective streak. He’d lashed out at the next person who raised their fists to him, the Wushu instinctive and automatic in a way he hadn’t managed since he’d reverted to pipsqueak proportions.

Despite the fact that he’d apparently taken out five of the mob in that first moment he’d been overwhelmed by the sheer number of children and the fact that he was trying not to hurt anyone too seriously. It was only D’Eath’s timely arrival that saved him from a prolonged beating, as it was Tony’s right eye was already swollen and beginning to purple impressively.
The war veteran had taken one icy look at the mob and in a no-nonsense manner hauled the scrum of children away from the pair at the epicentre of the chaos with no apparent effort. Tony had stared up at the man’s expression of cool anger from his prone position on the floor heart sinking as potential repercussions started whizzing through his head.

If Howard found out about this he was done for.

D’Eath had hauled both Justin and Tony off towards Mrs Kowalski’s office, icy silence echoing chilly behind him as he frogmarched the pair of them through the corridors of the school.

To Tony’s surprise Leekie had intervened on his behalf intercepting D’Eath’s march through the corridors with a gentle reprimand to the taciturn man. Tony hadn’t remembered the school taking such an understanding stance on bullying before, but well, he supposed there had to be some benefits to being a veritable teacher’s pet even if said teacher was herself subject to malicious gossip from her own so-called peers.

Leekie had insisted upon ushering Justin off to the nurse’s office and Tony couldn’t help the feeling of surprised relief that had shot through him. Tony had honestly thought that both he and Justin were about to be punished severely for an incident that they hadn’t even started, however Leekie had pleasantly surprised him by rescuing the only innocent in the whole stinking affair.

Leekie had deposited Tony with Mrs Kowalski before continuing on his way with Justin, the younger boy had shot Tony a commiserating look before allowing himself to be towed away. Tony had been worried about Justin, the sight of the younger boy on the floor with blood streaming from his nose still at the forefront of his mind despite the way that the other boy was obviously ok enough to shoot Tony a look of mute, if bloody, camaraderie.

Leaving the relative privacy of the bathroom next to Kowalski’s office, grateful beyond measure for that small act of humanity, Tony squared his shoulders and went to face the music. Mrs Kowalski looked down at Tony with an unconvincing mix of sternness and nervousness. It left Tony wondering how on earth she’d ever managed anything disciplinary when he could see straight through her masks.

Then again, he supposed she’d had the advantage of childhood on her side, Tony remembered not quite realising that the teachers weren’t infallible superhumans until he was in his last year at the school.
“Antho-“

Just as she cut across his reminiscence Tony mulishly interrupted her misuse of his name,

“It’s Tony.”

“Tony dear.” Mrs Kowalski’s tone was alarmingly firm, she sighed wearily, “What are we going to do with you?”

Tony gaped at her, what? How was this in any way his fault?

“Mr Leekie and I have been worried about your lack of interaction with the other students for a while now, and now we find out that you’ve been fighting with your roommate? How long has this been going on for?”

Tony opened his mouth to correct her but she kept going,

“Honestly Tony, what are we going to do with you?” Her tired repetition alarmed him, “I mean, your grades are excellent, but that still doesn’t excus-“

Fortunately for Tony’s sanity Leekie chose that moment to poke his head around the door,

“Is young Mr Stark alright?”

“Wha-?”

“That was quite a nasty situation Mr D’Eath broke up.” Leekie bulldozed his way into the conversation completely oblivious to the thick atmosphere that had been building in his absence, “The poor man was furious enough with the situation that he had to take himself away from the students before he did something unforgivable to them.”

“I’m sorry – wha?”
With an annoyed flick of his comb over out of his eyes, Leekie blinked.

“Did no one tell you?”

At Mrs Kowalski’s confused look, Leekie frowned at both her and Tony in consternation, for once completely ignoring the long strands of hair that escaped down into his eyes. Eyes searching, Leekie began his explanation,

“Mr D’Eath rescued young Messrs Stark and Hammer from a nasty situation in the canteen. It seems their age-mates haven’t taken too kindly to this pair outshining them academically. I left Mr Smythe and Ms Ramesh in charge of the perpetrators given that they mostly appeared to come from their classes.”

Leekie sighed wholeheartedly,

“It’s a mess Evelyn, most of our youngest students were involved, including the majority of the gifted class. I’m afraid I don’t know what disciplinary measures we’ll need to suitably punish them.”

Mrs Kowalski visibly re-evaluated Tony,

“Tony…” she looked down at her paperwork, “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have assumed.”

Leekie shot Mrs Kowalski a sharp look at that admission, eyes darting between the two of them, the considering expression looked strange on the normally affable man’s face.

“Evie – you know we shouldn’t judge the students by their parents’ actions…” Leekie trailed off, giving Tony the side-eye before continuing in his too pleasant speaking-to-children-tone, “Tony why don’t you wait outside for a moment? I’ll just be a minute.”

Mrs Kowalski passed Tony off onto Weepy Leekie with visible relief, Leekie looked concerned in a way that had Tony struggling not to squirm. Even Leekie’s comb-over of unconvincing floppiness contrived to look apprehensive.
Tony caught a brief snippet of, “Evie I know how you feel about Howard Stark but that warmonger is not to blame for Pete D’Eath’s shellshock and you know -” before the door was gently closed in his face.

Tony glared up at the sign proclaiming the room the Principal’s Office, annoyance at this whole wretched situation peaking now that the building storm of panic had abated. Tony ended up childishly kicking out at one of the chairs in the corridor that served as a mini-waiting room of sorts. He stubbed his toe, and ended up quietly hugging his sore foot. Whatever Leekie and Evie Kowalski were talking about in there it was obviously taking some time, and Tony was in no mood to attempt to snoop despite the fact that he’d obviously gain some useful leverage if he did.

Despite the logical, rational side of himself pointing out that the reason the other children had taken against him so strongly was almost certainly a seething mixture of jealousy and fear of difference, Tony couldn’t help but wonder just what it was that the other children found so hateful about him.

The hissed taunts of “Tiny Tony” in both the corridors and his classes wasn’t helping matters. As insults went he’d had worse, far worse. The childish attempt at a derisive nickname probably not even breaching the Top 100 list of bad things he’d been called in the press, and by his friends, over the years. But still. It hurt somewhere deep inside, where the iron hadn’t yet managed to seep in and harden - the knowledge that even here in this brave new world, that he was forever destined to be a social pariah. Somehow the other children could sense the corrupted taint of a murderer, and traitor, that hung around him like a pall. A miasma of all of the worst things he’d ever done, subtly warning them off.

After what felt like an absolute lifetime, but was probably no longer than 20 minutes of sitting stewing in his own company Leekie emerged from Mrs Kowalski’s office looking unaccountably weary for reasons that Tony couldn’t be bothered trying to fathom. Not after the utter shite his day so far had been.

“Tony, my dear boy” Tony internally bristled, the phrase bringing up unwanted memories of Obie and all that that entailed, “I… I wanted to apologise for any confusion that occurred earlier. …And, I, that is to say…” Leekie paused uncomfortably as if marshalling his thoughts, “Myself and several other members of staff have noticed.” Leekie squatted down at Tony’s level, shooting him a caring expression before all too casually examining Tony’s hands, “You often have bruised and torn knuckles. As if you’ve been fighting. Now I’ve cautioned them to leave you be, we’ve had no complaints of fighting, and nothing from other students to imply that you’re the instigator here. But well. We’re all worried about you.”

Tony internally scoffed, who had noticed? Who had betrayed him? Certainly, Mrs Kowalski hadn’t found anything alarming about the situation.
It was typical, people seeking to help well after the damage had already been done. If anything, Ty had unwittingly done Tony a massive favour. Tony had honestly thought that he and Ben were being discrete enough. Apparently not. Now at least Tony had an all too believable explanation for whatever accidents occurred in his classes with Ben, hopefully Tony would be able to persuade the older man to stop holding back. Apart from one memorable incident that had resulted in a split lip Tony knew that Ben had been careful to limit his hits to areas that wouldn’t easily show.

Up until the past couple of weeks the scuffed knuckles would have been genuinely difficult to explain away. How on earth was he supposed to say that he’d earnt them by viciously sparring with a fully-grown man who was only supposed to be teaching him the basics of how to elbow a groin and run?

Still, the renewed need to be careful was annoying, and all Ty’s fault. This whole situation was ridiculous, and had given the irritating comb-overed man an excuse to intervene, the idiot man had obviously been waiting for a reason. Tony’s defensive scowl hardened, making Leekie lean back in consternation, his independently aware hair yet again flopping into his face.

Tony was dreading the conversation he’d have to have with Ben, he hoped that it wouldn’t mean that the other man would insist on holding back on him even more… But…

Tony glared up at Leekie as the man wisely backed off, allowing his annoyance to leech into his expression. He didn’t quite realise it, but the expression combined with his round cherubic face made him look like a toddler on the verge of a tantrum.

Leekie visibly steeled himself for the upcoming confrontation and Tony made a concerted effort to reign his glare back in, he didn’t want to start this difficult topic of conversation off on even more of a back foot than he already had.

Tony wasn’t 100% sure if he managed to pull-off the calm expression he was aiming for, but the attempt obviously assured Leekie that he wasn’t about to start something in the corridor,

“I’d rather not talk about it.”

Tony deflated immediately. That wasn’t the sentence he’d been planning, and it came out a lot more sulkily than he’d intended, but if anything, Leekie seemed to find this reassuring. Tony genuinely didn’t want to know what the other man had been assuming about his home life if he found Tony’s rather idiosyncratic responses to people caring about him as a positive sign. Tony was well aware that he wasn’t the best judge of people that claimed to care; he’d never been able to reliably parse what the actual motive behind the offer was supposed to be.
Leekie sighed and rubbed at his eyes, for once nothing of the annoying over-earnestness showing in his actions.

“Well, you know we’re all here for you if you want to talk. Right Tony?”

Tony leaned back, glaring up at Leekie suspiciously, Leekie huffed out another sigh, looking far older than his years in that moment,

“You do know we’ll believe whatever it is you have to tell us, don’t you?”

Puzzled, Tony’s response was an automatic,

“Ye-es?”

Leekie looked sad, the fine lines around his eyes harsh in that moment. He surprised Tony in that moment by seemingly deciding to drop it.

“We’re all here for you Tony, whenever you decide you want to talk…”

Sighing yet again, Leekie began to walk towards his office, looking back over his shoulder to make sure that Tony was following him.

“You’ll be pleased to know that young Mister Hammer is fine, his nose was badly bruised but nothing that the nurse couldn’t fix-up.”

Tone suddenly too bright, in a way that instantly made Tony suspicious Leekie continued,

“Let’s get you something fun to play with before I walk you to your next class, ey?”

Tony thanked his not so lucky stars for this blessing in disguise, if Leekie was willing to take Tony’s awkwardness in his own skin at face-value, attributing his slightly off reactions to everything around
him to nearly non-existent bullying, well, Tony wasn’t about to disabuse him of that notion any time soon. Tony was having a difficult time of it attempting to blend in, he might as well take advantage of every bit of help he could get – even if it was from as unlikely a source as Ty fucking Stone. Tony had a feeling that Ben would approve of such underhanded tactics. He felt a sudden icy burst of homesickness for a moment - FRIDAY would have been the first to sassily point out that Tony needed to rely on them.

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Edwin hurried towards the phone in the hallway, he’d been carrying out some belated housekeeping in a bid to keep his mind off of Ana’s latest round of exploratory surgery. Maria, and even Howard had insisted that he take all the time he needed, but he needed to keep himself busy. Left to the quiet of the empty home he’d made with Ana he was liable to drive himself mad. Indeed, Ana, who knew him best had insisted that he do something with his time other than fretting over her.

Whilst he knew the doctors were medical professionals who were far more likely to have an idea of what was wrong than he did, Edwin was becoming more and more tempted to use the ghastly list of possible illnesses that young Tony had so naively put together for Ana. Edwin hadn’t shown the rather grim list to Ana, the horribly relevant thing far too morbid for his tastes, the note had… angered him, much to his shame, despite the fact that young Tony had obviously had the best of intentions when he’d put the rather disturbing worse-case-scenario thing together.

If his charge wasn’t so very young Edwin had to admit that he would have been liable to do something rash about the contents of the letter. The hateful thing read like a ghoulish wish list of possible diagnoses. Edwin couldn’t possibly judge whether young Tony’s arguments were valid or not, even after he’d calmed down the roiling storm of emotions that the poor child’s well-intentioned missive had awakened. Edwin was too close to events to have any sort of perspective on them, and there was no way that he’d risk Ana’s health by putting the doctors under the impression that he was a hypochondriac making a big fuss over nothing.

However, for all of Edwin’s misdirected anger at the note, he dearly wished that the numerous medical professionals had something more to say to Ana and himself than the numerous pretty but altogether useless methods of dressing up “We don’t know what’s wrong” that they’d received so far.

The Starks had been very kind about everything, even Howard had been very good about the whole painful situation - especially once Ana had decided that she didn’t want Edwin there with her whilst Edwin had been too exhausted to argue the point with her. He’d dragged himself back to the cottage just off the mansion grounds, the guilt for allowing his darling wife to see just how much this situation was affecting him was nearly crippling. Howard had found him then, the other man just coming back from an appointment of his own. Edwin had caught a rare flash of the man Howard had once been, the man that had earnt his loyalty all those decades ago. Howard had dragged him back to
the rarely used games room, and they’d gotten through a bottle of good brandy together that evening (Howard well aware of Edwin’s aversion to whisky no matter how smooth), as Edwin unloaded all of his frustrations.

Howard had merely sat back in the leather armchair and listened. Edwin had forgotten how good a listener the man could be when he wanted to. (There was a reason Howard had been such a prodigious lover, much to Edwin’s chagrin.) The next day, feeling surprisingly chipper despite the amount of alcohol he had consumed, with Howard’s reassurances that his place at Howard’s side was assured ringing in his ears, Edwin had soldiered on - it wouldn’t do to let things slide here too.

Edwin shook himself out of his reverie. A vaguely familiar but unknown female simper sounded on the other end of the line interrupting the somewhat dark turn his thoughts had taken, he’d been half expecting some bad news from the hospital,

“Hello? Is Mr Stark there please?”

Edwin answered cautiously, unsure what the mystery caller wanted,

“May I ask who’s calling?”

“Oh, yes sorry. It’s Mrs Kowalski, Principal of Westchester Academy for Privileged Boys, it’s about one of our students.” The simper got firmer, “Is Mr Stark there please?”

Relief that it wasn’t the hospital and guilt sung through his veins. Beyond trying desperately not to ruminate on the inadvertent hurt that Tony had caused with that awful letter Edwin honestly hadn’t given the dear boy a second thought in the wake of Ana’s problems. Realising that he’d been silent for just a fraction too long Edwin hastily replied,

“Oh. I’m afraid Mr Stark is in New York on business at the moment. May I take a message? It’s Edwin Jarvis - I assure you that I’ve heard it all before if you’re worried about revealing things to someone who isn’t a parent.”

Mrs Kowalski’s voice on the other end of the line was hesitant,

“Mr …Jarvis, is it?”
Edwin did his utmost to sound both competent and confident,

“Yes, that’s me.”

“The gentleman who dropped Anth- Tony off at the school?”

“Yes, still me.”

“Ah, perhaps it is better that I tell you than Mr Stark after all. I remember you dropping his son off with us.” A momentary pause before the woman muttered, seemingly to herself, “If the man couldn’t even find it in himself to drop off his own son, I very much doubt he’d care enough to do anything about this situation.”

Edwin wryly wondered if Mrs Kowalski had forgotten just who was on the other end of the line before dismissing the notion of pointing out that he was under Mr Stark’s employ. It wouldn’t be helpful to remind the woman of his position and make her clam up on him. Though he had to wonder just what Howard had done to the woman that she sounded so very angry at the man, as far as Edwin was aware she wasn’t amongst his employer’s many conquests. He didn’t think he remembered handing over a silver bracelet in exchange for a slap from her, besides she really wasn’t Howard’s usual type.

Dragging his thoughts back onto the matter at hand for what felt like the umpteenth time that day Edwin decided that he should forestall this rant about his employer’s virtues or lack thereof before it gained a momentum of its own,

“Was there anything in particular that you wanted to talk about?”

His gentle interruption seemed to embarrass the speaker on the other end of the line, there was a loud shaky hiss of an indrawn breath, making Edwin’s heart sink, before,

“My - my apologies Mr Jarvis. Um, young Tony was involved in an incident at lunchtime today and well, it’s standard policy to infor-“

“What!?” the panic was immediate and strong, “What happened? What kind of incident, is Tony
alright? Why wasn’t I informed earlier?”

“Mr Jarvis. Mr Jarvis! Please, calm down. Tony is, well, he’s alright – physically at least.”

Taking a calming breath Edwin managed to repeat in what he thought was a passably calm tone,

“What happened Mrs Kowalski?”

“There was an attempt at bullying in the canteen Mr Jarvis, Tony and one of our other boys were the intended victims. One of our teachers Mr D’Eath managed to break it up before anything happened to Tony at least.” In an undertone, Mrs Kowalski muttered to herself, “I’m dreading the phone call I need to make to young Justin’s parents.”

Edwin sighed heavily into the receiver,

“I see.”

“I’m very sorry to have to inform you about this Mr Jarvis.”

In the privacy of his own head Edwin thought to himself, ‘I bet you are.’ Before shaking himself and getting back down to the business of caring for his young charge.

“Am I to understand that this is the first incident of this type that I should be aware of?”

“Uh – yes. That is to say we were beginning to worry that Tony was fighting with his roommate, several members of staff had noticed that he seems to have scuffed knuckles rather a lot. But… Well, sadly this incident provides ample explanation for what’s been happening.”

Edwin felt as though his heart were in his throat, he’d been so wrapped up in his own not inconsiderable problems that he’d utterly failed in his promise to keep a careful eye out for his charge, for Tony. Ana would have his hide if she found out how lax he’d been in his duty of care.

He wrapped the conversation up quickly after that, unwilling to show this woman just how rattled
the news had him, allowing her to hang-up with the impression that his shortness with her was due to anger rather than his burning desire to drive to the school at full speed to embrace Tony in a hug whilst muttering apologies in his ear.

No doubt such actions would embarrass the dear boy enormously, especially the newly reticent version of his charge that Edwin had been slowly getting to know the previous summer.

Edwin busied himself by re-educating the frankly incompetent staff that Howard insisted on employing about the proper upkeep of a large household. He didn’t fail to notice the relieved looks on several faces by the time his lecture wound down, the fools deserved it, they still hadn’t mastered the proper discretion required in a household of this type.

About an hour after the frankly alarming phone call came through Edwin realised that he’d been directing his anger at the wrong people. Ben had promised to keep Edwin informed of anything and everything that he thought Edwin would want to know about the goings-on at the school.

Ben’s biweekly phone calls had been cheery and, in hindsight, all too brief. Edwin wondered why on earth the other man hadn’t deemed fit to inform him that his charge was being bullied at this place that was supposed to be a haven for children like young Tony; bright, precocious and the unfortunate offspring of parents who made remarkably lucrative targets to extortionists the world over.

Whilst this wasn’t quite at the terrifying level of unpleasant incident that Edwin had specifically asked Ben to keep an eye out for Edwin was nonetheless angry at his old friend. Ben should have known better than to keep something like this from him dammit. Had his trust in the man been misplaced?

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Justin pranced into their shared room that evening with a huge grin on his bruised face, Tony was relieved. He’d missed the boy at dinner that evening and had been semi-convinced that Justin had been hurt badly enough to have to go to an actual doctor’s despite what Leekie had said to him earlier.

“Tony! Guess what?”

Tony dropped the poorly disguised IQ test gratefully. Whatever ‘what’ was it had the other boy excited enough that he’d forgotten his usual caution when it came to their carefully friendly
interactions, in a dry tone Tony asked the question that H-Justin was practically demanding of him,

“What?”

“Everyone.”

Tony repeated the question, this time in genuine puzzlement,

“What?”

“All of the Krelboynes who were ganging up on us? They all got the paddle!”

“Oh.”

Tony didn’t really know what to say to that, but he had to admit that the mental image was a pleasing one. Whilst he didn’t quite share Ha-Justin’s gleeful malice over the situation he could well imagine that there’d been more than a few reddened cheeks in their afternoon class that day and he didn’t just mean on their scowling faces.

Justin’s vivacious mood suddenly darkened,

“Ty didn’t get in trouble though… He kept looking at me all the rest of the day.”

Tony’s heart sank, he’d been right, Justin had made himself a target. Dammit. The other boy didn’t deserve to go through this shit on his behalf.

Especially not this version of Hammer. Well, perhaps Hammer as Tony had eventually known him would have deserved it. Malicious, jealous, murderous fool that he was.

But Justin?
No, he didn’t deserve anything of the sort.

And whilst Tony was mature enough to admit that even *Hammer* hadn’t necessarily deserved all of the enmity that he’d received from Tony over the years, he had no idea how to fix this situation.

Struggling to keep up the cheery conversation with this new pall of guilt hanging over him, Tony’s replies devolved into the monosyllables that had typified their early interactions.

Eyes creasing with hurt H-Justin stuttered himself to a standstill, the sudden silence breaking Tony from his reverie. He hurried to fix the situation he had created,

“H-Justin?”

“Yes?”

Came the sulky reply,

“I’m… I’m sorry. I was distracted.”

Tony cringed internally at the pitiful explanation. It seemed even H-Justin picked up on it,

“By what?” Came the response, still in the same low sulky tone. Relieved as Tony was that H-Justin was finally feeling secure enough to take that tone with him, it still set alarm bells ringing,

“I –“ Tony cut himself off, before deciding to go for it, “I was worried about what Ty would do.” He couldn’t help himself after all of that disgusting emotional truth, and added his own sulky riposte to the end of the sentence, “Okay?!”

Justin sniffed, seemingly mollified.

“Fine.”
“What do you mean, fine?!” Tony took a deep breath, and stopped himself before he could dig any deeper. “Sorry.”

“That’s okay.”

Came Justin’s quiet, if still sulky response.

Tony extended a shaky olive branch,

“Want to listen to a record?”

“Okay.”

Justin’s response was still flat, but at least it had lost that angry edge. Tony added a sweetener to the deal,

“You get to pick.”

Somehow even the headache inducing evening of nothing but Jobriath on a loop was worth it to see H-Justin happy with him again. Tony wondered when on earth that had happened. The stupid borrowed ‘puzzle’ lay ignored in the corner of the room for the rest of the evening.

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“Yello?”

The other man picked up after what felt like an interminable number of rings, Edwin got down to business immediately, seeing no need to beat about the bush.

“Ben. Why haven’t you kept me informed about the situation at the school?”
Edwin tried to keep the anger out of his voice, he must have failed, since Ben’s reply was immediate and wry,

“And what situation would that be Ed?”

“What? You mean to say that you don’t know about the bullying?!?”

“Ed.”

“Ben…”

Edwin’s tone was a warning in itself. There was a gush of static that Edwin took to mean Ben had sighed gustily into the receiver,

“Ed, do you honestly think I wouldn’t be able to spot it if my charge was being bullied?”

Edwin paused at the tone in Ben’s voice, the world-weary tiredness, so similar to the flat, dead tone the man had taken in Ettersberg when they’d found him. Pushing the horrific images from the war to the back of his mind Edwin focussed instead on what Ben was pushing at, whilst Edwin didn’t know Ben anywhere near well-enough for his own sense of duty he at least knew the man well enough for this. Swallowing, Edwin reflected that anyone who refused to leave his people behind, thus subjecting himself to conditions at Buchenwald? Well.

Purposefully avoiding the harsh words that wanted to spew from his mouth Edwin instead asked the rather mild question,

“Are you sure you haven’t missed anything?”

“Ed…”

Now Ben’s tone was a flat warning, even over the static of the phone line.

Edwin took a different tack,
“Just as you had a duty of care to those people, doctor, I have a duty to Tony.”

“Do you think I don’t know that?”

Ben’s response was an annoyed hiss of exclamation, insulted outrage palpable in every clearly enunciated syllable.

“Look, Ed, I… I care for the brat alright? I thought I’d do my job here and be done with it. But, the kid’s grown on me, like a fungus. I’d have told you if there was anything going on here that he couldn’t handle. Trust me.”

Edwin read between the lines with a dawning sense of alarm,

“What’s been going on that he can handle?”

The silence on the line was answer enough.

“Ben…”

Edwin’s tone gained the sharp edge that he’d been fighting so hard to conceal.

“Tony has dealt with the situation with a remarkable deal of… panache.”

“…Panache…”

“Yes, panache!”

Ben’s voice had gone high pitched and defensive.
“Look, the kid doesn’t suffer fools. He’ll be done with this jumped-up school for rich twits by the end of the year, tops.”

“Ben. Just what has Tony been getting up to under your not so watchful eye?”

Ben snorted in inappropriate amusement at something in that sentence, before seeming to sense Edwin’s continuing building annoyance.

“Look. The kid, Tony, will be done with the high school theatrics come summer.”

“What? Is that why he’s being bullied?”

“Haven’t you been reading any of my letters?”

Ben’s tone was accusing,

“Yes! Yes of course I have.”

Edwin teetered off into uncertainty as he heard himself. Edwin felt his self-righteous anger draining away from him, even as he uttered the not-quite-an-untruth. In reality he’d skimmed the things, they were longwinded and often full of the kind of disturbing detail that Ben seemed to delight in – such as the information that the supply teacher was definitely having it on with three of the more permanent members of staff, and none of the other members of this entirely male love-square were aware of the situation.

After one, or rather several dozen, too many observations of this type about the goings on in the private-lives of the staff at the school, Edwin had given up on reading the rambling missives thoroughly. Especially once Ana had fallen ill.

In hindsight that was a mistake. Ben’s knowing tone showed that the often-infuriating man was aware of it too,

“Look, I told you in the first week that I got here that Tony had been bumped out of the grade system. What did you think that meant?”
“I… I, honestly it slipped my mind.”

Ben’s tone softened maddeningly, sympathy pouring out in his voice.

“I know Ed. Believe me I understand, I do.”

“How?”

“What?”

All of the anger, resentment and fear exploded out of him in an outpouring of grief.

“How could you possibly understand? You? So fickle, you’ve never had a meaningful relationship in all the decades that I’ve known you? What could you possibly know about loss?”

“Ed…”

Ben’s tone was a warning, but Edwin continued his rant, knowing all the while that the harsh words were ill-advised but unable to stop his tirade now that the dam had burst,

“How could you possibly understand anything about responsibility? Caring for another?”

Even as he continued his hurtful rant Edwin knew that every word was a mistake, yet he could do nothing to stop himself,

“I shouldn’t have entrusted Tony to your care. Not a man with a history such as yours.”

Ben’s sound of inarticulate sympathy finally undid him, none of the cutting anger Edwin had been expecting, hoping for present in that noise of commiseration. Edwin found himself sobbing down the line, clutching the handset of the corded phone as though it were a lifeline,
“I’m losing her Ben! I’m losing her and I don’t know what to do.”

If anyone had been around to see his breakdown in that moment Edwin would have been scarlet with embarrassment, as the situation was, his face was red with emotion and the long-suppressed need to vent to someone. Anyone.

A truly mortifying length of time later, with much shushing and many soothing noises coming from Ben on the other end of the line Edwin felt calm enough to get back on to the matter at hand.

“God, I’m sorry Ben.”

“No problem. It happens to all of us.”

“I… I just don’t know what I’ll do if I lose her. Ana, she’s my - my everything.”

“Really Ed, it’s fine. I, well I know you hate to hear this, but I understand. Really.”

Ben sounded hesitant, awkward. The irascible man never cared what other people thought about him, that alone clued Edwin into the fact that he must have crossed a line, though of course Ben would never mention it again.

“I’m sorry Ben, truly.”

“Pshaw – make it up to me by listening to my advice about your Tony okay?”

“My Tony? He’s not my anythi-“

“You and I both know that isn’t true.”

Ben’s tone brooked no argument, and for once Edwin wasn’t inclined to put up even a cursory fight, not after the show he’d just made of himself. Ben continued talking, as though he was unaware of
Edwin’s reason for pause,

“Look, he’s going to want to go to university this year.”

“So soon? But he’s so young.”

“There’s something else there isn’t there? You’re not usually one to put age” Ben’s voice turned wry, “or gender before ability Ed.”

Edwin smiled to himself as he remembered that meeting with Peggy, it was his turn to sigh this time. Rubbing at his already sore eyes as he spoke,

“It’s Howard.”

“Ah.”

“Indeed. When is it ever anything else?”

“Ha! So, what has the old bastard done this time?”

Ben’s implicit trust warmed Edwin’s heart, it went without saying that they were both well aware of Howard’s worst tendencies.

“I’m afraid that Howard has convinced himself that Tony is one of those mutant ‘freaks’ as he so charmingly put it.”

“Ah, I see. And you’re afraid of the consequences if Tony starts to exert some independence?”

“Frankly I want the dear boy to have a childhood. And I believe that spending some time amongst children his own age can only be doing him good.”
This time the inarticulate noise from the other end of the line was one of frustration, after a lengthy pause Ben hesitantly put forth,

“Look Ed, do you want the kid to hate you?”

“What?! No! Of course not.”

Ben made a noise as if what he was about to say was incredibly self-explanatory,

“Then let the kid do what he wants.”

Edwin’s temper flared at Ben’s disregard to the welfare of his, well charge.

“And how exactly is wanting Tony to make some friends his own age not acting in his best interests?”

There was a significant pause on the other end of the line before Ben drawled out,

“Well put it this way. His only friends in this dump are one of the security guards, myself – if you can even count me given that I’m his teacher – and his roommate. And I’m nearly convinced that as soon as the kid is able to he’s going to dump the roommate.” In afterthought, “Half the time he acts as if he can’t stand the brat, the rest of the time it’s as if Tony killed the kid’s puppy or something.”

Edwin wasn’t sure what to make of that information.

“You mean, he hasn’t made any friends?”

To his own ears, Edwin’s voice sounded small and shocked.

“Well, no. Like I said, there’s the roommate. But, well. No. Not really.”
“But, how?”

“He doesn’t seem to like kids very much Ed.” A pause, “I can’t say I blame him. Snotty nuisances the lot of them. Even in this role I’ve had to clean up far too many bodily fluids.” Ben sounded vaguely horrified “It’s ridiculous, for people so small; I don’t know how they aren’t dried out husks.”

“Is he at least trying to make friends?”

“What am I? His watch-keeper?”

“Well. …Yes.”

Another burst of static as the receiver struggled to translate a sigh.

“Fine. He’s made some half-hearted attempts. But that’s precisely what they were half-hearted. The kid really doesn’t care much about other kids, beyond avoiding them.”

“But-“

“Ed, he’s chafing at the bit here. I can tell he’s finding the atmosphere stifling, you’d be able to see it too if you were here. It’s why he’s gotten so into our lessons.”

Speaking of which,

“Yes, how is that going by the way?”

“Oh, fine, fine.”

Ben’s tone was too airy, too laidback.

“Ben?”
“He’s very determined to learn.”

Edwin spotted the evasion, if Ben thought that kind of prevarication was going to pull the wool over his eyes he had another thing coming,

“And?” Edwin could hear the edge in his voice, “Ben? What have you been teaching him?”

“Nothing he hasn’t wanted to learn!”

“Yes, that’s reassuring.”

“Don’t push this one Ed.”

“What, just as I shouldn’t push Tony to spend some time amongst other children?” Edwin scoffed to show the other man just what he thought of that idea. “Ben, tell me just what you’ve been up to whilst my back’s been turned.”

Sounding not the least bit chagrined Ben rattled off an infuriating list,

“Teaching your boy the basics of self-defence, as you requested, reporting on his actions at the school. In essence spying on him. Oh, and having all of my perfectly good advice ignored.”

The last was said in a sing-song voice that Edwin just knew Ben knew was perfectly pitched to annoy. He really hated the other man sometimes. Though Edwin had to admit, perhaps he had a point.

Tone wry, Edwin asked the question he just knew Ben was waiting for him to utter,

“What do you suggest?”

“Beyond heeding my advice, you mean?”
Ben’s tone was unutterably smug.

“Ben…”

“Ed…”

Edwin rolled his eyes at Ben’s mocking repetition of his name.

“Very well.”

Edwin’s spine straightened as he recognised the tone in Ben’s voice, ah, good the other man had finally gotten down to business.

“Back Tony up when he makes his decision about uni, Ed. From what the boy has, or should I say, hasn’t said I get the impression that he isn’t expecting any back up from his father. So, shouldn’t his actual dad be supportive?”

“Ben…” Edwin hastened when he realised he was inviting the other man to start his game of silly buggers again, he sighed, “You know it isn’t that simple.”

“It really is Ed. Trust me. I know.”

From anyone else that phrase would have been trite and irritating. Lord, even coming from Ben it was trite and irritating. And yet, Ben had seen him through the belated aftermath of Finow, with a seemingly supernatural ability to discern just when to ask questions and when to offer silent companionship.

Well, Edwin admitted, at the time he’d found Ben incredibly irritating – it had only been the other man’s visible emaciation that had staid his hand on a couple of memorable occasions when he’d come very close to laying hands on his fellow Brit.

“Essentially, you want me to let Tony make his own mistakes.”
Edwin rapidly cut the other man off before he could get too smug,

“And, to turn a blind eye to those lessons you’re teaching him.”

“The lessons you instigated I point out.”

Ed sighed, knowing full well that he’d walked into that one.

“Very well Ben, I’ll consider your advice.”

“And if you have any sense you’ll heed it.”

“What about the Howard situation?”

“From what you’ve told me about that incident last summer it sounds like he has it well in hand Ed.”

“Incident?” Realisation dawned, “No! Surely not, that was an unfortunate accident!”

“Fine! Sure it was.”

Edwin grimaced at the too bright all too false acceptance in Ben’s voice

Ben grudgingly responded to the original question,

“Listen, you and I both know that short of taking Tony into child protective services there isn’t much to be done. And we both know that even with the current downturn in SI’s profits that Howie darling has enough power, influence and money that nothing would happen. Well, nothing beyond taking
away one of the few barriers between Tony and his father having carte blanche to do whatever his diseased alcohol pickled brain comes up with.”

“Ben!”

“What?” Ben’s defensive tone for once was free of the other man’s usual infuriating amused knowingness, “We both know it’s true Ed. And I think we both need to let the Kid deal with it. Believe it or not the brat knows what he’s doing.”

“Tony is not a brat.”

“No, he’s your brat. And that’s why I like him so much.”

With that rejoinder Ben hung up, Edwin had a feeling that he deserved it, he’d been snappish throughout their little talk even ignoring his sudden fit of tears. Edwin had some serious thinking to do, he’d been concentrating far too much on being maudlin as Ana would put it.

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Ben tutted at him when Tony slunk into their next session.

“What have I told you about laying low?”

“Wha-? Wait you can’t be implying that what happened in the canteen was my fault?”

The arch look Ben replied with was answer enough.

The session that followed that snappish introduction was a harsh one, though as if reading Tony’s mind Ben took care to never once come into contact with Tony with anything approaching bruising force – as if making a point that he was skilled enough to avoid such things if he so wished, unlike a certain student of his.

Tony ended up flat on his back on the mats an embarrassing number of times that session. Though
honestly that wasn’t what had him so worked up, the pointed lack of a certain kind of challenge that lesson left Tony in a foul temper for the rest of the evening. Oh, the lesson had been difficult all right, Ben calling on skills that Tony wasn’t sure he’d ever possess. But that was the problem, the whole thing had been too cerebral – forcing Tony to think, plan and strategize, when all he’d wanted to do was lose himself in the repetitive violence that he’d come to crave.

Tony desperately wanted a drink.

But of course, that was the problem, one drink was never enough. Sighing he resigned himself to a frustrated evening of tossing and turning, the insomnia that had helped trigger his descent into alcohol dependency rearing its ugly head again now that there was no chemical solution to keep it in check.

Tony was aware that he needed to find something to drown out the voices and the guilt, but, well. With the benefit of hindsight, he really didn’t want to restart himself down the slippery slope into alcohol dependency. Besides, whilst it had been easy enough to get a hold of booze at MIT, even as a 12-year-old freshmen, he doubted anyone would sell booze to a 6-year-old.

He needed to find a distraction of some sort. Something harmless, innocuous even. But what?

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If Tony had thought that Ben’s response to the canteen incident had been surprising, and unfair. Well, it was nothing in comparison to the weight of the sheer, outright disappointment Mr La Guerta immediately turned on the class the moment they’d all managed to line up as usual on one side of the small gym that doubled as the fencing salle, sleep deprived and shivering, that cold February morning.

Tony had to admit he was impressed, the man had shown no sign whatsoever that he was upset with them, calmly allowing them all to file in, as he took down the attendance register as usual.

Then came the explosion.

“I heard all about what happened in the canteen earlier this week.” La Guerta’s tone was low and casual, and completely belied the scowl he aimed at the children in the class, making many of the brats shrink where they stood.
Tony looked around blank-faced, feeling no sympathy for the little shits at all. These were the future senators and CEOs of America, somehow it was slowly beginning to dawn on Tony that his own appalling attitude towards his own company hadn’t been entirely his own fault. He’d been just as much a product of his upbringing as these snivelling idiots who couldn’t even take responsibility for their own act- Tony’s thoughts stuttered to a halt as the realisation struck, not for the first time, that he’d literally been no better than these children, he’d more than earnt himself the title The Merchant of Death.

“I am very disappointed in all of you class.”

The collective shrinking was a sight to behold,

All of the strength, and force and anger that the man’s sheer towering all-American bulk had implied, all of it shone out of the man at once in one low military growl. And it was definitely military, the war-veteran was looking out from behind those blue eyes of his, glowering disdainfully down at the terrified group of children ranged before him, as though they were his troop and they’d just failed inspection miserably.

“I thought I taught you better than that.”

The group were very carefully not meeting each other’s eyes, the shared embarrassment reaching over 9000 levels.

“The discipline of fencing is all about mutual and self-respect.”

The children were exchanging embarrassed glowers, that said, ‘Right, this never gets out of this room okay? You ever tell anyone else about this and you are dead.’

No one was quite managing to meet anyone else’s eyes, there was much shuffling of feet.

“What I heard from Mr D’Eath, shows me that you cannot be trusted with your swords this week.”

There was a collective groan.
“Instead we shall be relearning the basic principles of respect, and how to obey the basic forms of a fair match. Since that is all you can be trusted with.”

La Guerta didn’t shout, he didn’t need to. Tony waited for it,

“I’m very very disappointed in all of you.”

As one the class shrunk in on themselves, even Ty was gazing mournfully at his own feet.

In the small analytical corner of his mind that was always paying attention to these things, Tony noted with no small amount of vicious pleasure that La Guerta made a point of not singling either Ty or Tony out for special attention – though La Guerta’s expression may have softened just a fraction when his gaze was pointed in Tony’s direction.

The red-head was doubly terrifying in his anger, since he didn’t live up to the stereotypes about temper that were so often attributed to people with his complexion. Instead the entire class was spent with the man reiterating with embarrassing frequency how disappointed he was in all of them, and wouldn’t they try to be better people next time? If not for him, then for themselves?

As a self-diagnosed maladjusted asshole, and a self-assured one at that, even Tony had to admit that something about the man’s upset and saddened expression triggered, the long-thought dead, melted in acid, and buried in a cesspit, then dug up and burned for good measure shame in Tony. Even though Tony was almost convinced, like 99% sure, well alright 80% sure that he wasn’t the target of this little lecture. Okay – 60-40. But still, the odds were in his favour.

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Tony came awake with a start, shuddering as he shook off the remnants of the dream – no, nightmare. Not, sadly a nightmare of his subconscious’ making and his imagination but rather remembered horrors.

He lay there in his sweaty bedclothes staring blankly up into the darkness trying desperately not to remember the horrors wrought by Corvus Glaive first amongst the leaders of Thanos’ cruel armies, and his aptly vicious weapon.

Danny had fallen to that blade. Even the Iron Fist’s legendary chi and purpose no match against a
cosmological reign of terror that had been wrought for thousands of years by a madman who was on a level playing field with the very demigods who had shaped much of Earth’s civilisation.

Tony was only grateful that he hadn’t woken Justin for once, the other boy was deeply exhausted after their taxing day, and Tony envied him his apparently restful slumber. If anything in the wee long dark hours he found he rather resented the other boy’s relatively easy existence, H-Justin, only had to worry about his school-life. The other boy had loving, if somewhat distant parents, who were willing to give their young son anything that his heart desired. Tony side eyed the vague shape dimly silhouetted in by the reedy moonlight filtering through their curtains – and abruptly let out an explosive gust of air as he realised just how irrational his thoughts had become.

Jesus, he was being jealous of a sad and lonely six-year-old who was in dire peril of becoming the school’s resident punching bag. Christ on a bike. What the hell was he thinking?

Collapsing back onto the mattress at that ashamed thought Tony vaguely hoped that Ben would help him pummel the thoughts away the next day. Their sparring sessions were always good for working out aggression, even if letting himself get hit wasn’t exactly the healthiest coping method in the world.

He desperately needed to find something to help him shut up the night terrors.

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Instead of following his usual fruitless routine of attempting to meditate by the lake Tony spent the freedom afforded by the weekend rummaging through his trunk for something, anything, to do that wouldn’t affect the timeline.

Ben seemed to have definitely cottoned on to Tony’s ulterior motive during their sessions, and was having none of it. Their latest lesson had been another slow painful walkthrough of a set of katas. These ones from a martial art that vaguely resembled Krav Maga whilst never fully resolving itself into that particular military discipline.

Tony was painfully aware that he couldn’t even let his mind run away whilst he did some engineering. At least, not until Tony had earned himself some genuine privacy.

No.
Tony couldn’t fall back on that old coping method, much as he missed it, and it was closest thing to healthy that he’d ever developed.

Pity.

Habitually avoiding the socks, and the Wand of Watoomb, Tony spent a fair stretch of the time half-listening to, and wiping, the tapes that his little computer had made searching for any clues about Hydra’s current plans.

If the task weren’t so thankless he’d have been tempted to take the spying up a notch. But no, Tony was self-aware enough to know that the boredom of the job would mean he’d let something slip that he shouldn’t. Tony really couldn’t afford to spend the next thirty years locked up in some SHIELD holding cell because of his big mouth.

The chore completed Tony flicked through his small LP-collection, before selecting Paranoid to give the disc a second chance. Dammit, Tony liked Black Sabbath. He wasn’t going to give up on them just because of his freak outs as Harley had put it.

This time Tony managed to more or less take the music at face value, so long as he didn’t allow himself to think too much about the lyrics he was fine.

Tony cast about for something to do, eyes falling on the much more sparse contents of his trunk, with most of it spread out around him in the room. In the corner lay Fury’s present, ignored as it had been since he’d received it, and mistrustfully buried the thing alongside the Wand of Watoomb in the sock corner.

Thus, it was with LPs and other ephemera laid out around him in their shared room, a thought jumping up and down in the back of his subconscious, that Tony looked up with some surprise when the door opened unexpectedly. The interruption came just as Ozzy was getting to the part about the realities of a sincere drug addiction. Tony had to admit that there were some uncomfortable truths in that song.

“Hi Ton- What’s this? “

“What’s what?”
“Our room. Why’s it such a mess?” Justin’s already high voice rose in pitch, “What’s all of this stuff?”

The other boy was nearly shouting by the end of the question, irritatively high voice raised to alarmingly loud volumes.

“None of your business.”

Tony snapped out automatically, defensive hackles raised.

“Why is everything all over the place??” Just-no Hammer’s face was reddening in familiar indignation. The little brat pumping up in a way that would probably have been amusing if it weren’t so horribly familiar.

Tony found himself becoming genuinely annoyed in the face of Justin’s irrational fury. The other boy’s body language was aggressive and confrontational, and bringing back nasty memories. What was the big deal? It wasn’t as if he’d touched Hammer’s half of the room, much.

Well, okay. The oversized tape reels had ended up on Justin’s side of the room when he’d started rooting out his LPs. Tony had needed the space, Okay?

Surely it wasn’t that big a deal?

It wasn’t as if he’d touched anything on Hammer’s idiosyncratically arranged shelves. What was the big deal?

Still more puzzled than annoyed Tony found himself responding to the other’s rising flustered anger with near-automatic scorn, the old paths well-worn and comfortingly familiar in the face of this bizarre overreaction to a few things being a little out of place.

“What’s wrong Hammer?” The verbal attack a habitual routine in the face of this horribly recognisable version of his old rival, “Worried about your subpar toys?” Tony felt his tone turn biting and harsh, “Relax, I wouldn’t stoop so low as to touch anything a Hammer had anything to do with.”
Hammer’s face turned red and ugly as the other boy stormed over to loom above Tony, but not before he’d roughly kicked over the small mountain of clothes that had been encroaching on his half of the shared space. Tony scowled in indignation at Hammer’s rough treatment of his belongings, his hackles rising further as Hammer inadvertently continued to loom, like so many of the business partners, military generals, and well, men in general, that he’d had to deal with in the past. Tony opened his mouth to angrily call Hammer out on his hypocrisy, but was unable to get a word in edgewise over the sudden shouting.

“You’re being mean!”

The other boy was towering over Tony, fists clenched angrily at his sides.

“And?”

Tony drawled, in a tone that perfectly told Hammer just how little he cared about that.

“You’re just like everyone else!”

Hammer’s foot was perilously close to crushing Tony’s fingers, the other boy was still looming over him. Tony wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of showing him how much that bothered him, he purposefully leaned back with practiced insouciance, as if he hadn’t a care in the world channelling Howard’s sneer when dealing with rivals that he knew were below him for all he was worth.

“No. No I’m not. But if you’re going to be such a ridiculous Sheldon Cooper” Tony spotted his mistake as soon as Hammer blinked in confusion, and just steamrolled over the error, “about a little mess, maybe I’m beginning to see why everyone else avoids you.”

Tony felt a grim sense of satisfaction when the look of hurt flashed across Justin’s face. Perhaps he was being a little harsh with Justin about the interruption, but well, it had just gotten to the good bit, and besides, he’d been sure he was on the verge of something!

“I wish we weren’t roomies!”

Hammer ran out.
Good.

The little shit deserved it.

Who did he think he was, to push like that?

To niggle and push and threaten to break his stuff?

Tony went through the rest of the day in a haze of self-satisfied righteous anger.

Eventually the idea that had been jumping up and down and making rude gestures from the back of his brain resurfaced. After a dissatisfying lunch, Tony sat down and continued his thorough mistrustful inspection of the cassette player that Fury had given him.

Tony even went so far as to deconstruct the thing down to its base components examining every one for bugs before eventually deeming the device clean and reassembling it all grudgingly. Perhaps old one-eye had meant the thing genuinely after all.

It was through a haze of anger that he put together his first mix-tape of this strange new life, which was perhaps reflected by his song choices. Using a cassette that he’d scrounged from the school stores Tony made a point to thoroughly raid Hammer’s LP collection for music, as well as his own far smaller selection of records. Tony even forgot to be annoyed that the dip-vat was still no more likely to happen in the face of his annoyance with Hammer.

Tony had just begun to fiddle again with the cassette player Fury had given him with no small amount of suspicion – checking the thing automatically for tracking devices and bugs even though he knew that there weren’t any there – when the cresting wave he’d been avoiding all day hit.

Tony realised that Justin hadn’t reappeared in their shared room that evening, and the feeling that he’d been deftly not-thinking-about struck. Tony realised that some of the emotion that had been bubbling under his skin for hours was guilt.

Tony felt awful about how he’d lashed out.
Justin had behaved in such a Hammer-like fashion that he hadn’t been able to see past his memories to the upset child standing in front of him.

After two hours of frantic searching Tony eventually located Hamm-Justin holed up in the first place he should have looked. The other boy had hidden himself away in the glorified cubbyhole above the senior’s lounge. Although it was pretty difficult to make out details in the dim light, Tony was pretty sure he had a good idea of what Justin had been doing in there.

Avoiding meeting the other boy’s eyes Tony looked down guiltily, and awkwardly extended a hand with his peace offering – the second mixtape. The tracklist wasn’t quite as soppy as the stuff that became a cliché in 80s romcoms, but it was pretty close.

“What’s this?”

Ha-Justin’s voice was sullen, and small. Tony winced internally, he’d done this.

Dammit, Tony man-up. You’re a Stark, and Starks own their mistakes.

“An apology.”

There he said it.

Justin peered up at him suspiciously. He tentatively reached for the tape. Tony swallowed and passed over the second half of his gift,

“Here you’ll need to use this to play it.”

Justin hesitantly grabbed the proto-Walkman, or whatever it was that Fury had dug up for him. There was no obvious branding on the machine’s steel case, the thing could record and playback, and Tony knew it was far bulkier than even the earliest Sony models had been.
In Tony’s avoidance motivated distraction, he’d failed to notice that Justin had cautiously donned the headphones and was listening to the tape. The other boy was gently smiling, as he recognised the first song Tony had chosen for his apology tape, a Jobriath track, naturally, Good Times, a song that Tony personally detested, but Ham-Justin adored.

Tony hesitantly sat down near H-Justin, and when the other boy didn’t flinch at his presence carefully started unpacking the small pack he’d had brought with him. Inside the knapsack was the small treasure trove of candy that Tony had hastily crammed inside, he felt a little guilty that he didn’t have any real food to offer Justin. Tony was no fan of overly sugary crap, and he had a feeling that Justin hadn’t eaten anything decent all day.

Tony needn’t have worried how his little gesture would be received, Justin fell on the pack with a soft cry of joy. For Tony’s own sanity the second track on his ‘I’m sorry!’ mixtape was a T.Rex number, though admittedly it was the disgustedly upbeat song Get It On.

Tony had been a little worried that Justin would read something into the message behind the song, but to his relief all of the references flew right over the kid’s head.

The pair ended the evening by sneaking back to their dorm – Justin on a sugar high that made keeping him quiet nearly impossible, though somehow Tony managed it.

It was with a feeling of relief, and surprising lightness that Tony lay down to sleep that evening. Justin’s happiness infectious, even though Tony wasn’t sure that he deserved his forgiveness.

Tony didn’t dream that night.

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Ms Ramesh beamed down at Tony’s miniaturised water filtration device. Tony pulled off the headphones and stared back at her nonplussed, he really wasn’t sure what she was making all of that fuss about. Tony had been damned careful to make sure that all of the technology featured in the clunky thing was available today – today being 1977, but today.

At first, he’d thought that she was peering at him because of the addition of the headphones, Tony had started to sheepishly put them away when Ms Ramesh impatiently tutted at him and asked for a quick sitrep about the project he was working on.
The design didn’t even approach the level of complexity that he’d carefully drip-fed into the coffee filtration design that the lawyers were carefully patenting and pushing towards manufacture.

There was nothing novel in the thing whatsoever. He hadn’t even had to miniaturise very much of it either. Tony had to admit that he missed being able to just let his mind wander whilst his hands did all of the engineering, but Tony had produced far too many insane items of domestic destruction with access to only a toaster and a screwdriver whilst distracted, and had no intention of unleashing that sort of thinking on the world just yet.

Tony would wait until the 80s at least before letting that sort of thinking get out there, it would fit right in with the tech-boom that spawned the Sinclair-ZX Spectrum and later the batshit, and much maligned C5 that the founder of the company would be infamous for forevermore, rather than his pioneering work in the fields of computing and general human decency at the corporate level.

Blinking as he came back to the present Tony recommitted himself to the promise that he’d only release technology that would at the very least make people’s lives easier, and at a rate that the market was willing to accept, in order to further his aim of pushing humanity towards a more humane future.

Of course, even the best laid of plans never survives contact with the real world. Tony had been privy to enough disasters in his lifetime that he really should have realised that by now.

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“Tony Stark – A Chip Off the Old Block?”

_The Stark heir at the tender age of six has just revolutionised the world of water filtration with a revolutionary new design for…_

Tony threw down the copy of the New York Times in disgust, he’d made it into the business columns. Tony hadn’t wanted any of this to happen, but in the past month events had flown by at such a pace that it was all he could do to stay afloat.

Fortunately for him the Lawyers at Landman and Zach were well worth whatever the school was paying them on his behalf, so the leaked design had been retroactively patented and bullet-proofed before the press managed to spew them to the general public, but still.
Tony had never liked that damned lab-tech – the idiot hadn’t even covered his tracks, the man had been fired as soon as the administration had discovered what he’d done, Leekie showing a sadistic streak that Tony would never have attributed to the man.

Still the damage was done, Leekie’s intercession on his behalf meant that the tech-prodigy angle that Tony had been purposefully avoiding was back on track, more strongly than it had been the first time around too.

However, there was a silver lining to the latest incident, as Ben had so bluntly pointed out during their last brutal sparring match, it had lit a fire under Landman and Zach’s collective asses. Hopefully it would get the ball rolling on Tony’s little nest-egg.

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Tony was shocked when he recognised the handwriting on the envelope that had been handed to him by Smythe that morning. Tony completely missed the flash of an emotion akin to sympathy on the ascetic man’s face, too caught up in the impossible handwriting carelessly scrawling his name.

Spying Ty staring maliciously at him out of the corner of his eye Tony casually pocketed the envelope hoping against hope that the other boy hadn’t seen what had happened.

Sure enough, despite the care Tony had taken to pay attention to his surroundings that day – he’d even walked around with his headphones off, a real rarity ever since Tony had rediscovered the joys of portable music. Well, despite all of that care Ty cornered him in the narrow corridor near the senior’s lounge.

Tony was only grateful that Ty hadn’t spotted the door Tony had been heading for, it would have been the end of an era if the little evil little shit discovered his and Justin’s hidey hole.

“Look guys, Tiny Tony thinks he can hang out with the seniors.” Ty grinned maliciously at the small crowd of followers and hangers on that seemed to dog the boy’s footsteps wherever he went, “Stupid little baby. Don’t you know that the senior lounge is for the big boys?”

Tony’s brow furrowed as he processed the implications there, had someone scolded Ty for getting into something he shouldn’t?
Affecting his best political sneer Tony did his best not to let his puzzlement show on his face,

“What’s the matter, Cae-uh– Ty” Tony remembered just in time not to use the old nickname, that had never happened, not here, “Forget the fact that unlike you I have every right to be here?”

Okay, so it wasn’t his best attempt at being a wit, but Tony was still feeling rattled that Ty had come this close to inadvertently discovering his and H-Justin’s supply cupboard.

Tony swaggered past Ty, shouldering the bulkier boy aside when he belligerently moved to block the corridor and slipped inside the senior lounge, where sure enough Ty did not have any permission to be.

Unfortunately, in his flustered urge to act superior to Ty’s ridiculous pissing contest Tony had forgotten one small fact.

Most of the seniors hated him.

Tony was met with cold looks, oh there were a few neutrally indifferent gazes mixed in there, but they were far outnumbered by the faces showing scorn.

Edwin Cord spoke up,

“What are you doing in here Stark?”

“What-?”

Tony was still feeling rattled from the Ty thing, he missed the opportunity to shrug off his scorn by a mile. Edwin Cord grinned down at Tony, the self-confident swagger the taller teen had lacked ever since his encounter with Tony’s by-now infamous watch back in full force, now that the other boy was on his home turf.

“What’s the matter ickle Krelboyne – get lost?”
The mocking cry-baby tone in the other boy’s voice snapped Tony out of it, he regained the cold bluster of a CEO and shot out a verbal blow in the only language this fool was likely to understand. Money.

“Just because the only paycheque you’re likely to see in the next couple of decades is Daddy’s trust-fund Cord… Don’t tar us all with your brush.”

The bulkier teen stepped forward angrily, the shape of his perpetual shadow Jack Taggart looming threateningly behind him.

“Now, now Cord. You don’t want to start a scene, do you?” Tony made sure to pause, “Not here in front of all of your…” He sniffed for effect, “Peers. You do remember what happened last time?”

Taggart spoke up for the first time,

“Yeah, well we all know about your stupid watch now Stark!”

“If you think that’s the only trick up my sleeve. Well, you’re even stupider than I thought.”

Tony made sure to maintain eye contact with Cord the whole while, grinning his death’s head grin that showed far too many teeth in the process. Cord visibly paled, to mocking titters from his peers.

Flushing angrily Cord and Taggart stormed out of the lounge, leaving Tony to awkwardly try to look casual amongst people who, whilst not enemies really weren’t peers either.

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Tony crashed down on the bed and finally, finally, tore open the letter. Sure enough it was from Howard. Howard who’d never bothered to so much as turn up to a graduation ceremony, let alone sit down and write his only child a letter.

Tony,
Well done on the free publicity, that hippy crap is excellent for keeping the environmentalist’s off our backs. We’ll make a business man of you yet.

Howard.

Tony stared down at the scrap of paper unseeing, even, even something as good as this – the old man had taken it and twisted it into something hateful. It was all coming back, Howard’s insistence that he take business. Something useful.

In the end after many years of arguing, and Obie’s intervention on his behalf they’d compromised on engineering with a computing minor.

Not quite the course Tony had wanted to do – computing, and certainly not the business route Howard had wanted. But a solution that was partially acceptable to both of them, the plan had been for Tony to spend a few years in R&D learning the ropes of the business behind the scenes; working on his “little projects” whilst being coached on the finer points of sharkdom by his father.

Of course, that had all gone out of the window with the old bastard’s untimely death during Tony’s placement PhD year at Zurich on loan from Cambridge. The months and years following that horror had passed in a whirl of parties, alcoholism and extreme sports. Tony doing everything he could to avoid taking on the mantel that brought so many memories with it, and Obie doing everything he could to aid and abet his every narcissistic whim as Tony systematically worked his way through every kind of time-wasting high he could find in a bid to stay away from America and the responsibilities waiting there.

Of course, in hindsight, his oh-so-kind ersatz father figure Obie helping Tony fulfil his childish dreams had probably all been part of the backstabber’s plan to drive a further wedge between Tony and his father. Thus, ensuring that he’d have his way with S.I. when the time came.

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The remainder of spring term passed in a relatively peaceful whirl of schoolwork and exam preparation. Despite the glares, and hisses of ‘Tiny Tony’ that were often shot his way (seriously could no one in this place come up with a decent insult?), neither Cord or Stone dared to do anything with the aftermath of their latest humiliation, and the incident in the canteen so fresh in people’s minds (and on sore buttocks), especially given the seniors sudden inexplicable apathy with respect to their campaign against Tony. It probably helped that even Mrs Kowalski had been looking on Tony fondly lately with all of the publicity he was earning the school.
Justin had proven more than willing to abuse his parents’ generosity with the cash, the other boy had a sizeable stack of LPs of his own now, and despite his touchiness about his side of the room he was still happy to share them in exchange for free use of Tony’s record deck.

For his part, Tony was growing increasingly frustrated with the incredibly slow pace of the schoolwork that the senior year, even the advanced gifted class, were taking. Tony hadn’t remembered everything being so slow.

Then again, Tony supposed that it didn’t help that the teachers (even the otherwise affable Ms Ramesh) were suddenly insisting that he go at the same pace as everyone else rather than allowing him to skip ahead. It was irritating and annoying and – Urgh he’d proven that he knew this stuff dammit, Tony was aware that he’d passed out of high school education in that whirlwind of a first month.

But for some reason he wasn’t being allowed to progress at his own pace. Something that Tony was definitely not used to. He didn’t like it, this artificial hampering – and worse still, Tony had no idea what had caused it, or even how to make it go away.

Somehow Justin had been unusually perceptive at lunchtime, accepting Tony’s foul mood with a grace that Tony wouldn’t have attributed to adult Hammer let alone this strange new kid-version of the man. And yet that seemed par for the course these days, Tony’s life was full of strange and unwanted surprises from even more surprising sources.

Tony was almost entirely convinced that by the time he worked out just whose fault it was that he was being made to take even the science classes at the same pace as the rest of the seniors that he wasn’t going to be surprised by the source, only saddened.

That evening in shared commiseration the pair of boys worked their way through all of the acts that Justin could get his hands on that were in any way related to David Bowie and Glam Rock. Accompanied by an indoor picnic consisting almost entirely of sugar of course. In that month’s care package, received earlier in the week, Justin had received a selection of European candies from his jet-setting parents.

Whilst Tony had immediately gravitated towards the salty/sour candies that came from the Scandinavian countries, Justin had taken one taste of the chewy slightly salty gummies, pulled a face and dumped the entire overlarge bag in Tony’s lap. Thankfully there was also a copious amount of chocolate in the package, which Tony was happy to let the younger boy keep to himself.
Tony had to admit he thought that Justin was getting a little too fond of Marc Bolan, he was contemplating introducing H-Justin to something loud and brash, like The Clash, to mitigate the damage but he was afraid that it was already far too late. The pair were lounging on the floor listening to T.Rex's Electric Warrior in a sleepy, slightly sticky, malaise.

It had turned out that Justin adored Glam Rock, and with its peppy message of hope and how it was Okay™ to be different, Tony could see why. Much as from his adult perspective he didn’t quite see why Justin was quite so infatuated, Tony was of the opinion that there was an awful lot of dross to sift through before they got to the gems. And unfortunately for Tony’s continued sanity Justin had a tendency to drift towards the teenybopper stuff that targeted the kids still reliant on an allowance to afford their music.

Tony had to concede that the song Cosmic Dancer at least had a certain relaxed charm about it, if he hadn’t known better he’d have probably assumed the thing came out of the whole 60’s psychedelia acid-wave. The song certainly had a trippy laidback and lackadaisical style that spoke to him of lying back on one of the lawns at MIT and sharing a spliff with the other more party-inclined undergrads of his acquaintance during the 80s.

Still Justin’s record buying mania meant that in the space of just over half a term Tony and Justin’s room was a veritable hoard of records, Justin had managed to gather everything from the lighter end of the now defunct glam rock movement, acts like Marc Bolan, Lou Reed, and Roxy Music, to acts like Sweet, Mud, Slade, and even another album by that poor bastard who’d died in his strange glass pyramid cum mausoleum, Jobriath.

Justin’s half of their shared room was beginning to resemble a record shop, the young boy was getting records delivered so regularly. Much to Tony’s chagrin Justin’s record organising system proved to be just as idiosyncratic as every other organisational system the other had ever come up with. Though Tony had to admit that the style was rubbing off on him, much to his chagrin.

Ben had looked at him askance the other day when he’d casually mentioned that he rather liked cataloguing Suzy Quatro next to Iggy Pop in conversation.

Justin claimed that the order was autobiographical by way of an explanation, which Tony had understood all too easily. Tony had to wonder ruefully just why Hammer’s security programming was so pitifully easy to hack into, when his programming layouts had always been as erratically ordered as everything else about him.

Tony caught himself planning to teach the Hammer-scion to do better this time around and was horrified with himself. So what if he was a sweet kid now? The little shit had grown to be a thorn in Tony’s side, long before he’d become Iron Man and an almost legitimate target. He pushed the
thought back and down with an effort, no, it wasn’t fair to Justin, just as it hadn’t been fair the first time around.

With the benefit of little Justin’s… and Tony had to admit this to himself, welcome company for the past month, and nearly a decade’s worth of distance from the events at the Expo Tony had to wonder just how much of Hammer’s treachery he’d brought upon himself.

Tony hastily smiled back across the table at Ha-Justin, as soon as he noticed the other boy’s face falling from his lack of response to whatever the other boy had been chattering about. With a sinking feeling he suspected that Justin was rapidly becoming a not just a schoolmate, but an actual friend.

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The minor public debacle caused by the leaked filtration design kept Tony busier than ever.

Tony and Ben had been forced to sit in on a whole slew of impromptu lawyery meetings during the Easter break, as the law firm of Landman and Zach proved that they were well worth the promised percentage of profits that had been required to gain the promise that they would continue to act in Tony’s best interests long after the fees paid by the school dried up. In the end, Tony had ended up with the first roster of patents to his name; and a deal that sold the filtration units at cost to a non-profit organisation with ties to several dozen NGOs all working in the turmoil going on in the Gulf, large swathes of Africa and several other countries that the UN was keeping an eye on due to ongoing humanitarian crises. (Though sadly there was nothing in the turmoil ridden stretch of countries sandwiched in the region between India and China, the poor souls stuck there left to rot by even the aid charities.)

Much to Tony’s chagrin, of the file of patents and proprietary ideas that he’d given the firm nearly full reign over, the scheme most likely to get off the ground any time soon was the Starkbucks idea. Helped along by the revolutionary coffee filtration machine, that was going to be produced by the same company manufacturing the humanitarian units. The only roadblock there was a tiny micro chain in Detroit, who were resisting all attempts to buy up the brand-name.

Tony’s school-funded sessions would only stretch so far (and being honest Tony had been bitterly surprised to find just how all-encompassing the school’s contract on behalf of its students with the law firm was; given the struggles to survive that he remembered enduring as a student at MIT. Tony wasn’t sure what changed between his childhood and early teens, but that sort of aid had never been offered the so readily before, and had been all been long-gone by the time he’d reached MIT. Perhaps the disparity was related to the school-fees for this place come to think of it), and understandably given that the firm were already effectively putting in pro-bono time on his behalf when compared to the usual hourly rates they commanded, despite raiding said fund slightly illicitly for their fees they weren’t willing to plug the sizeable disparity in the amount available to them, and
the amount Starbucks were optimistically demanding.

For a company that wasn’t actually anywhere close to being in profit they were a tenacious bunch. Especially when the fact that their business model was only superficially similar to Tony’s plan was taken into account. Really, the only real grounds they had for complaint was the name, and even then, Tony could argue that Stark was a family name with a straight face, even if the damned thing was an Americanism of a far older, Germanic-Jewish surname.

Still, if negotiations held out for just four months the water-filtration scheme was due to be handed over to both the Red Cross & Red Crescent, and Médicins Sans Frontières, at which point, purely down the necessity of keeping the manufacturing plants open, the Starkbucks branded coffee machines and filters would come onto the market buoyed up by the humanitarian publicity, earning a projected profit of 25% - 70% of which would be plugged straight back into expanding the reach of the aid given with the water filters.

The 70% value still irked at Tony who wanted 100% of the money to go into the network of charities that his accidental breach of his wall of silence was aiding, however he’d had to concede that he was working within a largely capitalist system, and as such he needed to play within it.

If the four-month target was reached the slice of the profits from the scheme would enable Tony to buy out all of the current Starbucks branches, and all rights to the business scheme, and more importantly the trademarks, that they were using.

Of course, Tony had no intention of following their methods, he wanted to jump-start the trend of paying a living-wage for farmed produce that had begun to take off at the turn of the 21st century. If the practice was further ingrained in the collective consciousness perhaps it would survive the recession that was due to hit come the end of the 00s. However, in order to make his firm bullet-proof he needed to protect himself from the swathe of litigation, suing and counter-suing that would likely ensue if he opened his chain up right this instant.

Tony internally cursed. If he’d arrived just two years earlier he could have started this scheme uncontested. Though of course he’d have been four when he woke up rather than six. He swallowed the fit of pique down, Tony was struggling enough as it was, he dreaded to think what would have happened if he’d found himself in the body of a kid that had barely just outgrown being a toddler.

He refocussed on the meeting – ironically the one aspect of the entire plot that had gotten through the lengthy lawyery sessions uncontested had been Tony’s logo ideas for the Starkbucks brand. It helped that the Starbucks firm were still using their old-fashioned rather detailed mermaid logo rather than the stylised one that, Tony had to admit, had inspired him to use his beard as a basis for the undefinable shape that he’d doodled.
Tony was hunched down in his usual spot by the lake morosely glowering out over the deceptively attractive looking water. Despite the fact that it was only mid-March it felt fairly warm in the shade, or at least it did when compared to the freezing temperatures they’d been enduring just last week.

Tony hated the winters on the east coast, the longer this one lasted the more Tony longed for the warmth of Malibu.

As always Mr Reid quietly made his way over and offered Tony the customary mug of cocoa, Tony gratefully accepted the offer and the mismatched pair trudged up to his little raised guardhouse, looking forlorn, a cold nearly skeletal structure of spindly wood looming in the melting slush like a beaconless lighthouse that would never shine.

By the time the pair had both settled down on the slim entryway that served as their balcony, overlooking the lake from their elevated position Tony had become aware of just how cold a day it really was – temperatures entering the 50s or not.

“So, what’s got you looking like a smacked ass? I heard you hit on some big fancy design that was worth a fortune, or going to save the world or some shi- uh, something like that”

Tony sighed expansively

“Lawyers.”

“Oh.”

Reid’s tone was accepting, as if with that one simple word Tony had explained everything. In a way, Tony supposed he had.

Carefully keeping his gaze on the distant shoreline Tony continued his explanation,
“And the stuff that Ty – um that is Tiberius Stone started. Poor H-Justin is so scared, and he’s all alone with the Krelboynes and…”

Tony dared a quick glance up at Reid, and was surprised to see that the scrawny perpetually bestubbled man was glowering harshly out at the distant horizon. It was the same look he’d seen on Mr D’Eath’s face in the canteen nearly a two months ago. Tony swallowed and stared down into the opaque depths of his cheap cocoa, suddenly ashamed without knowing the reason why.

Reid was looking unusually perturbed, the expression on his face so unlike the man’s more familiar laidback gaze of relaxed melancholy that Tony usually envied.

Not knowing how to broach the subject Tony decided to approach it from a tangent, hoping vainly to ease his way onto the thin ice rather than crash right through it, as was his usual response to matters like this.

“Uh-“ Tony paused, already hesitating. Biting his tongue, Tony stared again out at the placid lake before trying again, “Uh, Mr Reid?”

“Yeah?”

“Uh, if you don’t mind me asking, is something bothering you?”

Tony could have smacked himself in the face, so much for gently skirting the topic. He was useless at this kind of mushy shite, he knew it. There was a reason why he always communicated in backhanded gestures.

Fortunately, Tony still had the cute factor going for him, Reid grimaced, before seeming to catch himself. The skinny line of the other man’s jaw twisted, before his face settled into a fonder, more tolerant expression.

“Lord, you’re a perceptive one kiddo.” Reid’s voice was wry, Tony risked a fleeting glance up at the man, afraid that he’d ruined their quiet companionship forever with his direct question.

Reid looked down at Tony with a sad grin, an expression that Tony recognised from his own face, having seen it reflected in Par-Peter’s goggles once too often.
“Nah, don’t worry about it Tony, it ain’t nothing you could do anything about.” In that moment Reid frowned, Tony gulped worriedly, “And it’s definitely nothing that you should be blaming yourself for. D’you hear me?”

Reid’s usually laid back southern drawl sharpened as he reiterated that point,

“Really kiddo, you think I didn’t notice the way you shoulder blame?”

Tony stared down at his mug again, unable to meet the other man’s eyes. Since when had everyone around him suddenly turned so ridiculously perceptive?

“Listen alright? Me and La Guerta, we’re worried about your teacher Mister D’Eath is all.”

“Oh.” Tony flinched when he realised how tiny his voice had become, Tiny Tony indeed.

“And it’s nothing you need bother yourself about, we’ve got a plan.”

“Oh?”

Tony glanced up again, this time seeing the warmth in the other man’s eyes that had been the very thing that made him tentatively trust him.

“Yeah, we’re just waiting on the weather to turn. Me, and La Guerta, and Dawson” at Tony’s puzzled look Reid added, “You don’t know him. We’re gonna bring D’Eath back to the real world, whether he likes it or not.”

The new determination sparking in Reid’s eyes made Tony believe it. He turned back to his hot chocolate in quiet relief, the genteel balance of their usually non-verbal companionship restored.

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Despite Tony’s overabundance of schoolwork, Tony and Justin took to spending more time in the library as a way of relieving their shared frustrations with their academic situations. Well, in Tony’s case it was more a resumption of previous habits, only this time with company. The library had the clear advantage of permanent adult supervision, even when Ty and his cronies followed Tony and H-Justin inside they couldn’t do anything. Not with a member of staff as a witness.

Mostly though, it gave Tony a break from the whispers of the older students. Cord and Taggart had once again stepped up their campaign to isolate Tony from the seniors, not that they needed to put much effort in, given the age-gap. Somehow the fact that Tony looked as though he was going to be the first of them to own a successful business rankled amongst the nearly-but-not-quite-adults of the seniors more than anything else had. Especially after he’d so cuttingly pointed that fact out, loudly in the middle of the lounge no less.

Whilst nothing serious had happened since the drum contamination – and thinking about it Tony admitted that the drum’s loss was serious enough. Ms Ramesh had contacted every supplier that she had contracts with, and a few that she didn’t, and none of them had been able to provide them with a replacement that matched the specs they needed.

At least, not for a price that the school was willing to pay.

Hence, the overabundance of schoolwork – as Tony rushed to catch-up on a project that he’d already started nearly two months later than everyone else. Fortunately for him, Tony had a built-in replacement ready and waiting, one that would impress the exam-boards far more than the purely scientific research he had been planning on writing-up.

And as an added bonus, Tony was sure that Cord (if not the rather slow Taggart) was aware that it was their little act of sabotage that had forced Tony’s hand, and all but dropped a golden-goose of a project into Tony’s lap.

Tony’s scientific coursework was, of course, the write-up about the water filtration device, complete with the preliminary tests that he’d daydreamed his way through in class as proof that Tony could carry out the scientific process with no supervision. All backed-up by the rather more impressive R&D that Tony’s, fledgling coffee-chain and humanitarian aid organisation Arc-Tech could produce.

Tony suppressed a smile when – speak of the devil – he spotted Taggart and Cord enter the space, immediately spotting Tony and H-Justin at their usual table, turn tail and leave.

For the most part the boys studied in companionable silence, both ensconced in their own private worlds afforded by the mixtapes they’d both become mildly obsessed with - Tony occasionally
helping Justin when he saw that the younger boy needed the assistance.

Tony’s first attempt at offering a helping hand had been awkward and clumsy, but once Justin realised that Tony’s motive wasn’t a prelude to some unpleasant trick the younger boy seemed to revel in the opportunity to bounce ideas back against someone who was smarter than him. Tony was secretly pleased that he’d been able to help. His own struggles to find someone on anything approaching his level leant Tony a level of empathy that he’d never have credited himself with.

For Tony’s part, he spent most of the time that wasn’t spent on his ‘Project’ alternating between the dull but necessary task of memorising interminable list of “facts” & literature for the SATs and other more international qualifications that he was planning on sitting for later that year, and his more… esoteric reading.

Ms Ramesh and Mr Leekie had both been a huge help in that regard, for Ms Ramesh’s part unlike Mr D’Eath she actively encouraged her students to think beyond the curriculum, and encouraged extracurricular learning. (Despite the incontrovertible fact that she refused to let Tony speed ahead of his classmates, Tony refused to think of them as peers – they weren’t)

Leekie had proven an invaluable source of specific information about precisely what the differences in requirements were for the numerous international qualifications that Tony was planning to put himself through. As well as the standard High School Diploma, Tony was working his way towards earning GCEs, and A-levels, and was seriously contemplating the Baccalaureate qualification that was recognised across the Commonwealth nations.

The additional work wasn’t actually that strenuous, though of course the fact that he often sat in the back of Ms Ramesh’s classes doing something different to everyone else didn’t pass unremarked.

As well as the previous attempts to mock him for his age and swottiness, he was now deemed a snob for not deigning to carry out the same good old fashioned American style education as everyone else. Though again, Tony had to concede that his ill-judged put down of Cord in front of nearly everyone really, really hadn’t helped matters.

Privately Tony thought that it was probably a good thing that he’d decided to wait a few years before officially reconfirming his fluency in Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien, Japanese, Korean, French, Italian, Arabic, Berber, Pashto, Wakandan, Sokovian, Romanian, Latverian, and several Thai languages. (To his everlasting shame, Tony had learnt the majority of said languages during the course of his playboy “career” – finding it far easier to have a good time when everyone understood each other than forcing others to speak hesitant English for his benefit. The remainder had been gained as a direct result of the superhero lifestyle, another life-choice that was simultaneously unhealthy and frowned-on by governments and the general populace)
Whilst Tony found navigating the different scholastic approaches a more interesting challenge than the actual work, he had to admit that it was still an unpleasantly boring task. He’d actually sat most of the CE’s at the turn of the month, spending several lonely weekends alternating between the hated but necessary meetings with the bloodsuckers at Landman and Zach, and hours under the watchful eye of the external adjudicators and Leekie. Tony was beginning to loathe Leekie’s office, with its cheerful blocks and bright colours and air of quiet despair. Between the lawyers and the tests, he was probably spending more time in there than any other room in the school.

Still, Tony was aware that he should be grateful to the man, he’d actually fought tooth and nail to let Tony take even those pitiful exams. In a bid to stave off the impending insanity that this enforced bout of solitary activity of dubious scholarly value had nearly induced, Tony had ended up falling back into the magic research with a depressing degree of enthusiasm.

Unfortunately, the mythology research hadn’t flagged up much of use, though Tony had found a thick tome about Norse Mythology that he hadn’t encountered back when he’d been looking up Thor and Loki’s backgrounds to try and figure out why the sack full of cats hated his brother so much. The tome took an interesting new spin on the mythology – Tony was beginning to realise that the level of information remaining about the Norse Pantheon was the equivalent of only the tales of Heracles surviving from Ancient Greece. It was incredibly frustrating, and rather tragic. With the 20/20 that hindsight provided Tony wished that he’d spent more time attempting to draw blood from the stone that Thor had proven to be, despite the usually affable demigod’s cheerful ignorance of his own cultural heritage, Tony knew that he should have tried harder to glean what he could from the prince.

Beyond the fascinating new information about Einharger Tony had to admit that the book didn’t provide much more information than that he was already aware of, it just presented it from a slightly different perspective. Depressingly unlike the rote repetition the qualifications required, which, unfortunately all seemed to be lacking something by way of common sense, or rather common humanism to his jaded eyes.

During their current study-session, Tony ended up meandering down an unexpected path during his perusal of Tibetan Buddhist mythology, it hadn’t occurred to him before, but the description of meditation espoused in the volumes that he’d found was utterly unlike the approach that he’d been taking with Bruce. Tony thought that this needed some more consideration.

Maybe he needed to focus inwards after all?

But on what?
Even when Bruce had been encouraging him to get to know his own mind more he’d been annoyingly unclear on just what he thought Tony should be looking for. Tony had to admit that the reason for that irritation may just have been irrational, due to his own scientific bent he’d been disappointed by Brucie-bear’s vague and wishy washy reasoning when he’d espoused the benefits of meditation.

Tony preferred clear, accurate and precise instructions.

This was why he was so bad at cooking.

Tony was an engineer and a scientist dammit, he could follow instructions that were ten times more complicated, and several orders of magnitude more sensitive than any damned recipe.

And yet that was precisely the problem.

Cookery books tended to be vague and wishy washy… Just like Brucie-bear’s instructions had been.

Vague and irritating instructions like… Finely dice, slice thickly, cook until golden brown, simmer until thickened. How the hell was Tony supposed to know what a “pinch” of salt was or a “splash” of oil?

Tony harrumphed quietly to himself, earning an annoyed glance from H-Justin that reminded Tony uncomfortably of the looks that Hammer had used to shoot him. He knew he was getting irrationally annoyed, was aware in that distant part of himself that was always watching the rest of him, that he was trying to avoid the real reason he was so upset with Bruce. But it was satisfying to be able to pinpoint why he found cooking such a struggle when he was so skilled at achieving the delicate mixes, temperature adjustments and annealing regimes needed for precise metallurgy as well as the more esoteric polymer processes.

If only he’d been able to persuade Pepper that it was the recipe’s fault rather than his own – maybe he’d have been able to convince her that he cared enough, that maybe she’d have stayed… On the same level that was always watching, Tony was aware that this was precisely the reason why he tried not to think about Bruce unless he could absolutely help it… The other man had left him too, left him to the wolves.

Sighing loudly enough that Justin looked up at him in concern this time, Tony settled on his other major project this term. (As if he didn’t already have enough things to focus on.) Tony had decided
to bite the bullet and start reading about modern swordsmanship technique. Whatever Ben was teaching him was so far removed from the stuff La Guerta was using in class that any overlap between the styles was few and far between and usually purely coincidental.

Unfortunately, just as with cooking, Tony found the language in the few vaguely helpful tomes incredibly flowery and vague.

It was yet another source of frustration.

However, Tony did think the current huge book spread out before him would help a little with his footwork. There were clear diagrams, like the ones found in dancing manuals (Tony shuddered at the comparison, but well, as a member of Society he’d had to learn) so at least he thought he could see what he was supposed to be doing – even if Tony wasn’t exactly sure how some of the contortions between the steps were supposed to be possible.

Gods, whatever Ben was teaching him was so far removed from this… technical work, the latest sword that the infuriatingly secretive man had added to their ever-growing sparring repertoire had been a Greek Kopis of all things.

Ben had been pleased that Tony recognised it, Tony hadn’t had the heart to tell him that he only recognised the thing because he’d been forced to sit through The 300 dozens of times. Not that The 300 even existed yet. A certain blond teammate of his from years gone by had been far too enamoured of the film’s warrior code, and Tony had not-so-privately thought, homoeroticism, all so helpfully encouraged by Clint of course.

They’d all gotten into serious trouble when Clint had encouraged (and filmed) Thor kicking a nameless Hydra goon off of a cliff, shouting,

“This. Is. MIDGARD!!!”

Before posting it on Youtube – within hours the video had over 12 million views. Tony had only found out about it after the fact when Fury – vein throbbing at his temple in the way that it only did when he was desperately trying not to murder his idiot insubordinates - had called them all into his office and shouted at them for hours over that one.

Somehow Tony, being the designated adult for that little excursion had gotten a particularly long shouting at. He still felt more than a little miffed about that one. Sure, it had just been the three of
them there, but he’d been busy securing the perimeter from the air when the incident had happened, and besides since when was he the responsible adult in any party?

That had been the incident that had started Tony on cataloguing Fury’s tells in detail. The seething resentment that he of all people had gotten the blame for the incident triggering a near manic desire to find the spying spyer’s weaknesses.

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Though still somehow terrifying in his sheer distance from everyone else, members of staff included, Justin reported that Mr Smythe had inexplicably started to be nicer to him in class.

Tony wondered what the trigger to that change of behaviour could have been. Tony had been trying his damndest not to fall back into his bad-habits of sarcastically criticising every little thing that H-Justin did wrong in their social interactions. Well, alright, every perceived thing that Justin did wrong. However, paradoxically, now that Tony was actively trying to maintain a friendship with the other boy, the urge to cajole him, for his own good (and wasn’t that nastily reminiscent of a certain judgemental boyscout), was nearly overwhelming.

Justin was happily chattering away about his latest musical idol (Meatloaf for reasons that Tony just couldn’t fathom, especially since the infamous album that had made the man famous didn’t appear to exist yet) over their evening meal of coincidentally enough, suspicious school meatloaf, when Tony spotted his first hint that something other than the slightly warmer climate might be making Mr Smythe more amicable these days.

As a kid, Tony wouldn’t have spotted it, hell, being honest with himself for the majority of his adult life Tony would have remained cheerfully oblivious too. However, in the aftermath of being de facto leader of the Avengers, when no one, least of all he, wanted him in the position? Yeah – Tony had learnt some people skills as a matter of self-defence.

Smythe was making googly eyes at Ms Ramesh along the length of the staff table.

And worst of all, Ramesh was clearly happy with the attention.

Eeesh – when the hell had that happened?
Tony was horrified by what he’d seen, surely not? Not… Not Ms Ramesh? Why on earth would she want to go out with the rude and misanthropic Smythe of all people? What the hell could his favoured teacher possibly see in his least favourite staff member?

If Justin noticed that Tony barely touched his meatloaf that evening the other boy wisely held his tongue, instead putting on an LP (sure enough, the strange looking Victoriana covered number called Stoney & Meatloaf) at a volume that might have made Tony wince about annoying their dorm mates, if he actually cared about such things.

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Tony was beginning to regret agreeing to these one on one classes with Ben, whilst he was probably getting better at self-defence, nearly two terms in Ben’s attitude was beginning to grate nearly as much as the other teachers’ more familiar simultaneously awestruck, wary and slightly condescending attitude.

The only adult Tony had regular contact with who’s behaviour wasn’t rubbing Tony up the wrong way was Ms Ramesh, and he wasn’t at all sure why. Though he had a feeling it might be linked to her no-nonsense attitude with everyone, she treated everyone like an equal. Of course, that had been spoilt lately by the not-so-small revelation about her social life.

Ben on the other hand condescended to him on a regular basis, though Tony supposed he had more right to than everyone else. If anything, Tony welcomed the too-familiar feeling of being talked down to. It wasn’t a nice feeling, but it was comfortable.

Tony was really beginning to feel his age again now that the distractions of finding himself in the fucking 1970s had settled into a routine. He was finding it harder and harder to play the part of the innocent six-year-old, not that Tony had ever managed it satisfactorily if Ben’s hints were anything to go by.

At least the schoolwork had become slightly more engaging, or rather Ms Ramesh’s classes were – otherwise it was the usual routine of re-memorising a load of information with too little background behind it to be anything like the kind of depth or understanding that Tony was used to working with.

It didn’t help that Tony was finding it increasingly difficult to toe the line in D’Eath’s history classes, to his twenty-first century outlook on the world the incredibly America-centric viewpoint his textbooks were pushing seemed childish and dangerous to him. The point of view favoured in the Commonwealth biased GCE’s hadn’t been much better, though at least at this point the Brits at the Cambridge University Press were beginning to admit that perhaps the attitude of we white people are
automatically everybody else’s superiors had something off about it, if the leading question in the essay assignment about Lord Mountbatten’s role in Partition was anything to go by. At least Tony hoped that he’d judged the gist of the question correctly.

He still felt uncomfortable when he remembered the automatic response to D’Eath’s question, ‘What is communism?’ Tony had answered factually, outlining the underlying belief system in equality, Marxism and equal share of the state amongst the people, bringing up the foundations of Socialism as a point of interest. D’Eath, and the majority of the class had given him appalled and shocked looks, D’Eath had awkwardly stuttered out that, ‘No, no that wasn’t quite what I meant – Mr Cord?’ And Cord had smugly rattled off a response about Stalin, repression, Mao and genocide. Internally Tony had been seething, not at the people around him, but at himself.

Of course, the question hadn’t actually been ‘What is communism?’ of course the whole thing had been framed under the automatic assumption that capitalism was the only right and proper system of state. And yet, mind wandering, Tony’s brain had supplied the textbook response. Just the 21\textsuperscript{st} century textbook, rather than the 1970s barely past McCarthyism edition.

Tony found the incredibly western, white-centric viewpoint shocking, he’d been horrified when he realised that the Trail of Tears and the so-called “Battle” of Wounded Knee were still being taught as if it they were a positive thing. In order to pass his upcoming exams, he might have to espouse a viewpoint that he found morally repugnant. From his time as CEO of SI it was a position Tony was used to, but he still didn’t like it.

Of course, Ben took advantage of Tony’s distraction with ruthless efficiency, by the end of the hand-to-hand session Tony had been flat on his back often enough that he’d resorted to the Turtle of Fury out of sheer exasperation.

Tony had very nearly managed to trip Ben up with Jarvis’s signature move, Ben managed to leap out of the way, but it had been close. Tony tried one of the other signature moves from the technique, this time succeeding in knocking Ben’s left foot out from underneath the taller man, and earning himself a look of surprised appraisal that made him bristle. Ben’s lips had thinned as he very pointedly did not chastise Tony for his lack of attention, rather, Ben upped the intensity of the session to a nastily exhausting level.

Tony who’d already been finding their current pace difficult to keep up with, distracted or not, immediately regretted the rash decision to let that little trump card out of the bag. It seemed he’d earned himself a little bit of respect there – respect that he wasn’t sure he actually deserved if the way the muscles in his legs were trembling from exertion was any indication.

During the warm-down Ben too casually asked,
“What was that move?”

“The Turtle of Fury?”

Ben shot Tony a puzzled look,

“It’s Jarvis’s signature. You should get him to teach it to you.”

“Hrmm.”

Ben looked vaguely disturbed, as if he hadn’t expected something so effective to come from the dithering butler, then expression softening Ben turned to Tony and said,

“You really should tell him you know.”

Tony jolted in unpleasant surprise. He’d thought that Ben had dropped this topic. He certainly hadn’t brought it up for months. Side eyeing the older man Tony cautiously replied,

“I won’t. I can’t.” He huffed out a resigned sigh, “Besides, what would you have me tell him? Anything resembling the truth would have me committed.”

“I’d say true, but then I’d have to point out Edwin Jarvis’ heavy involvement in the affairs of your father.”

Tony gave Ben a look of undisguised horror,

“Brain bleach – brain bleach! Urgh! No! I thought I’d long since corrupted myself to the point where nothing could horrify me, and then you had to go and prove me wrong. Urgh, nonononono.”

Ben snorted in genuine amusement – the snigger turning into an out and out fit of laughter at Tony’s continued horror.
Once they’d both managed to calm down enough to continue the conversation, one bout of laughter-induced cramps for Ben later, Ben continued to pry.

“You know that isn’t what I meant.” Tony just glared at Ben suspiciously, “Okay – no you didn’t. But that really isn’t what I meant. I meant your knowledge of Ed’s involvement with a certain organisation that you really shouldn’t have any inkling about. Capiche?”

Tony briefly tried the innocent act,

“What organisation?”

“Oh, cut the crap Kid. You and I both know that Edwin Jarvis has been highly trained in martial arts.” Ben shot Tony a significant look, “And we both know why.”

Tony stared at Ben’s toes rather than the other man’s changeable and all too perceptive eyes.

“What? Did you really think I’d gone senile in the past couple of months? I do remember you telling me all about those interesting individuals who taught you your subpar survival skills, remember?” Ben gasped dramatically, “Don’t tell me, you’ve got dementia?” He clutched at his chest, as if deeply wounded, “And in one so young!”

This time Tony thumped Ben on the upper arm as hard as he could manage, the other man allowed it. Tony thought ruefully about this casual reliance on violence, it probably said something unpleasant about both of them. Tony didn’t want to think about what it said about how seriously the other man was taking this discussion.

Glaring half-heartedly Tony instead answered Ben’s non-question with one of his own,

“You know, don’t you? What are you – fried chicken?”

“Wha-?” Ben’s look of puzzlement was genuine enough for once.
Tony mentally recalled his last sentence,

“Chopped liver!”

Ben’s smiled was crooked,

“I meant chopped liver!”

“Well at least that was a genuine mistake this time rather than a ‘wrong’ one. Perhaps we are making progress after all Kid.”

Grateful that Ben had dropped the subject Tony fell back into their old routine,

“Sure thing Old Ben, next you’ll be telling me how to use the force.”

Used to the Old Ben comments as he was Ben didn’t deign to comment – merely casually brought up that he’d be teaching Tony yet another style that was possible with the three types of sword they were currently practicing with. Three! At the beginning of the school year Tony had barely contemplated weaponry more basic than a gun and bullet beyond a materials perspective.

Now – he was learning how to use five, well six if you counted the epee, types of edged weapon and Ben was already heavily dropping hints about beginning on another type soon.

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Tony was sat on the damp grass staring unseeing, as always, over the boating lake. He’d been there long enough that both the seat of his pants and his underwear had been soaked through by the cloying wetness of the rain that had fallen earlier that morning, but he didn’t much care.

He’d grown to enjoy spending time out here for its own sake, rather than the necessity of trying to get in contact with his chi, or whatever mystical bullcrap it was that he was trying to cram into his head. Whilst the task no longer carried the desperation he’d felt all those months ago when he’d first arrived here in this strange ersatz world it still irked Tony that he was making little to no progress on a task that Doom of all people had strongly implied he should put his mind to sooner rather than later.
A part of him had noted, but not thought much about the fact that Reid hadn’t shown up with his usual offer of a drink and quiet companionship. Tony had a feeling that the skinny, perpetually in need of a shave, security guard thought that he had no friends.

Well, he wasn’t far off.

Tony spotted movement on the far-curve of the lake shore, and turned his attention to it – the lack of Reid’s presence unnerving him more than he cared to admit.

There were three men, wrestling on the ground. One of them was probably Reid from his build. Tony furtively made his way over, his sense of self-preservation taking a backburner to his worry for his friend.

As he got closer Tony gradually realised that he recognised all three of the men, and he relaxed, giving up all thoughts about stealth when the familiar bulky form of Mr La Guerta, and the slighter form of Mr D’Eath emerged from the distance.

He crept closer, this time out of a desire to see what they were up to before they spotted him, rather than any real fear for what would happen if he were spotted. As Tony drew nearer he could hear that all three men were laughing, phew – that ruled out the all too probable idea that Mr D’Eath was having a flashback.

Tony eventually worked out what the three of them were doing to each other, a split second before he was spotted. It was his own fault, he’d completely forgone any attempt at being sneaky, being too busy chuckling to himself.

All three of the men were trying to stuff cold and sticky mud into each other’s shirts and pants. Tony had no idea what had triggered their messy little game, but he was glad it was something so innocent – rather than the first thought that had flashed to his mind.

As is always the way in incidents like these, Tony was not allowed to be a neutral bystander for very long. Mr La Guerta spotted Tony and cheerfully greeted him – at which point Reid threw the clod of mud he’d been about to stuff into the seat of the other man’s pants at Tony.

It smacked him in the arm messily.
Tony had to admit, he’d never expected to carry out this sort of extracurricular activity with the teachers, but it was fun. And to top it all off, D’Eath was grinning ear to ear through a thick coating of mud that made him look like a prehistoric monster that had crawled out of the primordial ooze.

The four of them caused quite a stir as they trudged muddily through the school grounds towards their respective washrooms to clean off.

Tony even managed to ‘accidentally’ smear mud all over Ty’s t-shirt when the other boy had automatically moved to try and push him once he’d realised who it was underneath all of the filth,

“Oh look, did Tiny Tony have an accident?”

Ty had once again attempted to block the corridor, when would the other boy learn? Tony had casually brushed the other boy aside, he may have been scrawny, but all that exercise – running around the school grounds, Ben’s sparring and even the damned epee classes was beginning to pay off.

Tony had been wiping off the worst of the mud in the seniors’ bathroom, deciding, perhaps childishly, to spread the love around when he overheard the interaction that confirmed all of his worst fears about Ramesh and Smythe.

Tony was in the shower section of the room, the water not yet turned on - since he wasn’t a complete savage Tony had decided to scrape the worst of the mud into the trash rather than attempt to wash it down the shower drains.

As such Ramesh and Smythe must have assumed that the room was empty.

When Tony overheard the pair whispering he hadn’t been worried, merely continued to scrape the rapidly caking mud into the trashcan. However, as he turned to leave, urgh. Tony was not a child. He wasn’t.

And yet there was something about catching two of your teachers kissing that never ceased to be disturbing. The pair were so caught up in their oh-so-adolescent make out session that they hadn’t even noticed that Tony had been there.
Ana tried not to glare at the nurses as they brought in her evening meal, it wasn’t their fault that the repast was less than appetising, or the doctors less than helpful.

This was her sixth diagnostic session, if Howard weren’t being so generous with his money she dreaded to think how they’d pay for all of this, even the generous health insurance she had with SHIELD only extended so far. And Ana somehow doubted that a woman insisting on a diagnosis for an illness that half of the medical professionals she’d seen were convinced was ‘psychosomatic’ would be covered by even the most generous of insurance firms.

Still, despite her own situation Ana couldn’t help but worry about her boys. Edwin obviously wasn’t taking care of himself, oh her darling tried so hard to hide it, but she was his wife, and an Agent of SHIELD to boot. She could spot a man exhausted from stress and lack of sleep a mile off. Ana had made sure to smile gently at her darling husband when he’d tiredly brought her an apple torte, the neat lines of the apple slices perfectly arranged in a spiralling pattern on the tart’s surface.

Despite her lack of appetite and the roiling unease fuelled nausea that threatened her dignity Ana made a point of eating a large slice as he’d worriedly sat by her bedside. She’d carefully watched the tension in his shoulders ease at her false display of hunger, and felt herself relax a tad.

To her shame, Ana still hadn’t shared her worries about Tony with Edwin, her darling already had so much on his plate. She couldn’t bear to add to his load, even as she mentally braced herself to prepare for the worst. Ana had already updated her will, leaving everything to her two boys using the facilities SHIELD provided to do so discreetly.

Tony’s sudden and striking shift in personality had niggled at Ana’s sense of foreboding for months now. Whilst she was almost certain that Tony was still Tony, a DNA test, and the boy’s knowledge of events that he couldn’t possibly have known of otherwise reassuring her… Ana was concerned.

Ana had even contacted Peggy about her worries, knowing that the other woman knew well enough when to keep things to herself. The near break in Ana’s and her darling Edwin’s relationship when he finally broke down and revealed the secret he’d kept from her ever since that awful madwoman Frost had attacked her, had more than proved that.

Despite the fact that Ana and Edwin had reconciled, their relationship growing more depth as they both learnt to confide their hopes and fears in each other… Well, Ana had remained angry at Edwin for months after that little revelation, her career at SHIELD had been an almost direct result of that
Ana had felt stifled and betrayed, and couldn’t face her husband. She’d fled into the SSR’s patient clutches instead, immersing herself in the culture of training and espionage that Edwin had tried so hard to protect her from.

It had taken six long months before they’d broken down and shouted all of the anger and hurt out at each other. And in the meantime, Ana had proved her point, communicating the betrayal that still burned through her veins by trouncing Agent Carter on the training grounds, snubbing the other woman’s gestures of apology at every turn.

Until, a month after her reconciliation with Edwin, the Agent’s awful disgusting attempt at cooking Hortobágyi palacsinta, a strange post-war invention that Ana had never even heard of before… Well, the resulting mess had made both of them break down into near hysterical giggles in the break room.

Their high-pitched laughter had attracted the scorn of a few of their fellow agents, specifically the more hidebound male members of the SSR who still felt that women should go back to the kitchen now that the war was over.

The pair had proven their point on the sparring mats, teaming up for the first time since Ana had officially become a member of the SSR.

No, Peggy had long since proven that she knew how to be discrete, even perhaps when she shouldn’t be. Ana trusted the other woman to keep her confidences.

Ana attempted to settle down for the evening, the near constant ache in her belly as ever a maddening backdrop to her life. Almost as maddening as the doctors’ patronising insistence that there was nothing wrong. The dark fear gnawed at her guts, the fear and rage and anger at her situation turned to a physical ache. The rage and helplessness of it all, forcibly reminding Ana of her flight from her home country, dredging up dark memories from the recesses of her mind. Images that Ana would much rather remain buried, in Hungary where they belonged.

And yet, despite all of this, Ana found her thoughts returning to Tony. What had the boy gotten involved in? And how would the dear cope without her there to shield him from the worst of his parent’s excesses?

Ana eventually drifted into a fitful sleep, filled with disturbing memories from Hungary, and Edwin’s argument.
run-in with the Black Widow all those years ago. The dreams merging her fear for her husband with her own terror when the madwoman Whitney Frost had attacked her and the darker overarching madness that had engulfed much of the world in the thirties, forcing their emigration to America amongst thousands of others.

In the strange logic that comes with dreams Ana found herself staging a rescue mission, nothing was going right, the layout of the building they were in kept changing. Razor wire lined every surface, chambers kept opening up on all sides. The walls of the place itself glistening ominously with the black malice of Zero Matter. At the end of the hall, a shower room loomed ominously out of the black rushing suddenly towards Ana’s small squad of agents.

Outside of her room a sudden alarm preceded a rush of noise, as nurses, doctors and even other patients rushed towards the source of the panicked mechanical whining. Ana frowned in her sleep as the noises of frantic medical intervention quite seamlessly became part of the nightmare.

Ana didn’t bother to hold back the glare the next day when after a morning that seemed to stretch on forever, the matronly nurse bustled in at mid-afternoon, and matter-of-factly informed her that they had found nothing wrong. Of course, they hadn’t. As she packed away the belongings she’d brought with her Ana wondered how much more of this she could take.

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It had been a fairly mundane April weekend, nothing about it had been particularly special, yesterday’s mud wrestling match aside. Even the latest in a long line of swordsmanship styles that Ben was rapidly taking him through had faded into the dull routine of work that was all somehow beneath Tony’s interest.

Tony felt that that in itself should have set alarm bells ringing in his head. Since when had he ever managed to have enough peace at any time in his life, that he of all people could afford to experience such an inventive emotion as boredom?

Tony stared in horror at the trashed contents of his and Justin’s shared room. It seemed the reduction in bullying attempts had all been a ploy. He could have kicked himself; Tony had known that it was too good to be true.

Dozens of Justin’s LPs lay in sad black shards scattered all over the floor, the cardboard sleeves ripped and crumpled. The VCR was in so many pieces, the delicate film of the few tapes they’d bothered to acquire strewn laid out all over the room like the guts on some mechanical battlefield.
The devastation wasn’t limited to the records, Tony’s half of the room hadn’t escaped the wanton carnage. It was only his habit of locking most of his belongings inside his trunk that had saved him there.

With his paranoid inclusion of his LP-deck amongst the habitual contents of his trunk, unfortunately many of Tony’s clothes were targeted instead - torn and dirtied cloth mixed in with the broken miscellanea of belongings that were strewn around the room. The one genuinely valuable item that Tony had lost was the computer – the nixie tubes were noticeable in their absence, tiny shards of glass mixed in with the overall carnage. The computer rendered useless, the circuitry completely fried.

Tony sighed, dragging his hand over his face in annoyance. Well at least that was one less problem to worry about he supposed. Tony was only grateful that the idiots hadn’t gone so far as to smash the cathode ray tube.

Ha- Justin looked utterly shell-shocked, Tony couldn’t blame the other boy. He shuddered as he remembered the overreaction a few weeks back, when Tony had gotten a little messy. Tony supposed, if he didn’t have so much experience with all of his shit getting fucked up, well, he supposed he’d be pretty upset too. Tony winced when he remembered the total remodel he’d been forced to carry out on the Malibu mansion after the absolute disaster of his “last” birthday party.

His workshop had never quite been the same after that.

Compared to H-Justin Tony had gotten off lightly too, all he’d really lost was some clothes, and… okay, all of his textbooks. But still, Ha- Justin had left all of his belongings out in the open, so nothing apart from his clothes had escaped the carnage.

Oh, Tony could see that whoever had done this had made a good attempt to get into both of their trunks. Tony’s especially; there were deep gouges all along the seam between the lid and the actual body of the trunk, concentrated around the lock. But. Well, Tony had made a point of buying a military-grade piece of kit there despite the strange looks that Jarvis had given him when he’d insisted upon it during their shopping trip.

Tony was only grateful that the idiots hadn’t gotten far enough into their attempt to trigger any of the self-defence mechanisms that he’d taken some pains to install. Tony honestly couldn’t imagine how he’d explain one of his fellow students somehow being unfortunate enough to find the equivalent of a bear-trap clamped around their arm.
He supposed he should have expected it. After all, Tony’s continued lack of a shit to give every time Ty or one of his cronies hissed “Tiny Tony” at him in the school corridors as he pushed his way past them had probably grated on them enough that they’d decided to up the ante.

Tony should have seen it coming.

Stupid, foolish, idiotic, useless, ass that he was he’d gotten Justin caught up in all of his crap. Tony could only thank the gods that he knew existed that H-Justin was too upset to even cry. The other boy was still staring in mute horror at the destruction, his already pale skin milk white.

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Yelena Belova waited crouched at the feet of her master. Hardly daring to breathe, lest she call his wrath down upon herself. She was waiting for his judgement to fall. She’d failed in her mission to take the potential asset, one Anthony Edward Stark from the mansion in New York.

She knew that she was going to be punished for her failure.

“Black Widow. You have failed Madame F, as she has failed us, given that it was her lax training that caused this. Roxxon Industries will be very disappointed in the services of the Red Room.”

Yelena kept her face impassive, she knew she was going to be punished for this, she could only keep her silence and hope that her otherwise exemplary record, and docile behaviour was polite enough to earn her some small mercy.

“As such you will be sent back to the main house for further re-education.”

Yelena dampened down the instant urge to struggle, to get out before it was too late. She was a Black Widow, one of a long line of assassins who had served the Red Room and Mother Russia proudly and efficiently. The pain that was in store for her would help her regain the focus she had lost in the wake of the strange incident at the Stark mansion in New York and her subsequent months spent evading capture in the prison state of North Korea.

As a beefy hand clamped itself inexorably around her scarred wrist, Yelena allowed all resistance to drain from her body.
In the wake of Ty stepping up his bullying campaign Tony and Justin moved several of Justin’s more precious surviving LPs into the little hidey-hole above the senior’s lounge. Whilst a lot of superficial destruction had taken place that irritating afternoon, the bullies hadn’t been particularly thorough with their malicious self-appointed task. Since Justin had very nearly lost his wardrobe to the destruction, the lock of his expansive trunk barely holding against whatever tool the bullies had used Tony had offered the use of his more secure trunk. However, to his secret relief Justin had declined.

Tony was mildly annoyed by the loss of the computer and its Hydra chasing properties but perhaps it was for the best. He hadn’t been sure what he’d do if the software actually did flag something up. And as it was Tony really wasn’t sure how on earth he should attempt to deal with the hornet’s nest that was SHIELD cum Hydra, let alone the particularly deadly problem that the Winter Soldier program presented.

However, to his surprise that was the least his problems for the time being, he wasn’t anywhere near as upset about the situation as Ty probably wanted him to be. He had to admit to himself that he was furious that the little bastard had gotten away with what he’d done, but in the scheme of things as far as victimising attempts went. …Well, this one was pretty pathetic really. Almost laughable.

The only thing that raised Tony’s resigned almost amusement above anything more than mild irritation was the fact that little H-Justin had gotten caught up in the crossfire. Tony had only been able to watch in mute sympathy as Justin tried, and failed, to piece back together the shattered remains of some of his most prized LPs. Even if the small boy were to successfully work out which black shard matched which, well, there was no fixing that kind of damage.

Something inside Tony hardened at Justin’s crestfallen expression when the boy realised that his treasured Jobriath discs were amongst the casualties of the destruction. If the album artwork wasn’t so painfully familiar Tony doubted he’d have been able to identify it from the small shreds of card that were left; much to Tony’s chagrin that particular artist had remained Justin’s favourite. Tony had suspected that the not so subtly gay themes on open display on the albums’ covers had been the source of the attention. No doubt they were probably the reason that the discs had been one of the primary targets.

Tony had no proof that it was Ty, and it might not have been. Though from the suddenly smug expression that seemed to grace his features whenever he caught Tony’s eye Tony felt he had all the confirmation that he felt he needed. Still, nothing important of Tony’s had been out in the open. Hell, if Tony was being honest with himself, he didn’t really have anything important. Not anymore. Well, maybe the sword. But that was stored with Ben’s things anyway. Even Ben hadn’t wanted to try and talk his way out of why a six (nearly seven) year old was in possession of a large edged weapon.
But that wasn’t the point.

Ty had hurt Justin.

Tony was fair game.

But Justin?

Justin was an innocent in all of this.

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Howard sighed when he read the latest report from the fruitless search in the Arctic Circle. Nothing. He’d been at this for over thirty years. And still. Absolutely nothing.

Summer was nearing, he’d soon be able to go back out onto the ice and continue the hunt. He had to bring Steve home, despite the fact that even with the glimmer of hope that the serum’s newly discovered cryogenic properties brought it was highly likely that Steve would be returning on his shield rather than with it.

Gulping down the whiskey in one swallow, savouring the nearly acidic burn, Howard turned to the tottering pile of paperwork in his in tray.

Howard accidentally sent a whole sheathe of papers sprawling with his elbow as he leaned over to place the glass on a reasonably stable surface that wasn’t completely covered in reams and reams of paper.

Sighing he angrily plunked the glass down on the nearest flat-ish surface, uncaring of the condensation seeping into the documents below.

The typeface on the letter that had been unearthed in the lower strata of paperwork by the landslide caught Howard’s eye, an overly decorative cursive that most reputable businesses wouldn’t dream of
using these days. It was vaguely familiar; the font dredging up memories of a grovelling apologetic letter about leaked designs…

Howard cursorily reached over and tore the envelope open, only realising once he’d done so that it was a status report on Tony’s progress from that damnably expensive school that he’d shipped the idiot boy off to. Ah, that’s why it had caught his eye. It was about that hippy crap his idiot boy had gotten so enthralled with lately; Howard would have to do something about that sooner rather than later. Though for now it was a useful source of publicity.

Apparently, his useless spawn had skipped ahead to the senior year already, at least partially living up to the gushing missive that the Mensa idiots had sent him earlier in the year. Alright, Howard conceded as a glimmer of something warm flickered in his chest briefly dispelling the constant cold heavy weight of the guilt he’d carried around since Finow, perhaps the boy wasn’t quite as useless as he’d thought.

Howard went rummaging for more similar looking envelopes, ignoring the fact that the mountains on his desk became a sea of paperwork on the floor in the process, and eventually he unearthed another, more recent letter begging for more money.

At first Howard had been angry when he realised that it was a scrounging request. When he realised what it was for, he was infuriated.

It seemed the oh-so-exclusive school that he was paying a five-figure sum for every term had managed to allow most if not all of his son’s possessions to be destroyed, oh and apparently, this was the fifth request for a replacement Czochralski Dip Vat of all things. For a moment, Howard wondered why on earth they thought he would accede to such a spurious request, before dismissing it.

No son of his was going to be wandering around in public in rags. Howard perfunctorily rattled off a cheque for Edwin, scrawled out a quick note of explanation for the boy, and sealed the envelope.

To Tony’s shock his strongest ally on the staff in this campaign of wits against the paired dangers of both Edwin Cord + Jack Taggart and Ty Stone turned out to be Mr D’Eath, perhaps the very last person (well, alright Smythe was the last person but D’Eath was a close second) on the staff that he’d have given credit to on that particular front.
D’Eath seemed to have firmly taken Tony’s side in this whole affair, a fact that up until that point had escaped him. Tony wondered when the turning point had been, when had D’Eath decided that Tony was worth the time and effort?

The man’s empty gaze, so often trapped in the jungles of Vietnam, seemed to burn with a napalm fuelled heat whenever Tony caught the man’s eye. He’d (mostly) kept his head down in the man’s classes, uncomfortably aware of the heat of the man’s gaze.

Had he misjudged the other man so badly?

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Tony had been pleasantly surprised when in the aftermath of the destruction of his room another hastily scrawled note from Howard turned up giving him the rare permission to replace the things that he’d lost. The note was perfunctory, quite literally demanding that Tony not shame the Stark name by walking around like a pauper.

The very first thing Tony had done with the money was order several dozen records to replace the ones that H-Justin had lost, alongside several new acquisitions.

The other boy had been nearly star struck at the gift – which had left Tony feeling awkward. He had no idea why H-Justin was so grateful, he’d only replaced what had been destroyed because of him anyway.

Still, to Tony’s relief Justin had finally moved on from Jobriath, though perhaps the boy’s favour of the artist was tainted by the memory of the thoroughly destroyed album sleeve. Justin was now spending his time alternating between Here Come the Warm Jets by Brian Eno, and Tapestry by Carole King. Tony wasn’t sure which of the two albums he found more irritating – though Eno probably edged King, with his enthusiastic use of irritating sound effects and analogue synths that Justin seemed to adore, of course.

Carole King came a very close second, quite apart from Tony’s (justified, of course it’s perfectly justified the song’s crap okay?) hatred of You’ve Got A Friend – with its twee, utterly untrue message about twu-fwiendship. Urgh Tony wanted to make exaggerated barfing mimes every time the song came on, Justin played the twee acoustic album often enough that Tony was beginning to hate the rest of the LP too.
To Tony’s complete lack of surprise Justin had taken to playing You Make Me Feel on a loop, singing along with the song with gleeful abandon. Whilst the sight never failed to make Tony smile, he now knew most of the album by heart, and had even caught himself singing along to the chorus once or twice. It was a good thing that he’d never been tempted to sing along with the proto-walkman in the school hallways, too aware of the unfriendly eyes just waiting for him to stop paying attention to his surroundings. Tony could only imagine the aftermath of singing the eponymous line in that song in front of a group of hormonal schoolboys.

That task dealt with Tony had hastily replaced all of his textbooks, mourning the loss of the computer all the while. There was no feasible way he could replace the thing, nowhere unsupervised to carry out the necessary delicate soldering. Despite his earlier hopes the self-directed experimental labs were carefully supervised at all times.

Apparently one of the year groups that had come before Tony’s time had delighted in converting red phosphorous to white phosphorous and using the volatile stuff all over the school to create little explosions. Resulting in one boy nearly losing an eye, when a small chunk of the reactive allotrope had been hidden in his lunch tray.

Suffice it to say Tony was chafing at the (even he had to admit, understandable) restrictions placed on his access.

Tony had considered the textbook acquisition the end of the affair, until Ms Ramesh hesitantly commented that Tony’s outfits were looking a little threadbare - after the room destruction incident he’d been alternating between his two surviving sets of clothes – resulting in nasty titters from the entire senior college prep class. Tony had reluctantly delved into the mysterious realm of clothes shopping, dipping further into the surprising well of money that Howard had seen fit to gift him.

Tony was painfully self-aware that his own tastes in clothes were lacking, Pepper had told him so often enough. And unlike Ty she’d never belittled him for no reason. It didn’t help that to Tony’s eye the height of 1970s fashion was damned near the ugliest style he’d ever seen.

Jarvis had sealed the urgency of the situation by sending him a note pointedly enquiring about when he’d be receiving the wardrobe requests given that both Tony’s ‘academic and leisure’ pursuits had already been covered. Tony had been a little hurt by the lack of personal content in the missive, until he realised the probable reason for that lack. The guilt that replaced the petty feelings of hurt had weighed heavy on him for the whole week that he’d spent picking things out.

In the end, he’d compromised between things that he’d have chosen for himself, and things that Tony thought Pepper would have liked him to wear, with more than a little influence from a certain musical idol who he’d gained a taste for in recent months. He’d rattled off a sheepish note to Jarvis with the list of clothes that he wanted, all taken from the department store catalogue that Jarvis had
not-so-subtly included with the letter. Tony had to admit that that scornful instruction from Howard may have been part of the reason why he’d avoided the chore for so long.

Of course, the other reason for the head-in-the-sand tactics was exposed when he’d started flicking through the damned catalogue. Whilst Tony had never much cared for high fashion, he had been unpleasantly reminded of how strange this era that he was trapped in was. There was no Alexander McQueen, or Paul Smith included in the long list of designers that supplied the store, no Vivienne Westwood, or even Jimmy Choos - a brand name that Tony was only aware of because the brand was Pepper’s *other* favoured choice when she wasn’t in the mood for the towering red-lacquered Laboutins that she loved so much. (Of course, Tony had delighted in pointing out that Danny Choo had created his own brand of creepy dead-eyed dolls in a fit of annoyed pique when Pepper had commented on Tony’s ‘childish’ taste in sneakers.)

The backwards fashions in this era were yet another unsettling reminder that he was almost literally on another planet – and that it would be a hell of a long time before Tony managed to make his way back to what he thought of as anything resembling the ‘real world’.

Tony hadn’t much thought about his wardrobe, until he had to. After all, kids’ clothes were kids’ clothes, right?

Well, apparently not.

Whilst he wasn’t a complete novice at this, Tony had to admit that he found it difficult to judge which clothes were ‘cool’ in this horrible decade, and which clothes were the type that parents forced their children into. Dooming their unfortunate offspring to the march of shame through the school hallways. It was with that thought in mind that Tony had made his careful selection, for once grateful that the choice was his own.

Despite the unexpected hurdle, Tony had made do. He’d honestly been surprised when Jarvis hadn’t objected to his choices, but shrugged it off, since it was Howard’s money being wasted.

Tony’s new wardrobe was a mixture of well-tailored suits, and the more familiar band t-shirts and jeans that he’d always favoured. The suits were a very different cut to the style he usually favoured, hugging in at the waist, flaring at his ankles, and generally highlighting his slight figure rather than the usual boxey cut that was designed to enhance his bulk and intimidate. Whilst Tony would have loved access to his favoured tailor, Tony figured that the CEO Special would look ridiculous on his tiny kid-frame, besides, he should probably play up the cute child genius angle whilst he still could. Tony had taken care to avoid the casual blousy shirts that were horribly popular in this era, instead opting for a simultaneously far plainer, and more visually striking style that was all sharp collars and well-turned cuffs. Tony had found that he couldn’t quite give up the minimalist aesthetic with a twist
that had typified the designs he favoured in the 21st century.

Whilst he certainly didn’t care what the other kids thought of him, Tony was painfully aware that a misstep here could make his remaining months at the school hellish. Unworried as he was for his own wellbeing, Tony was more concerned with maintaining his nearly untouchable image for Justin’s sake.

He’d been unpleasantly surprised when the large-package showed up – revealing that even the sensible pairs of jeans that he’d chosen had ridiculous flares that had a tendency to get wrapped up around his ankles during his attempts to spar with Ben.

Fortunately, no one seemed to notice his discomfort, not even Ty had anything to say about the new wardrobe – well, aside from a snide remark about how he finally looked like a member of respectable society again, rather than a street urchin (apart from the fact that he was too short to believably be someone worth talking to). Tony had merely rolled his eyes at the comment, too relieved that he didn’t stick out like a sore thumb to bother thinking up a retort.

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Xavier had been surprised by how long it had taken the guardians of the newest lauded super-genii to reply to his offer of mentoring. Usually the parents jumped on the chance to help their child in any way that they could. Charles had to admit, he was even more surprised by the contents of the letter and the person who’d sent it, the note was written by one Edwin Jarvis, who claimed to be a family friend, and begged for his discretion.

Once Charles had quickly verified the information with some judicious use of Cerebro – to Charles’ surprise the man was much more than a family friend, and more of an ersatz father figure to the young man in question carrying a depth of love for the boy that was normally only shared in biological families. That fact had both reassured him about the rather odd request and completely saddened him when he realised why the other man thought such discretion so necessary.

The whole situation was uncomfortably similar to the delicate balance Charles was trying, and to his shame, failing to strike with young Jason. The boy’s innocent mismatched eyes were already haunted by some of the things his own father had done.

As such Charles had discretely made enquiries with the bureaucratic staff at the school, unfortunately even with the liberal application of his …gifts the process to provide an external visitor access to the place had taken months of bypassing red tape. Still, Charles supposed that the delay was at least partly worth it, he now had a perfectly legitimate reason to visit the institution again should the need
arise. He was visiting under the guise of encouraging inter-school relationships, as far as everyone else was concerned Charles was merely there to encourage a private school little league. Charles had to admit that he wasn’t looking forward to the false speech he was going to have to give to the assembled students. However, the ability to make unfettered contact with potential future students for perfectly innocent reasons was utterly invaluable.

Charles had no concrete plan about how he’d gain access to chat with young Tony Stark, but he was confident that he’d be able to wing it.

He had to admit that he found the ball of neuroses and nervousness that personified the Principal’s post a surprising fit for the role. Mrs Kowalski was an inherently honest soul, constantly feeling guilty about some minor imagined infarction or other – usually involving the occasional unkind thought about her charges’ parents. (Charles personally thought that said thoughts were well deserved if the woman’s memories were accurate.)

Eventually after spending the entirety of the morning giving speech after speech to each successive group of children that were herded in before himself and Hank, Charles struck the jackpot with the first of the senior classes that reluctantly filed into the small hall.

The repast in the canteen had been an interesting experience, reminding Charles far too much of the unpleasant slop served up in Baliol College’s Hall, a side effect he ruefully supposed of over a decade of rationing. The morning speeches had all been short perfunctory affairs, targeted at young children and uninterested teens. The afternoon speeches were all targeted at high school aged kids, attempting to encourage the older children to bolster their CVs by volunteering to help actually run the thing. Though illogically to Charles’ mind, he’d been given the brightest and oldest of the kids to talk at first, Charles grudgingly admitted that the idea was probably that they would be fresh faced and chipper after lunch.

Charles noticed his target’s presence before he actually entered the room, giving a small jolt of surprise, which made Hank look down at him in concern. Charles sat up straighter in his chair and gave Hank a subtle nod, the other man would have to take this one. Charles was going to be busy. Aware of hostile and bored eyes on him as the teenagers filed in and lounged around on the uncomfortable looking chairs laid out, Charles somewhat self-consciously stroked at his receding hairline - cleverly concealed by his fashionably floppy haircut.

The mind in question was abuzz, once again Charles got the distinct impression that he wasn’t being consciously repelled from the other, but nevertheless he faced an impenetrable staticky barrier that promised pain. Charles wasn’t sure why, but the sensation put him in mind of being forced to watch several thousand televisions simultaneously, here in this realm of metaphor with no physical equivalent.
Taking a more delicate tack to that of his last unfortunate encounter with this fascinating mind Charles allowed himself to sink still further into his gifts, only leaving enough of himself behind to save embarrassment should anyone ask him a direct question.

Finally, finally, the boy in question snuck into the room – one of the very last students to do so. Compared to his fellows the child really was incredibly young, the age gap profound and ridiculous. Charles felt a great swell of pity for the boy, for compared to the young men who were supposed to be his peers he was a boy, attempting to get on in a world of testosterone and hormones that he could know nothing about.

Still, the part of Charles that had grudgingly learnt to read body language (for what use was body language to a telepath?) when his gift had been supressed by the nerve serum noted that the child, this Tony, didn’t shy away from his fellows. If anything, the boy moved like a shark, a self-confidence evident in his every action. Charles would have to ask Hank what he thought about all of this later, he had no doubt that the incredibly intelligent man had noticed, and it never hurt to have a second opinion.

Charles would have asked him then and there, but the other was midway into the delicate opening segue of their little presentation and Charles was still trying to oh-so-gently worm his way past formidable subconscious mental defences.

Ben had been keeping an eye on their guests all day, he didn’t trust these two schoolteachers despite Edwin’s missive. The pair were from a school with a spotty record of student intake to say the very least. He’d been careful, oh so careful, to keep everything he did well within the Ben Adams persona that he’d built for himself, doing nothing to attract attention. As far as they were aware he merely happened to be the member of staff that happened to have a free day today, an open schedule and an insouciant air.

“Please, call me Hank”, had actually been the harder of the slightly mismatched pair to get a read on, all careful control, and nervousness about secrets. Ben had been incredibly careful to keep his body language open and laidback around the other man – paradoxically reminded of the utter fear of an atrocity survivor and the extreme overconfidence of the younger idiots just after their first death.

For a long horrible moment, he thought that he’d been made when Hank had snorted explosively just as they went to shake hands, something about the skinny boffin reminding him of a certain giant of his unwilling acquaintance in that moment, before the bespectacled mutant settled back down into his self-protective stance and smiled nervousely at him.
The near miss reminded him why as a rule Ben avoided mutants – just as he’d carefully avoided every potential source of conflict in the second half of the twentieth century thus far. Ben had learnt that lesson (again) when he’d gotten caught up in the camps at Ettersburg. He’d promised himself never again. Of course, Ben was painfully aware that he’d inevitably find himself in that far too familiar situation again sooner or later, but he was determined to put it off for as long as possible. Hence avoiding mutants.

Ben was even more careful to keep his thoughts precisely within the bounds of what Ben Adams, ex-SAS commando, and disenfranchised soldier’s soldier would think. No leaving the carefully worn-out groove today. No.

If you knew the right people, and Ben, unfortunately was intimately acquainted with scores of the wrong people, well… If you knew the right people Charles Xavier and his little group were infamous.

A powerful and far too likely to stick his nose into other people’s business telepath, and a genius (and mutant to boot) who was prone to experimenting on himself. Both sharing an unfortunate habit of hanging around violent extremists. Just the sort of individuals that Ben habitually moved to other continents to avoid, and here he was interacting closely with the pair as a favour to a friend. Not that Edwin would have appreciated it as such, the silly man, far too caught up in petty concerns to even think about recognising the bigger picture for what it was.

Still, though he didn’t like to think about it, Tony was rapidly turning from a charge of circumstance into a Student. And the boy deserved the capitalisation, for all that there was no tell-tale buzz, Ben could have sworn from his mannerisms that he was dealing with a young one who’s first death had been later in life. Only it was impossible, especially given the child’s age.

Ben had done his research thoroughly, and whilst there was definitely some question about his parentage… Well, Ben had found the birth records. No changeling here.

Ben narrowed his eyes when Xavier stiffened in his chair, a clunky oversized thing that had been hell to navigate around the gothic revival architecture of the school, Ben hadn’t seen anything about the students filing in that would warrant that sort of reaction. He carefully observed the silent communication between the pair before focussing his attention back on less obvious people watching. They hadn’t noticed his notice, but it didn’t hurt to be cautious.

Tony trudged in looking just as unhappy to be there as the hormone driven teens. Despite Ben’s best efforts, the boy’s gait was still an awkward combination of a child’s natural exuberance and curiosity paired with something far more self-asserted, notably wary and weary. Ben was happy to observe that Tony had wholeheartedly embraced the decision to play-up the child genius card for all that he was worth – the boys replacement wardrobe after the destructive incident in the dorms played up to
that expectation perfectly, pairing t-shirts emblazoned with strange slogans and references with outdatedly flared trousers, awkward gawky oversized barely tinted sunglasses and overlarge sneakers.

Ben wasn’t sure where Tony’s newfound lack of style came from, or how on earth the brat had persuaded Edwin to buy it for him, but he had to admit that it provided an effective and admirable smokescreen to the awkward juxtapositions going on right underneath everybody’s noses. He only hoped that his continuing educational efforts would mean that Tony could drop the ridiculous charade long before he hit his teens, Ben would be ashamed if any student of his had to go around dressed like that for any length of time.

Ben stared out at Xavier from behind the mask of the Ben Adams persona. Analysing the powerful telepath with distrust, he’d met his fair share of telepaths, and he knew how to deal with them. But Ben did not want to draw that kind of attention, even if it would bring a sense of malicious glee to dump the arrogant man on his ass. Ben had felt Xavier summing him up and dismissing him, and he hadn’t like the sensation, useful though it was.

Settling down to watch from behind the mask he’d erected for himself, Ben prepared to protect his student.

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Tony was vaguely aware of a twinge, a headache building up behind his eyes. Looking around surreptitiously he could see that he was about as willing to be there as the rest of the honours students, well except perhaps Baines, who looked thrilled at the idea of more sport, and he didn’t count, that kid was disgustingly good at everything he tried his hand at. Managing to be well-liked amongst both the nerds and the jocks, even Taggart didn’t seem to resent him.

Resisting the urge to sigh loudly Tony tried to at least look like he was paying attention to the nervous young man at the front of the room, the guy looked like the kind of nerdy stereotype that Taggart and his cohorts loved to bully. Side-eyeing the aforementioned group Tony could see that they were definitely planning something from the nasty grins and chatter.

Another sharp twinge of pain had Tony drawing himself up and trying not to look like he had a migraine, decades of attending board meetings with the worst kind of three-day hangover had acquitted him well there at least, Tony was well-used to working through the kind of pain that would paralyze most people. His mind skittered away from the real reasons for such immunity, flashes of hands holding him down, and a cutting tearing sensation in his chest as Yinsen pulled out a large chunk of his ribca - Tony came back to himself with a start looking around surreptitiously so see if he’d done anything stupid.
No one seemed to have noticed, well the balding guy in the wheelchair looked a bit green, but since no one else was looking worried Tony chalked it up to the dude being a bit spaced. Everything about the man screamed the very worst sort of seventies fashion-sense, it wouldn’t surprise Tony, if alongside that ill-advised large collared floral shirt, leather jacket and flares combo that the dude was into pot. He certainly dressed the part. Tony completely failed to recognise the irony of that thought given his current wardrobe choices, but the sudden relief from the build-up of pressure behind his eyes was a compelling reason to relax.

The inexplicable headache gone Tony decided he’d actually listen to the spiel, though he very much doubted it Tony thought it might be worth paying attention – especially if the way Ben was meaningfully eyeing him was any indication.

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Charles slammed back into his own head with a jolt. Just as he’d been making progress, this time avoiding any attempt to sync with the impossibly fast mind in question, and getting through the outer defences by sheer slipperiness, he’d been hit with a flash of something sickening and hot. It had been like a mental brand tearing through his own mind with remembered heat and pain.

No, not heat. Just pain. The self-defence mechanism had been violent and alarming, but effective.

Nursing the telepathically induced headache Charles tried not to look as though he was about to be violently ill, though of course he needn’t have bothered, Hank was already shooting him concerned looks. One of these days Charles was going to work out how to keep things from the other man again, though they’d been living in each other’s pockets for so long now that he knew that was a forlorn wish.

Deciding it was silly to try and hide the headache any longer Charles reached up and rubbed at his temples in a bid to soothe the building pressure, he didn’t notice, too caught up in his own discomfort, but his actions made a certain Ben Adams straighten up in alarm before the man just as suddenly slumped back into his more usual casual slouch.

Charles tried to work out just what he’d done wrong, he’d eased his way past the first layer of defences successfully he was sure of it. To a less accomplished telepath Charles was sure they would have been fooled into thinking that layer was the only layer – there were several sets of memories stored in this outer region ready for his exploration, and he’d been about to do so when that jolt of emotion had lashed out at him.
He heaved out a frustrated breath, Charles was so sure that he’d managed to avoid the issue he’d encountered last time, he hadn’t even attempted the impossible task of keeping up with the flashes of current thought and gotten straight to targeting the boy’s long-term memories. And yet, despite that avoidance tactic seeming to work, Charles had been repelled as soon as it seemed that he was getting anywhere.

Where on earth would a child learn to use such tools, and how? Unless this confirmed his possible theory that young Tony Stark was no child. However, up close and personal like this, Charles could tell that this boy didn’t have the same disturbing double-echo that Logan had carried three years ago. And there was certainly no tenuous yet strangely immutable thread to follow, echoing through the impossible.

It was a puzzle and no mistake.

Unfortunately, one that would have to remain unsolved. With no access to the boy’s memories, and no feasible way to sync his own mind up with the impossibly scattered thoughts of the child that sat so disinterestedly in front of him. Well, Charles honestly hadn’t a clue how to go about teasing this little mystery open.

Charles started carefully probing his own memory of that mental defence, realising with an internal jolt that it hadn’t been a defence mechanism. Charles hadn’t triggered anything, he’d been through the first layer, nowhere near touching anything in that mental space, and nowhere near the secondary layer of defences surrounding the deeper memories.

As Hank droned on about the possibility of setting up a sports league between the two high-school aged groups of students that both schools shared, stuttering his way nervously through the spiel that Charles had found so effortless, Charles got to pondering about that incident three years ago.

What on earth had made him trust Logan in the end? When Charles had been so very cynical about the world and his place in it?

Being honest about it Charles knew that he’d only been playing along for the majority of that awful escapade, but by the end of that tumultuous week he’d trusted Logan completely.

What had made him follow the other man down through that impossible maelstrom of time?

Thoughts of Logan’s sudden, and appalling attack of PTSD gave Charles a sudden jolt of realisation.
A sensation of ice trickled down his spine, and Charles barely resisted the urge to stare at the boy in question in concern.

What Charles had taken as a defence mechanism had actually been a projection of memory, loud, sudden and vicious. Even if he’d been safely ensconced within his own skull Charles would have felt it. The sensation had been wrenching and awful and painful as anything Charles had ever come across, and it had been a memory. A flashback – ruthlessly quashed, but a memory nonetheless.

Charles needed privacy, and possibly the help of Cerebro to try and work out what he’d seen. Like everything else related to this impossible, ridiculous mind that shone so tantalisingly close, well the memory was overwhelming with an overabundance of information.

He rapidly forgot all of his promises to one Mr Edwin Jarvis as this new puzzle swept aside all other concerns. If he could prise the memory open, unlock its secrets, perhaps Charles would be able to work out just what it was that was so intriguingly different about this impenetrable maelstrom of thought that lay before him.

Whilst Charles wasn’t convinced that this boy would prove to possess the X-gene when the time came, he would nevertheless extend an invite to attend his school during the summer months. Charles wanted to get a better idea of the young man’s personality, mutant or not, a certified genius who was intelligent enough to immediately be flagged for several government watch lists bore keeping an eye on by someone friendlier.

Besides it would be useful to instil the moral compass required to view mutants as people from a young age, and interacting with other genii as well as children his own age, who were similarly excluded from their peers could only do the boy some good.

Fortunately, Hank was around to quietly cajole him into remembering their reason for coming here - It took most of the rest of the day, but eventually, after dozens more interminable speeches about this, as yet entirely fictional little league, Charles managed to manufacture the ‘coincidence’ required to allow him to meet Tony in relative privacy.

Charles and Hank were forced to take part in the evening meal at the school before they finally had the time to go and ‘examine’ the small training gym that would be ‘perfect’ for their needs, sat with the rest of the staff at the raised platform that elevated them ever so slightly above their students. The difference was little over half a foot’s worth of height, yet psychologically it was a world away.

Charles had been shoehorned in between a bear of a man with bright flaming hair, and a jittery individual with a thousand-yard stare that he could have spotted a mile away after his experiences
with Erik. Hank was seated opposite, and a little way down the table from him next to a charming young Indian woman, who in turn was sat next to the young balding (in an utterly undignified manner) man who’d arranged this small gesture of interschool friendship – the trio seemed to be getting along swimmingly, a fact that made the thin ascetic fellow on Hank’s other side glare furiously.

Charles was working hard on his over-reliance on his gift, he was purposefully trying to avoid falling back into the old habit of gently skimming minds instead of observing simple human interaction. The man sat directly opposite him, the fellow with the big-nose who’d been their escort all day smirked at him,

“I see you’ve noticed our burgeoning love triangle. Care to place a bet?”

Charles frowned at the other man, trying to convey his disapproval as mildly as he could. Whilst he didn’t want to upset one of his hosts he couldn’t say he liked the man’s apparent attitude towards his coworkers, treating them as if they were sideshow attractions merely there for his amusement.

Giving in to the urge Charles decided that a quick skim of the other man’s mind couldn’t do any harm, it wouldn’t do to have any charge of his being corrupted by inappropriate company – he knew too well where that road lead.

He reached out mentally sending out a quick probe before diving in… Odd, he hadn’t noticed before, hadn’t been paying enough attention to the man to notice, as supercilious as the man was Charles hadn’t deemed him worth considering more closely. Where everyone else in the room pinged to his senses, the minds around him buzzing with a quiet susurration of thoughts, and yet from young Mr Adams’ direction – silence.

Charles gently synced with the surfaces of the minds around him, skimming surface thoughts as easily as a dolphin playing in the waves before focusing his attention on Adams and just what it was that had caught his attention.

Oh superficially at least Adamson’s mind was like everyone else’s, a smattering of noisy surface thoughts jostling for his attention amongst a great sea of noise, but the deeper ping and response.

He pinged.

And there was no response.
Charles waited with a sense of baited breath, but again nothing but that eerie silence came.

Curious.

If he hadn’t looked closer he wouldn’t have noticed. Tentatively he reached out to Hank and tersely let the other man know what he was about to get up to. Aside from a quick sharp glance in his direction Hank made no show that anything was amiss.

Allowing himself to briefly refocus on the conversation at hand, the convenient excuse of eating not holding much more than a candle of an excuse for being rude Charles concentrated again on examining this strange mind.

The surface chatter so easy to skim from, that was but a shell, a front, a disguise – the exact thing that a telepath carrying out a cursory inspection would expect to see.

He glanced sharply at Adams, the other man clearly misinterpreting the reason for the look gave him what he probably thought was a roguish grin. Charles extended another cautious mental probe, mindful of the possibility that the other would notice his presence and dove deeper.

Immediately he found himself lost in a miasma of noise, nonsense thoughts, and lude sexual observations about staff members of both genders drowning out all other thought. Everywhere he turned Charles was faced with an overload of information, a constant bombardment of the man’s thoughts on the events of the day, in minute, distressingly lewd detail. On top of all of it, making everything even more difficult to comprehend was the sensation of being zapped by 10,000 volts.

Charles wasn’t sure which way was up or which was down.

He was lost in the other’s mind – with none of the usual clues about which way would lead him deeper into the psyche or which would let him resurface in the real world.

The sensation was similar to, yet utterly unlike the painful overload that he’d received during that first foolhardy attempt to touch young Mr Stark’s mind. Through the haze of pain, Charles hoped he wasn’t bleeding again, that would be difficult to explain away at dinner. No, Charles could tell that this response was unnatural, targeted, an attack rather than the seemingly natural overwhelming flow of thought that Mr Stark’s brain seemed to produce.
Still reeling from the painful electrical jolts Charles focused on trying to spot any kind of pattern to the information he was being purposefully overwhelmed with. There was none, no source, no linking thought, no pattern.

He gritted his mental teeth and tried to regain any sense of focus, unlike the pure overwhelming noise he’d felt the other day this effect was predictable, Charles could almost taste it. Mentally spinning around Charles tried to work out what his subconscious was trying to tell him.

There! – There was a gap in the information, it was tiny. A few years ago, before he’d come into contact with quite so many people Charles was sure that he’d have missed it. Charles blindly struck out in the random direction trying to ignore the overabundance of information and failing. It was overwhelming, the sheer number of sights, sounds, smells, tactile information – heat, pressure, up, down.

Charles felt as though he were in Cerebro again, that hideous time when he’d lost control of his gift – being electrocuted by the very machine that had been designed to help him, reeling from the pain of it all, and unable to tell where he ended and everyone else began.

How was this even possible?

A sudden sense of gaping empty space made him halt. And just in time.

The informational overload ended as abruptly as it had begun, Charles was left reeling from the suddenness of it. He took the time to catch his metaphorical breath, before trying to comprehend what lay before him.

A vast empty blackness, that stretched out and down. So far down. Charles had the impression of impossible depth. Charles had a feeling that he’d breached whatever that defence had been.

And yet what was this?

Another defence?

Somehow Charles didn’t think so, it was unlike anything he’d come across in a mind before. Then
again, that overload of sights sounds and feelings was unlike anything he’d come across in a single mind before.

Cautiously, hesitantly, Charles sent out another ping. There was nothing, no echo, no response, nothing. The effect was even more striking without the veil of surface thoughts there to distract him. The uncaring silence completely unnerving.

Charles got the distinct impression that if he just reached a little further he’d find something. It was incredibly tempting to just let go, and drop down into that nothingness. The urge to jump so strong he could almost feel it like a physical hand pressing on his back.

Charles stumbled back from the edge.

Somehow, he didn’t think he’d make his way out again, despite the nagging feeling that the bright core that must be at the centre of the mind he was searching for was just out of sight, just a little further, that all he had to do was lean over the edge and...

Ignoring the fleeting and all too tempting impression of lights just beyond his range of view Charles backed up further, feeling the overwhelming informational overload brushing uncomfortably against his mind again.

He took a deep metaphorical breath and steeled himself for the journey back to the surface. This was one mystery of the mind that Charles was content to leave be.

Steeling himself Charles turned to face the barrier that he’d fought his way through to reach this space… Whatever it was.

Gulping at the angry looking lightning that seemed to form the bulk of the structure Charles decided that he couldn’t afford to waste any more time in here. Intriguing mystery or not Charles still hadn’t actually sensed any ill-will, it had been his own damned foolish curiosity that brought him here.

The unsettling sense of down down down echoed up emptily and eerily behind him as he plunged back through the chaos.

The journey out seemed easier somehow, as if the mind was expelling an unwanted guest.
With a jolt, Charles found himself back in the here and now, breathing heavily. He blinked and looked around himself, surreptitiously checking that he wasn’t having another nosebleed. He wasn’t - thank goodness, though Charles had to admit, after fighting his way out of that maelstrom of chaotic thought he was surprised. No one else seemed to have noticed his short absence, not even the man who’s mind he’d been drowning in. Though Hank was peering at him with poorly disguised concern.

Charles shot his friend what he hoped was a reassuring look, before he got on with the business of working his way through his disappointing evening meal, the memory of the unsettling darkness lingering uncomfortably at the back of his mind all the while.

Chapter End Notes

Again, thank you all so much for all of the kudos, bookmarks, and lovely comments. This thing is beginning to gain a little bit of a momentum of it's own - so apologies for the prolonged wait.

I hope I've managed to do this section of the tale justice I hope this covers the goings on at the school satisfactorily as the thing inexorably moves towards the next stage, and in a realistically difficult manner! (Personally I always hate it when the plot moves on too conveniently... But I do realise I may have taken things too far the other way!)

As always this work is still unbetaed, and all mistakes are my own (you can't have them they're mine, all mine!) so please feel free to point out anything that you spot! Helpful stuff like that is helpful.

...And as a little extra for those of you who've spotted where the slightly odd chapter titles are coming from:

Watch Bowie's Blackstar music video again, specifically pay attention to the moment where he has his hand up to his nose and is sticking his tongue at the camera (I'm sure there's a specific term for the childish "nah!nah!nah!" gesture he's making, but I don't know what it is) - anyway at that precise moment the song's lyrics are amusingly relevant, and never fail to make me giggle despite the overall dark masterpiece that the thing as a whole is.
If the homework brings you down then we'll throw it on the fire and take the car downtown

Chapter Summary

End of the academic year.

Chapter Notes

The end of the school year, and the beginning of the next stage of the plot.

Apologies for the delay on this one - this chapter contains a series of relatively important scenes that each required quite a lot of refinement (and one particular scene that just refused to slot into place neatly until very recently)

If you spot any errors/seemingly random bits that don't fit feel free to point them out - my final run through of this thing was slightly hastier than it has been in the past given that it really was one damned scene that's been holding this update up for so long!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Chapter 8:

If the Homework Brings You Down Then We'll Throw It on the Fire and Take the Car Downtown

Tony and Ben were practicing their hand to hand techniques when they had a most unwelcome interruption. Their sparring match was just warming up, Tony beginning to lean on some of the more fluid moves that T'Challa’s Dora Milaje guard had taken the time to show him at the height of the intergalactic siege Thanos had been warring against Earth - despite the fact that at the time Tony had been nowhere near flexible enough to actually carry the movements out properly it had been a way to pass the time. Tony had finally begun to feel comfortable enough in his own skin to try out a few of the moves that, theoretically at least, he knew inside-out, and back to front. The attempt had been unsuccessful, and earnt Tony an amused and none-too-quizzical eyebrow raise from Ben in the process, when a wheelchair rolled its way into what had effectively become their private salle.
The wheelchair was followed by the nervous geek who’d been giving them the over earnest spiel about a school little league for some mysterious reason that afternoon – interrupting the perfectly good session of water filter tweaking that Tony had had planned. Tony frowned in their direction, and glanced up at Ben uncertainly.

Ben’s face was open and warm, welcoming and friendly. Somehow Tony knew it was a front. Ben briefly turned his back on the pair and shot Tony a warning glance, eyes eerily cold in his seriousness. Ben threw a subtle glare at the man in the wheelchair as if the dude had just run over a puppy, and reversed back over the poor thing for good measure. Tony decided to hold-off his own judgement, however he made note of Ben’s reaction; whilst Tony was no longer willing to blindly follow anyone’s lead, not anymore. Well, he was willing to take Ben’s opinion into consideration. Besides, putting up a friendly front was always a good delaying tactic. Tony warily straightened up from the lunge he’d been in the midst of executing, eyeing up Ben as much as the newcomers who’d interrupted their private match.

The mutual moment of inspection between both parties stretched out into an uncomfortable silence before the skinny guy who’d been droning on earlier seemed to shake himself, he stepped forward and stretched out a hand,

“Hello, I’m Doctor Hank McCoy, but, uh, you already know that…”

The geek trailed off awkwardly rubbing at the back of his neck and refusing to meet Tony’s eyes. Eesh. Tony had hung out with his fair share of nerds and dweebs over the years, but this guy took the expected asocial behaviour to a whole other level.

And this man was supposed to be a teacher?

Tony side-eyed Ben hoping to catch his opinion, so happened to be looking at him at just the right moment to catch the shift.

Ben stiffened, and shot a hate filled glare in the direction of wheelchair dude. Perhaps Tony should have expected it, but he was surprised when Ben’s unimpressed drawl was present in full force, shattering the thin illusion of welcome in an instant,

“Yes, we were introduced.”

Tony side-eyed his mentor in all things sarcastic, wondering where the sudden, almost overt, hostility
“In fact, I babysat the pair of you throughout the day. Don’t tell me, you’ve forgotten me already?”

With an effort that was clearly visible to Tony’s accustomed eyes, Ben reigned himself back in. He’d been expecting the man’s usual caution, not this barely controlled need to move simmering under the skin, poorly disguised as an off-colour sense of humour.

The nerd seemed to buy the excuse hook line and sinker and as for receding hairline and flares, well, he hadn’t even noticed the slip in the first place. Tony caught the ageing hippy staring at him with an overly benevolent, ‘I’m a kindly mentor’ look on his face, Tony found himself scowling.

Tony started reigning himself in, as he remembered how childish the expression made him look nowadays, and stopped. Actually, Tony could work with that, and at least it meant that Ben’s mini-meltdown had been subtle enough not to draw attention. Surtur take him, Tony had gotten too used to his mentor’s moods. Following Ben’s lead Tony aimed for something cautiously friendly, and missed.

“What do you want?”

A moment later Tony realised just how petulant he’d sounded, and after the momentary flash of embarrassment decided that it was definitely a good thing. Ben’s hackles were still up, anything that made his normally unflappable teacher panic like this justified the reaction. Hell - Anyone who elicited this sort of reaction from one of his allies deserved caution, it was just common sense.

The skinny geek looked taken aback for a moment before, after a moment of silent communication with floral-shirted wheelchair guy, he got on with the sales pitch,

“We were informed by a mutual acquaintance of ours that you’re a very special young man Tony.”

Tony bristled, not liking where this was going in the slightest,

“And, well, Xavier’s School for The Gifted specialises in providing a safe environment where talented individuals like yourself are given the chance to thrive.”
Tony had to admit that, despite all evidence to the contrary, this Hank had balls. The skinny nerd was soldiering on despite the obvious hostility from his audience, though perhaps it helped that he was currently all of 3 and a half feet tall.

“We would like to extend an invitation for you to attend our school during the summer holidays.”

Tony blinked. That… That really hadn’t been what he was expecting given Ben’s obvious caution. Trying not to look too obvious about it he glanced up at the other man questioningly, every line in Ben’s stance screamed unease and mistrust, at least if you knew him well. His open-handed gestures were just a little too open, a little too friendly, and a little too welcoming.

Ben pointedly ignored him. Taking the unspoken signal as read Tony decided to try and gauge where this sudden interest had come from. He didn’t remember anything about any special school making offers for him last time.

Keeping up the petulant act, Tony asked the all too obvious question,

“Why?”

“I’m s-sorry what?”

Hank was nervously fiddling with his glasses, in a move that was painfully reminiscent of Bruce at his most careworn, Hank pulled the frames off to pinch at the bridge of his nose before seeming to remember that he was trying to negotiate. His too happy to watch companion was giving him an exasperated look, Tony almost felt sorry for the man. With his milky complexion, thin gawky frame and self-protective posture everything about the guy screamed ‘nerd!’ and even more ‘target!’ What’s worse, the man was clearly in his mid to late 30s, and he still carried around the air of pathetic helplessness, even in the face of someone as unthreatening as Tony himself was.

Filing all of that speculation away for later use Tony decided that definitely-going-baldy-bald guy was probably the reason for Ben’s harsh reaction. Tony eyed the wheelchair bound hippy with barely concealed contempt - completely uncaring of whether the guy thought that Tony’s response was due to ableism in the face of the out-of-character panic that he could still feel emanating from Ben.

Tony glared.
“Well? Why should I go to this special school of yours? I’m attending a perfectly respectable establishment now thank you very much.”

In his anger Tony’s spine straightened, and his stance shifted, unconsciously shifting back into full-on corporate executive mode, with more than a hint of British snoot – learned from Jarvis, JARVIS, and Ben respectively.

There was a stunned silence.

“Well?”

Tony was unaware, but the sniff of disdain was pure Howard.

Between Ben’s ill-at-ease silence and the hippy’s oh-so-calculated “I’m harmless me” act Tony felt his ire rising. Just as the hippy opened his mouth, Tony ruthlessly cut across him,

“Really? That’s all you’ve got to say?”

The nerd was flashing looks at both Tony and Xavier, visibly panicking in the face of a six-year-old’s hostility. Tony mentally filed him under, ‘likely to snap, explosively’ and proceeded to ignore him.

“Really Young Master Stark, is that any way to treat someone who’s trying to help you?”

Xavier’s transatlantic accent only served to rile Tony up further, too reminiscent of the boorish men that Howard liked to spend all of his time with, and evenings when Tony was forced to be polite to the condescending morons.

“Your sales pitch is stellar thus far, really, well done.”

Tony slow clapped. Utterly uncaring of whether the sarcastic gesture even made sense in this time and this place. From Xavier’s puzzled expression Tony guessed that it hadn’t made it into popular culture yet, good. It gave him one more source of anger to fuel the fire building within him.
“Seriously. Why the hell would I want to go to your proxy little finishing school that no one’s ever heard of?”

Tony consciously borrowed the insult from his compiled list of Jarvis’ most cutting responses to the staff, he didn’t think it had quite the same withering effect when he said it, but Xavier seemed to wince nonetheless.

“Especially when the staff appear to consist of an incompetent and a fool who doesn’t know how not to patronise a six-year-old who is due to go to University during the next academic year. I mean, seriously? Am I the only one who ever does the reading?” Tony’s exasperation was no longer feigned, “For gods’ sake, do some research.”

With that riposte, Tony made to storm out, ‘forcing’ Ben to supervise and follow him to the doors of the salle. Tony briefly paused at the doors, and looked up at Ben through his lashes, searching covertly for permission. Ben gave a tiny nod in response,

“No offense Mr Xavier but… Go fuck yourself.”

Hank’s face fell comically, seeming to crumple in on itself

Once the pair had finished storming out, Ben looked down at Tony, and in his driest tones said,

“Well that particular bridge was not only burnt, but the land it’s foundations were built on was salted, and the river dammed as well.”

Despite his words, Ben tone was wryly amused, and Tony thought, quietly approving. Ben looked down at Tony with both eyebrows raised, questioning,

“What on earth did they do to get you so worked up?”

Tony’s rejoinder was instant,
“What did they do to make you so jumpy?”

Ben’s face was suddenly furtive and guilty, the long planes of his face uncharacteristically weasel-like in that moment,

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about Kid.”

“Yeah right, Old Ben.”

Tony’s glare was heated, his round cherubic face attempting a fierce expression that did not suit it. Ben immediately pointed this out, in his typical roundabout fashion,

“You’ve got no leverage you know. I’ve no reason to tell you anything.”

Tony’s response was automatic, he made no attempt to hide the smugness in his tone,

“Which in itself is an admission, whereas before I only had conjecture and suspicion.”

Ben’s large nose crinkled in his displeasure.

“Damn.”

Looking skyward Ben muttered to himself,

“You know, sometimes you remind me far too strongly of Kenneth.”

Tony mentally reminded himself to ask Ben who Kenneth was when he had his guard down. One of these days the contrary ass was liable to tell him something.

“Okay….” Tony decided to drop the subject, true to his nature the man was as stubborn as a mule when he wanted to be, “If you won’t tell me why those two made you so nervous. Um.” Here he
hesitated, genuinely unsure how to voice the question. Tony was still staring at his shoes when Ben reached out from his new position crouched in front of him on the floor,

“What is it?”

Despite his apparently reassuring gesture, Ben’s voice was cautious, promising nothing,

“Well…”

Tony bit his lip, then decided to hell with it. He’d just told a potential ally quite literally to go fuck himself purely because he made a current ally nervous. Though to be fair, seeing said ally nervous had been a quietly terrifying experience. Tony admitted to himself, and resolved to fix, the fact that he may have transferred the childish impression that all of his teachers were perfect super humans onto Ben instead. Tony knew from bitter experience that even Superhumans weren’t perfect, indeed they were just even more human than everyone else, their flaws as exaggerated as everything else about them.

In a burst of exasperation, the question shot out of him,

“Why the hell has everyone been stalling on this university thing?”

“Huh?”

Clearly Ben hadn’t been expecting that question, damn. Tony wished he knew what question his mentor had been braced for. Ben recovered admirably,

“Well… I’m really not sure I should tell you.”

Ben stood back up and puffed his cheeks out as he considered it,

“Look, we didn’t have a deal as such. But fair’s fair. I’ll only drop the other question if you answer this one. And you know I can be persistent.”
Ben’s wry look confirmed that the older man was also thinking of their training session a few months back that had resulted in a very bruised bum for Tony, as he kept getting knocked on his ass – but also an extremely bruised ego for Ben, as the move Tony’d been attempting to force his muscles to carry out for the whole damned session finally paid off and landed Ben on his own posterior.

Ben pulled a face, and for a long moment Tony thought that his leverage wasn’t as persuasive as he’d thought it had been. Huffing out a sigh the older man folded,

“Fine. But you won’t like it.”

“I don’t care. I know they’ve been holding me back, I’m not stupid. I know what it feels like. They’ve even gotten Ms Ramesh in on it!”

The last part of that sentence came out in a childish whine of sadness at that perceived betrayal,

“Oooh. You’re really not going to like it.” Ben pulled his hand down his face, tugging on his lips as he went. “But you’re like a dog with a bone, and I don’t have that kind of patience anymore.”

Tony opened his mouth to point out yet again how he could make things awkward,

“Fine, fine. It was Ed, alright?”

It took a good minute for Tony to process that.

“Wait, what? You mean the reason why everyone’s suddenly been so interested in stopping me from moving on… It was Jarvis??”

After a long moment of muted silence, Tony broke the tension by saying,

“You’re shitting me.”

The sudden spike of hurt betrayal was shattering even with Ben’s quiet confirmation that he hadn’t wanted things to turn out this way.
Tony was surprised, and heartened when his end-of-month meeting with the school’s Landman & Zach attorney proved infinitely more productive than he’d dared to hope for. The long-winter had finally given away to stifling summer heat, making their usual small meeting room feel close and uncomfortable. The initial panic when their usual lawyer hadn’t been in the room hadn’t helped, at first Tony had been suspicious. However, once the reasons why began to emerge it rapidly became clear that Tony’s contract with the firm had just received a serious upgrade in terms of importance.

The lawyer had clearly been well-briefed on the situation, the man very carefully not acting surprised or treating Tony like a child once. Though it helped that after an awkward ten minutes of Tony genuinely being unsure if he could trust the new guy or not, Ben and their usual contact with the firm strolled in chatting as if everything was fine.

Starbucks were still digging in their heels over the hostile takeover deal despite the four-month deadline looming rapidly over their heads, and honestly Tony couldn’t blame them for that. However, one of his other filed patents had received a sudden surge in interest despite the fact that it had been filed away, and since then largely ignored, months ago.

The hi-res, non-degrading Polaroids were a go.

Ironically the money was coming from a war, however it wasn’t military, or a government (thank gods – Tony wasn’t sure his conscience would have allowed him to sign the contract if it had been, and he didn’t put it past the military to be underhanded enough to just go ahead and use the tech anyway), but the international federation of journalists who had noticed the potential. A war journalist had somehow gotten a hold of one of the very few prototypes of the film that had been manufactured on the tiny budget that Tony, and the fledgling firm all of his patents were filed under - Arc Technologies - were working with. They had been impressed by the prototype’s size, cross-compatibility, rapid development and the high quality of the images produced.

Tony had been shocked by the news, he honestly hadn’t thought the tiny numbers of prototypes produced would make it very far beyond the confines of Landman & Zach’s offices and staff. Tony had been resigned to the fact that it would be several years, if not a whole decade before he could start building any momentum on his goal to push tech forward, and yet here he was with a potential contract with Canon sitting in his lap, and a surprise bid from Leica of all people.

Tony made a mental note to remember to ask about just which employee of Landman & Zach had leaked the film when he was in a position to do so and give them a hefty bonus. Whilst the film wasn’t especially ground-breaking or at all world-changing, Tony was glad that the first contract to
land on Arc Technology’s books was going to be for a product so completely innocuous.

Tony listened with only half an ear as he scanned over the documentation, Leica and Canon had apparently both dug a little further into the on-record patents filed under Arc’s name, on the basis that any company capable of advancing their field of speciality this far had to be worth looking into. Apparently both firms were offering vast sums of money to be allowed to be the sole recipient of the prototypes of the batteries, and had even had their own scientists looking at the shock absorbing applications of the non-Newtonian fluids Tony had also filed at the patent office, with respect to producing more resilient models of camera and lens.

Tony felt gleeful at the idea that he could begin sneaking out such tech in such a harmless fashion.

It was a sign of how desperate both firms were to gain the upper hand over their competitors that they were offering to fund all of the charitable work planned for the filtration system, and back-up the Starbucks takeover. Though Tony noted their complete puzzlement about why a technology-based firm such as Arc should want to muscle in on a failing coffee chain.

By the end of the meeting Tony had hashed out a crude plan with the lawyers, Ben providing a surprising amount of insight into the harsh world of business. Arc Industries would be offering partial deals to both Canon and Leica allowing neither firm to hold a monopoly. Tony sincerely hoped that the proposed contracts would be accepted.

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Exam season snuck up and overwhelmed them all. One moment Tony was sheepishly accepting an unexpected, and unexpectedly generous birthday present from Justin – a wholesale lot of several hundred cassettes as well as a heartfelt gift of a mixtape of all of Justin’s favourite songs, and the next the library was suddenly filled with newly industrious students.

Tony’s late-May birthday had often passed unremarked, at least until he’d earned enough freedom to mark them for himself. (Tony still shuddered reflexively at the memory of that ‘final’ party in Malibu.) Even so, Tony had been surprised when a small pile of packages greeted him that Saturday morning in the cafeteria.

He and Justin had hared-off to their private room above the senior lounge, now nearly filled with LPs and torn into the things together. Tony had to admit that even a few months ago, the thought of sharing such a private and personal moment with the other boy would have been abhorrent. Now however, the thought of upsetting his… friend by obviously deciding not to include him… Well, it cut deeper still.
The first small parcel was another surprise object courtesy of Nick Fury. The super-spy’s continued interest in Tony was a puzzle. Tony really didn’t think he remembered the other man hanging around all that much last time, and yet, here he was staring down at a not-so-small stack of 45s that the man had taken the time to send him.

Whilst the 45s were an incredibly eccentric mixture of American-style pop, and stuff that was obviously native to the country Fury was currently posted in (Vietnam from the looks of the labels) there was also the odd bit of strange music hall ephemera, as well as a double disc Monty Python 45 that had Tony paranoidly wondering about what Fury’s source was.

Unfortunately for Tony’s sanity, Justin fell upon a Cliff Richards and the Shadows single with an expression of unholy glee. Trust the man to give Tony something that was simultaneously thoughtful, and seemingly designed to infuriate him.

Aunt Peggy had sent over another mysterious item of martial-arts paraphernalia – it seemed that she’d taken the news that he was learning self-defence to heart. Whilst he’d taken to wearing the silver bracelet, Tony thought guiltily turned to the extending baton that was still sat unused in the bottom of his trunk, and carefully inspected the strange objects. They appeared to be child-sized practice Sai, carved in wood. Tony had to wonder where she’d found them.

Ben’s gift had been more ephemeral consisting of a pile of bizarre candy from around the globe. Tony had been relieved that there wasn’t a new sword to start practicing with, though the gleam in the older man’s eyes promised he’d suffer for that traitorous thought later. Even Mr Reid had somehow heard about the date – and had handed over a large unopened carton of the hot chocolate mix that they still tended to share, despite the increasingly hot weather.

Despite the day of respite caused by the small unexpected celebrations Tony had to admit that he was feeling just as stressed out about the upcoming future-deciding exams as the rest of the school.

Even Justin was feeling the pressure, despite being an ickle-Krelboyne who should have been too young for such things. The other boy’s sudden unholy obsession with cramming made Tony want to wince in reminiscence. He had vague memories of caring that much about something that ultimately mattered so little.

The pair gave up on the library with the sudden influx of other students, more often than not they’d arrive to find their favoured table already occupied. The mass of warm bodies in the usually airy room made the already sticky summer weather unpalatable too.
Eventually the two, by mutual agreement, spent most of their study periods in their shared dorm room – alternating the record choice so that neither party drove the other mad.

In deference to the fact that he was sharing the space Tony tended to put his copy of Low or Young Americans on the turntable when it was his turn, rather than his usual choice of something loud enough to blast everything but the particular thought he wanted to concentrate on out of his brain.

Justin on the other hand seemed determined to work his way through his entire, ridiculously large, considering the time-span in which he’d acquired it, LP and singles collection that month.

Tony had to admit that the other boy’s approach to studying wasn’t as irritating as he’d have previously given him credit for. Tony had been fully expecting Justin to continue his usual practice of picking one single to obsess over for the foreseeable future. Fortunately for his sanity, Justin had seemed to realise that his more usual habit of looping whichever song he was enamoured over that week would not be welcomed. It was a nice change.

Despite himself Tony was nervous about his performance in the upcoming tests.

Oh, it wasn’t that he doubted that he had the knowledge. Tony was self-assured enough in his intelligence at least, that things of this nature no longer made him nervous even though Tony was painfully aware that he still knew far too little about the History curriculum that he was currently focusing on cramming into his brain.

No, it was the necessity to self-edit. Tony barely managed that socially, all too aware of the judgemental stares whenever he did something to earn someone else’s ire – self-aware enough to spot that he’d done something wrong, but never equipped with the tools to fix it.

Tony was obsessively memorising the text books, trying desperately to cram the backwards outdated racist homophobic and sexist doctrine of the internationally awful 70s-schooling systems into his short-term memory. (There was no way on earth Tony was going to let that mind-set contaminate anything else.)

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Howard eyed up the latest missive from Anthony’s school with distaste. The boy had recently sat, and apparently received straight As for the CSE exams. A standardised qualification that held some weight in Britain of all places. Howard vaguely remembered signing off on the school’s request for
some additional education when Edwin had all but shoved the paperwork under his nose with an irritated huff. Despite the gushing tone of the note he couldn’t bring himself to feel much more than unease. Why on earth was the boy taking British exams of all things? It was bizarre.

Still, the implications didn’t pass him by – Howard was aware that his son would probably want to head off to university soon. Howard wasn’t sure if the sensation roiling through his guts was pride or unease. He’d certainly been amused when Edwin had informed him, tone frosty, that Anthony had outright refused Xavier’s offer of spending time at the man’s little mutant clubhouse over the summer.

Despite the disapproving tone in his old friend’s voice Howard had been relieved that Tony seemed to see through Xavier’s veneer of civility as easily as Howard himself did.

After a little digging of his own, using SHIELD resources, Howard was almost certain that his son didn’t possess the x-gene. However, that relieving lack made Xavier’s sudden interest all the more troubling.

Perhaps it was all of that running around with Peggy he’d done during the war, but Howard strongly suspected that the man was a racial supremacist of the subtler sort.

Howard had only okayed the proposed meeting after much cajoling on Edwin’s behalf, he had no idea why his right-hand man felt so strongly on this issue, but with Ana’s recent health problems he hadn’t the heart to put his foot down, the Jarvises had gone through enough on his behalf over the years. If the man wanted his son consorting with mutants, after all that Howard had put him through, well, Stark Industries could probably take the resulting stock fluctuations, no matter what Obadiah had to say on the matter.

Howard had not been looking forward to seeing the disapproval on Edwin’s face when he turned down the invite to Xavier’s not-so-secret training facility.

Fortunately, his boy had done that for him.

Perhaps his son was ready to enter the wider world after all. It hadn’t escaped Howard’s notice that there was a sudden quiet influx of patents filed under his son’s name, entirely separately from Stark Industries. Clever boy.

It seemed his son was a fledgling businessman as well as an idealist, that unfamiliar warm spark
sputtered in Howard’s chest again before dying out as the door to his office slammed open abruptly.

Obadiah strolled into the office as if he owned the place, Howard scowled in the tall man’s direction whilst subtly checking to see what on earth his secretary was doing out there. Whilst he was on the board of directors, Stane was not the CEO of this company, and didn’t own anywhere near enough shares to deserve special treatment - for all that he’d been there since the early struggles to push SI back into the forefront of the tech race of the post space-race era.

“What do you want Obadiah?”

His voice was tired, Howard was not in the mood to deal with the latest argument about who SI should and shouldn’t be dealing with. The SHIELD contracts weren’t lucrative no, but he’d been there at the founding of that organisation from the ashes of the SSR in the wake-of the furore of the over-zealous activities of the House of Un-American Activities after McCarthy’s sudden spectacular fall from grace. Howard was not going to let his people down. Not again.

The scenes of Finow flashed before his mind’s eye, bringing with it the familiar sensation of helpless rage.

Nothing he ever did would be enough to wipe his responsibility for that massacre situation clean.

Obadiah had ranted himself out whilst Howard hadn’t been paying attention, the great oaf excused himself with some supercilious remark that he paid no heed to.

Howard pulled himself to his feet to check on Beth, he was well-aware that she did not like Mr Stane, and honestly Howard himself was beginning to wonder how much damage it would do to push him off the board.

Beth was upset that Obadiah had barged straight-in, completely ignoring her calls for him to come back with an appointment, but she’d been otherwise unaccosted.

The prolonged time spent on his feet calming her down triggered the unpleasant hot-cold sensations in the not-yet-fully-recovered injury he’d acquired the previous summer. His idiot-son’s ridiculous contraption had somehow sliced clean through two of his metatarsals, a good deal of soft muscle tissue and a ligament. It had taken months to recover from, not aided by the fact that Howard refused to use a wheelchair like an invalid. Howard’s foot throbbed angrily at him.
Howard limped towards the cabinet he kept in his office for just such a situation, and poured himself a generous four or five fingers of scotch downing it angrily. The comforting burn combined with the lingering hot ache in Howard’s foot sparking off an idea. The first he’d had in what felt like eons at this point.

The hot burning sensation had Howard contemplating the well-documented (well, in the government facilities at least) propensity for mitochondria to put out prodigious amounts of heat under the right (or wrong) circumstances. If he could alter the prototype serum they’d been attempting to reverse engineer for decades now to work with the subject’s own telomeres to bypass the Hayflick limit with the aid of the serum’s own well-documented mitochondrion manipulation, then perhaps using the aforementioned proton-leak they’d be able to get somewhere.

As he started to hastily scribble down the proposed alterations to the serum’s formula Howard huffed to himself ruefully. Perhaps he should be thanking the boy for making that wretched toy after all.

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With the exams, and the increasingly hot summer looming, Ben stormed right up to Tony at the start of one of his free study sessions and demanded,

“How did you know?”

Tony was utterly nonplussed, he honestly had no idea what Ben was talking about.

Ben grunted in frustration and rushed out,

“Star Wars. How did you know?”

Tony grinned cheekily up at the older man.

“The Force, Old Ben, the Force.”

Ben glowered. Tony decided to rub it in a little further,
“I’m surprised you didn’t find out sooner Old Ben – the film’s been out for a couple of weeks now. Did you miss it in your dotage?”

He shot his mentor his most infuriating shit-eating grin, Ben huffed and stomped away in just as much of a fluster as when he’d materialised. The other man’s departure earned him curious looks from the numerous students all sharing the study hall but for once he didn’t seem to care.

Tony quietly laughed to himself, and got back down to memorising the book that was the Literature assignment for the end of year high school diploma exam.

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Leaning back and staring up at the tree that had become *his* spot in the school gardens Tony exhaled in frustration. Once again Mr Reid wasn’t in his little guardhouse, Tony suspected that the perpetually bedraggled security guard had yet again tag-teamed D’Eath with La Guerta. The thought made him smile, the pair were slowly dragging the other man out of his protective shell though Tony doubted he’d be around to see the end-results.

One year, he’d been at this for a year and progress was frustratingly slow. His academic progress was actually coming along nicely, if much too slowly for his tastes thanks to Jarvis’s meddling. But at least in that realm there was visible, quantifiable progress. Even though the long-promised dip-vat had never materialised.

Tony thought that if things continued at their projected rate he’d be able to test out by the end of the academic year earning himself a small measure of freedom from the system, and hopefully, Howard. The number of hoops he’d had to jump through to get to this point had made him feel like a prize pedigree fucking terrier.

It turned out that as well as the exam preparation Tony had earnt himself another round of stressful testing by pure dint of his age. He’d needed to prove that he was mature enough to cope in the “real world”, Tony scoffed at the thought, as if academia was the ‘real world’, it wasn’t just about academic smarts this time. The sudden inexplicable care for his welfare was unwanted and stifling. He wasn’t sure what had changed this time around. He’d been packed off to MIT at 12 in the first timeline, was 7 really that different? It was only five years early.

Tony wondered what he’d done to earn such a change, Howard certainly hadn’t given a damn last time. As soon as the school was willing to okay it Howard had shipped him off without a second
thought, and Tony had jumped on the opportunity to move to another state, further away from the mansion than even the school.

No, the old man had shown no hint of care this time either, it was definitely Jarvis’s interference. But why?

Ben had scoffed derisively at him every time he brought up his frustrations in their sessions, as if indicating that Tony’s too-slow progress in the field of swordsmanship was somehow comparable. Honestly Tony had very little idea about what Ben’s goal was nowadays, the insane crash course of styles from all areas of the world aside Ben seemed determined to impart some strange sense of knowledge to Tony. Not that Tony had a clue what that knowledge was, and contrary as usual Ben was keeping schtum about whatever it was.

Still, despite his perpetual lingering discomfort in his own skin, Tony had to admit that he’d learnt a lot under the man’s tutelage. And not just the self-defence that had been the initial goal of their sessions. Tony really had to admit to himself that he was going to miss the older man when he inevitably ended their sessions, Ben had been getting increasingly antsy and Tony had no idea what the cause was – other than the growing suspicion that Tony himself was beginning to bore him.

In the meantime, his fencing lessons had grown ever more frustrating – Ty’s constant irritating attempts to belittle Tony and the other members of the class however, had earned the other boy Mr La Guerta’s ire. Whilst the other members of staff (barring D’Eath) were willing to chalk Ty’s behaviour up to boyish high spirits, La Guerta had rapidly grown fed-up of Ty’s tendency to mysteriously hurt his practice partners whenever the man’s back was turned. Though La Guerta couldn’t conclusively prove anything, the Vietnam war veteran had clearly drawn his own conclusions from the fact that Ty was the common thread linking all of these little incidents in his class, and made a point of teaming up with the budding psychopath himself more often than not.

However, he was getting there, slow as he found the rate of completion – Tony had more or less finished all of the credit projects for his High School diploma, as luck would have it the coursework required for the CSEs he’d already taken, and the A-levels he was yet to sit, counted nicely as extra credit to that end too. So even given the high bias towards examination in this era, the end of year exams counted for less than they could have, not that Tony was particularly worried. (Well, apart from history. Much to Tony’s chagrin he just couldn’t bring himself to follow the doctrine of the seventies.)

The magical progress? Not so much. He’d been meditating regularly for a year with no real progress to speak of.

After that brief terrifying moment at the mansion he’d had nothing not a peep. Nada. Well that’s assuming that initial something had been magic and not stress induced madness. Doom had seemed
to confirm that he had done something. But then Doom was as trustworthy as a snake.

He hated magic.

Even with all of the data he’d acquired over the years he was still no closer to tying the universal laws of physics to the little magical theory he’d managed to pick up.

Cloying red tendrils, blocking everything else out with their haze... What was that?

Tony blinked at the sudden lack of light, peering up owlishly at the figure looming above him, somehow Tony was utterly unsurprised that Tiberius Stone was scowling down at him.

Even with the distance he’d been trying to maintain from Stone, the other boy seemed convinced that they were rivals.

If anything, Tony’s attempts at not joining in with the classroom politics in the advanced Krelboyne group had been interpreted as cool arrogant aloofness by the other students. If the situation, and the dreadful memories that were dredged up weren’t so dire Tony would have laughed wryly at his terrible luck.

It seemed that no matter what he did, Ty was destined to become obsessed with him. The mad gleam was already there in the other boy’s eyes. Tony really had no idea how he’d managed to ignore it for so long the first time around.

Tony shook himself back to reality, the meditative state he had been deeply immersed in was making it difficult to come up with any quick plan of action.

The larger boy grinned down at them, knowledge of their relative isolation writ large across his face.

Tony glared. He knew he wasn’t supposed to use his training with Ben in a situation like this, it was supposed to be his ace in the hole. Hidden. Secret. The only advantage he’d have in a truly dangerous situation was surprise, he couldn’t waste all of that effort on something so petty.

And yet.
Ty leaned forward as if to yank Tony to his feet, still half in the trance state Tony willed the idiot to go away and leave him in peace. He had no idea what he’d done to deserve this treatment this time around.

Ty seemed to think better of grabbing him, and pulled back a leg for a kick, his spiked soccer shoes glinting in the bright sunlight.

Tony’s eyes zeroed in on the metal, the fear rose up unexpectedly, memories of a different set of feet, another beating, voices shouting at him in all the languages of the world, a cave, water, electricity, oh gods, surgery without anaesthetic, open heart surgery with only ether to stop him moving around too much. Conscious of everything being done to him, brain recoiling in horror as he failed to control his limbs and wrench away from the madman cracking his sternum op-

When Tony managed to drag himself back into the here and now Ty was running away in the distance, screaming.

Tony cocked his head, puzzled. He was still awkwardly tangled up in his own limbs, halfway out of the lotus position that Ty had disturbed Tony hadn’t even managed to stand up.

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It had taken longer than the Ancient One would have liked to make the trip over to the New York Sanctum. Or rather it had taken her a long time to prepare for the trip, the journey itself taking barely a moment.

She sighed – the Ancient One hadn’t wanted to leave the central Karma-Taj monastery in a lurch. However, all of the prepwork, especially the reinforcement of the great-wards encircling the planet had eaten far too much time, time that she could have spent searching for this new potential. Knowledge that on a quantum level at least, all time was happening simultaneously be damned.

She smiled wryly to herself, Master Drumm had already made a point of locking all of the relics away in glass cases, shooting her a meaningful look when she arrived. The Ancient One had wanted to tease him about his behaviour but had thought better of it. She wanted to get started on her little search as soon as possible, and playing at internal politics for her own amusement wouldn’t speed things along, quite the opposite.
As always, the bustle of New York utterly failed to impress her, The Ancient One had grown used to the natural disorderly chaos in Kathmandu (despite her initial distaste for the place when Karmataj had been forced to up sticks from their old serene site in Tibet) – New York’s more modern, more *artificial* brand of busy just made her feel every second of her age. Always a dangerous thing for one such as herself.

The Ancient One had just set off for the relative oasis that was Central Park – impending bankruptcy or not, the vast space there was a haven, despite the occasional poster declaring “New York, Death City”. No matter what Drumm had to say about the dangers, the Ancient One had fended off more violent incursions than anything a few mundane crooks, and a jumped up Jack the Ripper wannabe could throw at her.

She was just crossing the road when the wave of power hit her, if it weren’t for her experience, the centuries spent channelling the fiery corrosive power that was Dormammu, the power that always threatened to burn through her at any moment… Well, The Ancient One dreaded to think what could have happened. Pausing for a split second, the Ancient One finished crossing the road before allowing the sensations to wash over her, there was power there, and fear and pain and rage. All born from the same icy terror. She could almost taste the depth of it, even for one such as her, saturated as she was, the energy was exhilarating.

And then, it was gone.

As quickly as it had come, the wave passed. The power taking with it the swirl of chaotic emotion that had obviously birthed it. The Ancient One sighed, and decided that she was going to continue on her trip to Central Park anyway. It would be nice to see what changes had been made to the place since Hooverville had been torn down, it had been such a long time since she’d last taken the time to sightsee in the city.

Besides she had a direction to start looking in now, the wave had come from somewhere to the North of here. Somewhere surprisingly close.

No wonder it had taken this long to track the source down to America, the Potential was right next to the New York Sanctum, practically hidden underneath the eye of the sanctum’s all-encompassing footprint. As far as these things went there wasn’t a better hiding place.

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Charles rocked back in his chair – clutching at his head. A wave of pure concentrated fright had completely separated him from his sense of self, and time and place.
Blinking back the echoes Charles refocussed on his study to find Hank staring down at him in worried sympathy,

“Charles?”

“Hank!”

The exclamation of surprise was genuine, the other man hadn’t been there when the wave of emotion had hit. Charles blinked up at him, once again hating the enforced sitting position that was so necessary.

“When did you get up here?”

“When you were away with the fairies? Was it anything we need to worry about?” The concern in Hank’s voice took on a more personal flavour, he looked at Charles assessingly, “Or are your gifts playing up again?”

“No, no.” Charles could see from Hank’s expression that the other man didn’t believe him, “Well, it wasn’t my gift that was playing up.”

“Oh, shall I prep the car? Where were they?”

“No, no. Nothing like that I’m afraid.”

“Charles?”

“I can’t be entirely sure without using Cerebro, but I believe I know who was in such distress yes.”

Hank frowned at Charles at that admission,

“And we aren’t going to help them?”
“I’m afraid that any attempts to intervene prematurely would likely result in making the situation worse.”

“Oh. Who is it?”

Hank’s tone let Charles know that anything less than the truth would not be accepted, the other man had already drawn his own conclusions,

“Yes Hank” Charles responded to the unspoken question underneath that sentence, “It’s the Stark child again.”

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Tony sighed inwardly when he saw Ty’s gang purposefully lounging around in the Krelboyn study room, terrorising the rest of the group before mentally shrugging. To hell with it. He’d tried for months to take the highroad, be the mature party, and turn the other cheek. …Well alright, with the odd brief and violent exception.

Now however Tony was coming to the end of his patience. Loosening the shackles around his inner cynical bastard Tony decided to channel Rick Sanchez for all that he was worth, what the hell. It could hardly make the situation any worse, right?

Fuck it, he’d lived under the yoke of Ty’s ridiculously ineffectual nickname for months now. Time to do what he did best and add a little spin to the tale. Assuming a cocksure grin and his most self-assured swagger, Tony strutted straight into the centre of the crowd and raised his arms in a grand sweeping gesture,

“What’s up bitches, I’m Tiny Tony!”

He channelled as much glee into that statement as he could cram in there, emphasising the by now hated nickname with extra volume. The clamour died down as belligerent and resigned expressions turned bemused, the crowd watching to see what he would do next. Feeling Justin’s gaze heavy on the back of his neck Tony spun around and winked reassuringly at his young friend, before continuing on the planned verbal tirade,
“Now I know you’re all wondering what I’m doing in here pissing on your cereal like this.”

Tony put on an exaggerated downcast expression for effect,

“And, well, frankly I’m here to remind you all of what happened when Cord tried to drag me into his silly little power games.”

Tony could tell that despite his dramatic entrance he wasn’t quite wooing the crowd with his usual skill, Tony could feel the aggression and anger that he was trying to keep stifled leaking out despite himself. Whatever had happened underneath the tree that day had really done a number on his already tenuous control.

The crowd of Krelboynes were as frightened of him as they were of Ty. Tony could feel it. The thought was uncomfortably sobering.

Ty sauntered over, followed by one of his more devoted hangers-on,

“What are you trying to do Stark? Prove you’re not a pussy?”

Not resisting the urge to roll his eyes Tony spat out the first retort that came to his head,

“You are both pieces of shit, and I can prove it mathematically.”

Crap. Perhaps he shouldn’t have been channelling his inner-Rick, Tony had wanted to charm his way out of this ridiculous situation that had built up not turn into a bully himself.

For a split-second Ty’s entire appearance changed, no longer a belligerent child but a small monstrous thing blinking at him with the same angry expression that had been on Ty’s face a moment before. Before Tony could contemplate a reaction beyond surprise the image had vanished leaving him glaring up at Ty once again. Tony tried not to let his momentary horror at whatever that had been show on his face, but he needn’t have bothered.

To Tony’s surprise, Stone didn’t seem to have his own come-back lined up, face reddening noticeably in embarrassment. Tony blinked as Ty’s face first paled dramatically, then crumbled into
noticeable tears as he fled the room ignoring the plight of his hench… boy.

Tony decided not to look a gift horse in the mouth, and moved further into the room to get on with cramming for exams.

The larger boy backed away hurriedly as Tony sauntered past. Tony internally grinned, he still wasn’t sure what he’d done that day underneath the tree, but Ty was temporarily terrified of him.

Ty’s increasingly small crowd of sycophants stormed out of the weekly Krelboyne free-study session to the sound of cheering. Whilst the Krelboyne’s didn’t actually like Tony all that much, it seemed they couldn’t stand Ty either.

Tony ignored the strange flashes of other-ness that caught his eye as he settled down to study, grinning at H-Justin all the while. Damn, he really really hadn’t expected that to work.

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Tony was still feeling betrayed by the fact that his academic progress had purposefully been slowed at Jarvis’s request. And, of course, the school had hurried to comply, since they didn’t want to lose the nearly bottomless funds that the Stark accounts no doubt represented. The cynical CEO in him suspected it was the school’s way of proving to Howard that he was getting his money’s worth. Howard had paid for a year’s worth of tuition, and that was what he was going to get – Tony’s wishes be damned. Tony had to admit to himself that Geeky Leekie seemed to care more than that though, so perhaps it really was due to some misguided concern for his welfare.

Tony looked down at the little folder sat on Geeky Leekie’s desk in satisfaction, it had taken nearly a whole academic year. But he’d finally gotten through all of the stinking coursework for the numerous international qualifications he was taking.

It was with a sense of accomplishment that Tony was finally able to begin the drawn-out process of university applications, heart in his mouth Tony handed over the SAT application form to Leekie.

Whilst the exams themselves were still to come, Tony felt that he’d more than earnt the hard-won permission to begin the university application process. The knowledge that it was Jarvis of all people that had slowed everything up this past year still chaffed.
They’d discussed Tony’s situation at length, Tony had opted to take the standard US High School level diploma. As well as the British CSEs he’d already put himself through, Tony was going to sit for the supposedly tougher O-Levels, the International Baccalaureates that were recognised by most of the Commonwealth nations, and the Japanese equivalents (whose name amusingly enough Leekie couldn’t pronounce).

However, the nearly interminable academic repetition hadn’t been anywhere near as infuriating as the sudden round of psychological evaluations that had crawled out of the woodwork as soon as he’d finally completed all of the academic brew-ha-ha (well, apart from the dreaded exams that were scheduled for late June).

Tony could see Jarvis’s fingerprints all over this little intervention. Only, of course the man was nowhere to be seen, leaving Tony trying desperately not to vent spleen at Leekie – one of the individuals with university veto power according to Ben. Tony still couldn’t quite believe the sheer number of obstacles that had been put in his way this time around. No one had seemed to care when Howard had shipped him off to MIT back in the day. Tony genuinely wasn’t sure what was different now, but it was infuriating.

After several months of negotiations with neither side getting anywhere the final obstacle in his path had finally and unexpectedly okayed everything. Due to the sheer length of the list of qualifications Tony was going to be earning himself at the end of the term, the psychologist the school had brought in had finally thrown up his hands and declared Tony ready to apply for university. Tony had been left boggling at the anti-climax, Tony really couldn’t quite believe how many variations of the same thing he’d been required to fill out over and over again just to prove he was ready for university.

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Tony spent much of the next two weeks debating with himself just which university he was going to end up focussing his application on, rather than focusing on the upcoming exams that he probably should have been concentrating on revising for. He took to wandering around with prospectuses in hand, constantly reading the information, even in the cafeteria, a room ripe with hazing potential (purposefully ignoring the occasional flash of unbelievable strangeness that would occasionally pop-up in the corner of his vision). Justin, bless him, did his best to warn Tony of any looming threats. The one would-be bully who’d gotten too close for comfort had earned himself a timely reminder of just why Tony’s electricity-enhanced nerve pinches were whispered of in fear around the schoolyard.

For some reason that Tony hadn’t managed to fathom, the few remaining seniors in Cord’s inner circle had taken to habitually wearing football armour on their shoulders. Or at least they’d tried to, after one week of this behaviour Mr D’Eath had gotten fed up of the situation. The dour man had taken one dour look at the class and ordered in a voice that brooked no challenge,
“Everyone wearing inappropriate sporting equipment. Out. Don’t come back until you’re properly attired for the classroom.”

Tony’s wary admiration for the man had grown. Though he’d half wanted to see just what the idiotic group had been planning, and was a little upset that his wait-and-see approach to the situation had been stymied.

Of course, the distraction of just which university to focus his nebulous plans for the future on was still a pressing one. MIT had many advantages, not least of which was the guarantee that he’d bump into Rhodey again. Much as Tony hated to admit it to anyone, he missed his honey bear like a physical ache. Sure, they’d spent months, even years at a time apart from each other. But this? This enforced separation with no end in sight? This was different. Tony swallowed down the hot surge of homesickness that threatened to overwhelm him, and tried to stop his heart from ruling his head. There was nothing that said Rhodey would even like him this time around. They’d certainly had a rocky first few months, who’s to say that the mysterious catalyst that had triggered their friendship would even appear this time? Tony was certainly none the wiser about why the older man had decided to be friends with him all those years ago.

Perhaps he should take that advice about business school after all? Much as he hated to admit it the old man had a point. Obie certainly wouldn’t have been able to get away with half as much as he had if Tony had only been paying attention. Half-heartedly flicking through the prospectuses to Yale and Harvard, heart sinking as Tony saw how behind the tech and R&D aspects of their curriculums were Tony resisted the urge to just give up and throw the paperwork across the dorm room. H-Justin wouldn’t appreciate yet another invasion of his precious personal space, even though Tony knew that the other boy probably wouldn’t say anything to him about it.

Tony frowned down at the lackadaisical curriculum laid out in the Yale prospectus. He knew he was being unfair. The STEM curriculum was at the cutting edge, amongst the top five in the country. Yet compared to MIT the Ivy League schools just didn’t compare, and Tony knew that if he committed to business with no option for another subject – well he’d go mad.

And yet, MIT. The world-renowned tech school just didn’t have the same allure that he’d thought it would.

Tony had been putting the promise of university, and the freedom that came with it, on a pedestal – a distant goal to be reached and attained. As if that meagre achievement would solve all of his other problems overnight. And yet somehow, now that decision time was looming, MIT wasn’t the beacon of hope that Tony had assumed it would be.

It really didn’t help that Tony’s memories of MIT weren’t all sunshine and roses, of course they weren’t. He’d shown up at the university as a snotty nosed 12-year-old, ego inflated by his meteoric
rise through the paltry academic challenges presented by high school. …Well his fellow students hadn’t taken well to his attitude, or the fact that he genuinely did have the smarts to back it up.

No. There was a reason that Tony had been avoiding the MIT prospectus, being truthful with himself, the sickness he felt in his stomach every time he glanced through the glossy magazine wasn’t entirely down to the possibility of missing Rhodey.

So… If the unthinkable was true, if MIT was really out, where else? Definitely not Yale. Harvard? They were well known, even in the hyper-competitive realm of Cambridge Massachusetts for their research and education in all of the fields that Tony cared about – and they had a pretty good reputation on the business end of things too. Princeton?

But no, somehow the idea that Howard was merely the next state over was sickening. More so now that Tony knew his father was watching his business endeavours. Whilst Howard had never shown that much interest in Tony’s academic career once he’d defied the older man and gone into computer science and engineering against his wishes, well, for some unfathomable reason Howard was showing more interest this time.

Where the delays had Jarvis’s fingerprints all over them, the sudden inexplicable removal of roadblocks was Howard’s speciality.

Eschewing the Ivy League Tony started to think further afield.

Stanford? It was in California at least. Tony would be back on the West Coast, with most of the USA between himself and his father. Somehow even that didn’t seem far enough away. Especially given the unspoken expectation that he attend somewhere closer to home.

Picking up and cursorily flicking through the international prospectuses Tony contemplated his options. The University of Tokyo? NIT? At least they focussed on the subjects that Tony preferred, and it would be easy to get lost in that megacity. Tony flinched, no, though the chance of running into her was slim in the extreme, Tokyo was inextricably linked with Ru. He couldn’t. Especially since Tony was well aware that their first ‘coincidental’ meeting had been no coincidence.

Sighing Tony didn’t even contemplate China or Russia – there was no way he’d be allowed that far away from Howard’s influence. He started to peruse the Eurotrash. Switzerland was always nice… But no, without the influence of CERN there was no way Howard would give him permission to bury himself in obscurity somewhere so far out of the way, no matter how good the skiing was there.
Glancing down Tony didn’t dare think of it when he spotted the option. Surely not? Was the answer really that simple?

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After all of that build-up, the nervous anticipation that had infected even the way Tony viewed the past couple of months, despite the way that he’d literally gone through the entire process before… Well the end of year exams were a hell of a let-down.

To Tony’s chagrin, after all of that stressing, and the number of hours he’d spent debating with himself over whether or not he should write down his actual opinions, or merely the opinion that the curriculum the school had decided upon required. Well, the damned high-school diploma end-of-year exams had been an absolute breeze.

The science and math papers actually turned out to be surprisingly fun, once he realised how basic the things were. The math paper especially was almost insulting, Tony ended up twiddling his thumbs for more than ¾ of the allotted time available. The science paper was slightly more of a challenge, due to the sheer amount of anxiety Tony felt about remembering what tech was/wasn’t available. He was rather relieved when the techniques & technology questioned turned out to be about fractional distillation techniques. A method that hadn’t much changed since the invention of accurate lab-glass, even in Tony’s time.

Tony had been almost disappointed when he realised that D’Eath had completely avoided any of the topics that he’d been getting so worked up over in their history lessons, the bulk of the exam focused on American history, thankfully skirting the knotty issue of the treatment of the Native population and focusing on the events and battles that took place during the Civil War and the War of Independence – both topics that Tony actually knew quite a bit about beyond the curriculum, due to his aforementioned research on battlefield tactics.

To his relief, the main essay question focused on the minutiae of the build-up to the second world war, and how the European approach of appeasing Hitler for several years had probably lead to a far greater catastrophe than would otherwise have been the case. Of course, Tony had ruefully admitted to himself, when midway through the allotted time he realised he’d answered all of the questions on the history paper, and had over an hour to kill… It probably helped that he’d grown up with first-hand accounts from people who’d actually lived through some of the situations in the paper.

Tony wasn’t sure if it was possible to be more relieved, he’d turned the page fully expecting the nasty moral-testing question to pop-up at him, and instead realised that he’d reached the end of the exam paper. In the end, he’d gotten bored enough that he’d ended up fleshing out his answer to the question with additional information about Japan’s march through much of the Pacific region, and the reasons behind the country’s pre-emptive attack on Pearl Harbour. He’d ended up putting forth
the argument that the second world war didn’t start in 1942 as the woeful current American textbooks had it, or even 1939 as in Europe but in 1937 when the Empire of Japan expanded its war on China to the entire region.

Tony had to admit that the stance might not win him any points when the exams were being marked, but he’d been bored nearly to tears by that point. Of course, he’d been left in a jittery state of excited nervousness for the rest of the day, the lack of the expected moral crisis leaving its own mark in its wake.

Perhaps inevitably the one subject that Tony hadn’t bothered to carry out a huge amount of prepwork for ended up being the toughest paper by far. Tony had decided against rereading the annotated version of the novel they’d been studying in English Lit, perhaps foolishly relying on his eidetic memory to help him and sticking with just reading the text itself. He regretted it immediately, when Tony realised that he couldn’t’ remember if his ideas about the overarching themes of the piece at all aligned with the accepted opinions that D’Eath had made them learn. Damn. Tony really wished that he’d paid more attention.

The remaining international examinations ended up being a rather perfunctory affair, however Tony should probably have expected it given his treatment earlier in the year when he’d sat the GCE’s.

Tony ended up spending a full week holed up in Leekie’s office sitting exams nearly back to back whilst the rest of the school was out celebrating its newfound freedom. Even Justin had looked upon Tony’s decision less than sympathetically, pointing out (correctly) that international universities definitely accepted high school diplomas as proof. (And that Tony would have to go through a whole extra set of exams again if he applied for them.)

Tony had had to admit that the other boy had a point, especially when at the very end of the interminable stretch of examinations, much to his chagrin the English Lit Baccalaureate paper referred to an obscure Shakespeare play (Coriolanus) that Tony only had the dimmest memory of half-heartedly reading at a conference, decades ago, rather than anything he’d studied recently. Tony had muddled his way through the question hazarding guesses as to what they meant about the themes of the play from his knowledge of the film adaptation. However, he had a feeling he hadn’t gotten away with it.

Apart from that minor hiccup, the only real difficulty that he’d had with the numerous curriculums in the end had all been provided by the arts end of the spectrum – it wasn’t that Tony didn’t understand the analysis, or even that he didn’t appreciate the literature (apart from that one play…) the IB exams focused heavily on Kafka’s the Metamorphosis, Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein (overlapping neatly with Tony’s CSE qualifications), and poetry from a number of sources ranging from the dark era of War Poetry, Byron’s romantic studies, and Pablo Neruda’s seminal works.
No – it was remembering precisely which exam board favoured which analysis that was the issue. Well, that and the utter chore that working through Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales in the Original Old English for the O-Levels proved to be. As an individual who regularly quoted Machiavelli and Plato in casual conversation, Tony certainly was no stranger to the world of classical literature, no matter what the rest of the world liked to think.

In comparison, even the small jump-up in content provided by the more focused, and slightly closer to university level content used in the A-levels wasn’t as challenging. Tony only had 5 subjects to get through for these particular examinations, Physics, Mathematics, Further Mathematics, Chemistry and Biology – and as such had no particular trouble with the things. (Despite a brief hairy moment in the Physics exam when he couldn’t for the life of him get a linear-relation on the graph question from the dataset provided, Tony eventually had a ‘duh!’ moment and swapped to a log-hyperbolic plot – slapping himself loudly on the forehead over his own brief moment of utter stupidity there.)

In total Tony had ended up spending nearly two more weeks confined to the exam rooms than everyone else, to much mocking from Cord, Taggart and especially Ty (who’d eventually gotten over his fright). However, Tony figured that the international options (and the inevitable reputation-boost) that this approach opened up were more than worth the trouble.

Despite the relative ease with which he’d completed the exams, nearly a solid months-worth of scheduled testing had taken its toll. The international qualifications had been squeezed in at all hours around the school’s own tests so that they wouldn’t drag out too long on either side of the official exam season – the A-levels carried out nearly a whole week before everything else. All of the mental jumping from one perspective to another had left Tony drained despite the fact that there wasn’t all that much difference between what was expected from him in each set of exams.

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The last couple of weeks of the school year were a strange time – most of the students were happily enjoying the summer weather, taking advantage of the sudden increase in free time that they suddenly found themselves with. With the end of year exams finally out of the way Tony was free to focus once more on his university applications.

Justin was amongst the lucky carefree section of the school’s population, whilst he had enough common sense to not fill their shared room with loud obnoxious repetitions of certain singles on a loop, Tony had to admit that he was mildly jealous of the fact that Justin was able to spend his afternoons lounging about in their room listening to the proto-walkman and reading whatever took his fancy.

Tony had expected the other boy to spend his days outdoors like almost everybody else, but perhaps he should have realised that Justin really wasn’t an outdoors kind of person.
In direct contrast a significant proportion of the seniors, Tony included, were still frantically spending their time cramming, this time for the SATs, and numerous other university entrance exams.

In the end, after much pondering, Tony had decided focus on applying to Cambridge, specifically to St Cedd’s college rather than his old postgraduate haunt at Corpus Christi. He remembered his time there earning his third doctorate fondly, no one had tried to kill him, or use him (much) for corporate espionage, and no one he’d met there had turned into a bona fide supervillain on him years later. Of course, by that time, the next generation of young genii had made their way into the upper echelons of higher learning, so as well as the ever-infuriating Reed Richards, Tony had occasionally shared company with T’Challa, Hope, and Helen Cho.

Of course, it helped that Cambridge and MIT had an exchange programme, one that Tony fully intended to take advantage of when he turned 14 and Rhodey turned up there. Tony knew he’d gone there when he was 12 the first time around, and he felt loathe to mess around with his MIT timeline too much. However, Tony couldn’t bear the thought of going through those two years of utter desolate loneliness again. Or the time spent avoiding anyone related to a fraternity like the plague. At least that particular aspect of US-university life hadn’t quite made its way across the Atlantic even by Tony’s time.

Tony whizzed through the SAT tests, mostly uncaring about the results now that he’d decided to apply to a University with its own separate entrance exam. The main thing he had to focus on was not referencing things that didn’t exist yet. A task he’d gotten better at, but still had to expend far too much conscious effort over.

If Leekie was surprised that Tony had opted to take every single subject test available – barring the languages, of which Tony only opted to take Chinese, French and Italian – the man hadn’t shown it.

Tony could tell that several of the other seniors had been surprised to see him in the language exams, given that he’d never shown up to any of the school’s optional lessons. Tony kept his face carefully neutral as he strolled in to the rooms to sit the things. (The Chinese was a risk, but Tony figured it would get reconfirming his fluency out of the way so was worth it.)

Whilst Tony felt the usual frustrations over the patronising content of the science questions and the points of view required for the history and literature papers Tony felt as though he’d acquitted himself reasonably.

The two main SAT exams proved a mix bag for Tony. Predictably he whizzed through both halves of the mathematics paper in less than half of the allotted time, finding the majority of the questions insultingly easy. The non-calculator half of the exam was especially irritating given the simplicity of
the solutions requested; however, Tony was well-aware that he wasn’t the best judge of these things.

The logic tests disguised as reading comprehension had Tony finding fault with the questions themselves – Tony found it incredibly frustrating to completely leave out his own knowledge on the topics chosen, and rely on the fact that the questions didn’t want Tony to actually apply that knowledge to the situations presented.

However, overall Tony wasn’t actually too stressed about the results. His natural competitiveness aside, Tony was aware that the entrance stipulations that Cambridge required relied more on their own internal interviews and exams than any standardised scores Tony received here. Just as the Ivy League and MIT had their own biases and preferences, the University of Cambridge had its own sense of pride when it came to their ability to select the best students using their own methods.

When it came time to sit the individual university application papers Tony paid far more attention to the entrance exam for Cambridge than the MIT papers this time around, the exact opposite of his behaviour the first time. Somehow even a whole ocean didn’t seem like enough distance to put between himself and Howard, especially when Tony bore in mind the rueful memories of Howard flying all the way out there in Tony’s late teens just to break up a burgeoning relationship. (Bizarrely the only other thing Tony really remembered about that final unpleasant week in Cambridgeshire was the weird ‘West-Ham’ themed Ents the college’s boaties, and rugby club had organised in Clare Cellars.)

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Unfortunately, academic progress or not, and the school’s written affidavits stating that the staff believed he was mentally fit to enter the big bad world of further academia notwithstanding; there was one final obstacle to Tony’s plan to go to university the next academic year.

Howard.

Somehow, and he really didn’t know how, Tony had completely forgotten that until he turned 18 Howard owned him. And his father hadn’t yet given his consent. Whilst Tony hadn’t actually received anything to imply Howard was going to refuse, he didn’t put it past his father.

Justin was bearing the brunt of Tony’s nervousness with remarkable calm, his response to Tony’s frequent outbursts of chattering had become routine, putting an LP on and talking at length about just why he liked it so much. Justin’s current obsession was actually one that Tony found he could get behind – which surprised him considering the hopeful and overtly religious overtones in the song. Tony wasn’t sure how, but Justin had discovered the Beatles during the summer term, nervously
listening to ‘Help!’ on an irritating loop during the long build-up to their shared exam-season.

The other boy had since progressed onto George Harrison’s solo work, specifically the Hare-Krishna, drum banging, flower throwing, religious chanting but wholly upbeat song My Sweet Lord. To Tony’s continued chagrin Justin was definitely far more into singles than LPs, which still tended to mean plenty of looping of a single track, let alone a whole album.

Something about the mixture of nonsense phrases praising multiple different deities and belief systems was utterly relaxing in a way Tony hadn’t expected. He had a feeling that Justin knew-so too, from the way the other boy unerringly chose that particular song every time Tony started to get the jitters.

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Whatever Ty had awoken that day under the tree Tony couldn’t control it. He’d been able to more or less ignore the problem during exam season, with the long practice of denial he’d chalked it all up to stress. The need to read overwhelming his and everyone else’s need for human interaction, and giving Tony the space to ignore and otherwise forget what had happened. However, now that human interaction beyond Justin was back on the menu Tony kept getting flashes of something, every now and again he’d look at a person and they’d be different, warped, twisted, strange.

Geeky Leekie’s eyes had a strange cast to them occasionally; something told him it was literal x-ray vision.

Mr Smythe, the Krelboyne teacher looked shrunken, and small, tiny and timid rather than his usual stern cast.

It happened more often with the adults, but some of the children had other selves too.

Ty was absolutely terrifying under this Other sight of his, the other boy was a literal monster to this strange new vision. Tony wasn’t sure whether to laugh or cry at this apparent confirmation.

The morning he’d looked up and Justin had been different had shaken him, the other kid looked even younger, bruising on his face, heart literally bleeding out of an all too familiar looking hole in his chest. Justin had asked him what was wrong with a hurt look in his eyes and Tony couldn’t take it, he’d rushed over to hug the other boy, and pretended not to notice the surprised moue on his face when they’d pulled apart.
The next time Tony met up with Ben it caught him unawares halfway through a sparring session. He ducked down to avoid a pinch grip, and when he spun back around to face Ben, he’d changed. Gone was the short-clipped hair, replaced by a savage mane that reached his shoulders, and stood up in every direction. Instead of his usual workout gear Ben was wearing a strange set of brown tiled armour, over flowing off-white robes, a huge sword, gold metal glinting through dripping blood was clenched in one hand as if it weighed nothing, worst of all was the expression on his face. Under a thick streak of blue war paint and blood Ben’s face was a cold rictus grimace, eyes fierce with the joy of killing, mouth turned up in a cruel snarl.

Tony let out a shout of fear and fell back. Ben in the midst of a move couldn’t quite slow his momentum in time and they fell to the floor in an ungainly tangle of limbs.

“What was that?”

Ben asked, voice harsh with concerned anger. Tony kept his mouth shut, peering up at the older man warily, half expecting the vision in white and blue to come back. The harsh lines of Ben’s face shifted into outright concern at Tony’s continued panicked breathing.

“Tony?”

Ben didn’t bother asking stupid questions like ‘Are you okay?’ when he so obviously wasn’t. Instead he backed off, and proffered a bottle of water once Tony had managed to calm himself down seemingly sensing that his presence wasn’t helping. Once Tony vaguely resembled a functioning human being again Ben asked, voice grave, with his usual uncanny perceptiveness,

“What did you see?”

“What?” Tony was surprised, but probably shouldn’t have been, “How could you tell?”

Ben just looked at him,

“When did you awaken The Sight?”

“The what?”
Ben heaved a put-upon sigh, using his nose to extend the length of the sound to great effect, his nostrils flaring with his irritation.

“How on earth did you open your Third Eye without even realising what the hell you were doing?”

Tony didn’t bother answering, the question was clearly rhetorical.

Ben had stormed to the far corner of the room, a stream of invectives that Tony was beginning to recognise and understand, much to Tony’s chagrin, following him. The older man rifled through the large case that he always seemed to have with him at these lessons, carelessly spreading the sword cases out on the floor in his haste.

With a muted look of triumph Ben produced a thick tome,

“Here, take it.” Ben shoved the positively ancient looking book at Tony, forcing him to grab it or let the obviously precious volume fall to the floor.

Tony was unsurprised by Ben’s lack of care with his belongings at this point, but still.

“I can’t believe how stupid you were after that talk we had too… Do you have any idea how dangerous it is to open yourself up like that without any kind of shielding in place?”

Tony was still bristling at the harsh tone of Ben’s lecture when he caught the next sentence, seemingly intended for Ben’s ears only,

“Urgh I might have to get in touch with an old ‘friend’ of mine, the bloody Witch of Donan Wood…”

Tony could hear the inverted commas.

“What talk?? The Witch? Ben, what the hell are you going on about?”
Ben’s whirled around in fury, grabbiing Tony bodily by the shoulders and pushing his face directly into Tony’s,

“I warned you to keep your head down, and now you go and do something as stupid and reckless as this?”

“No, you didn’t. I’ve been asking you questions all year about magic! And you never once hinted that you knew anything about it!”

Tony was incensed, he’d been obliquely asking for help for months now, and Ben had ignored him at every turn. Tony hadn’t exactly been subtle about it either, and Ben was a master of picking up on cues.

“And why the hell were you blue? What the hell were you doing going all Braveheart like that?”

At the ‘wrong’ reference Ben seemed to deflate. As suddenly as his frightening anger had appeared it left, leaving the man’s eyes shining at him dully, old and tired their changeable colours gone mute and flat. Ben shut his eyes tightly, pinched at the bridge of his nose, and didn’t even attempt to hide the subject change,

“I’m coming with you to Cambridge you know.”


“Ed doesn’t trust anyone else with your safety, I’m still your teacher, you’ve got a long way to go.” Unspoken between them was Ben’s assertion that Tony had decided upon Cambridge, Tony hadn’t told anyone that, “Besides, that dump of an antique store runs itself, my staff knows what to do. I might go and visit old Chronotis in St Cedd’s, see how he’s doing.”

Tony hugged Ben as hard as he could, trying to convey that despite the initial shock well, he wasn’t that frightened of an angry dude with a sword. How could he be after Ultron, Thanos, Loki, and hell, Cap? If Ben could obliquely offer his unwavering support, who was he, Merchant of Death to do otherwise?

“Thanks Obi Wan.”
Tony hoped that Ben recognised his acceptance of his dark side or whatever that had been. As Tony had said to Cap all those years ago, he didn’t trust anyone without one.

Ben seemed to take Tony’s silent acceptance at face value, shooting Tony a grateful look before conceding,

“It’s too late to start anything now. But believe you me – we will be talking about your third eye. And just why you decided to do something so reckless.”

Ben snatched the book back from Tony’s lax grasp, shoving back into the depths of the case. He proceeded to ignore Tony until he got the message and left the salle, ruminating miserably about the situation.

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“Well Tony, it’s been a very busy year for both of us, hasn’t it?”

Ms Ramesh smiled down at him warmly, for once Tony found that he didn’t mind the automatic condescension of the adults he interacted with. Not when she’d been in his metaphorical corner for the whole damned year.

“I’ll miss you Tony, I do hope you realise how high my regard is for you. How high all of our opinions are.”

Tony was flabbergasted, he’d never been on the receiving end of such warm, unsolicited, genuine praise before. Not like this.

“I wish you the best of luck at whichever university you choose to go to, I know you’ll do brilliantly.”

The slight woman bent down and hugged him warmly, stunning Tony into freezing awkwardly, unsure how to behave.
“I’ll be leaving the school at the same time you’ll be, I’m off to a teaching post in Massachusetts next month. Don’t be a stranger Mr Stark, if you pick one of the Ivy League schools I expect the occasional visit.”

She smiled warmly at Tony once more, before walking out of the large double doors, and surreptitiously ‘bumping into’ Mr Smythe. Tony scoffed, and they thought they were being so subtle too.

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Tony sat down with Ben during their next sparring session. It had been a strange couple of weeks, spent in a series of firsts and lasts. This lesson was another, the entire session spent in a frank discussion with the pair sat cross-legged opposite each other on the floor.

“So, Tony, what exactly have you been doing, and how did you manage to open your third eye?”

Tony fell back on sarcasm and instinct, honed over decades of people only pretending to care when it suited them,

“You mean my trouser snake? Nudge nudge wink wink. A nod’s as good as a wink to a blind bat.”

Ben looked utterly unimpressed by Tony’s lapse into pop-references, even though Tony did have a legitimate excuse for that one. …Okay, so it wasn’t his best line. But Ham-Justin had gotten into Monty Python lately, his parents somehow overlooking the rather adult content of the records they were sending their son in the mail. Despite himself Tony was beginning to develop a taste for their puerile mix of silly stupidity and sly cleverness.

(Tony had snatched the needle straight off of the copy of Derek and Clive (Live) that Justin had somehow gotten his hands on when the second track of that particular album had started playing, revealing the surprising depth of rudeness that was acceptable in British humour in this backwards era. Whilst Tony didn’t normally believe in censorship, being a staunch supporter of allowing people to make their own choices within reason… Well, Tony genuinely hadn’t been sure that Justin, in all of his wide-eyed innocence, would understand not to repeat the jokes within earshot of any concerned adults. Justin had been rather upset with Tony, until Tony had explained at length that under no circumstances whatsoever was Justin to repeat any of the jokes he heard on this particular LP to any adult ever. Once Justin had convinced Tony that he got the message, the pair of them had surreptitiously put on their paired headphones, the set filched from the senior lounge, and giggled their way through the entire lewd album.)
Ben still looked disapproving and worried, Tony gulped and tried his best to be truthful, the past few months had taught him that Ben was a secretive ornery bastard but not one who was likely to stab him in the back. He hoped.

“Meditation? Mostly meditation… Um. Ok this is really difficult to verbalise. Er… Clearing my mind, trying to think about nature and all that wet squishy crap”, Tony hesitated trying to work out how to talk about Extremis without talking about Extremis, “focussing on the idea of manipulating energy… And um… just letting thoughts come as they will.”

“Huh.”

Ben looked thoughtful, they spent a while with Ben prodding for information before the older man seemed to decide that that was enough discussion and he launched into a lecture about what he wanted Tony to do next.

“Okay, well first things first. We’re going to adjust your meditation routine. From now on we’re going to be focussing on looking inwards.”

“What?”

Ben misinterpreted the look of blank shock on Tony’s face, having no knowledge of the struggles Tony had been going through in the past couple of months trying to do exactly that,

“Well, until you know yourself I won’t be able to point you towards which school of magic you should be focusing on.”

The M-word. Tony resisted the urge to pull a face at the mere mention of the word magic, it was the whole point of this discussion after all. No matter how little he liked that fact.

“Wait – school of magic? Like Hog- “

Tony stopped himself and tried to think of another magical school, sadly Harry Potter had overtaken popular culture so much that his mind was a blank. Luckily apart from a sharp look as Ben spotted that Tony had been about to make another one of his ‘wrong’ references Ben seemed to understand
"No. No, more like a style. Similar to the different styles of swordplay or hand to hand fighting that we’ve been practicing. Actually, I’ll run with that analogy – the type of sword you have, determines the style of magic you’re capable of doing. Capiche?"

Choosing to ignore the too-easy innuendo he could draw from the metaphor Tony decided to take the information and run with it,

"Ah. Gotcha. So how many different ‘schools’ are there?"

Ben grimaced, pulling his hand down over his face,

"Far too many. There are probably twice as many as there have been cultures on this planet, and likely a few more besides. Anyway, all of that is academic if you get yourself killed, or worse, before you get off the ground."

Tony didn’t bother to ask what was worse than death, he’d been there, and from the look in Ben’s eyes suddenly weary and ancient so had he.

"So – maybe I shouldn’t keep going?"

"What?! No. No that would probably be the worst thing you could do. You’ve struck a bell that can’t be unstruck Tony – you have to go on there is no going back. No, as you are now, you’re like a beacon proclaiming ‘eat me!’ to all sorts of nasty things you don’t even want to think about too hard in case you accidentally summon them. Or worse, you could fall into the Tear."

Ben’s face seemed to go grey at the end of that little spiel, no it didn’t so much turn grey as slowly drain of all colour.

Tony looked at Ben askance. Given how much the other man seemed aware of, impossibly, Tony was unsurprised by that admission.

"No.." Ben continued seemingly talking to himself, "You’ve already taken the most difficult step –
you’ve found the path. You have to keep going, the way back is closed to you now.”

“Oh well you’re just full of cheer today Old Ben.” Tony huffed, Ben’s talk of doom and gloom getting the better of him and making Tony snap in frustration.

“However, there are multiple paths to take from here Tony,” Ben continued unabashed, before pausing significantly, “I want you to promise me one thing before we continue with this.”

“What?” Tony asked suddenly wary

Ben looked pleased by his caution,

“Good, good perhaps this wasn’t such a bad idea on your part after all. I want you to promise me that you will make no deals, no matter how minor, without knowing the full terms and conditions, the ramifications, having read the small print – all those business deal ideas are perfect for this – without knowing what you’re getting yourself into first.” Ben’s tone dropped still further from the deathly serious oath-making cadence that was so familiar from the Asgardians to something darker still, “There are beings out there that would take advantage of your ignorance.”

Ben’s changeable eyes gleamed at him as Tony tried to absorb the lecture,

“Oh.”

Tony considered, Ben’s request seemed reasonable enough, and the business-man metaphor was apt. Tony knew from bitter experience just how cut-throat that world was, and from the snippets he’d caught from both Loki and Strange over the years… Well the magical end of things wasn’t any better.

“I’ll try my best.”

“Promise me.”

Putting on a Yoda voice Tony spat out sarcastically;
“Do or do not there is no try.”

Ben’s eyes narrowed at the obvious reference to *something*, but otherwise didn’t react, gazing at Tony implacably.

“Urgh! Fine! But didn’t’ you just say that I shouldn’t make any deals without knowing what they were first?”

Ben’s jaw ticked in the way that told Tony that he was amused but unwilling to show it, he was otherwise still,

“Urgh! Okay! Okay! I promise – no deal making without reading the small print and understanding the consequences. Alright?”

“Good. For now, we’ll be focusing on whether you’re a mage or an …invoker, for want of a better term. That’s *essentially* what everything boils down to, barring one or two, or several other related disciplines.”

Tony decided to ignore the ramble and instead focus on the heart of the matter, though he made a note to ask Ben about these other groups later,

“The difference being?”

“Well… How to explain so you’d understand. Roughly speaking in layman’s terms… A mage has their own internal, replenishing power source. They can rely on their core, but it can be depleted. An invoker… They rely on external power, they have none of their own so to speak, but are skilled at manipulating the energy around them. Invokers generally rely on ambient magic, deities, or other planes of existence to fuel what they do. Mages tend to react on instinct, pulling from within themselves.”

“So, being a mage is easier?”

“Yes and no. Um… So, for instance a skilled invoker could quite easily channel a careless mage’s own power back at them and use it as a weapon.” Ben paused for a moment and added thoughtfully,
“And being honest a truly skilled invoker is probably capable of channelling more energy than a mage would ever dream of attempting to use.”

“So… Mages can’t channel any real power?”

“No, it’s just given the rather rigid schools of thought that have sprung up these past couple of millennia, most wouldn’t even think to try.”

“Mages… They’re a source of magic?”

“No! No.”

Ben breathed out heavily, not quite a sigh, but definitely a sign of exasperation. Tony was beginning to recognise the difference in his annoyed exhalations, and he thought that this one was targeted internally. After several long moments, with Ben seemingly studying the cracks in the ceiling in minute detail the older man continued.

“So, this isn’t widely known, or talked about. Not anymore. And a lot of it is conjecture on my part. But… Mages are able to innately harness and channel power. It’s a talent, it comes naturally to them. Just as storing power for a rainy day is instinctual.”

“Oh. So, they’re really just Invokers?”

“No.” It was Ben’s turn to make a wordless sound of disgust, “Urgh. How to explain…”

Tony watched with amused worry as his mentor in all things sarcastic and violent seemingly struggled for words for once,

“Mages have a power well – a reservoir or… say a battery of slowly replenishing magic that they tend to rely on. Invokers are taught how to channel external sources often in far greater amounts than mages even consider wielding but they have no natural internal ‘batteries’ of their own which isn’t to say that you can’t learn to build reserves.”

Ben seemed to battle with himself for a moment before adding,
“In short, everyone has the potential to be able to use magic. It isn’t an exclusive club like they’d have you think. But there’s a damned good reason why they’ve always made out that it’s rare… It’s bloody dangerous. Dangerous to learn and difficult to carry out safely. The very process of learning will change you. Unequivocally and irreversibly. You’ll be tempted by shortcuts that you shouldn’t take. All magic has a price. It takes just as much effort to do something magically as it does to say, just physically get up and move it yourself.”

“Huh. Your battery analogy sounds like it should be a capacitor metaphor instead.” Ben shot Tony a look that said, no you’ve completely misunderstood and I can’t be bothered to continue trying to explain this to you, “Ok, I think that makes sense. It’s a better break down than any other I’ve found. How do we find out which I am Obi Wan?”

“Not so fast.” Ben huffed at him, “Look it’s difficult to explain this to someone who isn’t already well-versed in the dogma and doggerel that the different schools espouse.”

“…Yeah, I’m getting that.”

“But, it basically boils down to willpower, intent and belief. There is no wrong way to go about this.”

“Wait what? But you just sai-“

“But there are ways that are riskier than others.”

Tony leaned back, resting his weight on the palms of his hands. It was his turn to contemplate the ceiling for a while.

“…So, what you’re saying, well, confirming really, is that all of the theories are correct. But that some of them are… more repeatable than others?”

Ben shot Tony a wry grin,

“Yes. I wouldn’t have put it that delicately myself. But yes.”
“Huh. I was beginning to suspect as much.”

Ben clapped his hands together loudly in a false display of enthusiasm, making Tony jump and glare at him.

“Right! Now to work out if you’re a mage or just an overly curious idiot who’s started himself down a path he doesn’t fully understand.”

“Hey!”

Ben shot Tony one of his ‘cheeky’ grins in reply before rapidly settling back into the serious subject matter at hand.

“Now don’t go getting all excited, I’m not going to be teaching you anything.” Tony held his tongue, resisting the urge to demand reasons, “Inherently there’s nothing I can teach you. The type of … magic that I have to work with is so different from whatever you might have that there’s no point. But I can talk you through a few of the basic techniques that everyone should know safely. Though thankfully it looks like you were 90% of the way there by yourself anyway. First things first. Mage or no?”

Ben easily sprung to his feet from the cross-legged position he had been maintaining, making Tony envious before he remembered that he too was able to do so with ease nowadays.

Tony followed him over to the case that Ben always brought along to their lessons, he watched curiously as Ben rummaged through the mysterious and loudly rustling contents. After a prolonged and increasingly awkward silence interspersed with frustrated swearing, and increasingly loud rustling Ben produced whatever it was he’d been looking for with a shout of triumph.

“Aha! Got you, you little bastard!”

Tony shot Ben an amused look, Ben had never bothered to hold his tongue around Tony. He could only hope that Ben didn’t let slip in front of Jarvis, that would be awkward. The object that Ben proudly thrust towards Tony as if it were some holy relic was even more bewildering than anything Tony could have imagined, it was a lump of rock. Shabby, beige coloured, sandy, actually leaving trails of sediment in Ben’s palm it was so crumbly.
“And what am I supposed to do with that?” Tony gulped, after all of their joking earlier… “I hope you don’t expect me to eat it.”

Ben shot Tony a heated look, huffing exaggeratedly.

“No.”

“Well?” Ben shot Tony an infuriatingly blank questioning look, “What do I do with it?”

Ben grinned,

“I’ll warn you now, this could take a while.”

Tony shot Ben a look,

“I suddenly find that I’ve got the time.”

“You do what you have been doing. Meditate. Open yourself up to the possibility of magic, and get to know yourself and your surroundings. Only this time, you use the rock as a focus.”

“Right, and when will I know which I am – mage or invoker?”

“When the rock either starts to glow or crumbles.”

“Okay…” Tony hated it when Ben drew things out like this, “…And, which means which o-mighty-Tim, and why?”

Shooting Tony a look Ben continued the explanation,
“Glowing – the stone’s energy is resonating with your inherent magic, hence the glow. Congratulations you’re a mage - The easiest reaction to produce is light for a rookie.”

“Okay… And the crumbling?”

“If it crumbles you’ve just drained the energy from the rock, and you’re an invoker.”

“Okay… So, should I expect it to be endo or exothermic?”

“Hah!” Ben gave a bark-like laugh, “Always trying to bring everything back around to science. Neither. This isn’t science Tony I’m not even sure if there would be anything measurable, other than the obvious end result of course. This lump of crumbling edifice is designed specifically to separate out the novices.”

Tony eyed the rock’s surface, seeing nothing that suggested it had been worked.

“Huh. Fine. What happens afterwards? Mage or invoker – what’s the next step?”

“Then we find you a neutral teacher, one who’s willing to step outside of the hidebound old farts who seem determined to pigeonhole magic.”

“Wait – if you’re so determined to avoid labels why are you making me do this whole one or the other routine??”

“Well, as I mentioned, you can learn to use aspects of both of those two main styles of use regardless of your natural affinity. But… It’ll make it far easier to decide what the first steps should be, and who we should search out to teach you. You do need to pick up the basics as soon as possible Tony.”

Ben had proven to be a veritable font of information in the past, Tony knew that he shouldn’t be surprised that the older man knew so much about this too, and yet somehow, he was.

“So people lean one way or the other, but most can do both?”
“Bugger – I’m terrible at this. English is such an imprecise language. But yes, I think you have the gist of it. Just about anyone can learn to manipulate what is within or what is without.”

Tony decided to put forth the question that had been bugging him for months,

“Yes, that’s all well and good, but what exactly is magic?”

Ben looked pensive for a moment before cautiously putting forward,

“To couch this in scientific terms that you would understand…” The next sentence, and the amount of insight into Tony’s brain surprised him; “Think of it as like the Higgs Boson particle, we know it’s there because we can see its effect – holding the universe together. We just haven’t been able to prove its existence because it’s a slippery little bugger.”

Tony grimaced, that little spiel would have held a lot more water with him a few years ago – back before the Higgs Boson had been discovered. Tony appreciated Ben’s point though, and all of the effort he’d gone to, to make this little lecture palatable. Tony couldn’t imagine breaking all of this down into bite sized chunks, and yet somehow Ben had managed to clarify points that Tony had begun to believe he’d never get to the bottom of.

“So… Basically we don’t know.”

“Precisely.” Ben thought about it for a moment, “Though do too much of it and you’ll turn your brain to cauliflower cheese.”

Tony blinked at him,

“What, literally?”

Ben nodded sagely.

“And you didn’t think to tell me that earlier????”
“Well, I didn’t know what you were doing, not for sure.”

Tony glared at the older man,

“If you’d warned me I wouldn’t –” Tony cut himself off in his frustration glaring impotently at Ben,

“Let me get this straight, oblique warnings about eldritch horrors eating your very soul don’t phase you, but a little parting shot about brain damage and you’re quaking in your custom-made sneakers?”

Ben was looking incredulous, he continued in that tone of his perfectly pitched to irritate,

“Besides, by the time I noticed it was probably too late. You were well down that path already, weren’t you?”

Tony didn’t want to admit it, but Ben was probably right. Doom hadn’t made that intensely irritating statement for nothing. Dammit he wished Fri or JARVIS were around to bounce ideas with.

“So… Is there any way we can turn off this ‘Sight’?”

“Nope! You’re gonna have to live with it until you learn more control.”

The grin Ben shot Tony at that statement was angelic, Tony wanted to kill him.

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The last days of the school term passed in a blistering heat haze, though the literally warm atmosphere of those last weeks of the summer term wasn’t all sweetness and light. Despite the fact that Tony was finally done with the veritable mountain of schoolwork (at least three quarters of which had been undertaken voluntarily on his part) there were still other pressures at work at the school.

To Tony’s continued annoyance the final week at the school was interspersed with several more attempts on his person. For all that Tony was no longer the miserable little boy he’d once been, it
was all he could do not to fall victim to the newly enthusiastic efforts of Edwin Cord and Tiberius Stone to corner him. It didn’t help matters that Tony felt the inexplicable urge to draw H-Justin of all people under his wing, and protect the boy from the worst of their targeted aggression.

Anyone who wasn’t in the ‘popular’ crowd was fair game, anyone that the boys deemed too stupid, or too clever was fair game. And sadly, Justin’s well-known association with Tony, and the boy’s own vying for the top-spot on the grades list of the Krelboyne class painted a large neon target on his back.

If it wasn’t one group it was the other, Tony was only grateful that the insurmountable difference of a ten-year age gap meant that the pair of them never once thought about pairing up together throughout the rest of the school year, their possible team-up for the LP-carnage notwithstanding. Tony had never been happier about the strange politics of school-life than he was in this moment. When you were six, ten years was a literal life-time, and when you were nearing adulthood, and desperate to prove yourself one, there was nothing more uncool than hanging out with a little kid.

It was proof of how desperate Cord had gotten, and a crack that Tony hoped to drive a wedge into. Taggart was still shooting his lord and master resentful looks over that perceived loss of cool once gossip and rumour had done the damage Tony couldn’t and revealed the dirty secret to the otherwise successful plan to ruin all of Tony’s and Justin’s possessions. He could only hope that the pair of increasingly small groups didn’t wise-up to their mutual targets. It was remarkable how blind the two separate groups of bullies had been to that little example of overlap.

Something about the hot summer sun, and the relative freedom that the end of exams brought with it had worked the two groups of thugs up into something of a frenzy.

Of course, both sets had learnt their lessons well, Ty’s group avoiding Smythe and La Guerta like the plague, and Cord’s group skirting around D’Eath like he might skewer them all at any moment. Though being fair to the teens they probably believed that he might, Tony still remembered the man’s reaction to the bullying incident in the cafeteria with cynical glee. Both groups avoided Leekie at all costs. Somehow his warm office and disappointed tone was more of a deterrent than any threat of bodily harm with the paddle to both groups.

Whilst Ty had temporarily been dealt with by his Rick routine, and whatever it was that had happened when Tony had opened his ‘Third Eye’ Cord and Taggart were like bad pennies, continually popping up unexpectedly and attempting to cause trouble whenever they appeared.

There was yet another near miss in the cafeteria, involving copious amounts of the unpleasant goop that masqueraded as putenesca sauce. Tony wasn’t entirely sure what would have happened if whatever they’d been attempting had gone according to their malicious plan. He didn’t really want to know or think about it too hard. That sauce had been hot enough that it was on a roiling boil.
Fortunately for Tony, the plan, whatever it had been, had been scuppered when one of the staff members serving up the dubious pasta had spotted the pot bubbling away in the wrong corner of the cafeteria and heaved it away – much to the visible dismay on Cord and Taggart’s faces.

Tony wasn’t sure what he’d done to reignite their ire, the Ivy League nonsense they’d been spouting last week was truly nonsensical. However, Tony had to admit that the sudden existence of free-time was beginning to drive him stir crazy, so perhaps that was the cause rather than anything that he’d done.

The pair very nearly discovered Tony and Justin’s hiding space above the senior common room, if Tony hadn’t been so hyper-aware of his surroundings due to their constant irritating attempts to humiliate him they might have succeeded in finding the hidden den.

Tony wasn’t really worried about losing access to the room for his own sake. But more about what the loss of the small sanctuary would do to Justin. Tony was painfully aware that he was leaving the other boy high and dry in enemy territory.

Despite the stress caused by the continued efforts of his so-called peers, somehow Tony was more relaxed than he had been all year. The knowledge that he had access to someone with, theoretical if not practical knowledge of just what Tony was trying to do with the m-word was a bit of a relief. Tony had to admit, if only to himself, that he felt a bit of a fool for not thinking of asking Ben sooner.

He’d been fumbling around in the dark for nearly a year before he’d gotten the idea through his thick skull that Ben was even vaguely trustworthy enough to ask a direct question of that sort to. And even then, Tony had only really admitted he was working on the problem because his hand had been forced. It was bizarre in hindsight, after all, Ben was in on his scheme to earn as many patents to his name as possible, from a ground level at that. If that wasn’t his subconscious wanting him to trust the older man Tony didn’t really know what was.

Despite the building anticipation and worry about whether any of the universities he’d applied to would accept him (and what on earth the strange caveats to said acceptance were going to be) Tony had to admit that if felt freeing to know that there was someone who knew, or had guessed at, at least part of his secret.

Ben would never say so out loud, would never ask, and that in itself was a comfort. Of a strange sort, admittedly.
Tony still felt betrayed when every time he thought on the fact that many of the hoops he’d had to jump through were organised by Jarvis. Tony had eventually coaxed the full story out of Ben, just in time for the older man to vanish on whatever errand it was that had him promising to “Meet you at St. Cedd’s.” Apparently, Jarvis had had doubts about Tony’s mental stability ever since the incident with Howard’s foot. Tony had to say he thought this was deeply unfair, he wasn’t the one who’d rained down wanton destruction on an innocent child’s toy, was he?

A letter turned up during the last week of the summer term it was a bittersweet affair, Ana had just gotten out of hospital after her latest attempt to gain a diagnosis came back inconclusive. Jarivs apologised for missing Tony’s birthday, and promised that there’d be a surprise waiting for him when he came home for the summer.

Tony wasn’t sure what he felt about that missive. Obviously, his attempts to warn Ana about just what she was suffering from had fallen on deaf ears.

Tony and Justin rounded the corner towards the library and stopped dead in their tracks.

The path was blocked.

Ty, and his dwindling mob of resentful Krelboynes were gathered in the courtyard, chattering excitedly amongst each other in malicious anticipation.

More alarmingly, behind the small gathering of children was a selection of the more unpleasant members of Tony’s senior class.

Edwin Cord and Jack Taggart, were, of course, at the centre of that little gathering. Standing proudly, as if they’d achieved something monumental.

Being fair to them, whilst gathering a group of children together into a mob was a rather pathetic achievement, Tony had to admit that crossing the decade wide age-gap was quite something.

Though Tony couldn’t help but notice that Cord’s group of sycophants had shrunk significantly
since the beginning of the school year.

“Well, well, well.”

It was Cord who started things off,

“If it isn’t the little Stark spawn, still thinks he’s too good for the Ivy League, ey?” Cord sneered, “Wants to join the Eurotrash in Cockbridge.”

If Cord hadn’t been so self-aware of his ‘image’ Tony knew that the pretentious ass would have spat at that last line.

Ty merely spent the majority of the little speech grinning smugly at Tony, like the proverbial cat with the canary. Tony wondered what on earth Ty thought he was going to achieve here. Did the idiot think that Tony would hesitate to rat them out on the off-chance that they actually managed to do anything?

He’d already proven unequivocally that he lacked a shit to give, successfully rendering the ridiculous nickname worthless. Dammit, Tony had genuinely thought that he’d dealt with this before the exams. Making sure that Justin was out of harm’s way, without making it obvious that he was protecting the other boy Tony pushed his way forward into the heart of the small crowd.

“So, this choice selection of fools wishes to act the wise man finally?”

The blank looks Tony received for that bastardised quote had him internally grinning,

“You’ve not changed with the times, is it any wonder you’ve had nothing but constant failure in this endeavour?”

A couple of the brighter seniors’ expressions were beginning to slowly lift in realisation.

Tony took a bow, choosing to use and abuse his favourite quote, one he’d often misused before,

“It is double pleasure to deceive the deceiver.”
Twirling with an almost jester-like bounce in his step Tony had made his way right up to Cord without any of the others in this fragile alliance realising what he was up to.

Tony noted gleefully that the brighter students had already started drifting away from the commotion he was causing, perhaps remembering the incident at the beginning of the year.

Casually, almost lazily, Tony reached his hand up and poked Cord in the chest. Uncaring that the action emphasised their height difference. Cord flinched back violently, though otherwise nothing happened.

Tony quickly hid his disappointment. What the hell. Surely, they were only here for one thing, why wouldn’t they just get on with it?

Cord’s unwilling display of weakness had the majority of Ty’s crowd vanishing from around him despite (or perhaps because of) the boy’s angry calls for the ‘pussies’ (again with Ty’s obsession with that word) to stay where they were.

Tony continued quoting, willing the rest of the idiots to get what he was practically shouting at them,

“No enterprise is more likely to succeed than one concealed from the enemy until it is ripe for execution.”

The much smaller group were all looking at Tony suspiciously clearly waiting for the other shoe to drop. Tony looked around in exasperation,

“No? No one? Oh fine. I’ll do it myself.”

Tony pointedly removed his by now infamous watch and handed it to H-Justin before sauntering over to Cord.

Tony grinned right up at the far larger boy, adding a touch of suggestive leer to really get the self-important twit angry, it worked.
Cord punched him right in the nose.

Tony stood there passively for a good thirty seconds, letting that image sink in for the curious bystanders.

Large aggressive senior hitting a much much smaller child in an unprovoked attack.

Seeming to think that Tony’s lack of a response was their cue to start a beating the small mob of idiots moved in. Tony allowed the diminished mob to surround him, watching with some satisfaction as Ham-Justin was left well outside of the circle of violence.

Tony was aware that he was almost, but not quite, completely hidden from view by the bystanders. Perfect. Just the right amount of utter confusion.

Tony let them get a few hits in for the look of the thing, before executing his (slightly mad, he was willing to admit) plan.

Tony extricated himself from their clutches with a few well-placed nerve cluster pinches. Earning himself a clearing in the circle of children. Eyes meeting Ty’s hateful glower Tony proceeded to attack himself in much the same manner as a certain lead character with mental issues from a film that had become damned near iconic in his time. Of course, in Tony’s era of smart phones, and the iconic status of the movie in question, well, this insanity would never have worked. But Tony was willing to take every advantage he had over these idiots if it meant H-Justin was going to be safe in his absence,

“No! Please! Ty! Don’t what are you doing?”

Tony sent himself crashing to the ground, punching his own eye with an accuracy that he surprised himself with.

As one the mob seemed to jump back as if frightened of a rabid dog.

He turned to Edwin Cord, crawling on all fours he approached as if in supplication, purposefully smearing dirt and blood over the older boy’s trousers and shirt in the process.
Cord extricated his hands from Tony’s clutching fingers with a noise of disgust, Tony used that moment to smear dirt and blood all over them.

The resultant scrabble ended with Cord actually striking Tony again in annoyed frustration, busting a knuckle on Tony’s teeth, and splitting Tony’s already bruised lip. Which made Tony grin bloodily up at the snob,


With that loud exclamation, Tony sent himself back into the feet of the few remaining older boys closest to the frozen ringleader. Their expressions of aghast horror said it all.

“Don’t you remember the time I helped you out in lab? No please!”

Tony hauled himself face first through the dry dusty ground that had hardened under the sweltering sun, tearing through the thin shirt and trousers that he’d chosen to wear that day, and earning himself a few nasty scrapes and gashes in the process.

“No! Taggart what, what are you doing? Why? Tagg- What no!”

Taggart now also shared the same smearing of blood, dirt and blood-hydrated mud that encrusted Cord’s hands. Though unlike Cord the fool hadn’t hesitated to get his licks in. As such the other boy’s shoes were already scuffed, and Tony was sporting the beginnings of a nasty bruise to the abdomen.

Tony picked himself up by the collar, and staggered his way over to Ty, giving the other boy a broad bloodstained grin.

Ty staggered back aghast, clearly still fearful of Tony for more reasons than the ghastly spectacle he was making of himself in that moment,

“No! Ty? What are you doing?? I don’t even know you? Why are you so obsessed with me? With Hammer? ACK! NO! JUSTIN!”
With a loud choking noise Tony heaved himself over to Justin and winked at the shellshocked boy – smearing his blood over H-Justin’s face and ‘accidentally’ pulling on the younger boy’s shirt as he heaved himself upright.

Tony calmly turned to the stunned ex-mob, and as if nothing had happened calmly quoted,

“The offenses one does to a man should be such that one does not fear revenge for it.”

Before allowing himself to collapse into a protective huddle on the dust dry floor, worrying at his torn lip to make the blood drip more gruesomely.

In the same exaggerated accent, he’d taken when he’d reclaimed the ‘Tiny Tony’ nickname Tony rolled over and facing the cloudless sky said,

“I’m Tyler Durden, bitches.”

As expected the loud commotion he’d caused had the teachers bursting into the courtyard.

Smythe and Ramesh.

Perfect.

Tony had espied the duo having a sneaky make-out session a couple of corridors down from the courtyard. Tony had been relying on the fact that they’d need to neaten up before they came bursting in to pull this off.

From the thunderous expressions on their faces, Tony’s plan had worked perfectly.

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To Tony’s shock, and admiration, Smythe and Ms Ramesh made their not-so-subtle secret relationship a public matter.
Disappointingly Mr La Guerta showed his not so subtle disapproval of the relationship just as publicly as the now-outed couple, Tony had thought better of the man.

Tony’s rushed scheme worked out better than he’d expected, in response to Tony’s purposefully gory injuries the majority of the mob were under suspension, with Damocles threats of instant expulsion for any further infractions – which was the result Tony had been aiming for. Tony had hoped that by showing the idiots that their actions would have consequences, then they’d think twice about attacking H-Justin next year.

However, Cord, Taggart and Ty as the ringleaders, and known instigators of trouble throughout the year faced harsher punishments. Given that it was the last week of the school year, and two out of three of the ringleaders were seniors the punishments were mostly symbolic. However, the fact that they were meted out at all was significant.

Cord and Taggart had both been involved in previous acts of violence against other pupils. However, they’d never been caught targeting students of such importance to the school before. As such the pair were expelled. Tony found the confirmation that it was the money the school cared about disgusting, but, well, he’d banked on it.

Taggart, being a scholarship brat was sent home in disgrace that very afternoon. Tony felt a twinge of guilt, before remembering that it was the guy’s last week at the school anyway. It wouldn’t really affect anything for the thug, beyond sending a distinct message to anyone else who thought that Justin made an attractive target.

Predictably the parents who could afford to kicked up a stink.

Somehow Leekie managed to convince the Hammer, Cord and Stone familys to turn up to a series of discussions about the violent incident, as if that would make any difference to what had (supposedly) happened. As Tony had relied on, the wall-of-silence effect was in full force. No one was talking about what had happened, so Leekie and Kowalski had assumed the worst.

Tony suspected there’d been a missive to his own parents, and was quietly relieved that they’d obviously declined to attend.

The rivalry between Hammer Tech and Cord Industries had the improbably named Drexel Cord upping the stakes of his threats against the school to such a ridiculous extent that Tony had almost laughed in his face during the ‘friendly’ meeting that Leekie had organised.
The man was another one with no sense of believable threat.

Leekie had stood firm against Cord’s empty threats, explaining that after multiple violent incidents that the school had no choice but to expel their son, no sign of his usual nervous tell – flicking his combover back into position – as the usually friendly man’s spine stiffened in the face of such overt hostility.

Whilst Drexel was clearly used to having his own way in such situations he clearly hadn’t counted on the fact that Ham-Justin’s parents were cut from a similar cloth. In the icy precise tones of the British upper-crust H-Justin’s mother coolly enquired about how they’d raised their own son, triggering an infuriated reddening of the overbearing man’s complexion before he’d stormed from the room dragging his scowling boy behind him.

In turn the Hammers had taken one look at Tony’s spectacularly bruised face, thanked him for protecting their son, and haughtily declared that they were taking their son back to the ‘safety’ of the British public (incredibly exclusive private schools) schooling system (which Tony privately questioned) the next academic year. It was only Justin’s puppy dog eyes that earned him permission to finish off the school week with Tony, his obvious affection earning Tony more assessing glances from the snooty couple.

Leekie had ended up organising a second meeting with the Stones, which the Hammers declined to attend. Despite the fact that several days passed between the two awkward occasions, Tony’s bruises hadn’t faded one jot merely darkened unpleasantly, the sore reds purpling and gaining an ugly brownish yellow tinge.

Ty’s parents contested the expulsion notice, and almost succeeded in reducing his punishment to a suspension. However, their involvement meant that Hamm-Justin was actually an ‘old-money’ scion. Hammer had been born in ‘Surrey’ wherever that was.

Tony had honestly been shocked to find out that Hamm-Justin was actually an ‘old-money’ scion. Hammer had been born in ‘Surrey’ wherever that was.

Mrs Kowalski impressed Tony with her firm stance on the situation, whilst the Stones were subtler with their threats they did make threats, none of which successfully landed. Mrs Kowalski was visibly angry that the Stone’s ‘upstart’ of a son had cost the school clients in the Hammers, and was probably stricter about the situation then she otherwise would have been.
If the Stone family business had already turned to ViaStone, and the journalism that Ty liked to use and abuse so much Tony might have been worried. As it was, Tony was aware that the company was involved in a long, expensive three-way defence contract battle with both Stark Industries and Hammer Tech.

A battle that SI would probably win if past history was anything to go by.


With trembling fingers Tony opened the envelope, he didn’t know why he was so nervous, he’d been through this before.

He’d been accepted, he was going to St Cedd’s College Cambridge to study mathematics. It wasn’t the same college he’d gone to the first time around – King’s, the college that Tony had childishly chosen at the time to make Howard even more furious that he’d disobeyed his orders to go to England to get another “unnecessary” degree. King’s reputation for breeding communists and spies had attracted Tony like a moth to a flame, but this time Tony had chased the Professors most likely to be able to actually help him.

For instance, Chronotis had quite a reputation, for both his brilliance and his eccentricity. The college also had strong ties to the university’s Engineering and Materials Science departments, with accommodation available in both the centre of the historical city and right next to the burgeoning science park in West Cambridge.

The college fostered an intense three-way rivalry with both Emmanuel college and Trinity Hall. They viewed Emmanuel as an unwelcome neighbour, and interloper. The rivalry been there from the very beginning, when in 1584 the new “upstart” college Emmanuel had moved in next to St Cedd’s on reclaimed monastery land. From the start, St Cedd’s had been disgruntled by their new neighbours. The rivalry had become permanent when Emma had built their New Court (in the 1600s…), extra student accommodation directly overlooking St Cedd’s then Master’s Lodge and accompanying private garden. Amongst the collegiate at Cambridge the rivalry between St Cedd’s and Emma was as infamous as the rivalry between Oxford and Cambridge to the general public.

The rivalry with Trinity Hall owed to a dispute over who actually had the rights to the boating-sheds along the riverfront (and indeed some of the very land on which Trinity Hall was actually built), ‘Tit Hall’ arguing that since the sheds were on their grounds, that they had right of possession, St. Cedd’s responding that Trinity Hall were squatting on grounds that they’d originally intended to build their library on.
Tony had to admit that he was pretty fucking excited to be finally getting out of Westchester. Though it was ironic that he’d taken, and passed the entrance exam for university before the results for his qualifications had actually come in.

Shaking himself out of his euphoria Tony forced himself to actually read the letter. Ah, there was the catch – despite passing the internal entry exam with flying colours, the inability to conduct a face to face interview meant that his offer hinged upon whether or not he managed a high-grade point average, or managed to get a 1 at the CSEs, or straight As in the o-levels as well as the required run of straight As in the a-levels.

Given that Cambridge, and thus St. Cedd’s was situated in the United Kingdom Tony wasn’t surprised that the most emphasis was placed on the CSEs, o and a-level results with the other qualification results being relegated to more or less a footnote status. The genteel assumption that the UK-based qualifications were better did amuse him, it seemed some things never changed.

Tony sensed the bemused tone of writing in the letter – the Cambridge staffers just as puzzled about his choice to take multiple, very nearly equivalent qualifications as nearly everyone else he’d talked to this year.

To Tony the explanation was obvious; he wanted his academic achievements to be infamous and unquestionable. Whilst he hadn’t done much to combat the issue, it still rankled that even with seven doctorates to his name, and an eighth on the way Tony had been called ‘Mr Stark’ by Cap and SHIELD alike. Petty as it was, Bruce only had the two PhDs, both in overlapping fields and Strange was only an MD.

Tony spent much of his last days at the school enviously watching, and hearing about infamous leaving parties that the Senior year were participating in, both on and off of school grounds. Despite technically being a Senior himself Tony was not deemed old enough to have permission to leave school grounds, and besides none of the seniors would even dream of inviting a puny seven-year-old to one of their parties. Especially not one who’d managed to get two of their number expelled in the last week of school.

Whilst part of him was rather disappointed that the opportunity to spend some time trying to be a normal kid had utterly passed him by again, Tony had to admit that the rest of him was relieved that he’d managed to completely sidestep the knotty interpersonal politics of high school. From what he’d seen Underoos had had a very hard time of it at school, and that was despite the fact that he was a witty and all around fantastic kid attending an academy set-up especially for the nerds.
Yeah, on the whole Tony was grateful that he’d managed to skip the hell that was both junior and senior high both times around.

His own tiny going away party the day before term was due to end was utterly unexpected, Tony felt a flash of fondness for Justin, he was genuinely going to miss the other boy. Justin had managed to arrange a small gathering in the Krelboyne lounge; Leekie, Mr Reid, Mr D’Eath, Smythe (to Tony’s chagrin), and Ms Ramesh were all there.

Tony had to admit that it was rather sad that pretty much all of his friends at the school were staff, but he was past caring at this point. He had a legitimate reason for his struggles to relate to the children that were supposedly his own age this time.

La Guerta wasn’t there, which Tony had to admit was a relief. He’d been half-expecting to see the red-headed giant of a man given that the other two Vietnam veterans on staff were present, but Justin had organised the little party, and had no reason to know the guy given that he took his classes with a Mr Serpico. Then again Tony didn’t know how Justin knew about Reid, so perhaps Justin was aware of Tony’s current feelings on La Guerta.

Justin had put himself in charge of the music that evening, of course. Somehow, Justin had smuggled the LP deck down into the room alongside a truly ridiculous number of LPs and singles. Fortunately for Tony’s sanity the younger boy had the social graces to accept other people’s song choices, something that Tony wasn’t entirely sure he’d have been capable of at that age.

The small event wasn’t as awkward as it could easily have been, as per usual Ms Ramesh somehow managed to utterly bypass the usual societal limitations, somehow balancing the tightrope of charming and assertive simultaneously in the friendly spontaneous four-way debate that broke out between Reid, D’Eath, Justin and herself.

The afternoon wound down gradually, with Tony reluctantly accepting a copy of Mr Reid’s, Ms Ramesh’s and Leekie’s contact details before they’d all parted ways.

Tony dreaded having to go back to the mansion during the summer. It was ironic really, in the past he’d always yearned for the much-vaunted freedom of summer. At least until he’d grown up a little and realised that he couldn’t escape the misery no matter where he was. This time however Tony was dreading having to face both his parents, and the Jarvises again. Their lack of acknowledgement of his birthday hadn’t gone unnoticed, and Tony was quietly feeling terrified about what that might signify.

Whilst Tony thought that he had implicit permission from Howard to go to St Cedd’s, well, his father
was nothing if not changeable and taciturn. One wrong move this summer and all of his progress this year could come to naught, and selfishly, without the Jarvises there to act as a buffer... Tony privately thought that he was doomed.

Most of all though, he was not looking forward to facing the Jarvises again. The knowledge of Jarvis’s betrayal still stung sharply, not lessened by the paltry weeks that he’d had to deal with the information. As for Ana, Tony really didn’t know how he’d be able to face her, he never had worked out how to deal with grief healthily. All of his coping mechanisms involving drink, drugs and reckless promiscuity at levels that would have shocked someone like Hugh Heffner. It was even worse having to face the person who was the focus of those emotions whilst they were still alive, and try to put on a brave face for them. Tony didn’t think he’d be able to manage it.

He wouldn’t even have the interference that he’d been hoping for in Ben’s presence, the older man had vanished on whatever mysterious errand it was that he wanted to run and Ben was refusing to leave word about when he might return, beyond confirming that he’d “see you at St Cedd’s”. Tony found that he kept repeating that sentence in the privacy of his own head, as if he was attempting to convince himself that the older man was telling the truth.

Tony surprised himself by hugging Justin tightly the next morning before they were forced to part ways. Justin with a veritable vanload full of LPs in tow as his parents arrived to pick him up early the next morning. Tony had been surprised when they’d greeted him with courteous, if not actually friendly, nods.

Tony was relieved when Jarvis finally showed up on the school grounds, a full two hours later than the pick-up deadline, with an apologetic look on his face and a spark of utter exhaustion in his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

As always all mistakes are my own, this piece is unbetaed so any and all grammatical issues are entirely down to me. Feel free to point out any errors you spot - I'm sure there are plenty! (I'm still looking for someone to beta-read this thing - though I fully admit I've no idea what the actual etiquette is there)

Thank you all again for all of the kudos, comments, bookmarks - all of it! The friendly comments and helpful critiques have really kept me working on this thing. Not to mention the fact that when I first started writing this I thought I'd barely manage to hit 100 likes let alone the 900+ this thing has at the moment. Seriously - thank you.

Thanks to Evenmoor - for both patiently putting up with my ineducated opinions and doing a quick spot of language usage correction in the comments!

This chapter effectively concludes what I've been thinking of as "Part 1" in my head... The upcoming chapter should present a bit of a tonal shift, and actually has itself been
one of the main causes of previous delays.

The next chapter should be a fun one. *evil grin*

I'm painfully aware that as the chapters of this thing have bloated the rate at which the plot moves has damn near stalled, believe me I know it's a problem.

I'm going to be making a concerted effort to stop that happening from here on out - but please if anyone is willing to help wrangle this thing I'd be very grateful!
Get Me Off The Streets (Get Some Protection)

Chapter Summary

13th July 1977 New York.

The tagged WARNINGS make an appearance in this chapter. Strong gore

Chapter Notes

WARNINGS Gore warning!! Not kidding - turn of phrase purposefully macabre too. I tagged it - but this is the first chapter to really live up to the warnings in the tags.

Hi everyone! Thank you hugely for all of the incredibly kind supportive messages, kudos, bookmarks all of it. I never thought this thing would take off the way it has - you guys really keep me writing when the inevitable moments of "I can't string a sentence together" kick-in! Extra shout-outs for the lovely reader who I somehow inspired to check out Bowie, and to those of you who put up with my rather strong opinions in the comments section - thank you!

Sorry for the incredible wait. This chapter has been a bit of a pet-project for a while, so I hope you all enjoy it! It's very nearly it's own standalone story - to be honest I was almost tempted to post it as such, but it's very much part of this tale.

As ever any and all mistakes you spot in this thing are entirely my fault! Please feel free to point them out!

I now have grateful thanks to pile upon my incredibly supportive (and patient) beta-reader Kairi-ou who has very kindly acted as proof-reader, general ideas bouncer and moral support. (As well as putting up with random messages about this thing at all hours and for gracefully not running away screaming when I showed them the rather detailed potted timeline I'd written up for this thing... Not to mention the teething pains as they gradually wrest me away from my control-freak tendencies over letting anyone read this thing before I deem it 'ready'!)

The next chapter will be posted next week - my lovely new beta reader very kindly pointed out that as I had it this was very much a chapter of two disparate halves, and that there was a rather obvious place to jump off to avoid reader fatigue as the original document was well over 100 pages long.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 9: Get Me Off the Streets (Get Some Protection)
Tony sighed, not for the first time he wished that his fellow rich-brat Hope was with him at the interminable party. Unfortunately, she wasn’t even a twinkle in her parents’ eyes yet and even then, it was still about 10 years too early for the precocious genius to turn up in anything approaching her usual cynical form, so he was stuck here, alone. Making good with Howard’s friends and hangers on at yet another interminable society event. At least this particular soulless event was being held at Howard’s Manhattan penthouse rather than at yet another socialite’s playground.

Gods, he could really do with a drink right now. Tony eyed the adults with their champagne flutes, cocktails, and most of all the whisky tumblers with envy.

Initially, Tony had thought he might use the parties as an opportunity to hang out with Justin whilst it was still possible. However, as soon as Howard caught wind of who his “little friend” was, he’d forbidden Tony from talking to the Hammer scion at these events, invoking Stark secrets.

Last week’s party at the Rands’ had been spectacularly awful on several levels, not least because of the patronising way in which the ‘kids’ were all placed in a separate room from the adults. The awkward event had been made worse when Harold, the teenaged friend of Wendell Rand, had possessively decided that he hated Tony’s guts as he’d made his hesitant attempt to approach the older heir. Tony had hoped that the two teens would see past his age, and unlike Hammer, Rand Enterprises weren’t on Howard’s no-list - being into various aspects of the oil and chemicals industry with aspirations to med-tech. However, Harold had obviously seen Tony as a threat to whatever he was trying to do, and Wendell was a spineless wonder so Tony had met a dead end in his quest for tolerable company there.

Tony had to admit, he hadn’t remembered Janet van Dyne being so fun; over the course of the previous couple of weeks he’d gradually realised that the socialite who seemingly went to every party was cynically witty, with a good eye for who was and wasn’t worth the time of day. Unfortunately Tony’s admiration for the woman had caught him out, once Howard had realised who he kept talking to at these things he’d dragged him away pretty quickly, muttering darkly about Pym stealing Stark secrets. To Tony’s mind she’d seemed worthy of the hero worship that Hope had bestowed upon her mother. Tony wasn’t sure when, or how it had happened, but he hoped (hah) that Hope got to keep her mum this time.

Howard had made it clear that Tony’s permission to go to Cambridge, an institution that Howard seemed to automatically disapprove of because it wasn’t American, hinged on Tony not showing him up to the people that ‘mattered’. As such his summer evenings, instead of being spent in the steady company of the Jarvises were to be spent like this. Being trotted out at these awful functions as a trophy of sorts to prove how much better than everyone else the Starks were. He had to act like a
good little genius, and be charming not manic.

Tony was trying not to let the boredom show on his face, stuffed into an itchy suit, in a style that Tony just knew didn’t suit his current frame (unlike the ones he’d bought for himself) whilst avoiding Hammer’s eye. Tony had quietly taken Justin aside at the first event they’d both attended, and explained to him carefully what was going on in terms that the seven-year-old would understand. Fortunately, it seemed that Tony’s batshit (Tony was able to admit to himself when he’d done something stupid, he was an adult dammit) decision to protect H-Justin from the bullies at the school had earnt him a bit of leeway with the other boy. Whilst Tony had spent the past couple of weeks treated to the boy’s miserable looks from a distance, the Hammer scion had otherwise accepted the awkward situation with a level of mature equanimity that had honestly surprised him.

Unlike the previous events of their ilk this particular evening wasn’t a complete loss. Tony could tell that this particular party was a cover for something SHIELD related, adding a frisson of interest to the boredom. Aunty Peggy, Ana, Howard, and the Pym & Van Dyne duo were all in attendance. Something big was going down behind the scenes. Tony had done his best to snoop, but cute kid or no, he didn’t have access to JARVIS or FRIDAY and the spy-gang all had sharp eyes and experience on their side. Luckily, Aunty Peggy had been the one to catch him, not Howard, but nevertheless she’d gently but firmly turned Tony away from the secret meeting he’d been attempting to snoop on.

As such, Tony was limited to the more vacuous end of the social pool, and unfortunately, both Obadiah and the Stones were regulars at these “little soirees” that Howard kept dragging Tony along to. It was all Tony could do not to be overtly rude to either group, let alone act charming around the awful people that all seemed to want a piece of Stark Industries, and Howard’s heir apparent.

Despite the obvious restrictions on his movements, Tony did have one ace of sorts up his sleeve; his incredibly temperamental third eye. Tony’s second sight came erratically and uncontrollably, but continuing the established pattern, Tony did get the occasional glimpse of whatever reality this new sense was allowing him a keyhole into. Obadiah had been one of the guests who triggered it that evening, his eyes strange and frog-like, Obadiah’s skin taking on an unpleasant yellow tone – the colour closer to the exaggerated yellow of the Simpsons than the unhealthiness of jaundice. Tony suspected that there was something symbolic in what he was seeing, but as ever with all things m-word related, he lacked the vocabulary to read the language. Or even hazard an educated guess.

Janet Van Dyne’s… whatever, had been equally revealing when Tony had gotten a flash of it a couple of parties ago. Emblazoned on her chest, on what looked suspiciously like a farmhand’s uniform if the equipment was anything to go by, had been an ant inside a circle. Fortunately, in Janet’s case Tony had some background knowledge on his side. Tony knew that she’d been the previous wearer of the female ant-suit – The Wasp. He’d also been trying to read up on symbolism in the aftermath of awakening his third eye (with mixed success), Tony had genuinely laughed out loud when he’d stumbled across a book proclaiming the ant to be a symbol of both bravery and strength. Alongside the circle’s symbolism Tony just knew that Van Dyne had to be more than the socialite she seemed. Tony had no idea what the additional stuff around her meant, as far as he knew the Van
Dynes had never been into farming – but Tony already knew that his sight or whatever didn’t really work how it was supposed to in all of the mumbo-jumbo books. Tony still wasn’t sure what Ben’s blue-painted other-self had meant, symbolically at least. However, the dangerous warrior that revelled in bloodshed had been clear as day to Tony at the time.

Interesting distractions that his sight provided notwithstanding, the evening’s party had dragged on to such an extent that his seven-year-old body was on the verge of dropping off. No matter how frustrating he found his increased need for sleep, Tony was sorely tempted to vanish to the private rooms that were out of bounds to the guests. Perhaps he’d dig out the proto-Walkman he’d only remembered to stuff into his pockets at the last minute, and catch some shut-eye. Unfortunately, Howard hadn’t yet given his permission for Tony to leave, so despite his daydreams he was stuck, trying to be charming to patronising adults and snotty brats alike – though Tony privately thought that the two definitions were more interchangeable than either group realised.

Tony had spent much of the time being uncomfortably paraded around for the adults to coo over and doing his utmost to avoid Ty; Howard shooting Tony looks making it damned clear what would happen if he even contemplated acting up in front of them. For once Tony was missing the company of other children. Alas he was a good decade younger than most of the children of Howard’s peers, and he knew from past experience that Hope, and even Sharon weren’t due to show up for a decade.

Tony grabbed a glass of sparkling cider from one of the trays laid out explicitly for the children, for all that the beverage wasn’t alcoholic, a point had been made to serve it in the same champagne flutes that the adults were using. Tony sipped distastefully at the overly sweet concoction and eyed up the crowd, hoping that it was late enough that he’d be able to slip out without earning Howard’s ire.

The teenagers were beginning to get rowdy, staving off their tiredness with manic loudness, the few other children Tony’s ‘age’ (Tony groaned internally at that thought) were noticeably flagging. Catching his father’s eye Tony pulled what he hoped was a dignified questioning expression (it was actually shamelessly pleading), Howard scowled in response. Dammit.

Tony settled into his corner, away from the giggling women who were eyeing up the children with cheek-grabbing intentions clear in their gaze. Just as Tony settled in for the long haul, sudden darkness cut through the awkward high-society atmosphere like a knife, plunging the room into chaos. Someone screamed. There was the sound of breaking glass. Tony’s heart hammered in his chest, even with all of his experience in situations like these, a shot of adrenaline to the system is a hell of a jolt. Tony desperately tried to work out what was going on, blindly looking around in every direction, vainly trying to force his eyes to pierce through the cloying blackness.

Crash! Tony was forced into the centre of the room when someone tripped over the table he’d been huddled next to, champagne flutes and crockery smashed to the ground, splashing Tony in alcohol and food. Shit. If Howard saw him he’d be in for it.
Despite the initial panic, people seemed to calm down, there was much rustling and crashing bu-

“Nobody move!”

The pitch black of the room was briefly, blindingly, illuminated. Tony identified the noise as the sound of automatic gunfire. The adrenaline that had been waning spiked again. Tony’s heartbeat, already loud in his head, became a frantic drone yammering in his ears. Crap crap crap crap.

This time the screams were genuinely frightened. The crash of glass was loud, as inevitably, chaos ensued.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

Someone crashed heavily into Tony, sending his small form sprawling on the floor. Tony hurriedly tried to haul himself up, avoiding stiletto heels and wryly hoping that whatever stickiness he’d landed in wouldn’t be too unpleasant when the lights came on. Tony temporarily gave up on that plan, when an adult sent him sprawling again. At least he hadn’t been trodden on. Yet.

There was another round of screams, Tony was very nearly trampled underfoot in the chaos. Despite the clear instructions people were panicking. Underneath the din Tony could hear Howard’s unmistakeable tones, raised in anger from the next room. For once his father’s bullheadedness was being aimed at someone else. Curling into a ball to avoid being crushed or impaled, Tony waited out the mad rush before trying to catch his bearings.

There was another brief burst of blinding gunfire.

“Are you deaf or dumb? Nobody goes anywhere.”

In the strobing erratic lighting provided by the gunfire, Tony realised that somehow, impossibly there were nearly as many armed men in there as guests – how? It was like something out of one of his nightmares. Oh. It was the waiters. The help. Everyone always ignored the help. Shit. This was why SI in his time had had such thorough vetting procedures.

Dammit, Tony hadn’t looked at the plans to this place in years, and even then, with nothing more
than an eye to making the building safe for the surrounding properties. Careless. Stupid.

Tony’s breathing went ragged. The all too familiar lightheaded feeling overwhelming him. Tony couldn’t remember the current layout. Didn’t know if there was a safe room to shove the panicking guests into. Couldn’t see Maria, or Jarvis, or Ana or Peggy. Not in this blinding dark.

Heaving in a shaky breath, forcing himself to breathe in and out, Tony glanced around determinedly peering into the unyielding darkness trying to discern a way to help these people. High society trash or not Tony didn’t like the way this was going, and they were civilians. Even further from Cap’s loose definition of soldier than he’d ever been. In one smooth motion Tony casually bent down, reached for the half-finished stiletto dagger in his shoe, and rose to his feet. He’d have preferred to have gone for the daggers but the weapons were simultaneously awkwardly large for his pathetically small frame, horribly unexplainable, and sheathed in a rather obvious place.

In a balanced crouch Tony eyed up the gang warily, staring at the silhouetted forms that were moving confidently around the room as if it were daylight. If he didn’t know any better he’d say they were searching for something. Like a hound scenting its prey a masked head whipped around and stared straight at him,

“There!”

Crap. Of course. They were here for him. Tony really didn’t know why he expected any different, wasn’t that the definition of insanity? Tony could feel the blood rushing hotly in his head, his focus for once narrowing to this moment, directly in the here and now, instead of contemplating myriad different futures simultaneously. As one the gang began to close the distance. Where was everybody? He’d seen Aunt Peg earlier, Tony had been sure of i- When a tuxedoed thug got close enough Tony lunged – the sharp shard of adamantium clenched in his fist. The thug fell back, hot blood spurting from an arterial wound.

The scene was silhouetted surreally by the orange glow that had just started coming in from the windows.

A hand clamped around his chest from behind. Tony lashed out automatically, the drumbeat loudly hammering in his ear once again turning to a near whine with the unpleasant shock of it. Unseen in the blackness one of the men had crept up behind him – Tony struggled madly, kicking, biting, elbowing. Trying to stab his inconspicuous blade somewhere vital.

After what felt like an eternity of wriggling like a worm on a hook Tony managed to hit something. Dammit, he lost the blade in the process, the unhandled shard yanked from his grip as his attacker
staggered back.

“Shit! Shit! The little brat got Den!”

A huge fist appeared out of nowhere from the cloying blackness, the blow making Tony see stars. Blinking the afterimages out of his eyes Tony tried to stay upright, to put up a defence, anything.

“Shut up!”

Tony couldn’t tell if everything was blurry or not in the darkness, but from the way the world had suddenly gone woozy he wouldn’t be surprised if he was seeing double.

“But the little prick got Den!”

A hand clamped around his wrist and Tony felt his arm being twisted up behind his back. He hazily tried to stop it, to keep fighting until help arrived. It was futile. Despite all of his training, everything Ben had taught him about soft spots, grip, the man was three times his size and had an iron grip on him.

Tony struggled through the probable concussion, squirming, going limp, trying every dirty trick in his arsenal, but couldn’t find any leverage clamped as he was in his attacker’s arms. Inexorably his other wrist was forced behind him, and what felt like a zip tie bit into the soft skin. Where was everyone?! 

“Quick, Rob grab the Ludes.”

A large hand roughly pinched his nose shut, and another forcibly opened his jaw – stuffing a pill inside the next moment.

“Swallow.”

Tony refused.
Tony tried to wriggle his head out of the unforgiving grasp. The hand holding his nostrils shut only tightened in response. The pair of hands grasping his wrists renewed their punishing grip – something crunched. Not his wrist thank gods, but... Oh – clasp twisted Tony’s watch, a precious lifeline of tech fell to the floor, the mangled remains of his silver bracelet following it with a clatter. They crunched unnoticed under a heavily booted foot in the continued struggle. Tony still doing everything he could to resist bound and groggy as he was.

As his vision blackened, Tony gasped in a quick breath of air – the meaty paw that had so easily restrained him a second ago darted into his mouth wielding another pill – this time the fingers pushed the back of his throat. Tony gagged and reflexively swallowed.

Oh shi-

Forgoing what little pride he had Tony started screaming at the top of his lungs,

“Help! Help!”

But it was no good. There were too many of them. And he was surrounded by useless screaming civilians. Tony hadn’t noticed during the struggle, but the hazy orange light filtering in through the windows had brightened up and had turned everything into differing shades of grey and black, the giggling cocktail dress clad women who’d been so well put-together just minutes before, ragged in their panic and unable to do anything to help in the face of the armed men in front of them.

Tony could feel whatever it was he’d been given working, piling pressure against his consciousness on top of the throbbing in his head. Despite himself Tony was drifting off- as the men beat a hasty retreat Tony fought off a different darkness.

“Aw shit it’s not working. It’s not working! Come on! Get the ether.”

“No!”

Tony renewed his struggles desperately wriggling like a hooked fish. The damp cloth descended on his face and he was dragged down into the black.

2 Weeks Earlier
Edwin eyed up Tony in disbelief, he’d heard that there had been an incident. Unfortunately, between Ana’s latest stay in the hospital and Howard’s demanding preparations for his annual trip to the Arctic, Edwin genuinely hadn’t been afforded the opportunity to spend a whole day driving to and from the northernmost area of Westchester that the school resided in. No matter how much he wished to take the time to do so. Especially given the increasingly outlandish reports Ben had been so gleefully feeding him. It was with no little amount of hastily repressed anger when Edwin realised that the school had most definitely played down the extent of the most recent, and thankfully last, bullying incident. Young Tony’s face was black and blue, his lip swollen and painfully scabbed, not to mention the swollen shut eye.

Edwin held his tongue, mindful of his charge’s strange behaviour the previous summer, and the shameful fact that between the appalling traffic and Howard’s behaviour taking a turn for the adolescent that morning; Edwin had arrived a full two hours late.

Fortunately for his already tattered nerves the staff member on site was Mr Leekie, who Edwin already knew since he’d been his primary source of information from the school – barring Ben’s erratic missives. The school’s all-round bureaucrat and student welfare officer, had been the one in charge of the numerous tests that Howard had demanded, and Tony himself had requested. Leekie shot Edwin a knowing, if sympathetic look, no doubt taking in Edwin’s harried expression in a glance.

The thin young man’s kind smile as he turned to Edwin’s young charge, and, Edwin admitted, his charge too for these past nine months, was enough to reassure Edwin that there’d been at least one member of the faculty looking out for his son in everything but name. Edwin was man enough to admit to himself the truth in Ben’s words when he was face to face with the proof of them.

Edwin kept glancing awkwardly at the top of his charge’s head on the long drive home, ignoring the obvious signs of a recent beating, Tony held himself so differently now. Gone was the nervous little boy that he remembered, or even the strange skittish distance of the previous summer. No in that boy’s place sat a self-confident child, one who’d also grown a good half a foot taller in the meantime.

Whilst the hesitance and mumbled hellos weren’t unexpected, Edwin dearly hoped that Tony didn’t truly believe that he’d forgotten his birthday. This whole scheme had been Ana’s idea, and well, whilst he hadn’t agreed that it was a good idea, Edwin hadn’t had the heart to argue with his darling wife on affairs of the heart.

Catching Edwin by surprise, this stranger in Tony’s skin hadn’t behaved as Edwin had expected him to, at all. Instead of the enthusiastic hug he’d been expecting, and Edwin could kick himself for that erroneous expectation, given the fraught tension of those last months in the mansion, Young Tony had given him a world-weary look and climbed silently into the car.
Edwin had shared a long hopeless look with the still shockingly young Mr Leekie, put Tony’s luggage in the trunk and bade his farewells.

It had been all Edwin could do not to take his boy up in a hug and whisper assurances and tell him everything about the surprise waiting for him when he got home. But Edwin knew himself, if he started speaking first he’d keep rambling on and on, and tell Tony the whole plan, and Ana’s carefully constructed surprise would be completely ruined.

No better to keep quiet, and only talk about what Tony wanted to talk about. If the boy ever opened his mouth, that was.

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Tony had been afraid that the awkward silence that had somehow lasted the entire length of the journey back to the mansion had been a sign of things to come.

Tony would have attempted his usual tack with awkward social moments, blithely crashing his way through them, but his increasingly problematic Third Eye intervened. The image was only visible for an instant, but it was disturbing enough to effectively shut him up for the rest of the journey.

Jarvis had briefly been a man of 90, back bent double under the weight of the evil black demonic monkey that was chittering between his shoulder blades. The demonic little monster yammered and drooled noxious looking goo, as it lashed at Tony’s erstwhile father figure with its claws.

One blink later and the image was gone, flickering like the negative afterimage of a too bright light. Back to Jarvis concentrating on the road, straight backed and calm.

The impression that all was not well strengthened when Jarvis maintained his icy manner, only speaking to Tony to tersely ask him not to attempt to carry his luggage up to the house. (Whilst Tony had gotten used to his miniature proportions over the course of the past year, he’d forgotten that Jarvis wasn’t really aware of just what he and Ben had been doing. Tony was sure he’d have managed, but settled for keeping Jarvis in the dark about that little fact.)

Tony was beginning to fear for his ability to get through the time until October if things had gone this far to shit since he’d been gone. The exhaustion and permanent new twist to Jarvis’s jaw spoke of the fact that Ana must still be unwell. Damn. And Tony had thought that he’d planned out that letter
so carefully. There was nothing for it, Tony would have to approach her himself. He only hoped that he wasn’t too late.

The mansion was just as he’d left it, nothing had changed. Still the same overbearing interior, the warmth of the summer sun doing little to alter Tony’s impression of gloom despite the large windows streaming bright hot sunlight into the entryway.

Jarvis made his way down to the staff kitchen, Tony followed him in surprised silence unsure why they were heading that way when his room was at the opposite end of the house.

Tony almost couldn’t bear looking at the back of Jarvis’s head, he knew that they hadn’t talked for ages, and things had been touch and go there before he’d left for school. But this hadn’t happened the first time around. The summer months had been just as they’d always been, right up until the-

Tony’s head jerked up from his shoes in shock at the shouted, “SURPRISE!” that came loudly from the kitchen. Everyone was there, Maria, Ana, Aunty Peggy.

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Edwin was gladdened by the look of stunned surprise on Tony’s face. It seemed that Ana had been right after all, he should never have doubted his darling wife. As Edwin had hoped, but hadn’t expected (not after the shameful cowardice he’d displayed once he realised his mistake), Tony’s face lit up even further when he realised that the large parcel that was his and Ana’s contribution to the small pile on the kitchen table was in fact a stack of LPs.

Frank at Jazzin’ Solos had really come through for him, Edwin had requested both hard rock, and David Bowie albums – something special.

In the end after waiting on tenterhooks for nearly a month as a mysterious order to the UK was put through Edwin had ended up with a choice selection of LPs, the eponymously named David Bowie – a blue spotted gatefold album with a curly haloed Bowie gazing out at the viewer on the cover and a bizarre set of illustrations covering much of the remaining space. The black disc with the Phillips label in the centre reminding Edwin strongly of home. The second album was a bit of a puzzler to Edwin, and yet another LP for Tony’s expanding collection that would have to be kept well away from Howard – or rather one of two copies was, somehow Edwin had allowed himself to be talked into buying both the UK and the US versions of the album on the basis that it was simultaneously Bowie and Hard Rock, apparently a vanishingly rare occurrence. The UK copy of the album in particular had been expensive, even more so than the earlier eponymously named David Bowie
album, but then again Edwin hoped that the gift would go some way to being a suitable apology for his inability to do so much as visit during the school months.

The album in question was called The Man Who Sold The World, the US copy featured a bizarre childish comic book image of a cowboy who’d apparently shot a clock tower on the cover. However at least that version of the album would probably escape Howard’s notice if he ever saw it. The UK copy of the album was on a nasty textured card, though frankly that had been the least of his issues with it – next to the Mercury stamp on the cover David Bowie lounged with long hair wearing a dress. Edwin sincerely hoped that the album fitted the bill as well as Frank had claimed, for such a little thing it was causing him a lot of worry – and had already caused a lot of expense.

The next albums in the little package of collected discs that he and Ana had put together had been far cheaper/easier to acquire – consisting of Hunky Dory again by David Bowie, and still featuring an alarmingly ambiguously androgynous looking Bowie on the cover, and finally the discs that he hoped Tony would enjoy the most – The Idiot and Lust for Life by Iggy Pop. Both albums featured black and white images of the singer on the cover, and looked rather mundane to Edwin’s eye. However, Frank had reassured him that since ACDC was still an apparently non-existent entity, then other than The Man Who Sold The World these discs were probably the closest thing to the combination of hard rock and David Bowie that Edwin had requested that he would likely to find.

To Edwin’s profound relief, if the awed look on Tony’s young face was anything to go by, they’d made the right decision. It wouldn’t make up for the months spent apart, Edwin knew that. He’d spent the time that Howard had been purposefully keeping him busy trying to convince himself that he’d gone to boarding school, and he’d turned out fine. And the school Edwin had been shipped off to as a child had utilised the Fag System too, caning liberally applied, and playing serf to the older boys’ whims, all under the approving eye of the staff, and Edwin had flourished.

Tony reverently removed the wrapping paper, and his face lit up still further as he pored over the carefully selected albums. Edwin smiled at Ana, sharing in her joy that their boy was home, and, whilst she clearly shared his anger over the terribly swollen bruising, happy and mostly whole.

Somehow in the weeks spent planning this little affair with Ana’s capable help; his darling wife somehow still finding the energy to organise and plan the party with military precision from her hospital bed, Edwin’s arguments to himself had faltered. The resolve that he’d let Tony spend the time making his own friends, his own way, unhindered by unwelcome adult interference. All of Edwin’s arguments rang hollow.

Instead in between ferrying Ana to and from the numerous specialists’ appointments, all fruitlessly trying to work out what on earth was plaguing her, and the excess of busy-work that Howard had suddenly decided to dump on his lap in a rare moment of perceptive empathy on his old friend’s part to try and stop Edwin from drinking himself to death in the unwelcome quiet. Well, Edwin had suddenly found himself busy enough that it wasn’t just the certainty that his presence would be
Edwin’s time since that argument with Ben had been spent being reminded explicitly just how demanding an employer Howard could be when he set his mind to it. Whilst Edwin’s assigned tasks hadn’t been quite at the demeaning level of exchange a silver bracelet for a slap of the old days, he’d still been run ragged. Edwin had been sent on errands all over the Five Boroughs, on one memorable day he’d travelled from the far end of Staten Island, back up to the northernmost part of the Bronx, only to have to travel down back down South to the warehouse areas of Brooklyn for a component that Howard had suddenly remembered that he ‘needed’ by the end of the day.

No. Between Ana’s frequent appointments and Howard’s sudden whims, Edwin’s heartfelt wish to visit his charge and find out just what the hell Ben was teaching him had been an unfulfilled one.

Edwin spotted Ana and Peggy both shooting each other significant glances out of the corner of his eye, if he hadn’t been keeping an eye out given Ana’s hints and suggestions, Edwin would probably have missed it. However, he’d known that Ana’s insistence that Peggy be there wasn’t entirely due to the fact that she felt that Tony was missing his godmother. Edwin should have known that his darling wouldn’t let the issue of whatever had been going on with their charge the previous summer lie forever.

The look of stunned happiness was still lighting up Tony’s black and blue face as he gently set aside the records and turned to the next much smaller parcel in the modest pile. Edwin held his breath when Tony unwrapped his mother’s gift, whilst Peggy and Ana had supervised somewhat, he was slightly wary of just what could produce that smug expression on Maria’s face. Fortunately, Maria’s gift proved to be a surprisingly thoughtful contribution, she’d carefully spent her time wintering in Italy compiling a book of family recipes gathered from her extended family in Sicily. Included in the list were such obscure delicacies as cannoli and sfogliatella as well as a whole host of seafood recipes from Venice – since even when it came to the Carbonell side of the family the Starks were from an improbable stock of cultures from all over the Mediterranean coast, with constant fond arguments about whether the Tuscan or Bologna’s version of a Margherita pizza could even come close to the legendary original from Naples.

(And even more arguments between the mostly ignored distant Catalanian branch of the family and the Venetian branch about which came first, tapas or cicchetti. Though apparently, the Spanish half of the family tended not to be invited to family gatherings or Christenings – something to do with who’s side they’d chosen during the whole unpleasant Spanish Civil War/collapse of Catalanian government and near parallel Fascist Government in Italy during the Mussolini era making that particular branch of the extended clan de facto black sheep. Though Edwin had honestly never quite worked out if being anarchist communists or fascist hating Mussolini-haters was supposed to be the position of shame given that both the Italian and Catalan branches of the extended Carbonell clan had fought to oppose the oppressive regimes they’d suddenly found themselves trying to exist under. Perhaps the Maggia linked branch of the family in Italy were the black sheep? Edwin was really unsure of the situation, he’d never been able to parse the sly allusions Maria had used to make in the old days, before the multiple failed attempts to have a child that Howard and Maria had anguished
through, before they’d all but given up, and somehow the accidental miracle that had been Tony had happened.)

Edwin wished dearly that Maria would someday be able to find it within her to share this side of herself with her son, the warmth and fondness that shone from her eyes as she shared anecdotes about her latest trip home had Edwin wondering not for the first time how different Tony’s upbringing could have been if Howard hadn’t proven such a domineering head of his small family. The clan in Italy extended as far across Europe as the USSR to the East and Britain to the West. Edwin often felt that Tony could have been happy there, away from the fame and the weight of the Stark name. Safe in the more obscure power that came with the establishment, and anonymity, of old money in Europe.

Whilst the thoughtful gift had Ana and Peggy’s fingerprints all over it, Edwin could tell that Maria had put an awful lot of effort into gathering the tome together. The cookbook itself was a slightly odd mixture of professionally bound and type-set recipes faced with the hand-written originals carefully sandwiched into photo album-like clear sleeves – revealing the hastily scrawled Italian and Spanish instructions that had utilised a wide variety of mediums from napkins and pieces of scrap paper to, in one notable example, the back of a thick piece of wood, on the other side of which may or may not have been a painting by …Titian (Edwin’s eyes widened in horrified awe) if the signature on scrawled unobtrusively in the corner was to be believed.

The remaining present was a co-operative effort from Peggy and Howard, or so the hardened SHIELD agent had claimed. From the sudden absence of the brilliant smile that had so briefly lit up his young charge’s face, Edwin knew that Tony saw straight through the white lie. Peggy’s gift, and everyone in the cozy little kitchen knew that the gift was all Peggy’s doing, was a perfectly scaled down child-sized toolset. Everything that Tony could possibly need for his little projects was there, all adapted carefully so that little fingers could hold them comfortably.

Edwin wondered how on Earth Peggy had managed to get hold of such a thing, and the inner upper-middle class Englishman inside him, that still peered over his shoulder and judged everything that he did, even now decades after he’d thrown all of that away to save Ana and been forced to flee to America. Well, that side of himself tutted that she’d gone to such expense. The secretive habit of saving money and making do whenever it was possible to do so discreetly was difficult to ignore. Even now, or rather especially now that even Howard’s fortune was faltering in this long economic downturn of the 1970s.

Edwin hastily gave Tony a beaming grin before turning to fetch the cake, a homemade effort that had taken days to put together – especially given how difficult it had suddenly become to find time to himself. The multi-tiered chocolate monstrosity towered stickily, though that was at least partially due to the encrusting of Turkish delight around the edges. Edwin and Ana had both been startled the previous summer when their charge had shown a new delight in the cloying gelatinous substance, but they’d been willing to go the extra mile if it would help welcome Tony home.
To Edwin’s gratification the beaming awe returned to the boy’s face as he spotted the confection, Ana took charge,

“Now darling we couldn’t come to your school for your Birthday.” Ana’s tone was all apologies, before suddenly turning dark, “Stupid snobbish rules.” And just as suddenly, “So we waited and tried to make your welcome home party extra special!”

Winking theatrically at Tony Ana started up the hastily composed rewrite of Happy Birthday;

“Happy Birthday to you! Happy Homeday to you! Happy Homeday dear Tony! Happy Belated Birthday to you!”

The singing was comically out of time, none of the adults had thought to practice their changes to the song, so there was no plan about just how they’d attempt to cram that extra word in there. Ana tried to rush ‘belated’ into the verse as quickly as possible, Peggy tried to stick to the rhythm of the music, Maria was singing the song to a different tune entirely something lyrical with a distinctly European rhythm, and Edwin hadn’t a clue how to slot the word in and just awkwardly kept singing voice gone completely flat with embarrassment.

Tony had burst out into delighted laughter and Edwin knew that all was well with the world. At least for now. Edwin’s mood bubbled ebulliently when Tony revealed that he felt well enough at ease with them that he was willing to joke,

“Happy Birthday! Once rejected now accepted… By meeee! And Hector a trifecta! Ricky Baker!”

Edwin shared an amused but wholly puzzled look with first Ana, then Peggy who both looked equally confused.

“Riiicccckky! Baaakeeer!”

A fond smile grew on Edwin’s lips, he didn’t have a clue what on earth the dear boy was talking about, or rather singing about. However, Edwin found that he didn’t much care when he spotted the huge grin and warm sparkle in those beloved brown eyes. As the little quintet shared the oversized cake Edwin caught Peggy shooting Tony yet another considering stare.

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Once the small gathering ended Tony spent the afternoon listening avidly to the new additions to his LP collection. Or rather he had the time to put one disc on the deck’s platter by the time the chaos of the party was sorted out. Jarvis had insisted that he needed to tidy up the mess, with Peggy insisting that she help and that Ana should remain seated. Maria had gratefully edged away to go and lie down, but not before giving Tony an all-encompassing hug that Tony hadn’t even been aware he’d been missing.

There were so many new additions to Tony’s burgeoning collection that he didn’t really have time to listen to much of the music, or form an opinion on the discs. Well, beyond admiring the album artwork, with the small selection spread out around him. That and noticing the surprising hard rock, nay heavy metal aspirations of The Man Who Sold the World, and having a good long childish giggle about the particular song verse that had Bowie fellating the devil in hell.

The title of the next song, Black Country Rock, nearly had Tony devolving into a very different set of giggles as it reminded him forcibly of a mental image from a talking heads documentary he’d only half paid attention to, years ago. Specifically, the vision of tanned teenagers, who’d previously been enjoying the surf-rock stylings of California Sound, lazing on a beach trying really hard to get into the mindset of heavy metal. Aka, surfer dudes in sunny California trying to emulate the grim pounding of the drop hammers, and black soot stained atmosphere of the Black Country, to really ‘get’ industrial Birmingham and the North of England. (SI’s restructuring of an old BSA factory in Birmingham had enabled Tony to confront that reality face to face as a teen – it had been eye-opening. Skies grey, even when there wasn’t a cloud in sight.)

Tony had to force himself not to spiral into the now familiar whirl of chaotic imagery as Bowie touched on some very dark subjects during the course of the next song. Something about the Heavy Metal genre touched on exposed nerves that hadn’t been there when Tony had first discovered his love for the genre in the 80s. Despite the lingering ache that threatened to overwhelm him, Tony felt that he owed it to himself to enjoy the album. He was not going to let the Avengers, and all of the shit that came with them, dictate his taste in music.

As the disc spun onwards, switching from a song set in an insane asylum, to a soldier just back from a war finding civilian life impossible and going on a shooting rampage, Tony looked down at the small horde of music he’d been gifted with with something akin to awe. He hadn’t really noticed during the course of the year, but he’d been envious of H-Justin’s burgeoning collection, even with the other boy’s all too enthusiastic willingness to share. That mild jealousy came into focus with his access effectively revoked. Now, with his small selection that had just broken into the double digits laid out before him (Most of it consisting of David Bowie, an artist, that until Jarvis’s well-meaning, but thoroughly uncomprehending gifts began, Tony had only been vaguely aware of in a ‘Best Of’ sense.) Tony could feel the urge to thank Jarvis welling up. Naïve as the gifts were, they were genuinely heartfelt. And, if Tony were to admit it to himself, he genuinely enjoyed Bowie these days.
The selection of new LPs was slightly daunting, Bowie in a dress notwithstanding, Tony wasn’t sure what to listen to next. The two new Iggy Pop albums were especially intriguing, given that Justin had genuinely tended more towards acts like The Osmonds, The Runaways and other teeny-bopper fare, his selection of actual listenable rock for its own sake had been sporadic and accidental at best.

Despite his attempts to avoid the train of thought the song forced Tony’s brain back into darker territory. In light of Steve’s all too frequent hit first, ask questions later approach to any and all confrontations in his life, Tony had to admit that he found Bowie’s unerring detached accuracy particularly worrying. Lounging in a dress or not, the song hit upon something that Tony wasn’t sure he wanted to examine too closely.

Tony’s impression that Heavy Metal’s dark themes were newly unfriendly territory was reconfirmed when the next song on the album proved to be all about a murderous AI begging humanity not to let it burn the world.

“…don’t let me stay, my logic says burn, so send me away…” Eesh.

A strangely familiar red haze ate at the edges of Tony’s vision as the implications hit him, memories of Ultron’s gleaming red eyes threatening to overwhelm him. Thankfully the next track, a thoroughly vacuous song, which Bowie only seemed to be guest-starring in, cut in and shook him out of the threatening flashes. Pulling Tony back from an edge he didn’t think he’d be able to claw his way back from.

Tony regained his calm in time to be thoroughly surprised when the final track revealed itself to be a song he’d associated with the shoegaze band Nirvana and the 90s, turned out to have been written in 1970. Tony felt even more foolish when he realised that it was the eponymous track on the damnedly fascinating, yet insane, heavy metal album. Tony was determined to give the album a fair shot, Bowie and Heavy Metal were a combination that, by rights, he should adore.

Unfortunately, the surprisingly disturbing LP was the only disc Tony had the time to listen to that afternoon, the intriguing black and white images of the Iggy Pop albums and the two new additions to Tony’s ever-growing selection of Bowie having to wait for another day. Tony regretfully packed everything away carefully in his trunk before dashing off to join the adults to try to wheedle some SHIELD tales out of Aunty Peggy.

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It was only at the evening meal that the proverbial bomb was dropped, Peggy was here to stay for the entirety of summer. Tony had been absolutely stunned when he realised that Peggy had actually
come to stay for the summer not just one of her usual flying visits, the previously delicious spaghetti vongole that had come straight out of Maria’s recipe book almost went ignored that evening, as plans for the summer were made. Tony wasn’t naïve enough to imagine that she was only there for him, but still it was nice. There was obviously something SHIELD related going on, but Tony was damned if he knew what it was.

The next day was blissful, Peggy and Ana both seemed determined to spend time with him. In fact, all of the adults in their small household did, between their desire to ‘check-up’ on how Tony’s self-defence training was going, Maria insisting that she teach him how to cook some of the dishes in his new book, and Jarvis plying him with all of his favourite dishes Tony almost didn’t have the time to notice Howard’s absence.

The day after Howard dropped his own bomb, summoning Tony to his study Howard laid down the law.

“Good work on the grades Anthony.”

Tony was instantly suspicious, Howard never offered compliments freely. There was always a catch.

Howard looked up from his paperwork and glared, oh, he was expected to reply.

“Th-Thank you sir.”

Howard’s eyes narrowed. Shit. What else had he been expected to say there?

“Yes. Well. Good grades or no there’s no excuse to be letting the Stark name be dredged through mud.”

Tony blinked, nervously unaware of what Howard was referring to. His father gestured impatiently at Tony’s face, oh. Yes. That.

Tony swallowed and nodded vigorously, hoping that the jerky gesture would pass for ready compliance.
“Yes sir.”

Howard leaned back seemingly satisfied,

“As soon as the swelling goes down.” Tony’s back prickled with dread, the swelling not the bruising, “I expect you to join me at the necessary society events to keep the Stark name on the right tongues.”

No. Surely not.

“I’ll get the staff to cover up what you’ve done to yourself, and you will behave with the dignity and composure expected of a Stark. You will nod politely and make the company look good to our investors do you understand?”

“Yes sir.”

Tony hoped that his reluctance wasn’t coming across in his voice, but from the scowl that suddenly appeared on Howard’s face he hadn’t succeeded in keeping his opinion to himself.

Howard’s tone turned falsely airy,

“If you are to earn the permission required to go to Cambridge, and your St Cedd’s…” Howard spat the name, “you will do as I say.”

Shit.

“Yes sir…”

“Good boy. Your face permitting, the first event is tomorrow evening.”

If Tony wanted to go to Cambridge in October he had to do exactly what Howard said.
Tony’s days were filled with pleasantly busy hours, despite Howard’s commands regarding his evenings. Mornings spent cooking with either Jarvis or Maria – depending on whether or not Maria felt up to spending the long hours on her feet. Somehow Tony and his mother had never gotten around to spending time with each other in quite this way the first time around, Tony found it bizarre that they were bonding over an activity as mundane and boring as cooking of all things. However, Maria’s often ignored scientific bent meant that his mother was able to impart on Tony the significance of the purposeful vagueness in recipes, where no one had ever managed to do so before. Whilst Tony didn’t think he’d ever understand the people who waxed lyrical about soul food, and cooking from the heart, with his mother’s gentle coaching Tony slowly began to appreciate the joy of actually being able to cook for the people he loved without the dish turning into a charred mess.

Tony was grateful for the opportunity to spend time with his mother. They’d never had this shared time the first time around, their first hesitant steps to building a relationship beyond the early simplicity of mother and extremely young child, were cut short just as they were beginning. But at every moment, Tony saw ample signs of the woman that he’d idolised after her death, the kind but firm woman who wouldn’t take any shit from the staff, but who would be the first to offer a shoulder to cry on, and provide a secretive cheque when they were having financial troubles, or offer up access to the finest doctors’ money could buy. Tony was gratified to find that the woman he’d built up wasn’t a myth, but a real flesh and blood human being, who cared deeply about others despite her own problems. It was a relief after the years’ worth of nagging fear that the woman in his mind was entirely fictional, given that Tony had only seen his mother at the depths of one of her worst depressive bouts when he’d arrived in this strange new world of his.

After the inevitable long lunches, as Tony’s close knit little family of choice gathered to share the latest concoction he and Maria had put together that morning, his afternoons were filled with learning how to use the numerous armed and unarmed sparring techniques that Peggy deemed appropriate for a child.

Between his newly long evenings, and his own desire to spend as much time as possible in Aunty Peggy’s, Ana’s, and Jarvis’s company, Tony was exhausted.

Peggy insisted on teaching Tony the basics of how to use the laughable wooden sai, a set of tonfas she’d brought with her, and the extendable baton that reminded Tony uncomfortably of Tasha’s specialised weapons. The set of glorified sticks turned out to be deceptively complex weapons. Peggy patiently showed him how to use the tonfas to brace his forearms, the rigidity of the wood enhancing his blows and allowing Tony to block hers in turn without (much) risk of bruising. The extendable baton was a lesson in tactics; a whole separate set to the ones that Tony had gradually come to rely on under Ben’s tutelage.

During their sessions Peggy was patient and calm, but shared a surprising amount of her teaching
technique with Ben. Every now and again she’d let the hardened warrior out from behind the mask of kindly stern Aunty that she’d always carefully worn in Tony’s presence. Her tendency to occasionally show Tony the technique by using it on him, rather than her usual method of slowly walking him through every little movement of the action had Tony beginning to wonder why he’d never seen that side of her before.

During their third session with the tonfas, Peggy surprised him by switching her grip from the handles perpendicular to the main shaft of the weapon to the shaft itself. Suddenly Peggy’s reach was a foot longer, and she had hooks as well as bludgeons.

Tony blinked, momentarily stunned by the change in style, before taking the lesson to heart.

The sai were more difficult to pick up quickly than the other two new introductions, not because the techniques to wield the strangely shaped knives were more complicated, but because Peggy was more cautious about hurting Tony with even these blunt wooden practice knives.

Despite that care, Peggy had almost broken Tony’s arm when he’d been distracted by his increasingly intrusive Third Eye mid-spar. For a moment Peggy’s heart shone clearly in her chest, strong and large – the obvious cracks long since healed over and somehow adding to the overall beauty of the image. Especially with the ghosts of whatever links Peggy shared disappearing into all corners of the room, Tony only knew what the bonds were when he’d realised that one of the brightest thickest threads tied directly to him. Tony had been driven nearly to tears when he realised that his own chest was the other end of that connection. Peggy had reamed Tony out for his inattention, but with the aftermath of the beautiful image seared into Tony’s brain, he found he didn’t much care.

Sadly, after a couple of weeks of lessons, it was clear to Tony that Peggy was here to take over sparring duties from Ana and Jarvis. Ana was in no shape to spar, aware of Jarvis’s eyes on the back of his neck the whole time Tony had ended up paying so much attention to her rather than Peggy’s instructions that Peggy had huffed impatiently and swapped to the hand to hand techniques that had him automatically using the turtle of Fury. Point taken Tony started paying attention to her teachings, but as soon as their time was up Tony sidled over to Ana. Peggy had taken the hint and ushered Jarvis away. The petite redhead was exhausted, her already pale skin translucent white, despite Ana’s steady gentle smile and willingness to let Tony climb up into her lap, Ana was clearly very ill. Sickening as the thought was, the fact that she still had a healthy head of hair was information enough to Tony. The doctors hadn’t identified the problem, and the chemotherapy hadn’t started.

Tony watched Edwin leave the room, Peggy distracting him and shooting Tony a look that said ‘behave’, and took his chance,

“Um… Ana?”
“Yes dear?”

Ana’s tone was fond, but the exhaustion shone through underscoring everything,

“Have you.” Tony swallowed. He almost couldn’t bring himself to say it, the rock that had suddenly taken residence in his throat blocking his airway. If he said it out loud, it would be real. “Have you considered that it might be ovarian cancer?”

There. He’d said it. It was hateful, but he had to.

It was clear that Jarvis hadn’t passed on his letter. Damn the man. Tony was coming to loathe the man’s beloved overprotective streak.

Ana didn’t pale, with her current complexion that was impossible, but she did look even more tired than she had already.

“No. I hadn’t.” There was a long pause, even Ana’s automatic stroking of his hair had stilled, “Thank you, Tony dear.”

Hearing Ana thanking him for literally telling her about her death sentence was almost more than Tony could bear, but he would not cry. He would not add his own grief to the weight that rested so heavily on her too thin shoulders.

Tony desperately hoped that he’d done the right thing. Ana hugged him tighter as if sensing that Tony was just as upset by the possible diagnosis as she was, Tony latched on and pretended that he was comforting her rather than the other way around.

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In spite of all of the joyful chaos that was taking up so much of his time, Tony finally had a breakthrough with the barrier that had been preventing him from producing any repulsor tech during that first week back. He’d fled to the squash court to avoid Ana’s kind gaze, Maria was in Manhattan organising another Maria Stark Foundation shindig that particular morning. For all that he knew that he was being unfair, Tony couldn’t stand the thought of spending the time cooking under the Jarvises
patient, and too sad, eyes. Tony was trying to ignore the festering guilt over his actions, building excuses that sounded hollow even in the privacy of his own head. Even though Tony was revelling in the unexpected attention after the pleasant surprise of the party, Tony had immediately fallen back onto his habit of the previous summer of avoiding the adults in his life wherever possible. The frequent mornings cooking with Maria, and full-afternoons from Peggy’s determination to teach him self-defence notwithstanding… Tony was still a middle-aged man in mind and soul, and still chafed at the restrictions the well-meaning adults in his life kept trying to place on him. He’d been holed up inside the squash court cum workshop, taking advantage of the fact that neither Maria nor Jarvis were around, and ended up staring blankly at the fluorescent tubing that lined the walls above the large square windows that let the hot summer light inside.

New York had gotten increasingly hot in the past couple of weeks, temperatures soaring to such an extent that the weather had swapped from easing Maria’s usual homesickness to actually making her feel unwell. Tony couldn’t say that he blamed her, his hair was plastered uncomfortably to the back of his neck, and sweat trickled down his spine, when his t-shirt wasn’t practically glued uncomfortably to his skin that was.

The blank white relatively cool light source reminded Tony once again just how basic the repulsor tech actually was. The science behind the repulsors was deceptively simple, paralleling the tech behind EL-panels and wires, repulsors relied on an energy emitting coating, protected from the outside air by a physical barrier, and fed an AC current by whatever power source was available – be it an arc reactor or something cruder.

The new repulsor watch was far bulkier than Tony would have liked, Tony’s ample experience in cobbling together arc reactors from scrap metal notwithstanding, he simply didn’t have the parts to make anything smaller – or with enough power to deliver anything more powerful than a stun grenade or a flashbang.

Between the lack of power, and the thing’s obvious bulky not-just-a-watchness Tony reluctantly shelved the project, taking the thing to pieces and storing the slightly dubious repulsor panels amongst the LPs in his trunk. Instead Tony spent the time holed up in his secretive workshop making his modified Widow’s Bites more efficient. As it was, with the backwards transistors that relied on the ancient valve technology, the watch couldn’t actually give out that many charges before the power source needed replacing.

Tony’s continued frustration with the lack of tech and tools in this backwards era provided him with enough creative energy that he hit upon an idea of just how to maintain his relative anonymity as the owner of Arc Technologies. Taking a page out of the internet era’s book, Tony decided to set up a dead drop situation with the lawyers the next chance he got. He’d store the patented designs with the law firm, with strict instructions to supply the information to the R&D guys at Arc at a pre-set date.

The scheme wasn’t fool proof by any means, and was full of opportunity for exploitation in its
current form. However, it was a start, and Tony was sure that Ben would have a twist of his own to
add to dissuade people from trying to make a quick buck.

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Ana glanced at her darling Edwin, as they both waited impatiently for the news. Ana hadn’t told her
dear husband just where she’d gotten the idea from, the tightening of his jaw when she’d mentioned
that she’d found the worst-case-scenario in a medical tome had been bad enough without mentioning
that it had been poor Tony who’d pointed her towards the unpleasant, but given her symptoms,
horribly likely diagnosis.

The doctor finally called them over, from the expression on the small woman’s face Ana knew.

“Mrs Jarvis? I’m Doctor Anwara Perera, I’ll be your oncologist. Would you like your husband to
come in with you?”

Ana took one look at her darling, and saw through his ill-fitting mask of stiff-upper-lipped strength.
Edwin never had worn the expectations of British manliness well, he was trying to be brave for her
again. Ana could see it clearly in the unshed tears in his eyes, and the tense line of his jaw.

Ana carefully assessed her husband, trying to discern if he had the strength to get through this. He’d
tried to shoulder this burden once before, Ana remembered wryly where that had gotten them –
several long, wasted months that they could have been spending enjoying each other’s company lost
to painful tension and bitter recriminations.

No Ana decided, she wouldn’t subject her husband to the added burden of having to live up to his
own expectations of strength in front of this doctor. Whatever the news, Ana would tell him in
private. Ana turned to Edwin, plastering a loving smile on her face as she tried desperately to convey
how much she loved him with her eyes,

“No. I’d rather my darling didn’t have to sit through all of this medical talk.”

The doctor looked nervous,

“Are you sure Mrs Jarvis?”
“Quite sure, thank you.”

Hugging Edwin tightly Ana kissed him just below his eye and whispered for their ears only,

“...I love you darling... In a louder voice she continued, “I’ll be back in a minute. I’ll tell you if there’s any news. But I thought I should spare you having to sit through yet another ‘we don’t know’...”

Edwin chuckled wetly at the mocking tone Ana placed on the impression. Ana shot him one last look before she entered the office with the doctor, embedding that moment of hope in her brain.

“...Mrs Jarvis, please, take a seat.”

After several long unnecessary minutes of pleasantries, the dark-haired woman finally broke the news,

“You were right. It’s ovarian cancer. We at Goldwater wish to extend our sincerest apologies for the length of time it took to gain a diagnosis...”

Ana found herself focussing tightly on the nervous woman’s mouth,

“...The extensive uterine and fallopian scarring alongside the unusual structure of the tissue made it extremely difficult to gain a clear idea of what we were looking for...”

For the next twenty minutes Ana’s world tunneled into concentrating on the medical terminology and her prognosis. Her spine ramrod straight as she absorbed the information, and how they’d best move forward. Ana would have to relay this information to Edwin after all, carefully filtered so that he wouldn’t break down and decide to solely take their shared burden on as his own. Ana would be strong enough for the both of them.

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Between Howard’s demands, and Tony’s suddenly full days with Aunty Peggy and Maria, he didn’t
spend much time at all with the Jarvises in those first, increasingly unbearably hot weeks of the summer holidays. As the temperature rose, so did Howard’s temper. And Tony was finding it more and more difficult to live up to his father’s expectations of how he should behave at the numerous awful high society parties that he was being forced to attend.

Tony’s vague intentions to do as Ben had told him, and meditate on that dusty lump of rock were all but forgotten in the face of the unexpected fullness of his schedule. The rock lay in the bottom of Tony’s trunk, alongside the school books and Wand of Watoomb, ignored in favour of the few LPs that Tony actually owned.

Towards the end of the second sweltering week back at the mansion Ana and Jarvis suddenly had a striking change in mood, gone was the melancholy pensive tension replaced instead by a painful mixture of relief and resignation. So, they had their diagnosis, Tony could only hope that this time it hadn’t come too late. Of course, despite the fact that it was obvious from the shift in the atmosphere none of the adults deigned to let Tony in on the situation. At first Tony felt quietly resentful about the usual wilful blindness on display – that is until Ana gently took him aside after a less than successful teaching session with Peggy (Tony just could not get used to the way the sais were essentially stilettos with tines) crouched down and made sure in terms that even a child could understand, that Tony knew precisely what the situation was.

13 July 1977, 22:30

Tony struggled back to consciousness.

“Quick he’s waking up – what the hell he’s had enough ether to knock out an elephant.”

“Get the ludes!”

Tony struggled desperately, but again it was futile. He was feeling strange, uncoordinated, groggy. Besides Tony was seven, he was small for seven.

Once again, his jaw was forcibly cracked open and a couple of pills were pushed down his throat. Tony couldn’t even hack them back up – they stuck around long enough to make sure that the evil little things made their way to his stomach before leaving the room.
“Don’t you dare sick up kid. Stan will be right here.”

Presumably, Stan, grinned nastily.

“He’ll give you a kicking if you do. Sides we’ll only leave you locked in here lying in your own spew. It’s the least you deserve after what you did at the party. If it were up to me you’d get more than a kicking.”

‘Stan’ opened his mouth and added,

“Yeah – and give you more Ludes too. ‘Sno point kid.’

Rough faces smiled down smugly at him as they slammed the door shut in his face.

Tony stared around the cramped little room in dismay – waiting for the drugs to kick in in despair. Contemplating vomiting anyway, despite the visible lack of coating on the things meaning he’d probably already had a significant dose anyway.

Tony fought off the lulling soporific sensation that wanted to pull him under again with desperate ferocity. Godammit he was a Stark. Stark men are made of Iron. Tony would not let whatever the hell he’d been given drag him under, he’d wasted most of the 90s snorting mountains of medical-grade cocaine, amongst other things. If Tony’d gained nothing else during that wasted decade it was a prodigious tolerance for narcotics – he could take whatever this was. He could. He had to.

Tony only then remembered to do an inventory of his body, two hands, two feet, ten fingers, ten toes. There was a brief moment of adrenaline fuelled panic when Tony realised that he was covered in blood, but that moment passed, when as he plucked at his ruined jacket, Tony realised that it couldn’t possibly belong to him.

Just as Tony was about to give in, to lay back down, on the hard-concrete floor of the tiny cupboard, Stan peered back in and had him jumping up in fright. The large man chuckled as Tony’s heart hammered in his ears. Christ, with the distinct lack of attempts lately Tony had thought he’d gotten away from all of this crap.
Peggy eyed up the carnage with a practiced eye, the usually plush shag rug in the centre of the room was covered in broken glass, and sodden with a mixture of alcohol and blood. Peggy wasn’t sure if Howard would laugh or be apoplectic at the scene, she never could tell which way he’d swing these days. Peggy made doubly sure that her cocktail dress was covered by the lab coat she’d hastily scrounged from Howard’s small workshop, and that her rubber gloves covered her jewellery.

Blood.

And that led directly to her main clue, one of the home invaders, who’d been a full half of the damned wait-staff, was sprawled dead on the carpet. The man had bled heavily from a low gut wound, it would have been a slow lingering death. That would explain the other injury - the man’s own teammates had shot him in the head, one bullet to the base of his skull at point blank range. They’d rather he was dead than either slow them down, or worse blab everything to an interested party.

Making sure to take a quick photo of the man with her new Arc Camera first, the self-developing-film a godsend, Peggy clinically rolled the man over with her toe, grimacing as her Biba sandal came into contact with the man’s blood. Damn, she hoped it would wash out. Sometimes, Peggy really hated the shit that came with being a SHIELD agent. Ordinarily she wouldn’t have gotten quite this involved with a scene. But this was no ordinary scene, and even if Howard had objected (he hadn’t), Peggy was technically the only agent present who was even vaguely qualified to investigate a scene.

The dead man rolled stiffly over onto his back, rigor mortis was already beginning to set-in given the unusual, even for this time of year, heat. There was a shard of metal protruding from the man’s stomach, dispassionately Peggy noted that she had been right, it looked like a sucking wound. Mouth clenching in distaste at her self-assigned task, Peggy squatted down next to the corpse and examined it more closely.

At this close proximity the stench of shit, soured blood, and the already unpleasant reek of death was noticeable. They’d have to get the body out of here fairly quickly, in this heat a well-bled steak would go rotten within hours, let alone a carcass that still contained its blood and gizzards.

Peggy pulled the balaclava off his head, wincing when the move made the man’s minced grey matter slop messily onto the shag pile. There would be no rescuing that rug. She didn’t recognise the face, the man looked perfectly average, sandy brown hair, grey eyes. Peggy snapped off a quick photo anyway, peering out at the not-quite-black orange haze that was the New York skyline in the power cut, she considered that they’d be able to work out who the hell he was later.

Peggy carefully inspected the corpse for any visible identifiers, but found nothing obvious. Sighing,
and regretting it immediately as the ever-present stench of shit and death made its way to the back of her throat Peggy got on with the job she’d been avoiding. Making sure that there was nothing to cut herself on Peggy took a firm grip on the slither of metal and pulled it out. The suddenly far stronger waft of faeces and bile went ignored as Peggy noticed that the little blade had pulled free far more easily than she’d been expecting. Peggy held it up to the light, there was nothing visibly remarkable about the shard, barring the obvious fact that Tony had been the one to put it there.

Tony

Peggy pushed that thought back into its compartment. Get the job done, panic later. Snapping yet another photo Peggy realised that she’d have to ask Howard what was special about the blade, something about the metal just felt unusual to her, but damned if she knew what. Peggy resolved that if she could manage it she would get a handle added to the makeshift stiletto, for Tony’s sake. If the fool boy had only asked her she’d have given him a decent blade dammit! He shouldn’t have had to have been carrying around this ridiculous useless knife.

Peggy stopped herself from wiping at her eyes in the brink of time, remembering the gore on her rubber coated fingers when they were an inch from her face. Setting the accusatory knife aside for the moment Peggy continued with the unpleasant task of undressing the corpse, hoping that he would give up some of his secrets.

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Once Stan was sure that Tony wasn’t about to spit out the pills he left, giving Tony a cheery, but menacing, little wave as he slammed the door to his cupboard shut.

To Tony’s surprise he managed, barely, to stay awake. After what felt like an absolute age of fighting off the urge to sleep, the urge passed. Vanished as if it had never been in the first place.

Huh.

Not in the mood to look a gift horse in the mouth Tony started looking around the cel- no it wasn’t a cell. He was locked inside a broom cupboard. Oh for fuck’s sake, did they have any idea who they were messing wi- oh. Of course, they didn’t. It was 1976, not 2008, or even the aftermath of the 1993 kidnapping and the self-defence trial. Tony didn’t yet have the reputation for taking apart his would-be hostage takers that he’d earnt himself.
Tony sat in the middle of the tiny little room and giggled. He felt strangely euphoric. Tony hugged himself, and only then noticed that 1) he felt amazing everything was tingly and his previously itchy suit was gloriously rough against his now hypersensitive skin and 2) he still had his knives. The idiots hadn’t even searched him. Tony giggled again. The noise bubbling up out of him unheeded.

So his watch was gone – no biggie.

Tony drew the largest of his two remaining adamantium daggers and spent more time than he’d care to admit admiring the oily play of the harsh fluorescent lighting on the blue tinged blade. Pretty.

Tony giggled again. And quickly clapped his hands over his mouth, nearly stabbing himself in the head in the process as he momentarily forgot about the dagger in his left hand.

Oops.

Trying to be quiet, Tony wobbled to his feet, using the handy wall that was oh so handily next to him to haul himself up. Realising distantly that his balance was completely shot, and that the floor seemed to be jumping around like a mad thing. Tony landed back on his ass, and considered the problem, idly doodling the atomic structure of Vibranium in the polished concrete of the floor he was sat on with the knife in his hands, the impossibly sharp blade cutting deeply into the hard material with ease.

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Edwin felt the helpless rage building up. They’d tried to phone the police but the switchboard was down. Everything was down.

The city was in absolute darkness and poor Tony had been taken.

Edwin started out of the window at the distant orange glow in a detached horror.

Tony was out in this.

His dear boy, he’d only been back for a couple of weeks and already this.
The rather pathetic police presence that had turned up to investigate the incident had Edwin quaking with rage. At least until dear Peggy had taken him aside and explained in no uncertain terms that there were no police in New York at the moment, and that they’d been lucky that they’d even gotten this kind of response.

It was chaos out on the streets below. And the much-diminished police force, weakened by decades of underfunding, and the current near-bankruptcy of the city itself… Well the police weren’t available tonight.

Edwin stared at the deceptive peace presented by the island of Manhattan to the orange glow that ominously appeared over the river, before seeming to surround them – Brooklyn, The Bronx, Harlem, Hudson – no matter what direction he stared out at the horizon from there was that damnable orange glow.

The city was in turmoil.

And poor Tony, his charge, had been vanished into the heart of it.

Edwin clenched a fist and tried not to let his turmoil upset the guests as he gently but firmly ushered them away from the chaos of the private rooms back into the ‘public’ areas of the penthouse. The responsibility of making sure that the stranded socialites were kept calm had fallen solely to him, more’s the pity. Edwin would have dearly liked to be out on the streets, like the old days, with Peggy, knocking heads and leaving no stone unturned until they had Young Tony safe and sound in their arms again.

Unfortunately, from the tense lines of both Peggy and his darling Ana’s spines even they were struggling to make any sense out of the chaos out there. Especially since the blackout was total. Not even the phones were operating.

Tony ran out of space when he was halfway through his diagram of the atomic structure of Uru, well the theoretical structure. It was impossible to synthesize on Earth. The diagrams surrounded Tony, the floor and walls surrounding him covered in neat atomic structures, with the energy levels and other subatomic details carefully sketched in in Tony’s untidy scrawl. Tony couldn’t reach high enough to finish the structure. Somehow Tony had forgotten that he’d lost more than a metre. In a fit of pique Tony dashed the knife through the images he’d just spent so long carefully etching into the
concrete. Panting Tony dropped back to the floor, succumbing to the pull of gravity. Blinking as the world shifted Tony remembered that he was supposed to be doing something, Tony made a final particularly deep gash through the Vibranium structure that dominated the tiny floor space of his closet, rendering the images completely incomprehensible, and staggered upright again.

Tony walked the two steps up to the heavy industrial door, untouched by the diagrams, for some reason Tony had been under the impression that it was important that he didn’t make noises on the door. Tony glanced at the gouged and pitted concrete surrounding him, freshly remembered dagger in hand, and simply cut out the lock. The thick dense metal of the industrial jamb parted like tissue paper before the razor edge of the adamantium, the hardened industrial steel of the doorjamb putting up no more resistance than butter. The lock fell out of the door with a loud clunk. Tony giggled again at the incongruous sight of a locked lock still attached to the jamb lying on the floor.

He pushed open the heavy door.

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Despite all of their resources, all of their training. In the face of this chaos, Peggy Carter, Agent of SHIELD felt absolutely helpless. After getting through her fruitless inspection of the corpse, and acquiring Mr Jarvis’s assistance to herd the panicked guests out of the room that had been the focus of the evening’s events the enormity of what they were facing had hit her.

New York was in darkness, the city ablaze.

Shit.


Despite having access to Howard’s equipment, communications were basically non-existent. The blackout catastrophic enough that even the phone lines had gone down. Peggy had managed to get through to one of the SHIELD offices outside of the extensive radius of the power cut, but it would be hours before they could get here and provide any assistance.

The SHIELD offices within the blackout zone were dark. Both literally and in the communications sense, Peggy could only hope that Howard’s tech was holding. Some of the individuals contained within those facilities could do unspeakable damage if they got out. Even with SHIELD tech and the Stark designed radios all agents carried as a matter of course, communications were spotty and
limited. All of the emergency channels that could still operate were swamped. And the police were doing nothing.

Somehow, they’d managed to get in contact with the local police, Peggy wasn’t sure what technological marvel Howard had pulled out of his arse, but she could have kissed the infuriating man when that small glimmer of hope had sparkled in the form of an impossible connection. The brief blossoming of hope had been punctured sharply when the promised officer finally arrived two hours later. Despite the seriousness of the situation that had just gone down, and the terse professional manner in which the events had been relayed, only one member of New York’s finest had deigned to show up. And even then, Peggy could tell that the nervous fool was itching to get back to the safety of his station.

So far, the only information Peggy had to work with was what she’d gathered for herself from the corpse in the other room. Peggy had been unwilling to ask it of Mr Jarvis, well aware of his fragility in situations such as these, but fortunately Ana had once again proven just why she was considered a highly capable agent. The usually vivacious woman had slipped away from her husband, tending to the socialites huddled in the private rooms of the penthouse, claiming fatigue. Ana had materialised next to Peggy just as she’d been wondering how they’d deal with the corpse. The pair of women had proceeded to roll the man up in the already ruined carpet and roughly shove him inside the large ice box – rather than open the powerless freezer in this weather.

Mr Jarvis had complained as soon as he found out that he’d have no more ice to placate the guests with, but Peggy honestly couldn’t care less in that moment. Her focus had once again switched to trying to work out if there was any way to get Tony back. With the already tense atmosphere in the city due to the Son of Sam murders, and the intense sticky heatwave. Peggy knew that it was going to be an evening of riots. Not everyone sitting around cheerfully trying to emulate the can-do attitude of the ‘65 Blackout or anything approaching London’s so-called Blitz Spirit.

Christ.

With Mr Jarvis droning on in background, the high tones he always adopted when he was nervous on full display, Peggy shared an enraged glance with Ana, noting that her fellow agent clearly felt the same way about the situation.

Whoever had done this, and right under their noses too, would pay.

There was only the small obstacle of backup generators barely running, and the emergency switchboard being completely jammed to work around. Not to mention the riots in the streets, and the apparent refusal of New York’s ‘finest’ to go out and actually keep the peace in the streets.
That was no big deal, right?

Peggy could see the grim determination tightening Ana’s jaw as her fellow agent and godparent made call after call to the SHIELD offices that were reachable, desperately trying to get a handle on the insane situation.

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The next few minutes were a blur of action that Tony could never quite remember clearly. Memories lost to a haze of motion and seasickness, vague impressions of action and too slow reaction. Stan turned, mouth open in surprise, the giant of a man seeming to move in slow motion. The two stared at each other for a long moment, Tony distracted by the halo of swirling lights surrounding the giant of a man’s head. Stan turned back, mouth opening, and Tony rushed forward hoping to forestall the thug from getting in touch with his compatriots. A burst of urgency seemed to come from nowhere, the easily amused lethargy that had defined his whole being a moment ago evaporating like water on a hot day.

Ducking under the man’s arms as he lunged forward, Tony twisted. Somehow, after a confusion of movement, Tony managed to end up on the man’s shoulders in a bizarre parody of a father giving his son a piggyback. Stan was trying to throw him off without hurting him, Tony doing his level best to strangle the man with his legs in a poor mimicry of Nat’s signature move. Tony was clinging onto the man’s nose with one hand trying to speed the process along. As the meaty fist reached up again to try and gently pry him off, Tony petulantly hit Stan on the head, hard, with the butt of the handle. Oh, he’d forgotten the dag-

To Tony’s shock in the next moment he ended up flat on his back on the floor, Stan the mountain out cold beside him. Huh, he hadn’t expected to actually win that fight. Tony left Stan lying unconscious on the floor just outside his cell or rather, the storage cupboard. He’d spent a few fruitless minutes trying to drag the man’s gently snoring body inside, to hide the evidence. But their differing weights made the attempt worthless.

Tony rapidly ran down the corridor, and pushed his way through the large industrial doors at the end. The awakened sense of urgency pushing him into the unknown.

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Howard was busying himself shouting at anyone and everyone who was stupid enough to come near. Peggy was wasting her time trying to get in touch with the people at the little agency that she still thought Maria knew nothing about. Cute. Maria had taken the time to read the agent’s
preliminary assessment of the corpse, but there was nothing useful there.

Back straight Maria lifted her purloined radio and made the call to the Bensonhurst neighbourhood. The quiet area was about as far from the glamour of Manhattan as it was possible to get in Brooklyn without ending up in Coney or the sea.

“Giro? My bambino has been taken.”

Maria allowed the full force of her rage to seep into her voice. She knew from bitter experience that Howard was unlikely to do anything productive when people threatened his family, more likely to fall back on outlandish threats than actually negotiate his way through the situation.

Giro sighed on the other end of the line, Maria didn’t make it a secret that she didn’t approve of her cousin’s ‘low’ links to the NY Mafia. She much preferred the family’s Mafia ties remain within the bounds of Europe, and well away from the bitter fierce rivalry with the ridiculously named ‘Maggia’ gangs that roamed the streets on this side of the Atlantic. However, for her dear Bambino she was willing to lower her dealings to New York’s street level.

“I’ll call the family. Get our boots on the street.”

Slipping into the fluent mix of Italian and Catalan that she used when she was visiting home Maria continued to relay the necessary information at speed. Not for the first time she regretted not taking the time to teach Tony Catalan, whilst it wasn’t the language of her home it was the language of their family. But despite the way her darling bambino had taken to Italian, picking up the language like a fish to water, somehow there’d never seemed to be any time.

Pursing her lips tightly Maria debated with herself before passing on another key piece of information,

“The little boys at the SSR- sorry ’SHIELD’”, the disdain practically dripped from her voice, “have gotten themselves involved.”

Giro’s remonstration to be careful fell flat.

“Yes, yes I know.”
Maria pushed away his misgivings with an irritated wave of her hand. Nevertheless, even with the high likelihood of SHIELD interference, it was about time that the idiotic Americans who were no doubt involved in this pathetic plot learnt why the Martinelli family were one of the most feared crime-syndicates in Europe.

No one messed with her family. No one.

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Tony had intended to disable the guard he literally stumbled across outside the door. He’d wanted to hit a tendon or a ligament or …something.

Tony brought up the dagger as the oafish guy turned, mouth opening to let out a cry of warning.

Blood spurted everywhere. It was so shiny and red. Oh… The man’s hand was on the floor. It reminded Tony of the Addams Family. Giggling at the remembered image of the sassy hand Tony turned to point out the similarity to the wailing man.

Oops. There went the intestines, glistening and slick. Oh no. He hadn’t meant to do that. Still giggling, the bright colours of the fluorescent lights merging into oil slick patterns, Tony tried to push the man’s guts back inside, making matters …messier as he yet again forgot he was wielding a dagger.

The guts chattered up at him, steaming and stinking with visions of neon lights and graffiti, strangely monochromatic black and white skulls and JESUS!! Purple velvet, and disco lighting, flashes of silver and the smell of hot sugar and the sea, and red so much red all colliding and looming up out of the horror. Tony blinked owlish at the swirling chaotic imagery, brain skittering away from the horror of the coils laid out before him and wandered on.

Tony meandered down the dark corridor with its flickering fluorescent lighting and chipped flaking paintwork in that peculiar industrial blue and cream, trailing blood and other viscera. The knife was making such pretty lines in the wall.

Besides, his future was in the offal.
Edwin paced uselessly in the dark office that had been commandeered as a command centre, someone had acquired a stash of candles and set them strategically throughout around the room. The darkness was still oppressive, but the dim candlelight was preferable to the orange glow that emanated from the windows.

The city was still burning.

Edwin noted the distinct lack of blues and twos, the police were still notable by their absence. This chaos had been going on for six hours now, and still he could see the ant-like people down below looting and fighting.

Running his hand through his dishevelled hair, Edwin collected his breath and continued on his way to fetch the promised champagne. It was a thankless task, but it was still his responsibility to stop the socialites from rioting, if it cost Howard the contents of his liquor cabinet so be it.

Lord knew where the man himself had gone, Howard had vanished when yet another interchangeable SHIELD agent had shown up and started whispering frantically in his ear. At first Edwin had thought that there’d been a breakthrough, that they’d found Young Tony. But no – from the tightening of the skin around Peggy’s mouth, and the fire blazing in Ana’s tired eyes that hadn’t been it at all.

Edwin plastered on a grin as he heaved open the double doors to the large open plan space that held the remaining guests, time to make good. God he resented his job sometimes.

There was a generator running somewhere, Tony could feel it vibrating through the walls. He giggled at the sensation and peered wide-eyed up at the lens glare from the light above him. Everything was so shiny.

He’d finally reached the end of the corridor – Tony turned back around when the minor resistance the wall had been providing the knife suddenly vanished leaving him unbalanced in the crossroads. A deep groove was etched into the concrete wall, Tony’s trail disappearing behind him around a bend.
Tony blinked and staggered around, still struggling with his balance.

Should he go left, or right?

Indecisive, no idea of what lay ahead, Tony gave into the unusually strong urge and twirled around until he felt dizzy… Dizzier. Tony enjoyed the new disorientation merging with the disjointedness he’d already been feeling.

Ignoring the little voice shouting at him that he was being an idiot Tony all but fell left – using the knife to regain his precarious balance against the wall and staggered on.

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Howard couldn’t believe how helpless he was. Best tech in the world. One of the most efficient espionage organisations on the planet at his fingertips. All of it useless in the face of this blackout. God dammit.

He’d vented loudly at the latest pathetic SHIELD underling to report into Peggy with yet another report of “No news.” It had only been when Howard noticed the looks of annoyed pity on the other agent’s faces that he’d gotten hold of himself and managed to stalk out of the room clutching the tattered remains of his dignity to himself like a cloak.

Stark men are made of iron.

Howard re-emerged from the back room, in the brief moment he’d taken fetching a drink he put on a brave face, as he’d done with every previous threat against his family that he’d come up against. The familiarity of the situation did not make it easier to face. If anything, that familiarity made it harder every time. Every time something like this happened it became that much harder not to freeze, to scream the world down, not to let the fears and the doubts, the nagging insistence that this would be the time that he finally lost them. Lost this new family that he’d built for himself out of the ashes of the old.

Howard grew up on Lower East Side, had immigrated to New York whilst he was still in his mother’s stomach in 1917. With the fall of the German war machine imminent the Staercks had gotten out of the country and hastily dropped the Germanic twang to their surname. The newly renamed Starks never looked back on the motherland with fondness; Howard’s father never quite getting over the actions he’d carried out in the name of Kaiser and country in the Great War. Their
small family, Howard, his older brother Morgan, and his parents had been lucky to get into the newly built tenement housing block that had gone up in the area just a year before. They burnt through most of the family money to make the expensive journey.

At least by the time they’d gotten into the building they were a small family. Howard would never know, as it just wasn’t something that people talked about in those days, but Howard Stark was the eighth child in the family. The youngest sibling by three years he’d been an unexpected but welcome addition to a burgeoning clan that included three teenaged daughters who helped their mother’s sewing, and three adult sons who were helping to erect the great social apartment blocks that were transforming the slums of New York city into somewhere with a modicum of the infrastructure needed in a modern metropolis. There was a reason the trip had cost them so much with ten family members to transport across the great gulf of the Atlantic.

By the end of 1918 only Morgan and Howard remained of their generation. The youthful strength of the young adults’ immune systems a death sentence in the great Influenza Pandemic, not that anyone had understood why youth was such a vulnerability at the time.

The great depression hit everyone for six in 1929. Even with two incomes, Howard’s mother working night and day sewing shirtwaists, the family only had enough money to send one of the siblings to school, Howard as the obvious brain had been chosen despite being the younger sibling. To Morgan’s growing resentment, Howard proved amply that it was money well-invested. Often Howard was the main-breadwinner in the household, despite the fact that he was still just a schoolboy.

Whenever times got particularly hard, his father would get out his Iron Cross - Earned during the inevitable fall of the German Empire, whenever the family would argue about the difficult monetary decisions they were facing. He would gesture at the medal, and say,

“Stark men are made of Iron.”

Howard took the lesson to heart. He had to be strong for the rest of the family.

Howard had been nearly 16 when their cousins had fled the mounting horrors in 1933, horrors that would take the rest of the world several long years to notice. They’d used up all the money they had scrimped and saved, sold off everything in the house that was anything approaching valuable, and still, it hadn't been enough.

Howard’s father had been the only member of the Staercks with enough money to buy his passage across the Atlantic in the pre-depression era, the only war hero with an Iron Cross and the
respectable income to match it. The Staerck clan on the European side of the Atlantic had been sprawling, Howard’s father’s many siblings had each had children of their own. For all that Howard had never met any of them, he’d always been distantly aware that he had many many cousins. With the hyper-inflation that came with the depression the Weimar side of the family had even less of a hope, only one of the extended families managed to save up enough to make the crossing before things got desperately bad, and the crossing closed. Even then, they’d only had enough to buy a ticket for his tall but shy cousin Arno, and his mother. Arno, as the youngest had been the lone sibling in their family of four children selected to flee Germany.

The family had barely been able to support the new additions to their household, on the meagre income gained from Howard’s father’s fruit-stall in the neighbourhood market, and his mother’s shirtwaist sewing they’d been making barely making enough to send Howard to school. With the new mouths to feed there wasn’t enough. Even before the unexpected additions it had already been looking unlikely that Howard would ever make it to university, unless he could earn himself a full scholarship. Still, unlike Morgan, who’d been forced into employment at 14, Howard had his cleverness to fall back on. His inventions earned him enough that he put himself through night school to finish his basic education. Howard’s inventions earnt him enough attention that he rapidly secured his place as a member of the international scientific community. Arno hadn’t been so lucky, basically an adult the boy had to make a living of his own despite the fact that he barely spoke a word of English, and was obviously a Kraut and a Jew in a city that was hostile to both. He quickly fell in with the Manfredis alongside Morgan. The boy’s cousin earning him a place as a member of the Maggia clan’s foot soldiers.

Three long years of starvation and being spat at on the streets of New York later, even their slum of a neighbourhood not safe for the wave of immigrants that the ‘real’ New Yorker’s resented so much, Arno’s father had finally managed to get word to them in the Land of the Free. Already Arno’s siblings were lost to him. Lost to the Nazi war machine. Despite Howard’s attempts to earn enough money to gain safe passage, he hadn’t saved the money quickly enough. Arno’s father was never heard from again. Howard’s father was never the same either, something haunted and dead staring out of his brown eyes, eyes that had once sparkled with life now flat. The same terrifying flatness that had used to mark his father’s bad days of irrational temper, jumping at shadows and the slightest noise, now marked all of them. Howard never learned what it was that his father had seen in The Great War, or the specifics of what had been in his uncle’s missive. He was never sure if that was better or worse. The not knowing. Unsure if the horrors his imagination dreamt up were a match to whatever horrors had caused those lifeless eyes.

The radio spoke of alliances, Germany and Italy becoming allies didn’t disturb anyone. Except for his father, who emerged from his shell to become taciturn and sullen. Beatings and the now too familiar refrain, Stark men are made of Iron, became commonplace in their tiny Lower East Side apartment. The Germany-Japan pact provoked the previously gentle man into such a rage that Howard and his mother had been forced to flee the tiny subdivided one-room apartment that they hot-bunked with the rest of the family.

They’d been lucky not to get kicked out of their building on Lower East Side, in the dwindling Jewish community that had been priced out of Manhattan into the wider Five Boroughs. It had been
the height of the depression aftermath, damned lucky not to be occupying one of the shanty towns dubbed Hoovervilles that still littered even this the greatest city in America. They’d been damned lucky. It was only the fact that their landlord was an old Imperialist, who was impressed by the Iron Cross that had saved them, and from the shamefaced look on his father’s face he knew it.

Stark men are made of iron became more than a phrase spoken for luck, or out of duty that day, but a prayer.

The Starks did everything they could to distance themselves from their Jewish ties. In public, at least. Being Jewish in New York was invitation to be beaten up, so they followed their traditions only within the privacy of their own home. Morgan forgoing his skullcap, to Arno’s approval – Arno argued that anything that marked them out as a Jew was to be avoided in the face of the identifying armbands that he’d been forced to wear in Germany.

News filtered across the Atlantic from Europe, in March 1938 the news that Germany had invaded Austria was met largely with indifference by the local population. Howard, by then 20, redoubled his efforts to both make a living and make a difference to the world at large. No longer relying on the international conferences that his genius gave him access to, instead becoming proactive in his efforts to save his people. In 1939, using the seed-money that Morgan and Arno provided, and the money he’d been saving in a futile attempt to save his cousins, Howard founded Stark Industries. Immediately making a name for the company in the weapon’s market as he desperately started trying to find ways to end the war, and hopefully save the relatives he’d never met. The world was descending into chaos and no one cared.

With every atrocity that the Nazis committed, Howard became more dedicated to finding weaponry that would end the war once and for all, to find the bigger stick. Over 90% of the money Stark Industries was making was being plugged straight back into R&D – Howard didn’t think anyone would believe it if they found out he was still living in his old tenement block with his extended family. Oh, he’d rented the apartments on either side of their original, but that had been the extent of his personal spending.

An outbreak of influenza in their tenement block at the end of 1939 put an end to the Stark household. It seemed that the Stark luck that had somehow enabled him to live through the 1918 outbreak had returned to ask for the payment due. Howard had been busily rescuing Erskine from the monstrous Johann Schmidt, the seemingly simple task forcing him to spend nearly six months chasing the camps Erskine was moved to across occupied Europe. In the end, Howard had taken a pilot’s license in a fit of pure frustration, miraculously getting the brilliant man out of the hell he’d been trapped in with the wonders of aeronautics. That mission had been the one that introduced him to Peggy Carter, the capable woman brilliant in her efficiency.

By the time Howard managed complete the mission and get home in the spring his family was already long buried, the apartments filled with new tenants. Even the Iron Cross was gone. Though
Howard’s father had hidden the medal away in shame once news of Hitler’s actions had reached them on this side of the Atlantic, it was one of the few possessions that Howard had hoped to remember the man by. The landlord had sold their belongings to pay for the funeral. Howard couldn’t bring himself to be angry, it was all he could do not to break down at the apologetic look on the old man’s face, Stark men are made of iron.

Howard threw himself into desperately trying to provide a pure energy source that would act as a catalyst to the reaction and prevent another monster like Schmidt. With the money he had been using to support his family, to try and help Arno and Morgan get away from a life with the Maggia, Howard started drinking, spending his money on frivolous things purely because he could, to plug the hole in his heart.

He still wasn’t convinced the trade had been worth it, he’d saved the world but lost his family. In the tumultuous years that followed Howard sold their tenement apartment, stole himself 10kg of Vibranium from Wakanda, and met and lost Steve Rogers. Despite the things he’d lived through, he’d lost so many people, Howard soldiered on continuing in his self-assigned mission to end the war, and save the world. Make it safe again, if not for his family then for his people.

Stark men are made of iron.

Finow had been a blow, seeing the horrors one of his inventions had wrought first hand had been sobering. Howard had been convinced that he’d never make something as flawed as Erskine. Thought himself clever enough to avoid the blackness that many scientists knew, but never talked about. The discoveries that could just as easily be used to end the world as help it. Howard stopped practicing the tenements of his faith even in private after that unwanted revelation. Relying instead on the old mantra, Stark men are made of iron, to pull him through the dark days.

Howard had helped save the world twice over, losing his super soldier friend in the process. Howard’s remaining time in the war had been divided between helping the international effort in Los Alamos, and providing specialised weaponry in Europe. He’d helped save the world again with the Manhattan project. Despite old Oppenheimer’s depression, and the current cold war they were all living through, Howard had no doubts that the Manhattan Project had saved them all.

Just as Edwin had been there for Howard, Howard had been for Edwin as the allies pushed into German territory and retook the region with the collapse of the Nazi war machine. The allied retaking of the camps at Ettersburg had further shattered something inside him, the starved skeletal prisoners in Buchenwald and the POW camp barely recognisable as human anymore. In a vengeful rage the Allied troops had forced the civilians in the nearby town to witness what their incivility had wrought. Edwin had been icily contemptuous of the civilian’s reactions.

Howard had kept his promise to Edwin in the aftermath of that awful week, a number of the newly
freed prisoners had died in their care, bodies incapable of processing the food they’d been given. It wasn’t until one of the prisoners had spoken up, a skeletal Brit who’d somehow survived the care of the ‘doctors’ in the ‘research’ block, uh – Adamson? The starved POW had spoken up, with the knowledge of just what to give to someone who’d been starving in order to safely reintroduce food to neglected systems that the prisoners had stopped dropping like flies. If it weren’t for the man’s obvious state of ill-treatment (Howard honestly hadn’t been sure how the man was still alive), the man’s knowledge would have earnt him a one-way trip to the interrogation chambers. Hell, it very nearly did, if the other victims of the place hadn’t spoken up for him the newly formed SSR would have happily secreted the man away for enhanced ‘debriefing’.

Howard had celebrated VE-Day with Peggy in London. The irony of that joyous day hadn’t escaped him when he’d continued working to free everyone in the months that followed. The skeletal prisoners were fresh in his mind, as Peggy pushed him into the Thames, his distraction meaning that he temporarily forgot how to swim and had to be rescued spluttering from the fetid river.

Those final months after Germany’s surrender had been spent in a mad frenzy of math and drowning the things he’d seen, and caused, in alcohol. By the time he met Maria, brilliant but brittle Maria, intellect shining brighter than any atom cloud, he’d already re-forged himself into iron. Recognised her brittleness as a mirror for his own. By the time Japan had surrendered, he and Maria had forged an unbreakable bond. Working in close quarters for those long desperate final months of the conflict, forcing the math to work out.

Oh, he’d tried to drown everything in the pleasures of the skin, but eventually that shared misery had drawn him back to Maria like iron seeking a magnet.

Howard knocked back the glass of scotch he’d been nursing and renewed his efforts to get the SHIELD information network working. Despite Peggy running the operation from the other room with her usual terrifying efficiency, somehow Howard could tell that it was up to the boy now. Howard could only hope that his efforts to teach Tony how to be iron had been lessons absorbed. Unlike Howard, who’d had time to find his feet, Tony would need to be iron from the very moment he entered the world stage.

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Tony followed the crazily swirling lights down the hallway, still relying on the wall for balance, and came upon a large open space.

In slow motion, he turned as there was a shout of alarm. Five men, who appeared to have been playing poker were staring at him in shock – still in slow motion they leapt back from the table, scrambling to their feet and groping for weapons. Playing cards scattered across the concrete floor.
Tony stared at their actions owlishly.

“He’s got a knife!”

Tony stared down at his dagger, blinking owlishly as he once again remembered that he was holding it. Oh right. One of the other men started a panicked monologue, his rapid voice thin and high with stress,

“That’s blood. There’s too much blood. Is the kid hurt? Oh shit we won’t get paid if the brats hur-”

“Shut up!”

“Shit!”

“It’s not his blood is it? It’s not his blood. Crap… Look at the little monster.”

Breaking the frozen tableau Tony staggered over to the group, his movements erratic and difficult to predict – even to himself. To his dazed surprise the men did not try to shoot him. Huh. He didn’t think he’d have hesita- oh right. An evil grin split his face, brat body to the rescue again. The first man spoke up again, voice low and exaggeratedly calm,

“Why don’t you put down the knife kid? We don’t want to hurt you.”

He was holding one hand out palm up in a gesture that had Tony thinking automatically about the whine of repulsors,

“Why?”

Tony swayed as he responded, genuinely puzzled by the request. Why would he do that?

One of the other men spoke up, false bravado an obvious front, betrayed by his darting eyes and the
sweat beginning to trickle down his temple,

“You’ve brought a knife to a gunfight.”

Tony grinned, he got that reference.

“Er Bob, he’s looking at me…”

That was panicked whiner again, Tony stared at him for a long drawn out moment trying to work out what he’d walked in on. Tony could feel that his brain wasn’t quite firing right, but he couldn’t begin to model his usual behaviour, not under the cloying influence of whatever he’d been given.

The nervous voice of the one who’d pushed the sodden cloth to his face drew Tony’s gaze, the man had previously been silent up until then. Tony could see chittering snake-like fluttering around the guy’s head, their movements somehow reminiscent of the parasitic remora in those nature documentaries that Bruce had been so inexplicably fond of. Huh.

Blinking against the glare of the inexplicable new light, Tony peered around at the other men in the room, sure enough each of the men had his own strange cluster of hangers on. It was weird, but Tony could somehow tell that the things were parasites. The strange vision switched to the, by now horribly familiar sight of their inner-selves, Stan was now a huge anxious looking humanoid rhinoceros. Tony giggled at the incongruous sight.

Strangely the men all took a hurried step back.

Tony followed their gaze – oh right. The knife. He kept forgetting about that.

Tony lunged and the world descended into chaos.

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Edwin couldn’t believe that he was still stuck here caring for these ghastly new-money ingrates.
Pym had just asked him for a cola to mix with his champagne. For goodness sake. If you were going to demand one of the most expensive beverages in the house you could at least have the decency to drink it properly.

Edwin was still waiting with baited breath for the moment they noticed that there was no more ice. Thankfully the expense of the cava was a popular lure.

Despite the earlier chaos in the candlelit space, all was calm.

Edwin had to ruefully concede that Janet Van Dyne had been a great help, well, alright, perhaps not all American new-money was worthless. Though Edwin found the woman’s ‘charms’ irritatingly American more often than not, perhaps he was biased if the amused looks Ana had always shot him in the woman’s presence were anything to go by.

Besides – Edwin was aware that Howard was courting the Pyms for more than their money. Though Edwin was damned if he knew what the attraction actually was.

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Tony burst out of the warehouse doors and into pitch blackness, trailing viscera and panicked shouts. For a long dreadful moment, Tony panicked thinking that he must have taken a wrong turn, he was still in the warehouse, or worse he’d gone blind – it was dark with his eyes closed and open.

Thankfully he glanced up – framed by a dimly orange lit sky was the Manhattan Bridge.

Oh thank *fuck*. He was still in New York.

Balance still all gone Tony stumbled forward in the blackness, hands extended to try and counteract the disorienting darkness – and the rainbow blur that still edged his vision. Tony hastily wiped the gore off the dagger he was still wielding and sheathed it in the holster that the crooks hadn’t thought to look for. If he could only make it to the nearest SI property he’d be saf- oh wait a minute. No. That wasn’t right. Shit. The nearest place was Howard’s penthouse and that was all the way in Upper East Side, overlooking Central Park’s huge reservoir. It was slightly north of the more famous glitz and glamour of central Manhattan and Broadway, but affluent as anything, far south enough to be well away from Harlem and well into the cultured museum dense territory that kept it clear of the touristy crap that plagued the area where Trump had plunked his tasteless tower.
The distant shouts from the warehouse got louder. Trying vainly to run, when it was all he could do to remain upright, with the world still jumping around like a trampoline on steroids, Tony rushed down the eerily abandoned streets of Dumbo. Trying desperately not to think of the pink elephants the neighbourhood’s name conjured up.

Tony knew where he was now, if he could only make it to the bridge quickly enough he might stand a chance of getting away. Tony initially tried to stick to the shadows, before his addled brain sluggishly pointed out that Dumbo was made up entirely of shadow.

His surroundings were still pitch black. From the darkness of the distant, disquietingly unfamiliar, squat skyline above him, Tony guessed that it extended throughout New York. Being furtive was of no use here, the eerily empty streets of the abandoned looking industrial neighbourhood intensely echoed every sound, and Tony didn’t have the motor coordination right then to manage quiet, let alone the silence that the nagging tiny rational corner of his mind was insisting on.

No. It was better to run.

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Peggy felt like tearing her hair out – despite the reputation she’d quite literally given blood sweat and tears to build for herself, every now and then she still had to come up against a dinosaur like the one she was trying to tiptoe around when working with SHIELD’s Rochester branch.

The fool on the other end of the line was trying to ream into her about proper use of SHIELD resources on a night like this, as if she wasn’t already painfully aware of her multiple responsibilities this chaotic evening. But goddammit she didn’t have the time to waste – Howard would make sure that the idiot paid for this delay, Tony Stark was her godson, and son of the non-Executive co-founder of SHIELD from the ashes of the SSR. If anyone deserved a manhunt for his kid it was Howard.

The man himself was busy putting out SHIELD’s other fires – metaphorical and all too literal. The least she could do was help him get his son back.

Not for the first time Peggy cursed the blackout – without it’s interference, tracking Tony down should have been easy enough. Peggy had been gratified to see that the boy had taken to wearing the bracelet she’d sent him months ago. Hell, it should still have been easy enough to trace the signal that the subtle little bangle was emitting. However, for all of her foresight, Peggy hadn’t realised that, alongside all over methods of communication, the tracking relays would be so much dead weight sat clogging up Howard’s office.
Peggy had experienced a veritable roller coaster of emotion as she first cursed her own stupidity for being so slow, the self-directed anger washed away by the elation that Tony was only a scan away, followed shortly by the crushing disappointment, verging on despair – as Peggy realised that alongside nearly everything else, there wasn’t enough power to start the tracking algorithm inside the huge valved console that lurked next to the flagging SHIELD communications desk.

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Tony blindly ran onto the famous bridge that connected Manhattan to Brooklyn, knowing in the back of his mind that it was a stupid idea but too panicked to care. It was pitch black here too. Tony panted harshly at the foot of the pedestrian access point to the bridge, and remembered to listen for pursuit in a distant sort of way.

He knew roughly where he was – but only because of the bridge, the rest of the landscape was foreign and alien in this strange black night. The neighbourhood of Dumbo should have been full of trendy cafes, upper-class galleries and hipsters, not this desolate barren wasteland of empty shells of industrial buildings.

Tony had zagged his way to this point, instead of taking the direct route that had been so obvious and inviting he’d stuck to side streets. Even in the euphoric haze of the drugs, trying to keep at least one block between the surviving men and himself.

Tony peered suspiciously into the black, speaking of which, where were they?

As if reading his mind, a body jumped out from the lee of the structure. Shit! In the flickering vision, which Tony still couldn’t decide whether it was drug related or his third eye, Rhino man loomed out suddenly. They’d beaten him here.

Tony had only spotted the man because of the faint glow his other sight was giving him, had he been spotted? A flicker of remora movement behind the Rhino man revealed that nervous-runs-his-mouth was tucked away further under the bridge ramp, a veritable cloud of spiritual hangers on surrounding him.

Doing his best to be utterly still Tony sized the duo up and tried to quietly back away. His brain recoiling in horror at his awful lack of balance. The exercise had brought the assessing part of Tony’s mind closer to the surface from where the drug had buried it, but he still couldn’t get his limbs to cooperate properly.
Tony managed to back sideways by about two metres before he was spotted.

“There! Look we got the brat! Bob was right!”

Tony took off at the closest approximation he could get to a dead sprint; the floor was still giving the occasional wild buckle underneath him. A rush of air, and the sudden feeling that his hair had been flattened told Tony that he’d just narrowly escaped someone’s grasping hands.

He wasn’t going to make it.

Tony zagged desperately, for once grateful for his small form when he managed to easily slip through the barrier that separated the boarded-off pedestrian walkway from the main sidewalk. For some reason pedestrian access was shut. For once choosing not to question his luck, Tony wriggled through the narrow gap in the hoarding, not stopping to gloat at the loud angry cursing coming from the other side of it. Tony dashed down the walkway.

Sudden close footsteps alerted Tony to his mistake, the pedestrian access may be shut, but the road wasn’t. Sure enough, Nervous and Rhino were awkwardly clambering over the precarious gap between the road and foot areas. Crap.

Tony sprinted, unheeding the scraped skin on his palms, when inevitably, his shaky balance failed him. Through the haze of the drugs his blood was pounding in his ears, adrenaline doing its best to burn through the artificial euphoria.

Tony waited until he heard a clang, a muffled curse, and the start-up of heavy footfall before he executed his hasty plan. He leapt for the barrier that separated the decrepit and pitted pedestrian walkway from the road, scrambling to make the crossing more quickly than his pursuers had managed.

There was a heart stopping moment when Tony thought he was going to fall into the river below, an unexpected inexplicable gap between the two sections of the bridge almost making him miss his intended handhold. It was only when he crashed to the train tracks that Tony realised his mistake. He was in the subway. Shit how could he have forgotten that he was on the lower deck.

There was a sudden burst of loud swearing from close behind him as his pursuers realised what had just happened. Tony forcibly stopped the panicked thoughts about becoming a greasy smear on some
poor train driver’s windscreen and rushed further into the darkness.

Zigzagging from walkway to train tracks wherever possible and more than once hiding in the through-way hoping desperately that the idiots wouldn’t think to peer inside. At one point, Tony was forced to scramble desperately up the iron trellis, and crouch on the worker’s access gangway that hung from the great suspension cables praying that his pursuers wouldn’t look up, and that his precarious drug-ruined balance wouldn’t give out. Unbelieving that the pair directly below him couldn’t hear the thunderous roar of his heart or his ragged breathing, it was so loud. If it weren’t for the overhang Tony would have seriously contemplated risking the road on the deck above, but there was no way he’d manage to clamber around the ledge.

There was another hairy moment when Tony was scrambling through the barrier that separated the tracks from the pedestrian walkway again – a meaty paw suddenly latched onto the collar of his posh little jacket, nearly throttling him. Tony managed to shrug out of the sticky blazer quickly enough that Nerves couldn’t grab him, and fled down the walkway taking advantage of their tangled confusion to escape from their sight and risk one of the maintenance walkways instead.

For now, his pursuers were still on the bridge. Tony had sneakily, impossibly slipped into the same place of shelter on the opposite side of the river from that which Rhino and Nerves had been hoping to ambush him at. Taking a moment, panting behind a seemingly abandoned placard proclaiming, “Fear City” with a skull peering out of it, Tony caught his breath and tried to think.

Tony glanced up and stopped dead at the sight that confronted him, the Twin Towers loomed over the unfamiliar skyline. More dominating than he ever remembered them being, in all likelihood because the rest of the damned skyline simply wasn’t there yet. The gap – that hole in the centre of New York wasn’t there yet. No – instead the rest of the skyline wasn’t there yet. Tony didn’t think he’d ever seen New York looking so… Flat before.

As he raced up the grimy streets of Lower East Side, Tony kept a careful eye-out for any sign that he was being followed. All the while noticing all of the subtle, and not so subtle differences between this version of the city he had such a love/hate relationship with and the one he’d known. Somehow, miraculously, considering it was literally a straight line, Tony had managed to lose the pair on the bridge. They must still think he was hiding there.

The familiar bustling streets were near-empty, people were clearly staying indoors. Tony couldn’t say he blamed them, the darkness that had been his friend moments before made everything strange and frightening now. Finding a rare spark of familiarity, Tony made it into China Town. Whilst superficially the place looked pretty much the same as it always had, Tony could see that there was a too familiar look of neglect about the place.

Tony hadn’t wanted to take the obvious route. His slowly returning tactical mind automatically
making him choose a more roundabout path than the relatively quick diagonal he’d have cut if he’d taken Bowery all the way up to Broadway. He was already wondering if that choice had been a mistake. But if he hadn’t actually managed to shake his pursuers, Tony didn’t want them to be able to cut him off by guessing where he was going.

That’s if they hadn’t already worked it out for themselves. Howard’s penthouse just north of Central Park was such an obvious destination that Tony hoped it was too obvious.

As he hastily made his way up away from the obvious choice of Bowery towards the East Village, purposefully heading in the ‘wrong’ direction, Tony’s mind started meandering down strange alleys, the strange mixture of euphoria and hyper now-ness that the drugs were forcing his brain into making his thoughts strange and unfamiliar. Even as Tony realised that, he felt more intensely himself than he ever had before. He wryly thought about the TV stereotype that New York was absolutely full of alleyways that you could conveniently escape and/or hide down. Yeah right, the city was built on a grid mostly consisting of wide multi-laned roads, or failing that, roads wide enough for cars and delivery trucks to make their way down at any rate. Tony thought there were probably a grand total of two alleyways in the entirety of the city. Of course, he could really do with one of those fictional alleyways right now. Tony had no idea where his would-be kidnappers were, or if they’d even noticed that he’d gone.

He needed to get off the streets.

Out of sight.

Hidden.

Of course, 1970s New York was even seedier than Tony’s memories of even the dankest areas of New York in the modern era. He’d managed to bypass the long slow regeneration of the city that had started with that weird society of gardeners in the 80s, almost completely avoiding the East Coast once he’d discovered the joys of Hell-A, plentiful sunshine, booze, and cocaine.

He wondered how he’d missed all of this… desolation last summer. Oh, of course, Jarvis had probably shielded him from the worst of it. Though Tony ruefully wondered how the hell that had even worked. Had he really been that wrapped up in his own head? That oblivious?

Scoffing Tony admitted that he had been. It was obvious that he had been. This air of run-down neglect didn’t just show up overnight. This was New York after years, perhaps even decades, of neglect.
Tony made it up to East Houston Street and let himself pause at the crossroads, catching his breath. He’d just sprinted nearly ¾ of a kilometre away from the bridge crossing, he could probably afford to give himself a moment. Besides he had sight-lines in every direction from here.

Making a mental note to thank Ben for all of that cross-country training he’d been forcing him through, Tony resolved to make his way towards the richer neighbourhoods in Midtown. Perhaps he’d be able to find help amongst the skyscrapers and the glisters of Broadway. Stumbling northwards Tony dragged his sorry hide in the vague direction of Central Park, already cursing himself for choosing this zigzagging route. If the rest of the city was as unfamiliar as this strangely empty Chinatown Tony didn’t want to think about how much better his pursuers might know his home city than he did right now.

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Maria’s contacts within the Brooklyn branch of the extended Martinelli family had paid off. Her little Bambino had been taken to Dumbo. Dumbo! Didn’t the fools know that Brooklyn was home to a huge Italian population? Whilst the vast majority of said population were law abiding citizens, they all knew too well that the police weren’t always the most efficient authority to turn to when things went bad. It was only a couple of short decades after the mass immigration of Italians fleeing Mussolini’s clutches, and anti-Italian feelings still ran high in some precincts. For all that, thanks to her father, Maria was technically known as an old-money Spanish girl and socialite; she still had strong ties to her mother’s side of the family. She knew bitterly from the way the extended Martinelli clan were treated by the contemptuous Irish American cops who’d gotten to Brooklyn a paltry decade before, how fair the system was in the Free World.

For all that her Carbonell surname had earnt her the quiet scorn of her relatives back home in Valencia. In the US, a whole continent away from the disdain of her Barcelonan family for her Italian roots, her father’s quick acquisition of legitimate money, and Maria’s ability to be the truly legitimate face of the family’s business had more than earnt her position at the table.

Resisting the urge to spit contemptuously, Maria paid close attention to the report from Giro’s boy. His little sniffer squad had found the warehouse where her Bambino had been taken, and… cleaned up. Maria had tsked at the knowledge that Giro’s boys had cleaned up someone else’s incompetence, but the calculating logical side of herself that she tried so hard to silence nowadays, pointed out the benefits of doing so. Maria would have preferred it if the boys had left the scum to rot where they lay – but she understood the need to keep things from the authorities. Especially when the authorities included Howard’s little toy soldiers with their nearly compulsive need to keep things from everyone.

After all it wouldn’t do for blatant evidence of a crime to be found on their turf.
They’d caught up with two remaining members of the gang, frantically searching Manhattan bridge for her darling Tesoro. From the warehouse in Dumbo it had been pathetically easy to find them. In total, they’d apprehended three surviving members from a group that appeared to have initially numbered 30. Thirty. Amateurs. That was far too large a group for something as simple as a kidnap job.

The boys had found just over a dozen men, in various states of mortally injured to dead - including one individual who’d somehow been eviscerated. It all pointed towards the small-minded fools having had a violent argument, and her precious bambino having escaped in the confusion. Maria had been surprised by the small number of bullet-wound fatalities, there were seven dead from bullet holes but ten had been viciously slashed. Including the aforementioned intestinally-challenged individual. If it hadn’t been so impossible Maria would have bought the protests from the survivors that her bambino had done it all, but it was far more likely that the gang had turned on each other.

Maria blanched at the knowledge that it meant that 10 kidnappers were still out there, and if the sobbing tales wailed at Giro’s best enhanced debriefer were true, well they were all out combing the streets of New York looking for her son.

Even as their captives continued to sing like birds, Maria’s boys were rapidly running down the ones who’d escaped the carnage. No one messed with the Martinellis. No one. It was about time the Mafia pointed out that her darling bambino counted among their number, for all that Maria was trying desperately to keep that side of herself from him, it was the least she could do to point out the folly of attacking one of theirs to the criminal netherworld.

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It was getting darker the further he fled from the orange glow on the Brooklyn side of the river. Ordinarily the dark held no terrors for Tony, however he was visibly vulnerable, and alone - a young small-for-his-age boy wandering around in one of the seediest parts of New York.

Tony was tiring enough from his escape that he was beginning to regret madly dashing off into the night. Whatever they’d given him was beginning to wear off, leaving only a vague ache and a lingering nausea behind. The new aches reminding Tony once again of the cost the adrenaline had exacted. Tony was flagging he knew it. In the end, Tony decided to chance fair-hopping on the subway, he hurried up the metal stairs to the platform suspended above the street, and checking surreptitiously to see if anyone was in the ticket booth, wormed his way through the barrier.

Ignoring the way that the low-light levels were flickering improbably between pitch darkness and the swirly twinkles that his third eye seemed to specialise in, Tony rapidly worked his way down to the
platform. Just as he reached the subway platform, a pile that he’d taken to be the same unidentifiable detritus that seemingly littered the whole city sat up and revealed itself to be a wrinkled toothless old man, he wheezed out in a surprisingly loud voice;

“Hey boy you don’t wanta be getting on the muggers express do ye?”

Cackling maliciously as Tony finally took notice of his surroundings - the utter desertion of the station, and the complete lack of power that usually hummed in the lines. There’d been a reason he’d gotten away with his half-mad scramble across the usually live tracks on the bridge.

Tony fled the station – even in his alarm making sure to keep moving away from Dumbo and the bloody mess he only half-remembered leaving behind. He ran back down the old cast iron stairs and was sourly disappointed when he finally got past the quiet Union Square Park and reached Broadway. It was late enough that despite the obvious affluence still on display, everything was shut tight. Tony knew that there had to be people inside the locked buildings, he’d discovered first hand that all of the transport networks in the city were down. Tony hammered against a few doors making his agitated way up the street. No one answered. Damn. He was alone.

Tony again eschewed the obvious path, the echoing blackness of Broadway making him wary of taking the quickest route and continued north up Park Avenue. Even at this time of night there were enough people around on the busy street that Tony hoped they wouldn’t try anything.

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Ana glared at her subordinate. The new SHIELD recruits were letting the side down, flapping around like green FBI recruits, rather than the seasoned agents that they’d been personally selected for being. For all that she and Peggy made a fantastic team, there was only so much they could do when surrounded by charlatans and idiots.

She was being unfair, Ana could tell that her temper was getting the better of her. The terrified looks her subordinates were giving her wasn’t the only clue, Peggy had pursed her lips at her in private reproach (after all they couldn’t be seen bickering in front of the junior agents) Ana had toned it down a notch with a herculean effort. However, she wasn’t convinced it was worth it. Morale was one thing, efficiency – or a distinct lack thereof was quite another.

The so-called boys in blue were refusing aid.
Her usually reliable network of SHIELD informants was in chaos, the informants were still there, but they had no way to relay that information quickly. Even Howard’s technology was struggling with the strain of suddenly being the only exchange open in the entirety of the Five Boroughs. The system had been designed with the future-proofing and increasing demand in mind, but not at hundreds of times more than its usual capacity.

Ana battered back the pain and nausea and refocused on reaching out to her network of eyes in the city. Someone had to have seen something. Her improbable group of gang members from across the city, youths from the Bronx, Hell’s Kitchen, East Side, Harlem, across the river in New Jersey even as far afield as Rochester, upstate.

If Edwin had had any clue that the young men and women who frequently nodded at her in quiet respect on the street weren’t showing the attention due to a respectable housewife, but to their commanding officer. No, their gang leader. He’d be balking if he knew and likely wouldn’t look at her the same way ever again.

The guerrilla techniques she’d learnt when Budapest had been occupied by the axis forces were proving useful this evening.

Technology had failed them.

But they still had their people.

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The subway was dead. And despite the, eerie to Tony’s 21st century outlook, lack of cars compared to the city he was used to – he’d already witnessed just what happened at a junction when the traffic lights weren’t working. Tony had seen the aftermath of two crashes already, drivers shouting loudly at each other as pedestrians watched on from the sidewalk.

Despite the ever-present threat of the people from the warehouse finding him, Tony was slowing down as the excitement wore off, the cheques his body had cashed earlier bouncing when the debts came due. Tony looked down and cursed his tight dress shoes as he felt yet another new blister forming on a blister. The stupid slippery things made running awkward too, not that he’d noticed when his own inner ear had betrayed him so thoroughly earlier.

Tony couldn’t quite believe how little help there was to be had as he struggled his way up the length
of Broadway. He had no idea what time it was, but surely a little kid all alone would garner some second looks, offers of aid? Something? Of course, from the fact that the majority of people he saw weren’t yet adults themselves, Tony thought ruefully that perhaps he had his answer.

Tony gradually realised that there was a distinct lack of pursuit. He didn’t think he’d been lucky enough to shake them on the bridge, for all that he’d managed to make it across the vast span. And yet Tony had somehow traversed several neighbourhoods without anyone jumping out at him.

Tony wondered what in the world had happened, or if his pursuers were simply cleverer than he was giving them credit for. Despite the unexpected calm Tony was jumpy, every adult he passed was a potential kidnapper. Every loud noise a sign that they were catching up with him. Tony was aware that the hypervigilance was tiring him out far faster than the rapid pace of his march up the street was accounting for, but he couldn’t help it. His paranoia (it’s not paranoia if they really are out to get you) was insisting that that couldn’t be it, that the two Home Alone-lite pursuers couldn’t have been the extent of it all, after the organised armed group Tony had witnessed at the party.

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Giro’s boys had caught up with the fools that had dared to take her bambino. Proving to Maria (not that there’d ever been any doubt) once and for all that the Martinelli Mafia were worth maintaining her connections with. The seven remaining members of the group had clearly been the brains behind the operation, armed with military grade handguns and the semi-automatics that had been so effective earlier in the night, they put up a staunch resistance once they’d realised what was happening. Giro had lost several of his men when they’d taken the scum down, with extreme prejudice.

The surviving members of the ragtag group that had been hastily gathered to snatch her son had been picked up on Broadway. Giro’s men had gotten the truth out of them, they’d drugged her bambino with Quaaludes and Ether – and still they maintained that her son had cut most of them down. Maria wasn’t sure whether to feel proud or horrified at that revelation. Surely Margaret’s little lessons weren’t that serious?

One decisive demonstration of the ‘ginger beer trick’ later and the greenest of the elite surviving members of the gang had sung like his life depended on it. It hadn’t of course, either way his fate was sealed, but the rapid confirmation that the gang were all accounted for, and that her bambino was still missing had been worth giving up the childish but effective technique she’d learnt from her father to the mobsters.

The remaining members of the group had pursued her son across the Manhattan Bridge, but lost him in the interconnecting chaos that was the subway, pedestrian and vehicular access. They’d split up doubling back into Brooklyn and taking the Brooklyn and Williamsburg bridges in an effort to herd her bambino, but their tactics had left them vulnerable to Giro’s boys. Their scattered forces not a
match for his foot soldiers, even as the remaining members of the kidnapping crew that Roxxon (and unbeknownst to the majority of the gang, the Red Room) had hired had proved just why they’d survived her Tesoro’s apparently vicious escape. They were pretty certain that Tony was on the Manhattan side of the river, and had been heading towards the penthouse to cut him off when her boys had caught up with them.

Maria could only hope that her son was alright, lost as he was in New York. Even as she tersely gave the nod to Giro to give him permission to dispose of the kidnappers however he saw fit. She couldn’t help but wonder if her bambino was frightened, wandering all alone in the vastness of Manhattan.

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If Tony had thought that the visible signs of pimping were bad, this street declaring that “Christ died for our SINS!!!!!!!” and “In times like these CHRIST is what you need” were even more startling. The general run-down grot of the city surprised him, but the famous viaduct and the grandness of the appropriately named Grand Central Station were reassuringly familiar despite the strange almost post-war atmosphere of their surroundings. The only thing missing was The Ave- Stark Tower. The old Pan Am tower still standing proud on the site that Tony had acquired in the 00s.

Tony eyed up the yellow taxis, that even in this chaos with the traffic lights dead, were still busily taking fares. Tony was tempted. But he had no money. And besides – he had no idea who he could trust. Anyone could be working for the people who’d taken him. Tony continued with his forced march, ignoring the incongruous religious signage that was warring with the disco posters plastered all over the place.

Tony cut up 43rd Street and continued the long trek northwards. He was really beginning to think that he’d made a serious mistake when he’d chosen to avoid the obvious long straight route up Madison Avenue. The path he’d zigged and zagged that damn near took him to the wrong side of Broadway, that had seemed so very clever before had only tired Tony out.

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Tony was accosted on his hellish trek across Manhattan outside a nightclub. Well, at least he thought it was a nightclub – it was hard to tell with everyone relying on flashlights and candles for lighting. The place was no Studio 54 (a venue that Tony remembered from his time to be the ex-nightclub/recording studio infamously for its booze, drugs, and the stars that had graced its doors over the years) but it was clearly affluent enough to have mostly escaped the chaos that reigned in the poorer neighbourhoods.
“Aw! Lookit the cute kid!”

The gruff and altogether grouchy, “Yeah, yeah.” From the companion of the high-pitched squeal made Tony chuckle in nostalgia.

“No seriously. He’s so adorable. And alone. Doesn’t he look alone? Do you think he’s lost?”

The scenario that Tony had been half hoping for and half dreading had finally started. Before Tony could think of how to escape the situation a loud call was shouted at him from across the street,

“Hey! Kid! Are you lost?”

Tony tried to keep walking, pretend that he wasn’t the kid in question, or that he hadn’t heard them.

“Hey! Kid! Are you ok?”

Footsteps ran up behind him, a hand fell hesitantly on Tony’s shoulder,

“Kid?”

Heaving in a rattling breath Tony slowly allowed himself to be turned to face the person who’d taken an unwanted interest. Towering above him, but not looming, was a young black teenager wearing the most seventies outfit Tony had encountered. Tony barely resisted the urge to laugh in her face - she was a kid herself, but it wouldn’t be at all fair to her.

Tony eyed her up, as she inspected him in turn. Alongside a meticulously cared-for afro, the perfect sphere of hair beautifully dense and glossy, the young woman was wearing a fitted mustard yellow suit – huge flares billowed around her feet, a meticulously tailored matching jacket cinched in just-so at her waist, the huge lapels contrasting with the pointed lack of shoulder pads. Towering platform heels in a soft brown barely added the height she needed to not trip on her own trousers, the only part of her outfit that didn’t quite seem to fit was the turquoise crocheted crop-top. Tony was facing the epitome of disco cool, and he found up close that it was indeed cool.

Behind her, still on the other side of the street was her companion, looking unenthusiastically at
Tony. He was less well-attired, obviously dressed for a night working that hadn’t come. As well as the cigarette he was industriously puffing on, the man was wearing a suit that was a near match for the teenaged girl’s, in a rich brown, but paired incongruously with his ensemble of shiny pointed shoes, open shirt, and artfully tied cravat, were the large above-elbow length gloves that spoke of restaurants and food preparation. For all of the tired world-weariness in the grizzled man’s gaze, Tony could tell that the old guy was alright. Though it may have been something to do with the way he briefly glowed the safe blue-white colour that Tony associated with the arc reactor that did it.

As if called over by Tony’s attention on him, the man resignedly made his way across the darkened street, proffering a long-fingered hand as he reached the pair still eyeing each other.

“I’m Jerome Williams – this here madam is my daughter Ayleen.”

“Dad!”

Ayleen’s voice was aggrieved, full of teenaged embarrassment and whine.

“Ayleen.”

Jerome matched her tone for tone, Tony unsuccessfully stifled a snort.

“What you doing out all alone at this hour son?”

“I’m fine. I know where I’m going.”

“Don’t you,” the man’s voice briefly took on a mocking falsetto, “‘I’m fine’ me young man. I know a lost kiddo when I see one, I’m a parent. I have a hard-enough time keeping track of my own, but I’ve got the eyes for it son, and you look lost.”

Despite his protests, Tony found himself being gently ushered inside the slightly seedy looking place,

“C’mon let’s get you inside where you can tell us all about how you’re not lost.”
Tony felt himself being ushered inside, something inexorable about the kindness these strangers were offering him,

“This here’s my juice bar, so there’s no alcohol, got that?”

“…Okay?”

Tony didn’t understand whatever point the tall man was trying to make. The cultural currency he was obviously expected to understand completely foreign to him, even with the benefit of a year to try and work out the differences forty years had wrought.

“So there’s no point going looking for it. You won’t find any.”

Tony glared and opened his mouth to say something cutting, before following Mr Williams’ pointed gaze. Ah, Tony was wearing the sticky remains of his evening wear, evening wear that still stank of the alcohol he’d landed in at the party. The party that felt like it had happened a lifetime ago. Tony was relieved to find that there wasn’t much visible blood, since most of it had been on the blazer he’d lost on the bridge. Well, Tony looked and smelled as if he was out in the city to try and blag his way into a nightclub in this outfit. Point taken.

Ayleen cheerfully helped herself to a glass of coke from the behind the bar, before sauntering off into a backroom somewhere. She seemed satisfied that her good deed was done, content to leave Tony to her father’s care.

“Look after your brother!” Jerome bellowed after her.

“Yes dad.”

In the gloomy light provided by a myriad of candles Tony thought that the place looked more like an incredibly disco nightclub than any juice bar he’d ever been to. The place had mirrored walls, a square tiled floor that looked suspiciously as if it would light-up if there had been any power, and Tony thought that he could see an honest to god disco ball glinting way above his head in the dimness.

When he made his way over, Tony found that the corner of the room dedicated to a payphone and notice board was just as dead as everything else in the city. Tony had been hoping that there’d be a
dial tone – but no, just as with every other phone he’d checked the thing remained stubbornly dead.

In the gloomy candlelight Tony half-heartedly stared at the posters on the noticeboard, more out of boredom than any real desire to read what they had to say, ‘DEATH CITY!!’, ‘Quaalude epidemic!’, ‘4th Anniversary of Clockworks Psychiatric Hospital Scandal Fundraiser’, and ‘JESUS Saves!! Repent your SINS!!’ were just a few examples of the scattered informational ephemera.

Taking the hint Mr Williams had given him, Tony took the time to clean up in the surprisingly luxurious toilets, the flickering candle that Tony had taken in with him reflected infinitely by the mirror tiles that covered every surface. In the dim light Tony did his best to scrub the worst of the alcohol, rust, mud and blood that his evening’s misadventures had earned him.

Re-entering the main room and turning back to the bar, Tony had to admit that he was puzzled, he’d thought the whole juicing trend was an extremely 21st Century ‘clean eating’ related phenomena. Pepper had certainly latched onto the trend with enough alacrity when it had surfaced to make Tony think it was a modern trend. Maybe not. Not if there were juice bars here in the 70s, apparently doing well enough for themselves that the proprietor felt he could afford to throw open the doors to the blackout.

Tony felt a sudden pang of homesickness, remembering fondly the number of times Dum-E had handed over his usual favourite greenish spinach and kiwi high-protein smoothie, only to be warned by JARVIS that there was added engine oil or antifreeze.

Despite the firm warning he’d given Tony earlier, Mr Williams generously proffered a tall glass of ice cold pineapple juice, improbably frosty in the face of the current lack of power. Looking pointedly in Tony’s direction, the three-piece-suit-and-flares-bedecked man passed the glass over with great ceremony. Tony cautiously took a sip, he didn’t normally care for carton juice all that much, preferring freshly made smoothies but in that moment, after hours of scurrying across heat wave blackout New York, the cold syrupy juice was delicious. It was cold and sweet and most importantly the wettest thing Tony had ever tasted.

With awkward small talk, Tony desperately trying to avoid the topic that Jerome Williams was more and more pointedly circling – aka who he was and why he was all alone in the middle of New York during the blackout. Tony was able to hear some official news about the situation, some of his hyperaware tenseness easing as the owner turned on a small battery powered radio. The station that was broadcasting from outside of the dead zone announced clearly that the power in Queens was back. The blackout had supposedly been caused by a substation causing a cascade of failures in the whole damned network. Apparently, the chaos was genuinely chaos. Tony really hoped that he didn’t know differently, but from the sounds of it, apart from looting in the poorer districts, and the refusal of the police to go out in the resultant mess, there was nothing especially nefarious going on.
“Dad! Ri’s asleep! I’m going out!”

“Ayleen you aren’t going out like that?’”

“Why not? What’s wrong with my outfit?” Ayleen’s hands rose to her hips, “It’s not so different to yours.” The teen sniffed as if she just realised she’d scored an own-goal. “Anyway, I’m going to go see Grandmaster Flash.”

“What, one of those damned scratchy disc bullshit parties? Ayleen, I don’t understand why you like that crap. We got out of Harlem to get away from all of that. ‘Sides, there’s no power!”

“It’s not bullshit dad. It’s hip-hop and it’s something you wouldn’t understand old man.”

“Old man, I’ll show you old man, my girl is Chic old hat?”

“It’s disco dad. It’s not cool.”

“Hrmph. Says you.”

“Anyway, the Rock Steady Crew are going to be having a DJ battle with Kool Herc. With batteries. I’ve got to go. The get down is going to be amazing.” Ayleen’s face took on an expression Tony recognised from the boardroom, extremely casually she said, “I’m meeting Jenny at the corner of 47th and 8th if that’ll make you happy.”

“Oh that nice young Costa Rican girl you know? Why didn’t you say so?”

“Daaaad!”
“What?!” Mr Williams’ voice was upset by the accusation, “She’s a good Christian girl that one.”

Ayleen’s face lit up at the tacit permission, she came up to the bar and kissed her father on the cheek,

“Thanks daddy!”

With that Ayleen all but skipped out. Tony admired her ability to stand her ground; the one time Tony had tried something like that as a teen he’d ended up bedridden for a week. Howard had beaten him so badly that he’d very nearly ended up in hospital. Tony stared open mouthed at the recently slammed door, before he was shaken by his thoughts by Jerome’s low chuckle,

“Ah my girl is just like her mother. Knows her own mind. Don’t worry son, I know she knows what she’s doing.”

The mismatched pair settled back into listening to the information the radio was relaying, Tony gratefully gulping down another icy glass of delicious juice in the candlelit quiet of the club. Tony eventually ended up nursing the remains of his third tall glass of juice, his unexpected thirst finally quenched, feeling mildly ashamed at how very much the small amount of kindness had affected him.

The door burst open with a melodramatic crash, a whirl of purple smoke flooding in from outside.

“What’s up freaks and baloneys! I’m here to rob you.”

A tall afro-bedecked man was posed ridiculously in the doorway, large pink guitar held out in front of him. Tony squinted, it looked like there was something wrong with the neck there was a hollow, and it didn’t look like the usual hole for the metal tension rod… The guitar shifted and the suspicious hole was whisked out of view. Instead, Tony gawped openly at the fool that had strode in, if Tony had thought the owner’s outfit was disco-tastic he had nothing on this guy. The man was clad head to toe in the most disco jumpsuit Tony had ever seen. He was wearing a pure white one-piece velvet flare suit, complete with a thick crusting of glittering rhinestones. The man had accessorised the hideous article of clothing with huge circular purple goggles, a purple silk cravat, purple leather wing-tips, purple shirt open to his navel underneath the white velvet monstrosity, and yep… a purple silk ribbon around his hat.

To Tony’s 21st Century eyes it looked like someone had been aiming for funk via Vegas-era Elvis,
missed entirely and ended up on parody of a bug-eyed space alien instead. It reminded him painfully of that evening he’d spent getting incredibly drunk and watching Eurovision when he’d been earning his second PhD (against Howard’s wishes) in Zurich.

“Who the hell are you??”

Mr Williams’ voice was more annoyed than frightened, outrage the primary tone his voice was conveying.

“I’m the Hypno Hustler – who the hell are you?”

Tony couldn’t help it, he burst out laughing, simultaneously drawing attention to himself and breaking the building atmosphere in the room. His uncontrollable laughter had the bonus effect of shattering any hope the would-be villain had of being remotely threatening that night,

“The hahaha-Hyp-hahah-no-haha! Hustler! Hahaha! Oh my god what kind of fucking pathetic villain name is that?”

The self-named Hypno Hustler glared at Tony,

“Sheesh you little shit, do you kiss your mother with that mouth?”

Grinning with all of his teeth Tony replied,

“Yes.”

“Why are you robbing the joint? You know this place is the heart of the neighbourhood!”

“Your DJ rejected the Mercy Killers demo tape without even listenin’ to it!”

“Be cool. Be cool. We don’t have to do this.”
Tony had to give Jerome credit, the man was calmly trying to defuse the maniac in front of him as if he wasn’t obviously as mad as a box of frogs, and itching to start something.

The self-proclaimed Hypno Hustler aimed his guitar at them, yep definitely a gun. The tableau was a terrifying one, Tony didn’t think the plastic and Formica bar would stand up to a low calibre round, let alone whatever insane calibre the man in front of him had drilled into his guitar. The man strummed his guitar, despite the lack of an obvious power source the electric hum that filled the air was unmistakeable. The idiot’s purple goggles lit up and Tony felt a rush of relief when he realised that the strange guitar wasn’t a gun.

The music was strangely soporific, Tony falling into a dreamy state as the song continued. Tony just couldn’t bring himself to do anything about it as he watched the Hustler move further inside the nightclub, intentions towards the till and backrooms obvious.

To Tony’s horror a toddler wandered out of the previously ignored backroom door, rubbing sleepily at his eyes. The commotion had obviously woken the tiny kid up,

“Dada? Wha’s goin on?”

The Hustler immediately seized the opportunity snatching the small child up,

“Aha!”

“Riri! No!”

The rush of adrenaline was all that it took to push Tony out of the strange reverie he’d been pulled into, the Hustler was still working his Hypno bullshit, the reasoning behind his name clear as he turned his mesmerising goggles onto the tiny child in his hands. Despite the anguish in Mr Williams voice, when Tony turned covertly to face him he discovered a lax, sappy look of disturbing bliss on the grizzled face. Shit.

Tony could feel whatever it was creeping up on him again, the music or whatever beating back the adrenaline too quickly for Tony to think of a plan of action or anything sensible. Looking desperately around, Tony espied the sharp knife that Mr Williams had been using to cut up the lime that had been in the latest batch of juice.

Tony grabbed the knife, and slammed it down into the soft flesh between his thumb and palm, avoiding anything structural in his hand. Tony had recalled in a distant sort of a way how painful the
injury had been last time he’d been speared there when a gauntlet had unexpectedly buckled in battle, but he only viscerally remembered how bad it had been last time once the agony kicked in a moment later. Lime juice still on the knife adding a painful bite to the wound. Shit that was brisk. The sharp agony in his hand focussed Tony’s mind wonderfully. The alarming signals his nerves were sending him overriding whatever mojo the Hypno ass was trying to pull.

All of that had taken a couple of seconds, the Hustler was still caught up in admiring his newfound prize of the club-owner’s son. The expression on the man’s face was revolting. Tony rushed across the room ignoring the signals his hand was frantically shooting at him, and stabbed the not-as-sharp-as-he’d-like knife through the Hustler’s foot into the linoleum floor beneath.

“Argh!!”

The ass dropped the toddler with a pained shout. Tony reached out to catch the kid, but fell down with a winded “oomph!” as he both overestimated his own weight, and underestimated how big the kid was. Tony struggled not to smear the toddler in the blood seeping from his injury, but he was simultaneously struggling to shuffle back away from the reaching hands of the Hypno Hustler. The tall man was bent nearly double, trying to reach Tony and the child he cradled without shifting his foot.

“That’s Jive man! Argh! You little brat you just wait til I come over there and get you!”

Thankfully with the cessation of the Hypno mojo, Mr Williams had shaken himself out of his stupor and strode across the room to deck the idiot. The velvet clad man fell stunned to the dancefloor.

“Kid you may be cute, but you sure are crazy.”

Mr Williams gently bent down to extricate the fussing child, Tony grinned up at the owner. The Hypno Hustler lay groaning on the floor between them, coincidentally the man was lying face-down in particularly suspicious sticky spot. Tony hastily passed the toddler over when his father gestured for him, side-eyeing Jerome as he did so,

“Riri?”

“Short for Richard. Riri here can’t do long words yet.” Mr Williams’ voice ascended into exaggerated baby speak, “Can you little man?”
Jerome leaned forward, gruff face soft with parental love, Tony found that he couldn’t watch. Blinking he turned away from the touching scene. By the time Tony managed to compose himself Jerome was looking at him with too understanding eyes, his whisky and smoke voice conveyed a world of sympathy,

“C’mon kiddo. You can crash here tonight. Not like I’ve got any customers with this blackout anyway, and you just saved my son’s life.”

“You don’t know that. I think he was just going to take the till money.”

“Nah. This fool would have gone big, and I’d have lost my son.”

Jerome gave the prone Hustler a vicious kick in the kidneys, Tony couldn’t bring himself to care.

“What are we going to do with him?”

Tony hadn’t meant to speak the question out loud, thinking to himself, but Mr Williams answered anyway,

“Well you heard the radio. We can’t call the police, there are no police tonight. And ‘sides, I’ve got nowhere secure to put this fool. I’m going to confiscate this scooby’s instrument” Tony looked questioningly up at him, with a feral grin Mr Jerome responded, “Damages. And then I’m going to let him sleep it off outside.” This was shouted in the still groaning Hustler’s face in a patronisingly slowly enunciated tone, “And if he ever comes back here again, he should know that his photo will be on the banned list. And my bouncers have licenses to carry.”

With that Mr Williams disappeared into the backroom for a few minutes, taking his son with him. When he returned, notably lacking a toddler, he pulled out a very familiar looking camera and snapped off an image.

“Ah kid. Lookit you. Let’s get you sorted out alright? Like I said I’ll deal with this sucka” a pause to get in a kick to the ribs, “then we’ll check out your hand.”

Mr Williams tucked the newly developed photo behind the bar quickly grabbing a small handgun with an unrepentant look as he did so. The tall man unceremoniously pulled the kitchen knife out of the floor, and started dragging the Hypno Hustler to the door. The thought Tony’s subconscious had
been chewing over finally made itself known, the small niggle proverbially jumping up and shouting at him,

“Wait!”

“What kid? This idiot could wake up any moment, and I rather he be locked outside when it happens.”

“Take his goggles.”

“What?”

Mr William’s tone was a mixture of confused incredulity,

“Not that I’m against the spoils of a fight, and all that. I mean he did try to take my Riri… But why do you want those purple crapsters?”

Tony remembered just in time not to use technical terms, that would have both been unlikely to be understood, and earn him more attention than he wanted.

“Well you’ve already taken his guitar. I think he was using the guitar and goggles to do whatever he did to us.”

“Sure, whatever kiddo. Far as I’m concerned you can keep em.”

Tony made sure to keep his grin innocent when he snatched the mystery tech off the now groaning Hustler’s head. Hopefully without his equipment the man was defanged. Tony pulled on the hideous bug-eyed contraption and tried to discern how the tech worked without actually taking it to pieces.

It was only much later, when Tony was leaning back uncomfortably in the small office, next to the fascinatingly modified guitar, grimacing as TCP was poured all over the hole in his hand that Tony remembered that he had daggers of his own that would have done far less damage than the slightly blunt kitchen knife he’d used. Dammit. One day he’d think of the daggers first.
Author's note, that comes with it's own **warnings, mentioned paedophilia**- the 1970s really were a different planet. I've already clarified to few people my possibly faulty logic behind Jarvis's questionable actions, but, to make my thinking clearer for everyone:

In the 70s children would often go out just after breakfast and only return in time for the evening meal during holidays. This was normal. At the more extreme end, underaged teenaged groupies would go and hang out with the rockstars of the age, they were celebrated for it, all too often their parents knew exactly what was happening. Generally, it involved sex, drugs and alcohol. This was the era of Cosby, and horribly, people like Polanski and Woody Allan basically getting away with paedophilia. Equivalently it was the era of Saville in Britain. A TV-entertainer who was one of the most prolific paedophiles that the UK knows of, his behaviour was more or less an open secret of people warning each other to stay away from him with nothing being done by the authorities; the few children who did try to report it accused of lying or telling stories for attention.

School was it's own minefield. Rich people would routinely send their children boarding from a v.young age. In such places sexual abuse by both staff and older students was rife. State schools weren't any better, often convincing their students that they'd never amount to anything. Academia was pretty much frowned upon in many circles (a good easy to find example of this is shown in the Netflix show Mindhunter, portraying the FBI's resistance to using the resources available to them in universities to improve their arrest rate, or even defining serial killers. The lead's decision to go to university is even questioned as 'gay').

Similarly the famous Pink Floyd music video Another Brick in the Wall can be read as a caricature of the schooling situation the band-members lived (albeit an extremely exaggerated one), but not entirely fiction. In the US teachers still routinely punished schoolchildren with the paddle, in the UK they used the cane. (I also recommend the film "If..." as a heightened example of the world young Justin is about to find himself in, since I strongly suspect that bit of subtext wasn't very noticeable.)

This is the era that Tony has been flung back into. Punishments that we'd view as excessive are used routinely and seen as normal. Regardless of the fact that the 70s were also a decade of great change with the rise of Glam Rock and Bowie in Britain and to a lesser extent the US, telling a whole generation that it was Okay to be different. And the reestablishment of black music into popular culture again with disco, funk, and hip hop... Well, the 70s probably weren't a great place to be if you didn't fit into narrow definitions of the 'norm' or adhere to strict, and capricious rules about how you lived your life as a child or adult. There's a reason, the now rather tame, video of Bowie in make-up on Top of the Pops singing Starman, with his arm draped suggestively across Mick Ronson's shoulders is cited as a life-changing moment by so many people who were kids or teens in the era.

For those who aren't already aware in the 70s New York was damn near bankrupt. The
largest city in the US had basically been told to go fuck itself by the president and central government. What few social services were still running were nearly crippled, this included the police. This was an era of white flight and incredible deprivation for those too poor and working class to get away from it all, a long cry from the sense of hope given by Martin Luther King Jr's iconic speech in the Central Park Bandshell a few years before. Of course this meant it was also an era of incredible innovation (eg the rise of hiphop in Harlem) and community, however the endemic lack of funding and rampant inequality of this era is showing.

Ahem sorry - a rather long note there, but I think that little bit of background/context may have been needed to clear up where a few of my more out there decisions came from.
Time, In Quaaludes and Red Wine

Chapter Summary

The aftermath.

**WARNING - attempted paedophilia** It's tagged and clearly delineated within the text for those who wish to avoid it.

Chapter Notes

**WARNINGS** Apologies, I'm not entirely sure what the etiquette is, however for anyone looking to avoid the particularly awful scene I've attempted to demarcate the relevant section within the text. And a brief moment to say please stop reading at included Warning, and skip to the page break for Edwin's POV. You won't miss anything important beyond a small character moment for Tony, and some instant karma for the would-be perpetrator.

The scene doesn't get anywhere graphic - since honestly I wouldn't feel comfortable with myself writing such content, however the attempt and intention is obvious and gets rather close to unpleasantness and is written frankly enough that the warnings are there for a reason.

Once again - thank you all for the extremely positive response to this thing! There have been some truly lovely comments on the previous chapter, and people spotting references that I wasn't entirely convinced anyone who'd lived through the era would actually remember!

Grateful thanks to my lovely new beta-reader are due too - they've seriously helped prune out some awful persistent grammar tics of mine that will likely continue to cause hair-pulling in the future.

And apologies in advance for the likely gap between this chapter and the next... Remember that my ancient laptop snuffed it? The replacement died unexpectedly - and is getting repairs.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**Chapter 10: Time, In Quaaludes and Red Wine**
Nothing. The wee small hours of the morning had long since ceded to the harsh glaring sunlight of the next day, and still Howard, and SHIELD had found nothing. There was no trace of Tony to be found anywhere in New York.

Peggy was still out leading her squad somewhere in Brooklyn, the last Edwin had heard, her team had been heading toward Dumbo and suspected Maggia involvement. In the meantime, his darling Ana’s group were …questioning some members of the Irish Mob they’d encountered. Edwin wouldn’t fathom saying so to either woman, but he personally thought that it sounded like busywork, rather than anything liable to find their missing boy. Not with two tiny teams of agents, attempting to search the entirety of New York – never mind the ever-present fear that in the chaos of the city, the evil men who’d snatched their dear boy could easily have gotten out of the Five Boroughs and be well on their way by now.

Edwin sighed, and resisted the urge to glare daggers at the agent who was passing on the news. Whilst he was no Souza, he had an air of kind competence, and besides he could probably snap Edwin like a twig - a dry one at that. Edwin’s time in the army notwithstanding, he was not a particularly physical man, the turtle of fury his main (and if he had to admit it to himself) only speciality.

Edwin’s eyes felt dry with exhaustion, the harsh brightness only adding to the headache he could feel creeping up. Edwin blinked trying to force moisture to his aching eyeballs. Edwin could feel the despair creeping up on him alongside the tiredness, dragged along on a tide of energetic irrationality, as he felt the need to sleep flip around into a startling inability to sleep. Lord – Edwin was useless to anyone like this, not for the first time he felt a huge surge of respect for his darling wife and the inimitable Agent Carter. The pair regularly forced themselves to work through situations like this, operating on next to no sleep for days at a time.

Edwin forced a long slow blink as he tried the phone line again, to his relief and surprise there was a dial tone. Things were starting to get back to some semblance of normalcy. Well, apart from the elephant in the room. Edwin couldn’t believe how little help he’d been to anyone, he felt so grossly atavistic, useless in the face of this looming loss they were all staring in the face. It wasn’t even the first time he’d been in this situation, sitting with his thumb up his arse whilst everyone else got on with the real work.

Even through the fog of exhaustion Edwin felt the usual self-directed rage, he’d been down this route before, and failed miserably. Christ, he was being a useless bloody lump again, unable to protect those he loved, reliant on the help of the people surrounding him and not even able to stand up and be counted when it really mattered. No, he was so wrapped up in propriety and maintaining order and he couldn’t even he couldn’t- Wiping his eyes hurriedly erasing the evidence of the minor breakdown he’d just weathered, Edwin plastered on his best butlery expression and strode out to meet the guests who only now in the late mid-morning were beginning to trickle out. No, this was the least he could do, put on a front of sanity for Howard and Maria’s sake.
The sun burned bright and hot, the pre-noon haze hinting at worse to come. The heatwave was as stifling as ever. Tony longed for the refreshment of central air, and he’d chosen to move to Malibu for the warmth. There was still no power, though fortunately Mr Williams’ establishment had a gas stove, so there were crispy fried eggs (fried in so much oil they’d essentially been deep fried) and extremely dark brown fried toast for breakfast. Little Riri was happily throwing his scrambled eggs all over the kitchen as he ate them, but from the achingly fond look on his dad’s face Tony didn’t think the man would mind the toddler’s antics for quite some time to come.

The burnt crunchy bits and seeping grease combined with the brittle fattiness of the fried bread had Tony privately waxing nostalgic in about the days of the Avengers hunting for Hydra, and the frequently-terrible food at the numerous diners and road-side cafes they’d ended up relying on all too often. Tony still found it hilarious that Nat’s guilty pleasure had been Curry-Wursts, sliced sausage covered in dubious sauce, that they’d all tried and found disgusting in Berlin. From then on, whenever that particular fast-food had appeared on the menu Nat would order it.

Nat’s unabashed love of the, frankly nasty, combination of processed hotdog-like sausage (the cyberman of food) and ‘curry’ sauce had been one of the first things that she and Bruce had bonded over. The shy scientist teasing the usually aloof spy about how the cloying sweet yellow-brown gravy sludge would have her thrown out of any household in India, from the varied styles of Guwahati to Chennai if she dared try to claim it was curry. Nat had calmly cited Japan’s tradition of curry making, startling Bruce into an actual *cackle* of surprised laughter as he’d pointed out that Japan’s ‘tradition’ of curry making had been imported wholesale from the British when ‘curried’ (aka yellow eggs and dubious vegetables) food had become a fashion amongst the Victorian middle-class. Tony still remembered Steve’s look of confused “what the hell is going on” innocence with a grin on his face. Despite what came afterwards, the greasy food managed to stir up fond memories for Tony.

After a largely silent, but comfortable morning in Mr Williams’ company, Ayleen strolled back in looking incredibly pleased with herself. She smugly kissed her dad on the cheek, before giving Tony a hug of his own, which again had him blinking back moisture. After spending some time unstringing the guitar, and locating and removing the strange device attached to the truss rod with the tools available at the nightclub, Tony worked up the energy to continue his journey northwards. Thanking the owner of the strange ‘juice bar’ profusely for his hospitality, Tony finally got on with his long trek with the sun already higher in the sky than he’d have liked. Tony had decided that since it had served him relatively well the night before, despite his exhausted misgivings, that he would continue with the slightly eccentric plan to use the many confusing paths through Central Park to evade his pursuers rather than use the more direct route. For lack of anywhere else to put them, Tony’s outfit distinctly lacking in useable pockets, Tony was wearing the hideous white and purple goggles around his neck like a particularly ugly necklace.

Tony got to Times Square, already drenched in sweat despite the fact that he was healthy at the moment, and was appalled by his own lack of recognition. The famous site was a terrifying jolt of unfamiliarity in the already unnerving vision of 1970s New York. Gone were the multi-storey...
advertising hoardings and high-end chain shops. Gone were the famous billboards and neon signs, replaced instead by a series of seedy signs declaring “Lovely Hostesses”. No, not gone. Not there yet. The only hint of familiarity was a currently unlit neon Coca-Cola sign at the familiar crossroads. This was Times Square pre-gentrification, post-white-flight, and a blatant show of some of the seedier sides of city living. In short, the world-famous square was filled with brothels and bordellos. Signs declaring “Girls Girls Girls!”, “Adult Films!”, and… Well, street walkers blatantly flaunting their wares.

He was beginning to understand what the Capsicle had been going through, Tony stared around in horror – it wasn’t the seedy atmosphere that had him reeling, but the unexpected distance from the New York that he knew so well. Ironically Tony was beginning to get fed up of understanding Steve’s predicament. He found himself re-evaluating some of Steve’s actions as he skirted his way around the hawkers of sex and porn, trying his best not to look vulnerable. Perhaps Cap’s rigid need to be right all the time, in control, to not take advice - even when more than half of the independent nation states on the planet were crying out for oversight…

Maybe it was Steve’s way of coping with the strange new world he found himself in? Tony breathed out a surprised gush of air at that surprising thought, could it really have been that simple? Nah. Shoulders slumping Tony remembered Steve’s nearly pathological need to hold Tony accountable for every little thing that happened, regardless of if it were true or not. That wasn’t it, or it wasn’t all of it, even if it was part of it.

Jesus that was a convoluted mess. Shaking himself out of his thoughts Tony realised that he’d made it halfway across the square without paying any attention, oops. Newly aware of his surroundings Tony covertly glanced around and felt hostile stares on his back. Guard up again, stance rigid, Tony hurried his way through the unexpected den of vice. He did not want to find out what happened to children who caught the eyes of paedophiles on this side of the tracks. Pushing down the awful memories of Dr Constantine’s unwanted touches Tony did his damndest to keep his steps sure and his glares icy. He was very nearly at his destination.

Tony had almost made it to the far side of the square when his fears were confirmed – it wasn’t an alley – a hand suddenly shot out of a shadowy side-street, one that would have been dark and gloomy even at midday from the looks of it, and grabbed him firmly by the upper arm.

Tony felt himself being pulled into the darkness. The person who’d grabbed him was already breathing heavily despite the lack of struggle Tony had put up in his surprise, breath rank with a rotting calcium stench. One meaty paw was still firmly clutching Tony, pawing at Tony’s pants, as the other fumbled at the man’s own flies. Seeing all the confirmation he needed, Tony used his free hand to grab hold of the already well-used blade at the small of his back. Remembering that he owned it this time. Using the element of surprise that had been so effective against himself, Tony lunged forward and pressed the blade to the man’s throat.
Piggy eyes widened in terror. A thin line of blood appeared where the razor edge was pressed against the already sweaty skin at the man’s throat. An animal stink of fear rose up, joining the already pungent body odour.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

Tony’s voice was ice. The only hint that there was a question was in his word choice, not his intonation, which had dropped to a monotone that was made all the more chilling by his cherubic looks.

“I-I-I-I.”

“What?”

“I-I-I-“

Taking his cue from yet another infamous pop-culture psychopath Tony spat out,

“Say ‘I’ one more time…”

“I-“

Tony was loathe to deal out vigilante justice, but the man had quite literally been caught red-handed. He hissed out his indecision between his teeth. Tony knew from bitter experience that children were not believed about these types of incident in the 70s, they just weren’t. In this horrible era children were there to be seen and not heard. They still used corporal punishment in schools for gods’ sake! It was only a stroke of sheer uncharacteristic good luck that the private school Tony had been shipped off to for the year happened to be a relatively decent one.

Tony narrowed his eyes at his would-be assaulter. The heady lethargic feeling of the drugs still coursing through his system all these hours later washed away by the surge of pure rage that flowed through his veins.

The blade flashed in the perpetual gloom of the dark street.
Edwin felt nothing but exhausted relief when the last of the guests finally allowed themselves to be ushered out of the penthouse. He quietly closed the huge double doors behind him and leant against the dark wood in a defeated slump.

If he hadn’t known any better, Edwin would have accused Janet van Dyne of purposefully drawing each and every one of the spoilt nouveau-rich idiots into prolonged conversation purely to spite him. Edwin didn’t know what had actually gotten into the woman, but the usually astute and waspish van Dyne had suddenly bloomed into a social butterfly, plying her fellow enthralled guests around her that morning with champagne as her partner, the surly Doctor Pym, formed his own little social gathering with the men in the opposite corner of the room.

Urgh.

American socialites were just as bad as the aristocratic snobs and the class system that he’d thought he’d escaped from when he’d accepted this exile to the colonies. Edwin prided himself on doing his best for Howard and his family. However, it still rankled that as a member of the upper-middle classes who’d been sent to a prestigious grammar school he’d ended up where he had. Alright, it wasn’t a public school – but he’d gone to a decent enough red brick university, and ended up in the officer corps of the army near automatically when he’d been conscripted. Assigned as a junior officer to one of the special forces regiments. From there he’d ended up in Budapest as a general’s batman, and met his darling Ana… Edwin had ended up as someone else’s butler of all things. It wasn’t the career path he’d envisioned for himself as a young man, but if he could stay by her side it would all be worth it.

Along the way he’d eventually begun to see his employer, and the man he owed a great debt to, as a dear friend. Gradually that bond strengthened, became family. Having stood with the man through so many intimate moments, both tragic and joyful, Edwin wouldn’t contemplate leaving his side. So of course, when the man’s son had finally come along – after many painful failed attempts by the couple, Edwin had been overjoyed.

Shortly after that moment of pure contentment the undercurrents that had been brewing for quite some time made themselves known. Maria came down with a crippling case of post-natal depression, made even more heart-breaking in the face of the fact that the incredibly intelligent woman had stood so steadfast through all of the losses she’d borne in her quest to have a child with the man she loved. Howard proved unable to cope with his wife’s belated mourning, and descended into drink and the guilt-fuelled rage that had been teetering on the horizon for decades.
Edwin allowed himself a long blink and tried to focus, the dark coffee he’d brewed using the stovetop kettle doing nothing for the exhaustion. He was wool-gathering, making himself even more useless than usual in this world of spies and monsters. As he tidied the chaos left behind by the guests Edwin could only hope that his darling wife was getting somewhere, in contrast to the trapped helplessness that was flowing through his blood alongside the piss and vinegar that was fuelling him. It rankled that even now, after all these damned years by their sides, watching helplessly from the damnable bloody side-lines that Edwin couldn’t keep the ones he loved safe. Relegated instead to the role of servant whilst everyone else was out searching and fighting for those they cared about.

Edwin had thought that he’d resolved this conflict within himself decades prior, when he’d concluded that as fantastic as the adventures he shared with dear Peggy were, that they demanded too fantastic a cost. But no, the bitter churning in his gut, a feeling all too familiar these past few months as he’d watched helplessly as his darling wife struggled with an illness that medics couldn’t comprehend… The feeling turned sour as, looking out over the smouldering New York skyline, huge plumes of thick black smoke rising to the heavens, Edwin realised that once again he was trapped on the side-lines watching the ones he loved fight and bleed, fighting a battle that he could have no part in.

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Tony had made the mistake of attempting to cross Central Park; his adult memories showed the place to be a green leafy and above all safe space. To Tony’s shame he hadn’t much noticed the difference to his expectations when they’d been there the previous summer, but he was certainly noticing the disparity now.

The well-tended paths of Tony’s memories were nowhere to be seen, he couldn’t have been that blind surely? This kind of neglect didn’t just happen overnight, even after a night that caused the smoke-haze that hung over everything like a pall. Tony walked northward, appalled by what he was seeing. The park was a desolate wasteland, the huge pond in what Tony had known as the nature reserve end of the park, a putrid puddle of brown stinking fetid water in the bottom of a concrete basin.

Every surface that could be covered in graffiti had been. Whether said surface was flat, or even one of the famous clifffy rocks that made up much of the ground underlying the landscaping, if it was possible to paint it, it had been.

Tony discovered that the usually abundant and leafy undergrowth of the nature walk was a complete no-go area; needles and other drug-related ephemera littered the space, speaking clearly of the alternative uses that the park had obviously been put to. Tony blinked. Just how oblivious had he been last year, to have missed all of this?
Tony marched his way through the slightly miserable looking trees towards the comforting familiarity of Bethesda Fountain; if he could only get to that wide-open space he’d be fine. The zoo was shut, obviously. And besides Tony was trying to get to the small mansion in Upper East Side, the site of which might as well have been on the opposite end of Manhattan from the damned bridge he’d trekked across, given how exhausted he felt. Tony resolved to thank Ben for all that long-distance training, without it he’d have given up, or even have been caught before he made it to this side of the river. Tony was uncomfortably aware that if it hadn’t been for Ben’s intense (and insane) training regime, with its daily, incrementally longer, long-distance runs around the school grounds, well. Tony was struggling as it was. Tony owed Ben a thank you gesture when he next saw the guy.

His mind wandered as Tony marched on, picking over all of the changes he’d seen getting to this point. The skyline was so woefully unfamiliar on so many levels, and yet the city was still unmistakeably his city. Grand Central Terminal, and the only slightly twisted surroundings just one example of the strange not-quite-rightness that still had Tony sympathising with Cap a whole hour after he’d resolved to put it out of his mind.

Instead, Tony focussed on the differences between the area surrounding the Pan-Am tower and the semi-rundown site that Tony had acquired in the noughties. Tony dearly wished that he still owned that damned land. Tony wouldn’t have had to go on this insane dash across most of Manhattan, unsure if the unfriendly stares he felt on his back every moment were his kidnappers finally catching up with him, or just some random creep.

It would have been a gentle stroll up past Chinatown, and he’d be there. Hom- no. No, that place had never been a home. Pepper had never moved in as they’d originally planned, instead they’d spent their time in the old Malibu house both of them too caught up in the aftermath of the chitauri incident to entertain the idea of sleeping only metres away from the site of the portal that was the source of so many of Tony’s nightmares. Not that it had helped, Tony had lost Pepper to the aftermath of that shitstorm, promising irrationally to give up being Iron Man at the height of it all, too buzzed on the high that came after the long low to realise that he was lying to her.

Tony had thought the rechristened Avengers Tower was home, for months it became his base of operations as they scrambled to clean up Steve and Nat’s mess, chasing Hydra and the sceptre across the globe. That house of cards had collapsed, leaving only bitterness and regret in its wake.

No. That tower had never been a home. There was a reason he’d sold the broken thing at the first opportunity. Given the chance again Tony wasn’t sure he’d bother to reacquire the land. Tony didn’t want to contemplate what would happen if he gave Cap the same opportunities to lord it over him as he had last time, the earlier revelation that he now knew almost exactly what Cap had been going through a harsh one, as Tony began to realise that he’d never begin to contemplate enacting the level of ill-advised international fuckery that had become Steve’s speciality.

SHIELD infiltrated with enemy agents? No problem! I’ll just expose every agent, good and bad to
the entire world. Tony shut his eyes, the list of the dead, the people he hadn’t been able to reach in time, still burnt into his memory. The failures seared there indelibly. Perky Hydra assassin creates an evil killing machine? No problem! Let her join the team, she’s shown that she cares now, right? 137 nations want to hold us to account for our actions? Calling for a system to be put in place rather than the ad hoc aid arrangements and last-minute permissions, Tony and SI had hastily patched the gaps with? No problem! I’ll just tell the world to go screw itself! Literally as it turned out – since they were utterly screwed when Thanos arrived. All the derision that they’d heaped on Tony’s back finally coming around to bite them in the collective ass, when the dire warnings he’d been throwing on deaf ears finally made themselves known.

If only the Ultron project had been completed - not the twisted mangled monstrosity that the hostile AI in the mind gem had forced into existence, but the actual project – maybe, just maybe, they’d have been able to prevent the hoard of Outriders and the Black Order from decimating the population - and razing the world - slowly whittling away at the pockets of resis- Tony hastily shoved the angry rhetoric in a box and slammed the lid. Motherfucking shit - would he be able to stop himself from punching the self-righteous ass in his perfect teeth if he ever saw him again? Tony doubted it.

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Peggy and her team of SHIELD agents burst into the abandoned warehouse in DUMBO and cursed. It was abandoned. Despite the efficiency of her teamwork with Ana, they simply hadn’t been fast enough. And with the junior Pym’s both subtly plying their trade on the guests to try and discover who, if any of them, had betrayed them. Well. Peggy wasn’t working with a full-deck as Howard would have oh-so-charmingly phrased it. That infuriating, charming, idiot.

Peggy crouched down, cursing her aching joints as she did so, at the edge of the nearest, strangely faded, blood puddle and inspected it closely. Dammit. If only Daniel were here, and not stuck over in San Francisco digging into whatever Pym was up to. For all of Peggy’s abilities, there were some things that her husband was just better at than she was – getting on with the local cops was one of them. Her gender still an insurmountable barrier to traverse even in the dying decades of the 20th Century.

The local cops would know who to frisk for information, and would probably have been able to tell her within moments which gang to ask questions of, and even what questions needed asking. As it was, the police were once again nowhere to be seen – and Peggy, international Agent of SHIELD though she was, didn’t know enough about the local gangs in New York to hazard a guess as to who controlled this neighbourhood.

Dammit.
Peggy eyed up the havoc with a practiced glance, not needing more than that to draw her conclusions. The place had obviously been cleaned up. It smelt strongly of bleach, and tellingly for all that there were pockmarks and bloodstains everywhere there were no bullets and no bodies.

Only 20 years ago she’d have confidently knocked on the door of the local Irish gang and had her answers within half an hour, at most. But these days, Peggy couldn’t tell you if it was the local Maggia or their rivals, the better-established Mafia that owned this turf or even if it was another group entirely. Even so, she had Ana chasing down that possibility. Seventies New York was rife with gangs, each fighting over their tiny patch of turf. Peggy, no longer a local, didn’t have the means to keep up. Infuriatingly for all that she could plainly see the fingerprints of a gang related clean-up all over the warehouse she was no nearer to finding out anything about the people behind the situation. Or even if the gang was cleaning up their own mess, or cleaning out a den of vipers in their own backyard.

Using skills honed decades ago Peggy made her cautious way deeper into the warehouse, the suspicious power that had drawn her here still making the overhead bulbs blaze fiercely where the rest of New York only blazed with flames. Disturbingly there really were signs of a struggle all over the place, a blood trail and deep gouges in the wall. The carnage extended well beyond the huge empty space, the deep gouges in the wall effectively marking a path for her to follow.

There was a particularly alarming puddle of blood and other less pleasant substances pooled slickly at a junction – signs of a struggle, and the stench of bleach failing to cover up the scent of a painful and messy death. Again, no body, and no clues left behind for her to gain more than a vague idea of what might have transpired. The expert clean-up job frustrating even Peggy’s practiced eye.

Making a note to get a proper team in her as soon as humanly possible, Peggy followed the trail of destruction all the way back to its origin, a bloody broom cupboard. Not literally thank god, however the obvious use the tiny room had been put to was both alarming and infuriating.

The cupboard itself was hanging open, door brokenly flapping, since the lock and a significant section of the doorjamb were both on the floor. There was a nest of filthy blankets on the floor, and a foul-smelling bucket in one corner spoke of the cupboard’s previous occupation. The walls were deeply scarred with the scratchings of its previous occupants.

But no sign of Tony.

This did not bode well at all.

Peggy backed up and investigated the obvious guard post outside the door again, poking at the small
chair until a plastic baggy fell out of the stuffing onto the floor. It was filled with pills marked 714, and a cloth, that upon cautious inspection reeked of ether. God, no. Peggy allowed herself a moment of horror before straightening her spine and marching back to the main room to rejoin her team and hopefully bark enough orders that they’d be able to find something useful in this mess.

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Sheep Meadow wasn’t really a meadow any more, the lush turf that Tony was used to a dry yellow dust bowl. In his distraction Tony didn’t notice the person coming the other way, until with a solid crash Tony found himself sprawled on the path. The other person involved in the collision was still standing, Tony looked up and up and up at the silver clad figure.

The person clearly liked silver. A lot. A hell of a lot.

As well as a worn looking silver leather jacket, silver converses and silver hair the boy was wearing silver-grey skinny jeans with a pair of goggles and headphones perched prominently on his head.

He reminded Tony of, no it couldn’t be.

“You OK down there?”

“Huh?”

“Oh man.”

The looming kid ruffled the back of his hair in a nervous gesture,

“Shit. I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“Um. No?”

Tony’s voice squeaked on the question. He hated it.
Tony pushed himself to his feet, glad for the new coating of mud. It hid the blood that he hadn’t been able to scrub off in the cold water at the club.

At breakneck speed the kid, and it was a kid changed the subject.

“Nice goggles. Hey is that a cassette player???”

The teenager reached out as if to take the proto-Walkman, making Tony jump backwards in alarm before seeming to remember himself. The hair ruffle came again.

“Sorry man.”

The kid twisted sideways and started fiddling with something on his belt, Tony backed up another step,

“It’s just I’ve got a Stereobel.”

The name was spat out with a strange mixture of distaste and mischievous glee. Tony let out a relieved breath he hadn’t been aware that he was holding when the teen held up his own cassette player in demonstration. The thing was integrated into the teen’s belt – which when Tony looked closer, he realised was actually a complicated rig holding multiple boxes of bulky electronics.

Jesus – Tony didn’t think anyone had ever manufactured one of those things. Oh, he’d seen the patent files but he’d honestly never believed they’d ever existe- Tony flushed and looked away, Peter had definitely seen the awed look on his face, if the boy’s preening expression was anything to go by. Face red, Tony marched onwards hoping that he’d be able to reach the building – and the relative safety of his dad’s penthouse sat pretty on the street East of Central Park that afternoon.

“What music have you got? And what are you doing in Central Park?”

The hyperactive change of subject was becoming familiar. Tony’s response was near automatic, a defensive rush of too much information,
“Uh… Bowie mostly. Some hard rock and heavy metal. You know Deep Purple, Meatloaf, Black Sabbath…”

The cassette was actually a bizarre combination of the more relaxed Philadelphia Soul tracks on Young Americans, with a b-side of an eclectic selection of the loud heavy rock that he’d always favoured, mostly scrounged from Justin’s collection.

“Ah cool! I’ve got… The Ramones on this one, and Animals on this one, an-”

“Animals?”

Tony found himself asking before he could help himself, puzzled. Somehow, he didn’t think Not-Pietro meant the 60s-era band, did he?

“You know with the pig and the, um, power station, and uh London?”

Tony stared blankly.

“Pink Floyd?”

“Oh.”

Tony was surprised. He knew, from experience, that in this era music taste tended towards obsessive almost tribe-like love of one particular genre at the expense of all others. Huh. The kid liked punk and prog. Not a combination he’d expected to encounter in this era of pre and post-punk.

“Wanna trade?”

“Huh?”

Tony wasn’t normally this stupid he swore, but something about the whole situation had him gawping,
“My copy of Animals for your… Bowie and Black Sabbath?”

“Uh, sure?”

Tony hesitantly ejected his cassette from the proto-Walkman and mutely passed it over to the fidgety boy, with great ceremony and to Tony’s surprise the silver bedecked boy in front of him pulled out a legitimate store-bought cassette of Animals.

“Here.”

“Are you sure? I mean mine’s only a mixtape.”

“A what-tape?”

Damn. Tony had used anachronistic slang again.

Peter sidestepped the issue,

“Pshaw! I can easily get another.”

There was a sudden breeze. The tape that Peter shoved over with little to no ceremony was suspiciously new compared to the battered thing he’d been passing over moments earlier, the thing still encased in its shrink-wrap with a small yellow price-tag proclaiming, ‘$2.99 |Tower Records!’

Tony hesitantly accepted the brand-new tape and avoided his suspicion by voicing another,

“Why are you even carrying that? Don’t Stereobelts take reels?”

The boy infuriatingly merely grinned at him. And stuck his hand out,
“I’m Peter, Peter Maximoff nee Rasputin.” A proud emphasis was in place on the Rasputin, “What’s your name?”

Shit. It really was Quicksilver. Only it really really wasn’t.

The surly Sokovian wasn’t in the building, instead, impossibly, this overly cheery American brat (Tony as a fellow wearer of that particular mask recognised it as the brand of false cheer that masks the hurt that comes from an indifferent world) with a Missouri drawl was in front of him.

“Uh- T-Tony.”

“This baby takes both.”

Not-Pietro patted the bulky equipment on his belt fondly,

“Isn’t that a prototype?”

Not-Pietro winked. He winked.

The mismatched pair started walking northwards, Tony recognising that Peter was suddenly walking Tony’s way rather than the direction in which he’d originally been heading.

They reached Bethesda Fountain. Well, if it could be called a fountain given that there was no water. Jesus. The great bowl was completely dry. There were plenty of people around, including a man frying and selling what smelt like Jerk Chicken. It was heartening to see that people clearly still cared in the face of this obvious neglect, but it was horrible that the park had been allowed to fall into such a state.

Tony glanced over at Peter, only to realise that not-Pietro was conversing animatedly with a guy that, if Tony was the type to go by stereotypes, looked like a weed-seller. Oh wait. Not-Pietro was buying weed, in broad daylight. Christ.
Ana pushed through the exhaustion; she couldn’t afford to pull all-nighters like this, not any more. The aching lethargy weighed heavy around her neck like a ball and chain, the sinking feeling so heavy. The welcoming arms of Morpheus giving the perfect illusion that if she only shut her eyes everything would feel better when she woke up. Ana had thought that the chemotherapy was supposed to make her feel better not worse. But the drugs coursing through her system made her feel utterly terrible.

She’d managed to pry the information out of her rat, the informant within the gang happily telling Ana everything she wanted to know in exchange for weed money. Unfortunately, the information was utterly useless, it had come hours too late, even Ana’s more direct methods struggling to keep up in the chaos of the power outage. Peggy had already been at the site when Ana got her useless confirmation.

The warehouse he’d so proudly told her about, the only warehouse in Dumbo with power? Had been a complete bust. She’d gotten there a solid hour after Peggy’s anticlimactic storming of the place, and her practiced eye could see Mafia fingerprints all over the scene.

Ana’s particular situation had meant that she was a US-bound member of SHIELD. Unable to safely leave the country due to the threat of extradition on her darling Edwin’s head, and the lingering threat to her person from certain at-large members of the Nazi regime. A threat which loomed large, even now, decades after the official ending of hostilities in the truly awful war that had claimed first her community, then her family, and very nearly her life.

Ana was an old hand at reading the gang situation in New York. It wasn’t much different to successfully keeping ahead of the Nazis in Budapest, by organising the completely disparate little pockets of resistance into something approaching a guerrilla force. If Ana’s focus had actually been the numerous gangs in the city they likely wouldn’t know what hit them.

No, in the aftermath of the genocide that Hitler’s Third Reich had wrought Ana had no ties or loyalties or links to any group of people, outside of the tiny family she’d built for herself. Instead of helping her people with situations on both sides of the law, Ana’s energy went towards protecting SHIELD these days, the work vital. Keeping the secret organisation that was so central to the continued safety of her people was deathly important. Ana guarded SHIELD fiercely; saw off attempts to place constraints such as oversight and transparency on the secretive group, like the oversight that had crippled the FBI, the CIA and even the shadowy NSA – because if SHIELD fell, then the efforts to stop atrocities such as those committed in the name of Hitler, Goebbels and the likes of von Strucker would be allowed to rise again.

No, never again.
Now the organisation that she’d protected so fiercely was turning its focus towards protecting her family, what little there was of it. To Ana’s sorrow, for all of her years of dedicated service she could see that she had failed. The organisation that she’d fought tooth and nail to keep in the shadows unable to pierce them itself. Incapable of shifting the veil of darkness that cloaked their darling Tony from them.

It was long past time to bring out a few of the techniques she’d relied upon back home, the very ruthlessness that made her progression through SHIELD’s ranks a too slow game. Ana eyed up her fellow agent carefully. For all that Ana could see Peggy’s formidable temper slowly rising to a boil, could see all of the signs of it, from the tightening of her fellow agent’s jaw, to the haughty tilt of her chin and most tellingly of all the fire burning in her dark eyes, she could also see straight through Peggy’s carefully constructed façade to the panicking godmother underneath it all. Could see how close Peggy was to doing something career ruining, not out of frustration but out of the kind of fear that had dominated Ana’s life those final few months in Budapest.

Ana was grateful that the police hadn’t shown, whilst she was perfectly capable of handling the results of Peggy’s likely explosion, she’d much prefer not to have to cover up that too familiar kind of mess at all. It meant fewer steps were needed to evade attention. And a lower possibility that she’d have to do some clean-up of her own once this was all over.

Still keeping a careful eye on Peggy, Ana ran her own inspection of the scene. It bore all of the hallmarks of the Martinelli branch of the Brooklyn Mafia – or at least the handling of the clean-up did. The bare minimum of removal of evidence had taken place here, there were no bodies, no weaponry and everything had been wiped down with bleach to remove fingerprints. Ana could clearly see that there’d been no effort taken to cover up what had happened here, the bullet-scars in the walls, floor and ceiling were fresh, the dusting of cracked plaster and concrete not the only signs that the events here were recent. Whilst the blood pools had been treated with bleach so that they wouldn’t coagulate and start stinking, no effort had been taken to remove them. The bleach merely thrown down in an attempt at good hygiene, or manners.

Ana took it all in and smiled grimly to herself. She could tell that Maria’s boys had been here. Oh, she gamely feigned obliviousness, acting like the completely ignorant Howard, her darling Edwin, and even fierce clever Peggy aping their all too real lack of knowledge. But Ana could tell, had already suspected, Maria’s boys were looking. After all they both hailed from similar worlds, albeit at very different levels. Ana could recognise a fellow player when she saw one.

Ana eyed the insulting cupboard her darling boy had been kept in, feeling a fresh sense of hope awakening in her, and even a smidgen of pride at the speed with which they’d managed to track down the problem - from the state of the scene they’d gotten damned close too.
But no – if Tony had been recovered he’d already be clutched tightly in Maria’s arms by now. This had played out before, and Maria had often been the one to recover the boy, through means that Ana politely didn’t enquire about, her sense of professional courtesy not the only reason she stayed her hand.

No Maria likely knew who’d taken Tony by now, but recovery hadn’t been an option.

Ana’s blue eyes glinted with cold fury as she eyed the appalling little broom closet her darling boy had been stuffed into. She hoped whoever Maria’s boys had come across had suffered, knowing full-well that the ever efficient Martinelli clan would catch their men.

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Whilst he still had no idea what in the everlasting fuck was going on. Not-Pietro seemed like a, well, not a good kid. But his heart was in the right place. They’d continued northwards, Tony still discomforted by the horribly familiar signs of destruction hanging over New York. It reminded him strongly of those long months in the aftermath of Thanos’ invasion, and the catastrophe that the Black Order had wrought. There were differences though, obvious signs that the state the park was in was man made, rather than caused by something truly awful. Belvedere Castle was a graffiti covered mess, every surface that could be painted had been. The important site of meteorological observatory was boarded up, even from ground level Tony could tell that the equipment on the roof was damaged. Urgh. Tony was beginning to understand the older generation’s disdain for punks if this was the sort of crap they got up to. The Great Lawn was even more of a dust bowl than Sheep Meadow had been, but at least the lake still had water in it, unlike The Pond or Bethesda Fountain. Tony was dreading the sight of the huge Reservoir further north.

Still they were in the centre of the park now, Tony turned and prepared himself,

“Listen, kid…”

The pair had reached the great lawn. Sure enough, up close the turf was yellow and dead. Though Tony conceded that in this weather that wasn’t actually all that surprising.

“Kid! Hark at thee young bratling, hark at thee.” Not-Pietro chucked to himself, and ruffled Tony’s hair with horrible inexorability, before muttering to himself, “Kid, good one. I’m 19, turning twenty in November. How old are you?”
Tony’s response was sullen.

“Seven.”

Fuck. Ben would have Tony’s hide if he found out that it only took a tiny bit of stress to send him tumbling back into his old speaking patterns. Especially to someone so… so potentially important.

“So… Pete?”

“Peter.”

“Peter. Um… What do you do for fun around here?”

“Well…”

The unholy fire that lit up his eyes should have clued Tony in, it really should have. In a blur of motion that would have made even Pietro jealous Not-Pietro vanished and reappeared before Tony could begin to panic about the fact that he was all alone, in New York, in the midst of a prolonged city-wide blackout, having just run for his life from a botched kidnapping that had gone horribly wrong, for the kidnappers at least. Not-Pietro reappeared in a gush of air with a triumphant grin stretched across his too young face.

With great ceremony, the great overgrown boy-child leant down and affixed something to Tony’s shirt. Tony bent his head over and read, upside down,

“I am not Paul Avery.”

Tony shot Wrong-Peter a puzzled glance, even though he’d been a kid at the time, even Tony knew this little bit of recent-history,

“You do know that Son of Sam has nothing to do with that Zodiac guy, right?”

“Sure he doesn’t… That’s just what they want you to think.”
Not-Pietro gave Tony what he clearly thought was a sly knowledgeable look, in reality it made him look constipated,

“Anyway, better safe than sorry.”

Tony gave Not-Pietro a scathing glance in response, but the expression seemed to sail right over the boy’s head. No, not sail over. Tony recognised that too careful water off a duck’s back expression, and consciously dialled down the distrust. Tony hated that he recognised that practiced devil-may-care attitude, it mirrored his own behaviour to a tee.

Tony tried to gently shake off the kid,

“Well, thanks for walking with me. I know my way from here.”

“No. No way. No chance. If my mom knew I’d left Wandy all alone when she was your age she’d have killed me! Nope I’m not leaving you alone kiddo.”

“Look do you want to be there when I get back to my rents?”

Wrong-Pietro’s face was genuinely confused,

“Rents?”

Shit. Not again. Godammit!

“Pa-rents.”

Tony enunciated the word exaggeratedly. Carefully acting as if he thought Peter was stupid for not getting the slang, whilst he was internally berating himself for yet another slip-up.

“Hah! I knew it! What did you run away in the blackout?”
Peter sounded far too gleeful.

“Yeah. Something like that…” Tony grumbled, rubbing at the back of his neck.

Peter stared down at Tony, something in his expression telling Tony that he didn’t buy that the situation was that simple for an instant. After a long uncomfortable moment Peter’s face lit-up.

“I know!” the kid beamed.

“…What?” Tony’s tone was reluctant.

“I’ll stick with you until the lights come back on. How’s about that?”

“What?” This time Tony was the one who was confused, how would that make a difference?

“That way I’ll stick with you until you get a cab back home, right?” Peter was clearly warming to his own plan as he said it out loud, tone of his voice and the speed of his ramble picking up. “Yeah. So, I’ll keep you out of trouble. And then make sure you’re in safely on the way home, but I won’t have to, you know, meet your …rents.”

The intonation on the last word made it quite just clear why Peter thought Tony was out here. Though Tony supposed that the bulky bandages wrapped around his palm, and the ugly brown bruising from his sparring sessions had only added to the 2+2= 5 conclusion.

Tony stared up at Not-Pietro in bafflement, he genuinely wasn’t sure how that ‘plan’ of his passed as logic in the teen’s head. But it would buy him time to try and work out just who the hell Peter was. Tony didn’t think he was a Hydra goon, the kid seemed too… Normal for that. Oh he was fragile in ways that Tony recognised all too well, Tony could see that clear as day, but it was the usual teenaged fucked-upness, not the assassin special that Tony had somehow gotten far too familiar with in his years hanging out with the Avengers.

All Tony wanted to do was get back to the penthouse and run into Javis’s or Ana’s or Peggy or hell even Maria’s arms. And yet…
"Yeah, sure. What the hell, why not?"

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Maria glared at Howard as he carelessly dismissed not just her own, but Peggy’s and Ana’s talents too. It was one thing to be wilfully ignorant of the fact that Maria was technically a Martinelli and therefore not to be trifled with (she kept her links to Italy relatively quiet despite the fact that she conversed with Tony in the language), but quite another to dismiss two seasoned Agents of SHIELD the organisation that he’d help found from the ashes of the SSR.

Maria shared an exasperated look with Ana, their temperaments similar in more ways than either of them cared to acknowledge. Maria was fuming to herself that the SHIELD agents had caught up to Giro’s boys so quickly, cutting off several of their routes of earning revenge on the pelacanyes who’d taken her bambino. Quickly as she was able Maria warned Giro to pull his men out of Dumbo, internally cursing all the while.

However, whilst the SHIELD agents’ efficiency had frustrated and infuriated her, Howard’s all too casual condescension was worse. Maria hated this side of her husband, how it turned the gentle man she loved into an obstructionist bore with all the finesse of a cul d’olla, saw the damage that shone in his eyes as a painful mirror of her own.

Maria bit her tongue until the idiocy was over, and tried to work out just where her son could be, if, as they all suspected, he’d gotten away of his own volition. She’d have Martinellis combing the streets of Manhattan, her bambino was a clever boy – he’d likely be trying to make his way back to the penthouse. From the look on her face Ana was sharing the same thoughts she was, the other woman always had been too astute for comfort.

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Tony glared at the great expanse of the reservoir, to Tony’s relief the great expanse of water was still there, but the area surrounding the water was noticeably covered in litter. The mismatched pair of seven-year-old boy and young-adult had slowly made their way around the great lake, still meandering vaguely north as they argued about just what they were going to do next. Tony completely unwilling to reveal just who he was to this strange version of a person he’d never learnt to trust.

“I know! Let’s go to Coney! I want a corn dog and I promised Wanda some cotton candy if she didn’t tell Mom I’d gone out...”
“Pi-Peter, how are we going to get to Coney? It’s a blackout. Nothings running. The subway is dead.”

Not-Pietro grinned down at him with an all too familiar shit-eating-grin. It was a look Tony was intimately familiar with, he’d often worn it himself. Stepping forward, that nervous jittery energy still overtly thrumming through him Not-Pietro, *Peter*, slowly held out his arms.

“What? You want us to hug our way there?”

“No I need to brace you, so you don’t get whiplash.”

Tony shot Not-Pietro a look, surely not, this really wasn’t a coincidence, was it?

“And why would I be at risk at getting whiplash. No. Don’t tell me, you can run really really fast. And not taking into account the tolerances of the average human when it comes to g-forces, you think it’ll be easy to -”

In hindsight Tony should have realised that he was lucky that Peter had let him rant at him for as long as he had. One moment Tony had been mid-sentence. The next the all too familiar sensation of a high-g manoeuvre kicked in, and Tony reflexively started clenching numerous large muscle groups, the response long-since ingrained after years of high-g piloting manoeuvres, instinctive.

A blink later – and with running eyes that were trying to overcompensate for their sudden dryness Tony and Peter were stood outside the main gates to Coney’s famous, and quaintly named, Deno’s Wonder Wheel Amusement Park. The Wonder Wheel loomed large over them, still and silent in the continuing power outage. Coney’s genteel run-down charm reassuringly familiar in this strange 70s-era New York.

Somehow Coney felt solid and real when the graffiti, lack of familiar signage and street furniture everywhere else had turned his hometown into an alien landscape worse than the post-Chitauri destruction, and Thanos’ later more catastrophic invasion had ever been. Tony turned around and shot Not-Pietro a look to cover up the sudden hot nostalgia blooming in his chest, threatening tears that had nothing to do with the dryness Tony was still blinking out of his eyes.

“A little warning next time? I mean I get it, really, I do. You’re the fastest guy in the room – everyone else is slow. Literally in your case. But still. At least let me actually pull on these horrible
goggles next time, use them like the pair you’ve got to protect your eyes.”

In a flash, Peter was proffering the most hideous, spangly pink swimming goggles Tony had ever seen.

“Um. No. Those are even worse. How did you even find anything that awful? Never mind. Look let’s just go to Nathan’s and get those corn dogs you’ve been talking about, okay?”

Peter shot Tony another shit-eating grin. It was really weird being on the receiving end of those.

Fortunately, a handful of the people running Coney did have their own generators. Whilst there wasn’t enough fuel to keep any of the big rides open, the famous Nathan’s was one of the handful of eating establishments still doing trade – as were the non-powered, low-tech attractions in the horribly dilapidated remains of Steeplechase Park. Otherwise the area was eerily still and quiet. The majority of tourists staying away due to the lingering chaos of New York that day. For all that Coney was down on the coast Tony could swear that he was getting the occasional whiff of smoke on the wind.

Still, Peter was right. Coney had been a wonderful idea. Ignoring the lingering guilt that the Jarvises still didn’t have a clue where he was Tony settled in to observe his unexpected companion. Munching on a Coney Island Dog – the dense meaty chili topping making the process less than dignified, Tony watched with amusement as Peter swindled prizes out of the numerous little stalls that made up the tiny little subsection of Astroland that was still open.

Tony could tell that Peter was using his powers to cheat on the ring toss, and on the duck catch, and the shooting, and even the tiny mechanical ‘horse race’ but somehow given that the boy only chose the very worst of the available prizes – the practice somehow a point of perverse pride to the boy. Well, Tony found it amusing, and he could tell that the stall’s owners felt similarly if the familiar air with which they all greeted the silver bedecked teen with was anything to go by.

Peter reminded Tony of, well, he hated to admit this, but a younger version of himself. It wasn’t anything to do with the setting. More Peter’s familiar ease in a world that was usually reserved for adults, and the condescending tolerance of his presence in areas that ordinarily no outsider would have been permitted to see. To use yet another anachronism, though admittedly one that at least wouldn’t have people wondering quite literally what the hell he meant – Tony thought that the kid had moxie. (Damn Cap and his stupid 40s slang.)

The duo spent hours that hot summer’s day meandering around the sites to be seen in Coney, Tony completely oblivious to Peter’s attempts to talk, caught in a haze of sad fond nostalgia. Tony had been surprised that Astroland was still apparently operating, too used to the old resignation that the
place was long gone in his era, though of course most of the site was temporarily shut due to the power outage. Tony had fond memories of some of the rides there, Jarvis’ patient visage watching from the safety of the ground as Tony obsessively rode on the Cyclone, Astroland’s space-aged theme too much to resist for a kid growing up in the era that had birthed the numerous Apollo missions.

The pair meandered through Deno’s Wonder Wheel park next, the large red letters of the eponymous wheel still reassuringly familiar. Tony stared sadly at the dead bumper-cars, the stillness of this section of Coney falsely giving the impression that the place was permanently shut – despite knowing that the closure was temporary. Tony smiled sadly at the memory of squealing as he, Ana and Jarvis engaged in an all-out three-way war in the little cars had him wishing that the couple were with him.

As they passed it Tony realised that Steeplechase Park was in a sorry state, remembering Trump’s hand in Coney’s fortunes Tony stared around at the decay with a jaded eye. The old wooden Thunderbolt ride was still standing proudly, though Bobs – or the Tornado had clearly seen better days. The wooden structure was blackened and crumbling.

Eventually Peter got bored of the aimless sightseeing, and guided them back towards the small selection of Steeplechase stalls advertising their own games of skill. As the mismatched pair wandered down the boardwalk back towards the smaller pop-up stalls that were still open Tony had to admit to himself that Peter had had a decent plan, though perhaps his own had been less than well thought through. Tony had attempted to subtly enquire about government experiments, but if there was a way to naturally bring up the topic of, ‘Hey, by the way? Did you volunteer to be part of some evil science experiment?’ Tony had yet to think of it. Tony’s attempts to skirt around the issue had only earned him a truly confused look from the young man, and Tony just couldn’t see the borderline kleptomaniac going for that kind of deal.

Tony surprised both of them with his marksmanship when he half-heartedly had a go on the duck shooting game. Tony scored a flawless run, giving him the right to any prize from the mechanical stall. Tony stared around in alarm at the selection of oversized plushy animals and plastic tourist tat, he hadn’t been expecting a prize at all. However, both Peter and the flat-capped stall owner were staring at him in awe, Tony grudgingly supposed that all of that arms training that automatically came as a side-effect of being a weapons designer had some uses after all. Eventually, after several long minutes staring awkwardly around at the selection in the stall, Tony spotted a pair of goggles that, whilst they were technically in the prize section – probably weren’t intended as a prize.

Tony pointed with a finger,

“Those.”
“Those?”

The stall-owner’s Brooklyn accent was puzzled as he turned to try and work out what Tony had been gesturing at, he turned back towards Tony,

“The pink bear?”

“What? No! The cap gun!”

“Huh? Oh! That thing. Uh…”

The reluctance was clear on every line of the guy’s face, but Peter’s expectant grin made it obvious that no was not an acceptable answer. Tony accepted the already loaded toy with no little glee, suddenly nostalgic for a childhood he barely remembered – his training in real firearms becoming a necessity all too early.

Tony shot a few of the red plastic caps out of the mock-revolver, and grinned stupidly as Not-Pietro-no, no he was Peter. Peter staggered back, feigning injury. Tony immediately lost his taste for the toy, and hastily underarm threw the thing in N-Peter’s direction. Peter caught it with a grin, that quickly fell as the boy realised something had happened, but apart from quietly pocketing the toy in one of his many pockets the teenager did nothing to acknowledge it. Tony found himself resentfully grateful for that.

In the end, it was Tony’s painfully intrusive Second Sight that had made him trust the teen enough to keep following him, all the way to his home in another state. Under the strange light of this unearthly vision of his, Tony saw clear as anything a flash of a peacock’s colourful tail and the shadow of an elephant. The animal symbolism surprised Tony, but he figured it was linked to whatever drug was still coursing through his system. Everything had gone animal kingdom on him since then. For all that Tony had read extensively about symbolic animals in his hunt for clarity regarding his flashes of whatever this was, Tony hadn’t actually encountered any animals – well until now. The peacock was an obvious fit for arrogance, the elephant, trustworthiness – but it was the third less obvious, to anyone else, symbol that sold Tony. Blazing from the centre of Peter’s forehead was the familiar blue-white upside-down triangle of the arc reactor, the atomic structure of Starkium floating in the air around the boy.

The mismatched pair eventually returned back to the end of Coney that held Nathan’s and the promise of food as the sun began to set. Tony had been mistaken earlier, the tiny area surrounding Nathan’s was a small oasis of power – the eateries a tiny pocket of business-as-usual in this bizarre New York that was still suffering from the blackout.
Peter again stuffed his face full of an inordinate number of corn dogs, Tony opting for a cheeseburger this time in a vague attempt to not turn into a hot dog. Though he also had a huge portion of chilli cheese fries – the smell of the slightly clovey chilli too tempting to resist.

Once they’d stuffed down their meals Peter casually bought the largest stick of cotton candy Tony had seen in quite some time and gestured casually. The sun was going down, the power still wasn’t back on – it was time to go. Maybe he’d be able to dig out more about Not-Pietro at his place, wherever that turned out to be.

Tony hesitantly pulled on the thick-lensed goggles and adjusted the bezel at the bridge of the nose until the lenses at least-sort-of rested over the correct areas, Tony’s child-sized head making the adult-sized things awkward – at least they were sturdy enough, and started clenching muscles in preparation (Tony hadn’t been mocking Hawkass when he’d asked him to do so all those years ago, despite what the archer must have thought)

This time Tony was aware of the rush of high speed travel, the world was an incomprehensible blur. Tony could feel the skin on his face shifting, and the heavy leaden weight of his limbs, even his genitals felt as though they weighed several kilos under the punishing acceleration. But the discomfort was secondary, Tony could feel blackness creeping up on his vision, as the high velocity acceleration started pushing the blood out of his brain into his extremities despite his efforts to use his muscles to keep it flowing.

It felt as though an age had passed, the torturous seconds seeming to stretch to eternity. Then as soon as the sensation of an elephant dancing on his chest had begun it ended, Tony staggered with the sudden lack of support and extreme deceleration. Trying desperately not to be sick he clutched at his knees and peered up at the suburban house that had suddenly appeared in front of him.

“Uh…. You okay there, little Tones?”

“Wha-?”

A paper towel was thrust at his face – Tony automatically grabbed it,

“What’s this for?”

“You’ve got a nosebleed.”
“Oh.” Tony sniffed the blood up as he wiped his face clean, pulling up the suddenly clammy goggles in the process. “Yeah it’s fine, nothing unexpected – I mean us vanilla humans aren’t meant for prolonged high-g you know?”

Peter shot Tony a look, as if he hadn’t thought of that before.

“Uh… Yeah. Right. Well, welcome to mi casa. Mom’s out so it’s just me and Wanda at home.”

Tony felt all of the blood rush out of his face, and it wasn’t due to the lingering effects of acceleration.

“W-Wanda?”

Damn. Wrong-Pietro had mentioned her before, but he’d stupidly thought she’d be out, taking the opportunity like Peter had. Tony gulped down the sudden nervousness and hoped it hadn’t shown on his face, Peter seemed oblivious as he replied,

“Yeah my Lil’sis. She’s only 12 but… Hey what am I going on about, how old even are you? Like four?”

Not-Pietro casually walked up to the little dark brown wooden door and pulling out a house key unlocked it. Tony found the juxtaposition utterly surreal. Quicksilver, Hydra assassin living a boring life in suburban America. Only he wasn’t, was he? This version of the kid was, well, apart from the speed thing (and the kleptomania), disturbingly normal.

“Hey Wandy I’m home – Mom’s not back yet is she?”

A small blur of pink barrelled into No-Peter’s legs briefly hugging the teen at the knees, if Tony didn’t know better he’d have guessed she had super speed too.

“Hey Peter. Did you bring back the cotton candy?”
“Yuhuh.” Producing an impossibly large stick of the sugary confection Peter passed over the pink cloud of sugar. Wanda, and it had to be Wanda, immediately grabbed it, and took a huge bite, before turning her attention to Tony.

“Who’s this Petey?”

The girl’s gaze was curious, but there was no malice there. Nevertheless, Tony felt himself take a step back, already tensed for any sign of red.

“Why’s his head all surrounded by that cloud?”

“Wha-?”

Tony properly panicked in that moment, backing towards the door.

“Wanda? What cloud?”

“There! Can’t you see it? It’s so thick.”

With that the young girl casually reached out a hand and made a grabbing gesture. Tony felt a horrible sucking sensation, but he couldn’t have told you where it was coming from – just that it existed, it was horrible, and that he wanted it to stop.

Tony pressed himself against the front door as the feeling of something being pulled out that didn’t want to leave continued, and kept on continuing, the sickening sensation drawn out, oily and cloying as if even the residue of this thing was pure unadulterated slime. Tony felt himself slowly sliding to the floor with a groan as finally, finally the flow of whatever that absolute horror was slowed to a trickle. With it, it had taken all of his already waning strength.

“Wanda! Wanda what did you do???”

Peter’s voice was high and panicked,
“I told you no powers!”

Wanda’s tone was completely guileless, her explanation simple,

“But look I fixed him – it was making him sick.”

Wanda held up her hands as if for inspection, hovering inside a bright pinkish neon-red glow was a cloud of horribly familiar blood red. The cloud was swirling around, almost angrily in its violence, clearly seeking an escape from the cage in which it found itself.

“No…”

Tony tried to interrupt, but his mouth was dry as the deserts in Afghanistan – he swallowed and tried to build up some moisture.

“See! Wanda that is not ok. You don’t get to do that to people. You know that using your Probabilities on people isn’t fair. Wand-”

Tony interrupted, and was surprised with himself when, “No! It’s – it’s okay,” popped out instead of the biting reproach he’d been intending.

Tony’s voice was still damnably quiet, if Wa- no if The Witch had seen him like this, she wouldn’t have hesitated to go in for the kill. Her irrational, if all too understandable, hatred of him not allowing her to leave a situation like this well enough alone. This kid though? Okay sure she’d immediately gone rummaging, but… Well Tony could see what she’d done. She wasn’t trying to hide it. And she’d done it to help him. Tony could feel it already.

As if triggered by the sudden lack of spiritual weight Tony’s third eye triggered for the second time that day. Wanda downright glowed, at her forehead the upside down blue triangle that Tony inexorably associated with safety beamed out brighter than the ethereal glow that surrounded the vision of the goddess Venus before him. The tree of life sheltered her, and despite the initial jolt of panic when he spotted the glowing image, Tony eventually recognised that the symbol scrawled across her belly as the Buddhist Swastika associated with well-being, as opposed to the Nazi Hakenkreuz with it’s awful links to genocide and hate. Stretching out behind her was a black shadow, a circle of eight arrows. Tony had no idea why, didn’t recognise the image, but that above all else reassured him.
Peter was staring down at Tony worriedly, all the while shooting his little sister a quelling look. Tony shook himself back into reality when he realised that the other two people in the room had noticed him staring and bulldozed onwards,

“I – I mean look at it Peter, does that mess look like it was supposed to be inside my head?”

“Er… No. No, it looks horrible. What is it?”

Wanda shot Tony a grateful look, it was clear that for all of Peter’s casual approach to other people’s property that the siblings had had this argument before. And frankly, ordinarily Tony would be firmly on Peter’s side here – having witnessed first-hand the sort of mess that was left behind when people tried to ‘help’ others in a ham-fisted manner without asking first. But… Well the red Lovecraftian lightshow *still* playing out in the middle of the room in surreal fashion really put any of the usual arguments he’d have made to bed.

“Er… Are you okay kid?”

Wanda was peering down at him worriedly, and wasn’t that a kicker she was *twelve* and she was calling *him* kid. And she was towering over him. Oh wait…

“Do you have any idea what it is? It feels… Nasty.”

“Um…”

Tony’s eyes flickered around the little overly brown living room as he tried to buy himself some time to think. Tony tried to avoid looking at the cloying wisp of red that was still thrashing about inside the clean bright glow of Wanda’s power, but found that it was inexorably drawing his gaze. The cloud somehow insinuated tentacles and dimensions that couldn’t possibly be there. As if reading his mind (and that thought made him shudder) Wanda broke the silence with an awkward,

“Erm… What do you want me to do with it?”

“Huh?”
The idea that he’d have a choice in the matter was so alien that Tony was stunned into silence.

Peter was still shooting his little sister death glares, which Tony found both adorable and comforting. Much as the kid’s own moral compass wasn’t anything to write home about, the very fact that he was trying to keep his sister on the right track was a balm in this moment. Licking still dry lips in a vain attempt to make his voice louder Tony dared voice the question,

“Wha- What do you mean?”

“Well? I can’t let it go, can I? It’ll get straight back into trying to twist your head up in a knot.”

“What?! What was it doing?”

“Couldn’t you feel it?”

“Uh…”

Tony shot her an incredulous look, just as Peter butted in,

“No Wanda – most of us can’t see those glows you’re always going on about. We don’t all have magical ‘probability powers’ like you do.”

Peter’s mocking emphasis on the phrase was another source of reassuring normality, the two siblings silently bickering in gestures and facial expressions, as Tony watched in amusement. In a reassuringly adolescent move Wanda rolled her clear blue eyes, like Peter’s so different to the icy grey-blue pair that Tony knew so well.

“They’re *auras* Petey. Auras.”

Wanda pointedly ignored Peter’s not-so-quiet mutter about tarot bullshit and continued gamely,

“And… Well. Uh Tony’s is all white like this really bright white, but kinda blue? With these blotchy orange and blue bits – and there’s these pretty green flashes… It’s like the… the… Oh you know we
saw that documentary about the North Pole last week! The Aura Bore-alice?”

Tony quietly corrected her mangling of the name,

“Aurora Borealis.”

“Uh Wanda. You sound crazy. Now don’t get me wrong I believe you. But we can’t see it. And you should ask first. You know better than that. What made you grab it, that cloud thing?”

Peter gestured at the writhing blood-red mist still held suspended in the middle of the room. As if aware of the inspection the cloud stilled for a moment, before with a sense of dripping slime, suddenly redoubling its efforts to break free of the forces holding it in place. Peter seemed to remember the other reason for the confrontation, and gently helped Tony to his feet shooing him towards the sofa as he did so.

“It was... It’s just it was wrapped all around his head. Like those cartoons where the cloud is following you? Only it wasn’t above him, it was like it was choking him. I used a probability hex to convince it that it really should be in the middle of the room not all up in his head like that.”

Wanda’s hand gestures were getting more and more expansive as she tried to explain herself to an obviously blank-faced audience. Peter handed Tony a glass of water, surprising Tony into completely forgetting his ‘thing’ about being handed stuff in the sheer casualness of the brotherly gesture. Tony automatically took a large gulp, the welcome wetness finally allowing him to gather his bearings.

“Uh thanks. Both of you.”

Wanda shot Tony a look of pleased surprise,

“You’re welcome.”

“Like big bro there I question your bedside manner Doc Banzai, but well I already feel so much better.”
“See!”

Wanda’s triumphant exclamation was so little-kid that Tony cracked up laughing. The moment of hilarity passed, but Tony found he couldn’t stop giggling, the sheer relief as the fact that yet another weight he hadn’t even known he’d been carrying around was gone made itself known. Well excuse him for feeling a bit happy.

Peter was shooting his little sister another look,

“Are you sure that red thing wasn’t supposed to be there? I mean I know I know – it looks evil, but look at him.” Peter gestured expansively towards Tony helplessly giggling on the couch, “That ain’t normal.”

The gesture didn’t help, the sheer normality of it after the past 24 hours filled with running for his life and fire and kidnapping setting him off again.

“Wanda… What did you do?”

“No!” Tony managed to gasp out between giggles, “Hee! I’m – hee- okay!”

Wanda’s amused look turned panicked as Tony continued laughing, sliding helplessly onto the floor, dubiously she asked,

“I can give it back if you want?”

Wanda’s tone of voice betrayed just how she felt about that course of action.

“No! Are you joking!?“

Peter answered before Tony had a chance to open his mouth, incredulity clear in every line of his vibrating body.

“Well I can’t just let it loose!”
Tony cut off the argument at the pass by asking matter-of-factly,

“Why not?”

“Well… Just look at it!”

Again, the preteen was reassuringly acting her age, eye-roll and huff making it clear that she thought Tony was an idiot for even contemplating, “It’s… It’s mal-mali-malickou-malev-evil.”

To be fair Tony knew exactly where she was coming from, the dark roiling red cloud was viciously battering against the somehow cleaner scarlet glow of Wanda’s power.

“It won’t just dissipate. I can’t destroy it.”

“Huh? Wh-”

“What do you think I’ve been doing all this time?” Another eye roll, and then in a muttered undertone, “When I could be eating my candyfloss…” before in a normal tone of voice, “I’ve been trying! But even with my probability hexes I can’t get the percentages down so that it doesn’t exist. Every time I think I’ve got it the stupid thing springs back again, and it’s getting stronger.”

The last, alarming fact was said as an afterthought. The typical teenaged sense of priority almost startling another laugh out of him. Instead Tony settled for,

“Oh.”

Tony didn’t know what to say to that rant.

“And if I let it go it’ll just go straight for someone else.” A pause, “Probably back to you actually.”

Alarmingly the scarlet glow faded slightly, and the dark red cloud of malevolence shot straight
towards Tony, before slamming into the renewed barrier.

“See!”

“Wanda!”

Peter’s shocked voice reflected how Tony felt about the matter, though Tony suspected from the sensation of the blood rushing out of his face that his own face spoke for him.

“Sorry.”

To her credit Wanda genuinely looked contrite, the apology on her face more genuine than anything he’d seen from the Scarlet Witch back home.

“I know I’ll try and clean it and then give it back!”

“Wandy…”

“It’ll be easy!”

“Wanda…”

“Alright alright. It should be easy. I’ll just use my probability powers, you know Madam Harkness has been teaching me how Pietro.”

“Tony?”

“Huh?”

Tony was still reeling at the very idea of Peter of all people being a semi-responsible big brother. Nothing about the cheeky teen had given him the impression that he could be serious, and then
Tony’d sat there in the peanut gallery gawping as he watched it happen.

“Oh. Well it’s worth a shot, isn’t it? If you think you can do it Wanda? I mean it won’t be too much, will it?”

Wanda huffed at him,

“You sound just like Petey, of course it won’t!”

With that Wanda reached out a hand, the most Wanda-esque gesture he’d seen from the teen, making Tony instinctively take a step-back. However, even then Tony noticed that her movements were more confident, more controlled, assertive—even where Wanda’s had always been sinuous and covert with always a dash of being one step away from an explosion.

The clean red glow around the roiling blood red mist intensified for a moment, the sheer brightness making the colour look neon pink rather than red as the light slowly edged closer to white. Tony slitted his eyes against the harsh brightness, determined to watch this however it played out. Tony could feel Peter vibrating nervously beside him, the usually affable boy – young man, Tony couldn’t believe that the kid was nearly 20 – tense and stiff.

Beyond the writhing mass of conflicting power Wanda stood determinedly, her stance reminding Tony more of Gandalf, or Stephen than the assassiny Wanda of old. Sweat beaded on Wanda’s forehead, her huge reddish-brown hair beginning to poof out with the power she was emitting, the air going staticky and hot – a taste of tin strong in the haze.

Slowly, and with the blood red cloud roiling angrily against the now bright pink glow that surrounded it, the darkness began to leach out of the mass. The red faded like ink leaching from a badly dyed shirt, dark red fading to the bright scarlet of Wanda’s power, then fading again to a dusky pink that highlighted how very pure the colour of Wanda’s powers were, before finally shimmering into the familiar yellow glow of the mind stone. Above it the concentrated little cloud of nearly black malevolent red seemed to dissolve away, as if without the golden-yellow glow to sustain it, it couldn’t exist.

Huh.

It wasn’t the mind stone. The familiar golden gleam in the air not resolving into anything solid. But it was definitely the same pure golden colour that Vision had been able to summon up.
“Shall I give it back?”

Wanda’s voice was breathy. The glow wasn’t visibly struggling anymore, but now that Tony understood without any doubt just where the power had come from, Tony had to admit he was impressed. Infinity Stones were not objects to take lightly, even when it was only the merest fraction of their power, they were nigh-on uncontrollable.

“I mean I could let it go. But I still don’t know what’d happen if I did.”

The reassuringly unfamiliar glow of this Wanda’s power brightened again around the glowing golden ball of light,

“Oh right. Um…” Tony caught himself looking up at Peter for reassurance, but the kid looked just as lost as he did, “Okay?”

Tony’s voice rose unwillingly at the end of his response, the hated squeak making itself known again.

“Cool. Um. I mean go for it.”

Wanda was clearly exerting far less control now, her powers back to the muted pure scarlet glow. With an almost casual gesture Wanda pushed the yellow-white glow towards Tony, watching with almost proud accomplishment as the glow made its way back ‘home’. As soon as Wanda’s powers let the ball of light out of their tight grasp the glow turned, as if scenting the air, before rushing towards him.

Just as it looked like the energy was going to leap back into him it seemed to pause. Tony got the distinct impression that it was asking permission. Huh. He looked around, wondering what the other’s thought of all of this, and realised with a start that time had gone still and strange, the weird blue tinge in the air that spoke of time dilation twisting his surroundings. Damn.

Tony gulped and eyed the… hesitant looking ball of energy, the sense of questioning came again. Ben’s decree that Tony should never agree to anything even vaguely magical without understanding all of the angles rose out of his mind. The memory looming guiltily out of Tony’s subconscious like an iceberg. Damn damn damn. Tony glanced again toward the frozen Wanda and Wrong-Pietro, there was no help to be had from them. The traitors.
Gulping, Tony came to his decision. Under Wanda’s influence he’d been living with this thing for years, and it hadn’t been benign. Now – well, unless it was all a trick, and it could be, but Tony couldn’t feel any malice off the glowing ball of energy. If anything with the way it was bouncing around, it reminded Tony of an enthusiastic puppy. Hesitantly, and with a certain amount of screwing up his face in preparation of pain – Tony tried to convey that he accepted the thing. Disturbing as the notion was.

The light seemed to envelop Tony’s whole world for a long moment, a warm suffusion of energy, not unlike the long-missed glow of Extremis’ tempered power, filling Tony’s perception for a long wonderful eternity.

The blue leached out of the world, sound and colour returned.

Tony found it disturbing how he suddenly felt ‘normal’ again – the near constant roiling of his darker thoughts hadn’t returned, thank gods, but the near hysterical lightness was gone. The sense of weight settling comfortably before vanishing. For all that Tony couldn’t really say where that weight had gone, since it wasn’t a physical sensation.

“Hah! I saw that!”

“Whu-?”

Tony turned to Peter in stunned questioning, still a little out of it.

“You glowed for a moment there Tones. All rainbows like the Aurora, just like Wanda said.”

“Oh.”

After the incident in the living room the trio settled in for the night – Wanda huffing that Peter had only gotten her cotton candy, and no dinner. Wanda ended up cooking up a batch of box-made mac and cheese, sharing it around when, unexpectedly in Tony’s case, both boys discovered that they too were hungry.
Tony was surprised when Peter flicked on the news on the boxy TV, and it revealed that the house was in St Louis. Tony couldn’t quite believe that they’d travelled that far that quickly. Despite having experienced the extended period of high-g for himself. The lights were finally back on in New York, but after the evening’s shenanigans they were all too tired to contemplate doing anything about getting back there.

With the ice so thoroughly shattered Tony managed to bring up the question of just where their powers had come from, the response hadn’t been expected, but it probably should have been in light of the information about the Stadium on the White House and the ‘mutant problem’ that he’d found in those textbooks all those months ago.

As far as the siblings were aware they’d both been born that way. They were mutants. As far as they knew they’d always been like this, just as Tony had always been a genius. Huh. And just like Tony they’d spent much of their childhood awkwardly learning how not to make their differences obvious.

Wanda tiredly wished Tony and Peter a “goodnight” before vanishing up into her room.

“Soo… Tony. Mind telling me what you’re on?”

“Huh?”

Tony was puzzled for a long moment before realisation struck,

“I dunno what the hell they gave me.” There was a pause as Tony dredged the unfamiliar word out of the chaotic memory, “They called them Ludes?”

Tony hated how his voice went high(er) and squeaky(ier) as the sentence unintentionally became a question.

To Tony’s surprise Peter’s face lit up in pleased recognition,

“Oh! Disco Biscuits! Sure! My Mom’s got a whole bottle full in the medicine cabinet.”
Looking around as if to make sure Wanda wasn’t there to overhear, Peter leant down and stage whispered dramatically,

“I like smoking them.”

Peter strolled into the bathroom and started rummaging around in the mirrored cupboard above the sink. Grabbing an absolutely huge prescription bottle and opening it, Peter poured what looked like half the bottle out into his palm and shoved it under Tony’s nose. Tony was simultaneously disturbed by and grateful for the show of unreserved trust that Peter was showing him. The fact that the trust was centred around illicit narcotics, and Peter’s assumption that Tony had willingly taken them was another matter. Tony let his mood show in his voice,

“Are you sure about this?”

“Sure they’re harmless, I take them all the time. They’re only sleeping pills. And ‘sides the docs around here give them out like candy, Mom won’t miss them if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Tony carefully pocketed the pills stamped Rorer 714 and grinned nervously up at Peter, he could still feel the drugs coursing around his system, the buzz and laidback lethargy a pleasant break from the usual spin of his thoughts now that Tony had the time to actually pay attention to the unfamiliar relaxed feeling.

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The next morning Tony re-donned the hated purple goggles, after a shared breakfast of toast and butter – the trio of children all too tired after their late evening to bother attempting anything more difficult. (And even then – there was a distinct waft of charcoal in the air.)

Preparing himself again for the high stress of prolonged high-g manoeuvres, Tony accepted Peter’s offered piggy-back with amused grace - Wanda didn’t bother to hide her amusement, snorting loudly at the image the pair made.

“If only I had one of those new Arc Film cameras…”

She’d sighed wistfully, as Peter suddenly vanished.
With a gush of displaced air Peter deposited Tony just out of sight of the doorman to the tower. With the newfound knowledge that Tony was Tony Stark – heir apparent of Stark industries, and as the news had oh-so-helpfully informed them all that morning, missing kidnapped son of Howard, they’d had a slight change of plans. They’d already checked at the Westchester mansion; the place had been eerily deserted. That had left the New York Penthouse – the high-rise itself soon to become Stark Mansion a pompous monstrosity that would be acquired in the 80s when SI business had suddenly boomed. Tony had pretty much abandoned that place in his haste to flee New York in the aftermath of the murder-car – Winter crash. Though he’d still owned the deeds, even when the time came to acquire more modern office space in New York, Tony hadn’t had the heart to do anything to it.

Stark Tower, later Avenger’s Tower had been built on an old bit of SI office-space on what used to be or rather still was the site of the MetLife Building (currently the Pan Am building), just south of Central Park opposite of Grand Central Station. Tony wearily found himself missing those days, dark as they had been with the Avengers as apparently unhappy roommates – if only for the fact that his current journey would already be over. Tony still wasn’t entirely convinced that he hadn’t made a mistake when he’d sold the high-rise but the place had had far too many bad memories tied to it, and like Tony, Pepper had never been the sentimental type. She’d actively encouraged him to get rid of the place and recoup his losses – especially given that SI’s NY headquarters had expanded to both upstate Rochester, and the acquisition of a new ‘floating’ block on Hudson Yards, West Side. New York hadn’t lasted long enough to see that ambitious engineering marvel through to its completion.

Tony caught his breath, the repeated high-g exposure in a body that was not yet used to such abuse dizzying, and knowing that Peter was watching him from the feeling of eyes on his back marched up to the doorman.

Thankfully a familiar face was there to greet him.

Maria rushed out of the building and wrapped Tony in a rib-squeezing hug.

“My bambino!”

“Hey Mom.”

“Don’t hey Mom me young man!”

The rest of the day passed in a blur of questions and evasive answers as Tony struggled to remember that it was easier to obfuscate without being an overt dick about it. Tony was too used to Fury’s, or
rather, SHIELDRA’s, Ross’s, and The World Security Council’s power struggles when it came to these things, so it was difficult to fall back on charm and disarm when he’d gotten so damned used to offense being the best defence.


At the first opportunity Tony delved into his own Mother’s medicine cabinet, and rifled around through the numerous large bottles of pills that were stored away inside. Sure enough, there was a huge jar marked ‘Methaqualone’, in fact there were several tubs worth of the drug.

Rapidly looking for the bottle with the longest expiration date Tony pinched one of the prescription bottles, topping it up with the handful Peter had given to him, and squirreling the whole thing away amongst the electronics ephemera in his already hidden ‘workshop’ in the old disused squash court.

For the next few days the Stark household slipped into an uneasy facsimile of the atmosphere that had prevailed before the kidnapping. Tony could tell that it wouldn’t last, the adults were planning something, their schemes made all the more obvious by the sudden lack of face time.

Maria slipped into Italian, partially in a bid to infuriate Howard, whilst Howard himself was from an immigrant family, Italian was not a part of the man’s repertoire. A fact that Maria took great pleasure in not so subtly rubbing into his face given that both his brother and cousin had been fluent. Maria directly addressed Tony, her Sicilian accent as strong as it had ever been,

“First opportunity I’m teaching you Spanish.”

“Wha-? Why?”

“I want you to meet the family.”

“I thought they were in Italy?”

“All of the family. You’ve met my mother’s side, but not my father’s. Surely, you must know that
Tony bit back the automatic, ‘Don’t call me Shirley’ response, knowing that the joke wasn’t yet famous and that his mother wouldn’t appreciate the humour.

Honestly, he hadn’t really thought about it.

“Huh.”

“We’ll be visiting your Grandmama in Sicily, and your Uncle in Venice before we move on to the family residence in Catalonia.”

Under the watchful eye of both the Jarvises and Peggy all Howard could do was fume in the background as his wife and son made plans that he couldn’t understand.


Maria found the SHIELD agents’ attempts to learn precisely what had happened during the 25 Hour Blackout (the city-wide event had already earnt the capitals in the press) amusing. Or rather, she would if she didn’t find their profound incompetence so disturbing. They were supposed to be an international intelligence agency for god’s sake!

From the discussions, that Margaret and Ana had at least had the grace to try and carry out discreetly – though Howard had rather bulldozed their attempts – SHIELD wasn’t at all sure whether the DUMBO scene was actually related to what had happened to her darling bambino. Oh the fools in Howard’s little group suspected, the remains of a bloody crime scene popping up on the same evening as the kidnapping, and the Blackout, was far too much of a coincidence even for even these idioti. Thankfully, the lone (known) murder of the evening had taken place in a Little Italy that bordered the industrial neighbourhood the foolish kidnappers had sought their refuge in - Maria accepted the darkness of her thoughts as purely her own.

Maria would have snorted her scathing opinion on the situation (she’d come across Ana and the presumptuous Margaret discussing it in the kitchen once too often), if such behaviour wouldn’t have rendered her carefully built façade of blindness moot. Only Ana suspected, or if Maria were being honest, knew, that Maria was more than the face that she presented in the Land of the Free.
Despite the debate still raging over whether or not the Dumbo scene was in any way related to Tony, Maria knew that Ana and Margaret both suspected a darker resolution to the commonly held scenario that the rest of the SHIELD fools, and by extension, Howard seemed to believe. Maria could tell that the pair suspected Tony’s hands-on involvement. With her eyes newly opened Maria could see why. Her darling bambino was a changed boy, however the change predated the kidnapping, rather than followed it. In hindsight Maria should have realised that her own darkness would be passed onto her son.

Maria could only hope that whatever her bambino had gone through wouldn’t taint him permanently, oh she’d gently ease him into the fold if need be, but she’d much rather he remain the beaming innocent who focussed all of his time on pleasing his father than be dragged into her world.

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Tony still couldn’t quite believe that he’d managed to get back to the penthouse quite as quickly as he had, without anything more permanent than the unexpected present Wanda of all people had gifted him with. But he supposed that was Quicksilver’s ability for you, the boy was literally superhuman.

The weekend following Tony’s ‘miraculous’ return to the penthouse and Maria’s unexpected pronouncement, was spent in a veritable whirlwind of activity. Whilst Tony mourned the missed opportunity to spend time with the Jarvises, he had to concede to himself that perhaps it was for the best. Now with the distance of 12 months behind him, Tony found himself wondering just why they hadn’t broached the subject of his behaviour. Tony was painfully aware that there was no way in hell that he’d been acting like his child-self, not a snowflake’s chance, if the sarcasm Ben often deployed with biting accuracy was anything to go by. It was only an unexpected bout of good luck, and perhaps Jarvis’s British reticence that had stopped him from being sent straight to a child psychologist and labelled as crazy for the rest of his days.

Tony had fallen to the temptation a grand total of five days and twelve hours after the kidnapping. Just after Maria had announced her intention to drag Tony to Italy – with both Peggy’s and the Jarvises’ approval if the smug looks on their faces had been anything to go by. The decision on his mother’s part had reawakened the all too familiar jittery overclocking of Tony’s thoughts, that Tony had just about convinced himself was only a side effect of the Witch’s meddling, despite knowing deep down that he’d always been wired towards neurosis and anxiety. The Quaaludes were a glorious source of forced relaxation, allowing Tony to recapture that impression of innocent carefree lackadaisical childishness that he’d lost decades hence. Tony knew that he wouldn’t have been able to keep up the charade for very long, and if the hesitant looks both Jarvis, and considering how infrequently she was around, Ana – with surprising frequency, were shooting him Tony knew that the gig was nearly up.
Fortunately, Maria’s newfound motherly tenderness kept his interactions with the couple down to a minimum, the aftermath of the very successful kidnapping attempt kept Aunty Peggy busy in the city most days, and Maria had already missed enough of his childhood that she really didn’t have a framework for comparison.

Despite the adult’s doting – and frustrating as it was, even Tony had to admit the coddling was preferable to Howard’s harsh rulings - Tony spent quite a lot of the week before he was due to leave for Europe huddled up in the makeshift workshop. Tony found himself spending a lot of time listening to the slightly strange album that Peter had all but shoved into his hands, the proto-Walkman the only source of music available in the jury-rigged space, despite the stack of nearly-new LPs all but calling his name from his trunk.

The dark, vaguely Orwellian, Pink Floyd album somehow put Tony in mind of many of the worst traits of SHIELDRA, and trying and failing to work alongside the chemical mixture that was the Avengers. The grim soundscapes were reminiscent of disturbing walls of sound that Bowie often used so effectively, however the band’s work, dark as it was, was shot through with a palpable vein of cynical hopefulness. Paradoxical as it was, Tony found himself appreciating the cold bubbling anger, so far removed from Bowie’s often utterly detached approach. Listening to the rage fuelled prog-rock, a genre Tony would forever deny he was developing a taste for, was somehow cathartic. Tony could almost feel the poison from the festering wound that was The Avengers draining away with each successive replay of the tape. Tony felt a justified anger as he realised that the rot was finally receding, now that that damnable red mist was no longer fuelling it every time his thoughts strayed into darker territory. Tony hadn’t realised how artificial and unhealthy the miasma of his mind was, until it had a chance to recover. The PTSD he’d been struggling with for years, which pre-dated Afghanistan if Tony was being brutally honest, still threatened his composure far more often than he’d like. However, at least now, it was wholly his own. Not some artificial sense of dread obscuring the very real doomsday scenario that had been looming over all of their heads. Though Tony doubted the ability to more coherently argue his point would have made much difference to Rogers’ head in the sand approach to anything Tony tried to bring to his attention.

Tony found it frustrating that he was still no closer to recreating the repulsor tech that had become his trademark, the degree of electronics miniaturisation required for some of the simpler components still nowhere near being a twinkle in their inventor’s eyes. The situation was stymying – the repulsor tech being deceptively simple, merely an infinitely higher-output form of an EL-panel, veritable child’s-play to someone with Tony’s knowledge even in this era. To make matters worse Tony had proved to himself that the tech was more than possible in this backwards year, after all Tony had managed to manufacture the panels required to produce the repulsors before the blackout. However, he was still no closer to being able to connect them to either a power source or the regulator required to modulate the output to anything less than violently explosive. At best the repulsors could be either on or off at the moment.

Despite this issue Tony managed to reproduce both the Widow’s Sting based watch and a bulky, but discrete version of the repulsor gauntlet that he’d wielded in the future. Whilst Tony didn’t dare attempt to up the power output to anything resembling the maximum that the original watch had been capable of producing, not least because Tony wasn’t convinced that the slightly subpar quality
repulsor panel was actually capable of handling the power, let alone the fact that the blasts would automatically be fatal to anyone he used it against at the power level he was used to.

It was with no little hesitation that Tony packed up all of his belongings for the long trip to Europe. For all that Tony would have to live with the regret of missing out on spending a whole summer with the Jarvises and Peggy, it was a relief to be away from their too perceptive stares, knowing looks, and the shared glances between them that they clearly thought he was oblivious to.

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In all of the chaos of Maria’s last-minute preparations to temporarily abscond to Europe, somehow the small fleet of cars at Howard’s disposal became temporarily unavailable to Edwin. With the switch back to the skeleton crew that was signalled by both Howard’s late, and Maria’s unexpectedly early departure, the house shut down for the summer months. Edwin had decided that he needed to do a last-minute shopping run with Ana and Tony, given his persona non-grata status in his home country, and the numerous extradition treaties the Allied European nations had agreed to, well, Edwin couldn’t exactly leave the USA unless he was directly under Howard’s protection.

The trio made their way into New York proper via a yellow cab, Edwin privately thought that they weren’t a patch on the London Black Cabs – but he was aware that as a homesick Englishman he was more than a little biased. Edwin was self-aware enough to acknowledge that the wave of sudden nationalistic pride had everything to do with the fact that very soon his young charge would be fending for himself all alone in his mother country. Well, Ben would be there. And the university had made it very clear in their communications that all sorts of careful arrangements were being made in anticipation of Tony’s arrival. Since technically somehow under UK-law, children under 16 weren’t accounted for in St. Cedd’s college’s residential license – a fact that was being rapidly rectified that summer.

The college had made it very clear that they were doing everything they could to provide Tony with an experience as close to that of the other students as possible – bending over backwards to allow the boy to feel ‘normal’ amongst his peers. Ben would have a room just down the corridor from Tony, a necessary move to meet the guardianship requirements to allow the boy to stay in college, but otherwise the dear child would be treated as if he were any other student. Edwin approved, especially when, as he’d read the correspondence aloud to Ana – he’d noticed his darling wife’s face ease from the frown that Edwin hadn’t realised he’d gotten accustomed to.

In any case – Edwin, and Ana, if the face she’d pulled when she’d first seen the boy had been any indication, felt that Tony needed more variety in his wardrobe. The haphazard collection of tailored suits, and jeans & t-shirts the dear boy had bought for himself during the school year, when Edwin had been so very caught up in Ana’s plight just wouldn’t do now that Tony was moving into the world of universities and academia.
The trio spent a fun, if exhausting day making their way through all of the best department stores that New York had to offer; Bloomingdale’s, Macy’s, Barney’s to name but a few. Edwin covertly bought his darling a selection of silk scarves when Ana slipped to the washroom. Tony noticed the move, and likely understood Edwin’s motive if the look of pained understanding on his too-young face was anything to go by.

Towards the afternoon Ana was flagging – her obvious enthusiasm at being able to spoil her charge notwithstanding she was clearly in no condition to be running around Manhattan all day. They stopped for lunch at the Budapest Café – Ana choosing the Korozott, Tony enthusiastically tucking into Hortobagyi whilst Edwin chose the Chef’s Special. Ana’s energy levels had recovered once they’d shared their repaste, but Edwin could tell that Tony himself was less than enthusiastic about their assigned task for the day – if the longing glances towards the numerous bookshops they’d passed was anything to go by.

After making sure that Tony had enough sets of clothes that would do for formal occasions, the lectures and the ‘supervisions’ as the letters the college had sent had described the teaching time, Edwin relaxed his grip on their small group – finally revealing the surprise motive for bringing them to Manhattan. They were going to see The Importance of Being Earnest on Broadway, Jarvis had bemoaned that if only Tony was leaving on schedule in late October, rather than for this hasty trip to Europe than they’d have been able to catch the revival of Jesus Christ Superstar.

Tony had no desire to see any musical that Jarvis thought was appropriate for his age-range and was thanking his lucky stars that the timings for Cambridge were awkward. Tony had been quietly relieved by that little fact, he’d never been able to stand Andrew Lloyd Weber’s particular brand of …pop. And somehow Tony just knew that if he expressed a preference to go and see Hair instead that he’d be treated to more than Ben’s amused raised eyebrow in response. Urgh - If the quiet mutterings Tony had overheard between Ana and Jarvis held true, Tony was already dreading the spring-break in March – they were making plans to see the Hello,Dolly! run that was apparently due in 1978…

They continued down the street and abruptly the evidence of the blackout was there for all to see. Tony figured that the looting, caused by the sheer depth of inequality that had built up in the city in this strange dark decade hadn’t reached this part of Manhattan. However, they’d turned a corner and there it was – a burnt out shell of a mom & pop shop in the centre of a neighbourhood that, now that Tony was paying attention, was a far cry from the wealth sat on proud display literally around the corner. To add insult to injury, the blackened shell of a site was emblazoned with a scrawled gang tag, the grammatically incorrect, “Morlocks Turf” declared that the shop belonged to whoever they were.
Christ – Tony had thought he’d seen the contrast clear as anything when he’d realised that Dumbo, the entirety of Dumbo, was an abandoned wasteland of old warehouses and factories rather than the trendy café centre that he was so familiar with in his era. But in the warm summer light, the deprivation and destruction in clear view made a stark contrast to the wealth that Tony knew flooded Manhattan even now, in the slow lingering depression of the 70s.

Despite his misgivings the play turned out to be an enjoyable experience, Tony watched the whole comedy of errors through jaundiced eyes. However seeing Ana’s and Jarvis’s joy at being able to sit and watch the genteel tale of privilege and wealth together, with him, well it made Tony’s chest hum with a warmth that he’d have attributed to the arc reactor if it was still there.

The return trip on the subway home was eventful for all of the wrong reasons. It was a late night – and the graffitied and vandalised subway cars looked eerie in the flickering fluorescents. They’d had to get a subway car going north – this one was headed to Washington Heights. Tony would have preferred to spend the night in his own bed, but he wasn’t blind, Ana had gotten tired hours ago, and was gamely trying to put a brave face on it for his sake. Whilst she wasn’t yet wearing those scarfs Jarvis had bought, well, Tony could see the effects of the chemo already. The sooner they got back to Howard’s penthouse the better. They’d make the rest of the journey back up to Westchester via Grand Central Station in the morning.

The subway car was empty, their tired trio the only people in the carriage. There had been other people on the platform but it was late – and as Tony was now painfully aware, rich people tended to avoid New York at night in this decade.

Fortunately, apart from Tony himself, Jarvis and Ana looked like any other middle class American couple in New York. Jarvis’s suit, whilst obviously well cared for, was clearly old and wearing thin at the seams, unlike the penguin suit the man usually wore when he was on duty. Similarly, Ana’s floral dress was old-fashioned enough that she’d obviously owned it for years, perhaps she’d even had the thing since she’d lived in Budapest.

Despite Tony’s nerves, the few other passengers paid them no heed, and Tony found himself settling down. Just as Tony had begun to relax his guard and doze off, a commotion in the car next to theirs had him jerking awake again.

There were two people fighting.

From the looks of it they’d run down the length of the train.

Through the grimy windows, and the death threatening gap between the cars, Tony could just about
make-out what was going on. Jarvis’s punishingly tight grip on Tony’s upper arm made it clear that the older man had spotted it too. A petite black woman with a discotastic Afro and a fabulous leather duster was going toe to toe with a Billy Idol-alike punk covered in ripped clothing and safety pins. The two were really reaming into each other.

The woman somehow had the strength to smash the bleach-blonde’s head through the reinforced glass of the train car. Christ. The casual display of superhuman strength was painfully familiar. From repeated experience with enhanced individuals, Tony knew he would be so much red smear if he managed to get between the pair. So much Tony pâté.

Tony watched wide-eyed as the fight ended.

One moment the woman had been winning, the next, in a flash of darkness as the train momentarily lost electrical contact with the tracks, the punk was on top and with an all too familiar movement, and a far too familiar ease (the human neck was a surprisingly tough thing) he casually snapped her neck, stole her coat, pulled the emergency stop cord and leapt out of the train onto the tracks.

After giving their statements to the police Ana and Jarvis looked even more bone-tired than they had already. Thankfully they hadn’t bothered interrogating Tony, just rather patronisingly left him sitting in the corridor with a notepad and a carton of orange juice whilst the adults talked.

Tony had asked the officer who’d clearly been drawn the short straw, and been given babysitting duty for a diet coke – however the puzzled judgemental look on the guy’s face had told him everything he needed to know. Tony’d inadvertently dropped yet another anachronistic reference. It was a damned good thing that Ben wasn’t around to give him a superior look, and add it to his mental tally of ‘reasons why today’s training session needs to be nastily exhausting’ list.

In all the session with the cops lasted all of half an hour, but after their long day the time felt ten times as long. The rather dour end to their day was made worse by the fact that Tony, Iron Man, Avenger, capable hand to hand fighter and all around unkillable arsehole, hadn’t even thought to get off his ass and save her. Tony had never felt the weight of his ‘not a hero’ label more keenly than in the moment he registered that fact.

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The next morning saw Tony bidding a tearful farewell to his small family unit, their spoilt daytrip, and the fact that Peggy was still dealing with the aftermath of the blackout doing nothing to dampen their tearful, yet joyful goodbyes. The situation couldn’t be more different to the gloomy farewells of the previous year, Tony was as close to free from Howard as he’d get until he hit 18. From the
nervous, yet hopeful looks on his small family’s faces they were just as aware of that fact as he was.

Tony hugged Ana and Jarvis tightly, his large trunk already packed and loaded into the trunk of the car. Tony desperately wanted to spend more time with the couple, now that it was highly likely that he wouldn’t be spending more time with them- and of course the malicious thought that refused not to be thought of, whether Ana would still be there when he got back.

Ana had given in to the inevitable, she sported a rather fetching silk scarf, tied artfully around her head. Tony thought it made her look like a glamorous starlet, and told her so, she’d only given him a sad smile in return. Tony hugged her again, something in Ana’s expression firmed into a fierce gladness.

If anything, Jarvis was the most forlorn of the three of them, Tony peered up at the man trying to convey the wealth of emotion that he’d never be able to verbalise with his eyes alone – Tony wasn’t convinced that he managed it.

Just as Tony was about to fondly peel himself away from the heartfelt hugging – all of those emotions were giving him hives, Peggy showed up. Looking glamorous as ever, if a little flustered.

“Tony! I’m so glad I didn’t miss you.”

Aunty Peggy reached out for a hug that Tony was only too happy to return, he still hadn’t managed to get over the fact that she was here – solid and whole in a way that, from Tony’s point of view at least, she hadn’t been for decades.

“Here.”

In a moment of cognitive dissonance Tony peered up at Aunty Peggy blankly – completely unable to comprehend why she was shoving a long thin box in his direction.

“Well, take it.”

“Oh! Uh- thanks Aunt-“
“None of that now, I’m only returning the item you lost on the thirteenth.”

Peggy’s reply was a faux-haughty sniff. Tony, now even more puzzled, slowly pried the lid off the small case. Nestled inside the rather posh velvet lining was Tony’s adamantium stiletto – complete with a brand-new handle that likely meant it wouldn’t fit in the sole of his shoes anymore.

Tony peered up at Aunty Peggy stunned,

“You didn’t think I’d let you wander around Europe completely defanged now, did you?” Peggy’s tone turned approving, “I saw what you did to those thugs at the flat.”

Jarvis started to weakly protest,

“I-I say this is-“

“Oh hush Edwin, whilst I can’t say I approve of our boy here being exposed to such things so early. We can all see that it’s a fact of his life now. If young Tony hadn’t had-” at this Peggy ruffled Tony’s hair, “his little blade I dread to think what would have happened.”

Tony stared stunned, glancing between the three adult faces before him, Jarvis looked worried, skin around his eyes tight with whatever emotion the older man was trying to suppress, but both Ana and Peggy’s eyes shone with fierce approval, protectiveness and pride warring for dominance in their expressions.

“Oh, come here young Tony – I’m not going to let you vanish for a year without at least saying goodbye first.”

At that slightly terse statement, Jarvis squatted down to Tony’s level and extended his arms. Without hesitation Tony ran into the obvious invitation, hugging tightly for all he was worth. The sudden warmth at his back had Tony reflexively reaching for a dagger, until he realised that both Ana and Aunty Peggy had joined in – making the hug a four-way affair. The little family unit stayed like that for a long moment, until the box still nestled in Tony’s grasp started poking uncomfortably and they were forced to separate.

Giving Aunty Peggy a quick kiss and a grateful look Tony quickly muttered a “Thank you!” before he hugged all three members of his chosen family unit once again, and hurriedly strapped himself
into the large estate car before they could see the tears that he refused to let fall.

The remainder of the summer was spent in a whirl of travel. At Maria’s insistence, barely a week after the power came back, on she’d whisked Tony away to Europe. First to Italy, then, to Tony’s surprise and consternation to the still-recovering-from-it’s-fascist-government Spain, given that Franco’s party had only really ceded power two years ago.

It was a whirlwind tour of the numerous branches of the Carbonell and Martinelli families, and an eye-opening glimpse of the less than legal activities they were engaged in. For all that Maria, and to their credit, the rest of the extended Martinelli family did their best to shield Tony from the worst of it Tony was sure that the Italian half of the clan had ties to the Mafia. Not that the aristocratic Carbonells were any better, whilst everything they indulged in was perfectly legal – it was legal under the Franco Government.

Tony enjoyed the fast-paced weeklong visit to the Venetian branch of the family, and the opportunity to try genuine Venetian cicchetti. The literally palatial Palazzo building the Venetian family was living in surprised Tony, until he realised that the medieval name literally carved into the stonework of the building did not match the family surname. Tony wondered where they’d gotten the money from. However, dubious monetary source aside, Tony could understand the family’s obvious pride in living in the heart of such a city. He had to admit that Venice, even with its perpetual smell and maze-like canals was a charming place, although anyone who wasn’t a local would be lost. Not unlike certain areas of New York.

Maria had made a point of taking Tony to visit the Schola Grande Tedesca, a tiny hidden synagogue at the heart of what used to be Venice’s Jewish ghetto. Tony hadn’t been sure why she’d done so, but he’d appreciated spending the day with her, when his time in Venice had otherwise been taken up with meeting a different member of the extended Martinelli clan each day.

Outside of the quiet of their visit to the holy space, Tony saw a new side to his mother on that trip, one he’d only just started catching glimpses of in his teens. Maria was sharp, and kind, and pointedly gregarious in the exact same way that Tony himself was. Tony had always thought that that cutting side of himself had been inherited from his father. He’d always overcompensated for it when it inevitably got out, babbling to fill the awkward spaces he’d created. Perhaps Tony had taken the wrong tack, here in Italy, Maria seemed to flower. Tony finally able to reconcile the woman who poured her life, and money, into foundations to help the poor, house the homeless, research cancer and a multitude of other worthy causes that Tony had been pleased to continue to build upon.

On one of their trips out into the confusing maze of a city, Maria, upon catching a would-be pickpocketer, let the waif-like child both keep the money that he’d had his hands on, and taken the
boy aside. Speaking in rushed Italian that only Tony could hear, Maria pointed out that she both ran a charity and had space to help a boy get out of or further into a life of crime should he so wish it. Maria made it clear that she’d prefer he’d get out of the business before it was too late to turn back, but also made it obvious that if he felt he had no other choice then the protection of the Martinellis was also on the table.

Tony wondered which way the boy would go.

Tony’s suspicions were amply reconfirmed when after a brief stopover in Naples. They took the opportunity to again indulge in genuine Naples pizza magherita under the shadow of Vesuvius, Tony finally met the main Sicilian branch of the family.

Just as the Jarvises did their best to misguidedly keep Ana’s cancer diagnosis from him, the adults in Sicily liked to talk business in euphemisms that they mistakenly believed sailed right over Tony’s head. It was true that he wasn’t a local, didn’t understand all of the references, but Tony picked things up very quickly.

During the three weeks in Sicily Maria fully showed the kindness and respect for humanity that Tony had always known was there, but never known was there. His mother didn’t even realise that she was putting on a demonstration that evening, mistakenly under the belief that Tony was asleep in his room when the incident occurred.

Maria caught a would-be thief rifling through her jewellery box. Apparently, the young man had climbed across from the neighbouring ‘house’ and jimmed the sturdy sunlight-protecting shutters open from the fourth floor. Tony had blanched at the casual disregard for his own safety the young idiot had. Again, instead of having the fool arrested, or worse siccing the family on him, Maria more or less adopted the boy.

Maria also began to introduce Tony to the languages Spanish (language of Madrid and the fascists – ptoui!), and Catalan. Tony could tell which side of the family debate Maria was on from her near violent distaste whenever the Civil War was jokingly brought up by the Italian side of the family. However, Tony eventually got the impression that Maria had been proud of her father for choosing exile over siding with his fellow aristocrats.

Again, Tony indulged in the opportunity to eat genuine Sicilian pasta in Sicily, instead of the make-do versions they’d been cobbled together in their New York kitchen. Even with the money that came from being a Stark, there was just no getting some ingredients on the other side of the Atlantic. Tony gorged himself on Pasta alla Norma, Manicotti and usually turned secondi into thirdsies and fourthsies. Tony even found that the sweets were to his taste, a rare occasion, enjoying the subtlety of granita siciliana far more than the more famous gelato.
Much to Maria’s glee Tony already had a taste for the street food on offer, pani ca meusa and arancini both favoured treats that Tony came back to whenever he was feeling particularly miserable about the fact that the Jarvises were both stuck back in New York, when he just knew that they’d love this. Love the sun, and the food, and most of all the relatively easy company that the Martinelli branch of Maria’s family were providing so readily.

It was late August when the long-awaited letter finally arrived, the innocuous looking envelope containing news of Tony’s future for the next several years one way or the other. Maria and Tony were enjoying their final week in Sicily, eating a relaxed breakfast with the matriarch of the family and cheerfully bickering about whether or not Calabrian cuisine, with its careful use of sparse ingredients, or the Venetian cicchetti were superior. Tony could tell that Maria was enjoying playing devil’s advocate in this heated but playful debate – he knew his mother secretly preferred Catalan cuisine, though she’d never admit to it amongst her family. As Tony joined the pair Maria wordlessly passed the bulky white item of post over, puzzling Tony at first as he struggled to work out why on earth he would be receiving post – before the penny dropped.

With shaking fingers, Tony ripped open the envelope, surprised with himself by how nervous the results were making him.

The first sheet congratulated him on graduating from the school as Valedictorian of the graduating class, and informing him that the high school graduation ceremony was to be held at the school in September. Tony had the highest Grade Point Average. Huh. He shouldn’t have been surprised, it had happened last time after all, but somehow Tony was shocked. The dreamy haze with which he’d confronted the academia this past year, treating everything as if it were some complex puzzle rather than his life, Tony gulped. It didn’t seem fair, he didn’t deserve this.

Tony robotically passed the top sheet over to his mother before reading onwards, Tony had achieved A+ grades in all of the STEM subjects, physics, chemistry, mathematics – even biology, which surprised Tony. Tony had even managed to get A+ in most of the artistic subjects, even the English Lit paper with the mini panic he’d had in the middle of the exam hitting the top grade. The only paper that hadn’t earnt him an A+ was History – which perhaps shouldn’t have surprised him given Tony’s 21st Century perspective on events, still an A- was a decent grade. The numerous language examinations Tony had sat through had all earnt him A+ grades as well, with a little annotation scribbled in the side about how surprised the school had been when he’d chosen to sit the exams. Tony supposed they had a point, given that he’d hadn’t actually attended a single language class in his year at the school. Fortunately, since the school was in the State of New York the Regents Exams themselves were considered enough, and Tony wasn’t required to actually attend the graduation ceremony that was due to take place in a month’s time, in another country.
Tony hurriedly flicked to the next sheet passing the previous one over for Maria to coo over, it held the table of CSE results – perhaps as expected Tony got straight 1 grades (roughly equivalent to the wide range of A to C grades in O-levels) across the board. Tony nervously flicked to the O-levels, straight As (As being the highest grade available in the scoring system used by the British examination boards), though his History paper score had been dangerously close to a B-grade. As his heart rate slowed, Tony realised that he’d probably done it, the A-level sheet slowly revealed itself as Tony nervously turned the page – revealing five A grades (A again being the highest available score) in the five STEM subjects. Tony let out a long breath he hadn’t realised he’d been holding. Tony had met the requirements to go to Cambridge.

Tony found he was much less worried about the International Baccalaureate results, the run of straight A’s almost an afterthought in the face of the relief, the draining of tense emotion that Tony hadn’t even realised he’d been carrying.

There was a loud whoop from next to him, Tony turned just in time to get a face-full of his mother’s bosom as she pulled him into an enthusiastic and warm hug.

“Congratulations my bambino!”

Tony’s mother lapsed into Sicilian, explaining to… Tony blinked, his great… Aunt? Precisely what the letter meant.

From the huge toothless grin and slobberly kiss, Tony supposed that she was pleased with the news. In a surprisingly strong voice the wrinkly old lady hollered the news around the house in a tone that conveyed a huge amount despite the language barrier. Tony resolved to make more of an effort to learn Sicilian no matter how useless it seemed.

The rest of the day was spent in a whirl of Italian and laughter, as numerous aunts, uncles, cousins, and more distant members of the Martinelli clan gathered in the ancient stone villa to celebrate the news. Men Tony had pegged in the privacy of his own head as street-smart toughs with decades of hardened criminality between them revealed a soft side, as the Martinelli clan threw a party loud enough to wake the dead.

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In the first week of September the acceptance letter from St. Cedd’s college showed up. Tony had no idea how the ancient college knew that he was in Barcelona, since he’d been barely aware that he was going to be himself – but Tony decided to run with it.
Despite being printed on thick paper stock with the college’s crest both printed on the letterhead and embossed into the paper, the letter itself was fairly matter-of-fact about everything. After the socially expected congratulatory paragraph, the letter merely told Tony that he was expected to report to the Porter’s Lodge at the college between October the 14th and 15th. He was to collect his keys, and the itinerary, given out to all new students, so that they could go about collecting their timetables from the relevant university departments before term proper got started. On another sheet, the recommended reading list was included, Tony eyed the books with a jaundiced eye, noting that he’d read most of them years ago, and that they were all woefully out of date by his standards. The name Mike Ashby on the author-list did light up a small frisson of fanboy glee however. Tony was reminded that, in all likelihood the giant in his field was actually working on some of his famous research at the university he was due to attend in that moment.

The missive rather snootily informed Tony that cooking utensils were not amongst the list of common-sense necessities that the college recommended all students bring. Since the college facilities were built quite literally in the medieval era, when, if one had to cook for oneself, one could not afford to go to university. Apparently the familiar ‘gyp’ rooms were available on each corridor, so perhaps Tony would like to bring a saucepan/plates if he simply had to forego the convenience of the facilities provided in hall. However, the aforementioned rooms did not contain ovens, only small hobs, so Tony shouldn’t expect to be able to or have to cook substantial meals. The letter also informed him that St. Cedd’s was one of the colleges at the university that still employed bedders, and seemed to be proud of that fact that Tony wouldn’t have to tidy his own room.

The other papers in the official looking packet were surprising, two handwritten notes fell out – both from current students at the college. Crap, Tony had managed to completely forego this slightly strange aspect of Cambridge University Undergraduate life the first time, by dint of only attending the place as a Postgraduate. Tony had College Parents. Two of them, a College Mum and a College Dad. Both letters were charming and enthusiastic full of oh-so-jolly trivia about the names of the numerous buildings that St. Cedd’s was comprised of, when the best times to go to Hall for meals was, and compelled him to come to them should he need any help whatsoever with anything, be it academic or more personal. Tony groaned. Maria was going to see this, and insist, he just knew it.

Still between Maria dragging him off to Europe, and the kidnapping Tony had earnt tacit permission from Howard to actually go to the university of his choice – and he’d see Ben again. It wasn’t all bad.

Tony matter-of-factly passed his mother the letter in front of the rest of the Carbonell family, well aware of curious, and not-altogether neutral eyes on him as he did so. Tony was welcomed as a long-lost grandchild by the family, but Maria’s socialite status in America was beginning to make a horrible sort of sense. Reading between the lines about what was and wasn’t said, Tony had soon gained the impression that the Catalanian side of the family had only really agreed to this stay because Tony was family, and more importantly Tony was a Stark. A disgusting nouveau-riche family sure, but an important one.
Maria as the half-Sicilian daughter of the disgraced, exiled, and deceased youngest son of the Carbonell black sheep was tolerated, but he could tell that the weeks spent in the huge Barcelonan ‘house’ (the ‘house’ was the size of a mansion) were awkward ones for all of the adults – much as the children (apart from Tony) didn’t really pay attention.

The Cambridge letter was in its own way, a key to unlocking the approval of the family – a sort of proof that, even if Maria was from the side of the family they didn’t much like, that at least she’d chosen her husband well, and borne a worthwhile child. Tony hated that the letter earnt them some degree of respect, but understood the need for this sort of currency all too well.

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During the long month and a half spent in Barcelona Tony picked up not only the Spanish that Maria had wished for, but Catalan too. As well as a taste for pa amb tomaquet, a dish that he privately preferred to Barcelona-bruschetta, and to the expensive black label jamon iberico de bellota that the family kept attempting to feed him by the truckload. In the aftermath of the letter’s arrival, family relations had warmed from cautious neutrality to outright companionship as long-severed ties gradually repaired themselves.

To the family’s consternation Tony much preferred the mojama, seitos and escalivada when given the option. It was probably all that time that he’d spent travelling, but Tony couldn’t help it if he preferred the food that his snobbish extended family deemed ‘peasant food’.

The Catalan branch of the family were welcoming enough, but Tony couldn’t help but stare at the people whom he knew had sided with Franco and wonder about them. Especially given the still extant black sheep status of his grandfather.

Tony could spot an elephant in the room when he saw one, and this particular elephant was thirty years old, and stank accordingly. Still, in all, Tony enjoyed the time spent in Barcelona. There was something hopeful about the city with the fall of Franco and the new freedoms that the locals were hesitantly enjoying. The Catalan flags proudly displayed in nearly every window proof of that.

Tony even took the opportunity to join in when an impromptu Castell competition got underway in the side thoroughfare outside the house. Due to his size, and well-advertised status as a foreign Catalan who’d come back home, he was allowed to be the enxaneta. Fortunately for Tony’s continued freedom, Maria had been tied up with some Martinelli business down in the business end of the city – a situation that Tony was sure was by design rather than by coincidence, so his newly protective mother hadn’t been there to witness Tony’s precarious ascent to the top of the human tower.
It was with a surprising amount of fondness that had Tony bidding his farewells to the Carbonells – half of him looking forward to whatever challenges awaited him in the cloistered academia that Cambridge afforded, the other half already missing the Mediterranean sun and relaxed atmosphere that seemed to drench Catalonia.

Chapter End Notes

Sooo... Maria Carbonell. Carbonell - that well-known Spanish surname... Once I realised that fanon had twisted things I had to play with it. Hence the complex family tree we've ended up with here! Hopefully it makes some sort of sense.

Maria Carbonell. A Carbonell on her father's side - her father being an exiled member of the Catalan Spanish aristocracy, who'd dared to side with the Republicans during the Spanish Civil War (the same side that Orwell fought on decades ago in his infamous memoir) who fled to France... Where he met Maria's Sicilian mother, a Martinelli - both a nod to the MCU, and a link to the extended crime families of Europe and America. The pair made a go of it in Sicily, but ran into trouble with Mussolini so then both left for America a couple of decades before the great Italian Immigration wave of the 50s. Allowing Maria to contribute to the War Effort via the Manhattan Project - and meet Howard in her late teens as one of the young female science students allowed on the project.

I hope that potted bio makes some sort of sense!

As for the chaos that is the 13th July 1977 New York - well, I had to use it. I don't have much more of an excuse than that. If you're interested there's quite a mix of spectacular landscapes, and rather saddening images of the aftermath available with a quick google. The 25 Hour Blackout became infamous for several reasons, the civil unrest and looting, as the haves and have nots quickly sorted out the inequalities on a street level extended beyond the usual. The majority of the police force didn't respond to incidents, and dozens of fires were set - as likely caused by owners claiming the insurance as the aforementioned looting. New York wasn't a place many people wanted to be in that decade.

The Blackout also made and broke dozens of careers, political and otherwise. As I understand it, a politician who had been on track to being the city's first black mayor had his career thoroughly derailed in the aftermath - the racial tensions, and concentration of the looting in poorer 'black' neighbourhoods making unfortunate tensions raise their heads.

The blackout is also fairly famous for fans of the genre hip hop - in the post-rap/DJing sense of the word that is. Legend has it that several crews who helped define the genre would never have gotten the expensive equipment so necessary for their craft if it weren't for the unofficial redistribution of wealth that went on that evening.

Despite all of the chaos apparently there was "only" one murder in NY that evening, a murder that remains unsolved to this day sadly.

Next chapter is the beginnings of Tony's time in Cambridge. And the slow build-up to a
very m-word heavy plotline.
Chapter 11: Although I wasn’t there, he said I was his friend

Chapter Summary

Tony makes some new friends in Cambridge.

Chapter Notes

**WARNING**: A few characters use a term that has become a disgusting homophobic slur, but wasn't used as such in this time and place. So apologies! Fag: English public-school use: – younger boy who has to play servant to older year student, not the US-English slur derived from the older Irish slur ‘Faggot’. Though it’s still definitely not a good thing. And odds are their usage is probably related, sorry! It was either use the correct term or try and make something up and then over-explain it. Apologies for the epic wait. On the plus side there's a whole load of mostly finished stuff waiting in the wings... So fingers crossed the editing for the next chunk goes quicker than this one did...

Grateful thanks to my lovely beta reader **Kairiou**! And a grateful thank you to **SemiFeralCatLady**, whose knowledge helped me to work out just how a certain scene would play out! I think it's going to be painfully obvious where my lovely beta reader stopped betaing - so fair warning grammatical edits/snafuls are almost certainly entirely my fault, and please do point out anything you spot so I can fix it!

This chapter is took a while due to appalling RL kerblams that hit both myself and my beta at different consecutive moments... Without their wonderful motivational help this thing wouldn't have gotten this far.

(And shout out to Ksecc1 - you got me through one of the thornier edits with your comments!)

Everyone! Everyone! Guess what? This thing got it's first, utterly wonderful, bit of fanart - the absolutely lovely **imyergoldfish** posted it here, please go look and marvel at their artistic amazingness:

https://www.instagram.com/p/BnSb778gA9M/?taken-by=imyergoldfish

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
The Ancient One frowned – she’d been so sure that she was catching up to that vividly flickering spark of Potential, so close. And yet. On the very night that she’d been preparing to finalise months’ worth of work on that location matrix; the numerous crystalline mandalas that had already led her to New York now no longer suitable for the fine detail work required… That oh-so-finicky framework that she needed to use when trying to pin-point the exact soul in a few square miles that contained millions very nearly complete…

The blackout struck.

The chaos that came with it was immediate and apparent on more than just the boring five-dimensional physical plane. The event was a locus; one of those dreaded nodes in the streams of causality. An entanglement of the quantum realm and the other mythological dimensions. It was the sort of thing that the young-ones with all their technobabble induced excitement over the strange new, amusingly far from (and yet alarmingly close to) the truth post-war sciences of S-matrix theory, liked to imagine they’d invented.

The Ancient One would have scoffed at their charmingly youthful excitement and naivety, if the reflected chaos that rippled out from the ever-shifting Mandala (back at the inner sanctum at Karma-Taj) hadn’t been dire enough to raise a general alert that led to all three of the lesser sanctums battening down the hatches – to borrow another military term.

The great barriers surrounding Earth, her home, and hub of mystical energies across the multiverse, shuddered. The Shadow King’s recent incursion, manipulating the tears in that damaged, yet terrifyingly powerful, young mutant’s psyche had left the ineffable barriers weakened. Proof that nothing was fool proof. Especially given that the malevolent entity was still very much at large somewhere within her domain. Hot on the heels of the chaos caused by that near disaster, taking advantage of the damage to the barriers that Farouk had wrought, something else got in.

The Ancient One hoped, hopelessly, that it wasn’t an Old One. That wish wasn’t to be. Whilst it wasn’t Shuma-Gorath itself, the malevolent eldritch abomination had sent one of its emissaries to try and wheedle its foul way through the hairline cracks that Farouk’s destructive rampage had caused.

Taking advantage of New York’s collective unease, the great mental jolt caused when millions of people simultaneously suffered the same nightmare – Nightmare slipped his way past the great transduction barriers.

In the emergency that followed there hadn’t been time to stop for breath, let alone to salvage the tattered remnants of the spell work that had been frustratingly close to completion. As it was, Master Drumm had been left severely shaken by the mental attack, pushed inexorably closer to the darkness that the Ancient One saw clouding his future. Not to mention, one very young Stephen Strange had been beset with nightmares for months; his sensitive untrained psyche a useful anchor for Nightmare.
The disquieting link was palpable even after the malevolent entity’s physical form had been expelled – at least until the Ancient One had finally tracked down the anthropomorphic personification and banished it firmly back into the realms of conjecture. That work to rescue one lone Potential had taken her *months*, ruefully she wondered in hindsight if it had even been worth it. There had been something *troubling* brewing on the West Coast too - a relic had vanished from the archives. Something dark brewing in the great expanse of Los Angeles being the closest any of her Masters of the Mystic Arts could come to locating the now missing Staff of One, let alone identifying the now palpable sense of… well, *evil* that seemed to permeate that whole section of the West Coast in the aftermath.

By the time The Ancient One managed to get back to the business that had been at hand, the spark had vanished back into obscurity again. Even taking the hammer to a nut approach that was using the great Mandala, with its ever-shifting susurrations, hadn’t enabled her to work out just where that oh-so disquieting little flicker of oil-slick power had vanished to. One thing was for sure though, The Ancient One thought, as she let herself give into the juvenile temptation to dash the delicate locating matrices into millions of tiny glowing shards of mystical energy. The Potential wasn’t in New York anymore.

For a moment she’d thought she’d caught up with the spark in Tibet of all places, something buzzing and electric and altogether obfuscating in the high plateau of the world attracting her to the ex-Karma-Taj site. But there hadn’t been anything of note at the old thoroughly ascetic Tibetan Monastery she’d found herself in when she stepped out of the hastily created vortex of mystical energy. The Ancient One had merely found the usual collection of Buddhist monks, and Western backpackers out looking to “find themselves” by briefly flirting with someone else’s belief system. A young tourist, in the unremarkable uniform of worn-out hiking boots, tourist tie-dyed trousers and scruffy t-shirt, with a rather noticeable nose, had briefly given her a sardonic look as she’d hurried through the religious sanctuary, but her harried appearance had otherwise gone unremarked and unnoticed.

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Justin gazed up in wonder at the really *really* big building that was his new school. It was *even* fancier than Westchester! Westchester had all weird curly bits on the walls, but Eton’s weird curly bits were curlier, and crumblier, and all the statues staring down scarily looked really *really* old.

Tugging at the high, tight collar of his scratchy new uniform (a horrible black suit, that was nothing like what the awesome and weird suits that Tony got last year were like) Justin peered around with eager curiosity at the green grass and all the other kids, already running around on the welcoming lawn. They looked so strange all wearing the same clothes. Like all of the li’l magpies who’d all peered down at him from the phone wire outside their new, his parents said it was old, and had always been their house all along, but it was new to Justin, and big and cold, and he didn’t like it. So *there*, it was new.
Ben relaxed back down onto the mat, this was holy ground. Not a one of them, not even the most deranged amongst them, like the Kurgan, would violate that sanctuary. It was too important amongst their kind.

Ben didn’t think he’d shown much visible sign of reaction, but one could never be too careful. The thrumming presence, that he was aware only he could sense, did not lessen. There was no obvious commotion going on at the entrance to this section of the monastery, though there were several dozen monks between the main hall and the private quarters deeper in the complex. Not to mention the busy practice halls between the residential and public areas at that. Ben subtly warmed up cold muscles that had long since gone stiff in the classical meditation pose that he’d adopted hours ago that morning. Though since he was in the shared meditation courtyard he had to do so subtly.

Slowing his breathing down again, aware that he was just one western tourist among many, Ben made sure to show no tell, no reaction to the frustratingly ever-present thrum. The source was not going away. They weren’t getting any closer either, thank the gods, but…

The tense situation reminded Ben of a different sort of cat and mouse game he’d been forced to play on Tony’s behalf in Hong Kong on the way over. The British territory was a relatively safe entry point into the greater bulk of China, and thus a hub of international trade for corporations on both sides of the capitalist/communist divide that still split the world in two. Even though there were dozens of ancient, and far easier, routes into the areas of this massive nation that Ben had a particular interest in revisiting still in use. Especially considering the massive span of the continent. Ben had decided to use the official channels for this matter. Ben had dug out an old standby identity – Richard ‘Dicky’ Denisof. A shell of a person, one of a multitude that Ben relied on to deal with his finances around the world.

(Oh, the paperwork was as thorough as Ben’s habitual paranoia demanded. The identity, like all his numerous personas was good enough to become permanent if need be. Birth certificates, passports, parents, schooling, university, CV, dental records, medical history, siblings, blurry photos to prove it all. All legitimate. Not to mention the old school friends ready to swear blind that young Dicky had enjoyed custard roly-poly on a Wednesday alongside the rest of them, and loathed rugby and the old fag system with a passion.)

Denisof had the background to impress the fools at the top of the corporate world. Harrow, Oxford, Harvard Law, he had it all, and Ben had the ruthlessness to take advantage of the old-boy’s network to give Arc Tech a boost.
As a result of the week of meetings in Hong Kong, Arc Tech was given a solid leg up into the competitive, but not yet noticed in the West, tech industry that was quietly blossoming in China, Korea, and Japan. Arc Tech was on the verge of collaborating with Sony on one of the mega-corporation’s latest forays into the photography industry.

Ben had no idea how Tony came up with the ideas, but the latest doozy was a camera lens that shifted its depth of field depending on the electrical current that was passed through it. Tony had bemoaned, at length, about how insanely bulky the current generating circuitry needed to be in this benighted decade (Tony’s words, not Ben’s) but Ben had seen how revolutionary the tech could be. He’d aimed his pitch accordingly.

It had worked too.

The humming presence that he’d been constantly aware of receded. Ben released the breath that he’d subconsciously been holding. No one new had entered the courtyard. Sanctuary was still sanctuary – for now at least. The other presence likely hadn’t even sensed him given Ben’s ridiculous range and his habit of reigning himself in so that his presence was quiet, contained and still. Sometimes there were advantages to being as old as dirt.

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Maria had insisted that she accompany Tony to the UK when the time came, after the pair bade their goodbyes to the Carbonell family. They left Catalonia with fond ties that Tony really hadn’t been expecting to form, especially given their initial frosty welcome. The farewells were heartfelt, and most importantly accompanied by a care package full to the brim with Catalan delicacies (and a recipe for Tony’s favourite Pa amb tomaquet thrown in – Tony’s family cookbook now padded out with dozens of extra pages in Catalan, Spanish, Italian, and Sicilian).

The journey was relatively uneventful, leaving Maria and Tony with nearly a week to kill before term started. The pair took advantage of the time to see the sights in London together, Maria adding to Tony’s already overflowing wardrobe with a few select choices of her own from the more expensive department stores. She dragged him all over the high-end areas of the city. Harrods, Selfridges, Liberty, and Fortnum & Mason knew the pair by sight by the end of the impromptu alone-time. (And Tony dreaded to think what his mother had bought in Sotheby’s and the numerous other auction houses and galleries that littered the expensive neighbourhoods in London that they were sticking to.)

Of course, Tony couldn’t help but notice the deprivation that mirrored New York’s current situation, oh in some ways it wasn’t as bad, not caused by decades of central government misuse, but in others
it was worse. The infamous 3-day weeks were mostly over, but the seemingly never-ending strikes, be it rail, garbage collection, teachers, factory workers… Well, for all that Tony was all for protecting workers, they were visibly taking their toll. Garbage was visibly piled all over the place – or at least in the grimier, less posh areas.

The sites that Tony had initially taken to be more burnt out husks to claim insurance, turned out to be old bomb sites from the Second World War. They were *still* cleaning up. Oh, there weren’t many sites left, and apparently the latest hole in seedy, disreputable Soho’s street had been caused by builder’s attempting to put in a basement, and coming across an old previously unexploded Schneider rocket… But still.

The horror of the grey concrete slabs of brutalist architecture that clearly followed obvious scar lines across the ancient city had Tony wincing. He’d always scoffed when the modernist architect he’d hired to help with Stark Tower (Johnson? Rogers?) had bemoaned that the 60s government had tried to finish off the job that the Blitz had started… But seeing the brand-new, but already deeply horrible results of the recent attempts at “redevelopment” was rather saddening.

Even the Barbican, deeply upper middle class (or well upper class by Tony’s estimates), establishment that it was, a purposefully grim construction of concrete and steel. (Maria dragged Tony there to see an old friend in the penthouse of one of the posh brutalist tower blocks, the grand old Catalan lady who owned the flat had much to say on the plans to build a new theatre in the upper-class estate. Though the custard filled xuixos she served up almost made up for the sheer boredom of that particular afternoon.) Tony with all his appreciation for the marvellous forms that concrete could be teased into; his old house on Malibu itself consisting of numerous cantilevers and curves, found it difficult to appreciate the joy of the material in the face of the what, and why, it had replaced.

Still, nascent ideas about civic architecture and the evils thereof aside, Tony was only grateful that his mother hadn’t taken it into her head to drag him down to Savile Row. He’d endured enough fitting sessions to last a lifetime, he didn’t want to have to put up with it whilst he was still bloody growing. Despite the horrors of prolonged clothes shopping, the food hall in Selfridges was nice – Tony much preferred their low-key basement to Harrods’ far more overtly flashy fair. The quiet wealth Selfridges indulged in somehow less insulting than the gilt and flash of it’s rival store.

His last day of indolence came, and with it another new Bowie album. The LP mysteriously showed up at the lobby of the opulent London hotel they were staying in (The Ritz, just next to the appropriately named Green Park). Once back inside their expansive suite Tony gave into his curiosity and pulled the parcel marked “Rough Trade” open. Inside the shipping sleeve was a note from Ben, promising that he would appear at Cambridge to be Tony’s assigned “chaperone.” The inverted commas Ben’s own addition to the words, neatly slotted around his usual almost illegible scrawl (seriously, it was like doctors’ handwriting, and almost as indecipherable to anyone else as the shorthand that Tony still caught himself using on occasion).
Removing the brown paper obscuring the record’s jacket, Tony almost sobbed in pained irony when he recognised it as the one that held that awful upbeat peppy song that had been everywhere when the 2012 Olympics were being broadcast.

The stark black and white image of the album artwork made a surprising container for the song that had been inescapable that year. Full of the hateful peppy cheerfulness of the international competition, a painful contrast to the jagged shards of his self in the aftermath of New York, and the Chitauri… And the nuke.

Still, painful as that part of his life had been, it was better than what happened later. In the aftermath of Sokovia, after the months of soul-destroying clean-up in that beleaguered nation, Iron Man himself helping to dig out the dead from the rubble. Tony had holed himself up in the corner of The States that had been about as far as he could get from anyone related to the disaster of his life without booking a flight, and thus leaving a trace. The sheer weirdness of the goings on in Deer Meadow, Washington, and that weird neighbouring town… (Twin Pines? Something about logging at any rate.) and the way the law enforcement had so vehemently denied that any of it had even happened. It had nearly been enough to drive him mad(er). Though at least Tony was unlikely to run across any of the strange jazzy music he’d encountered in that tiny town.

Tony semi-reluctantly placed the LP on the deck and leaned back on the bed to listen, reasoning to himself that even when Bowie had led him down dark paths in the past it had always been cathartic. Despite his misgivings Tony was pleasantly surprised by the first two tracks, nothing overly sentimental there. If he’d caught the meaning of one of the songs rather difficult to interpret lyrics correctly it was about the drudgery of day to day existence and how most people slept their lives away.

The painfully familiar plaintiff guitar wail of the eponymous title track came on and Tony listened with a wary ear, expecting the jagged shards he associated with the song, wrongly or not, to resurface. To his surprise for all that the song was hopeful, the imagery summoned was bleak and not at all like the peppy little anthem he remembered so spitefully. Huh. Sounded like a bit of a cut job had happened there then… Reassured that Bowie wasn’t suddenly going to descend into outright soppy idiocy on him, Tony lay flat on his back, bunched the hotel pillows under his head to get comfortable, and prepared to listen.

Tony mulled over his decision to go to Cambridge. He’d accepted their offer, it was a little late to be having second thoughts now. Much as they really were surfacing with a vengeance, with only a handful of hours between him and his upcoming life of academia. He’d even briefly considered both Sunnydale (for the nostalgia; its proximity to Malibu Point) and Seacouver (miles from anywhere Howard owned, and one of the US’s key metallurgical research cities), before dismissing both daydreams out of hand. Maria was due to take him up to the college in the morning, Tony was pretty much locked into this turn of events now. Temporarily reassured that his decision was… Decided, Tony settled back down to focus on the music.
The track, Blackout, briefly jolted Tony into full awareness, the darkness of the lyrics in the first two verses, strongly reminded Tony of the latter days of the Avengers.

“Too, too high a price, to drink rotting wine from your hands (your fearful hands)”

The unexpected association with betrayal, and red, and cut-glass pain swept out of the speakers. The cold furious anger that rushed down his spine surprised Tony with its vehemence. He was quickly coming to realise that now, without Wanda’s invasive meddling, Tony was furious about the way that the Scavengers had been treating him for all those years.

Landlord. Bankroll. Sugar Daddy. Consultant. But one of the team? No never that. He’d been tech support at best. The annoying uncle they all had to put up with every Christmas because he always gave everyone the best toys. But never a member of their little ‘family’. It had been bearable at first, he and Bruce had been a separate little unit from the rest of them for so long. Their own little partnership within the larger group, until Bruce and Natashalie’s altogether unexpected feelings had surfaced. Tony hadn’t resented them their happiness, all but pushing Bruce into her arms, happy to see his Science Bro coming out of his protective shell.

Perhaps he’d betrayed Bruce first…

Tony blinked, he knew he was projecting onto the song, the lyrics obscure and nonsensical, “Panthers are steaming, stalking, screaming…” Yet with this new unfamiliar rage curling in his belly Tony found he couldn’t help it, oh Tony hadn’t been some naïve victim. To say so would be to insult his own intelligence and everyone else who’d been involved in their farce. He’d walked into the self-described explosive chemical mixture of the Avengers with his eyes wide open following their first disastrous meeting on the Helicarrier. Tony had been well-aware that as clashing personalities went, their so-called team was a disaster waiting to happen. And yet, he’d given them a chance. The way they’d worked so well together as a unit in combat against the Chitauri giving Tony that most deadly of emotions, hope.

False hope that is. He’d fooled himself into ignoring all the warning signs that had been there since the beginning, Caps’ derision, Nat’s disastrous inaccurate assessment and contempt, Clint’s blind loyalty to however was holding his leash that particular week, not to mention Thor’s tendency towards dangerous violence that even Jane hadn’t managed to train out of him. Hell, even Bruce’s tendency to up and vanish when the going got tough was well-documented.

Tony should have left after Sokovia, and the worst-case scenario had played itself out. The team had fallen to in-fighting and strife, and they’d all done their best to blame each other, and especially Tony, for the chaos the mind stone and that pair of Hydra trained assassins had wrought. To make the burning 20/20 of hindsight even worse, Tony had somehow believed them. Despite all the evidence that proved Ultron had not arisen from anything that Tony had written. The international
The courts had even dismissed the case against him out of hand, there was no way that the innocuous programming written into the fledgling Ultron AI could possibly have amounted to the murder bot that had tried to wipe them all out. The only commonality between his code and the monster the Mind Stone had berthed had been a shared name.

Hell, he’d tried to leave. Yet, everything had gotten so twisted up towards the end, where good was bad, and bad was good. Right was wrong and wrong was right and might was right. In hindsight Wanda’s sticky influence was obvious all over his later extreme self-effacing efforts to make everything easier on the Avengers. She must have gotten her whammy back on him during the so-called Civil War, perhaps even earlier.

Ignoring that seething personal mess, even now, years later, Tony still agreed with the underlying principles behind the Accords. No matter how much Thunderbolt Ross had attempted to twist their purpose in the US. They’d needed to have that seat at the table to mitigate the demands of some of the more extreme members of the UN, who’d admittedly had every right to be furious with Enhanced individuals at the time.

(Tony felt sickened over the trend that had emerged after he’d tried to distance himself from them; of the Avengers storming into sovereign states uninvited. Usually leaving behind a trail of destruction, before patting each other on the back and declaring whatever they’d been attempting to do a ‘job well done’ and leaving. Stark Industries had ended up picking up the relief bill again, it had been the right thing to do, regardless of Tony’s complete lack of involvement with their innumerable disasters.)

Despite the dark political storm from which they’d emerged, the accords were designed primarily to help enhanced individuals. Help them find support, legal protections, and enshrine their human rights. The accords were always designed to help, in the face of extremists from all quarters baying for blood in response to the Avenger’s very public bad behaviour. Behaviour that endangered (and tragically frequently killed) countless civilians, and routinely caused millions worth of property damage for what should have been the most minor of tasks. It didn’t help that the world was still reeling over the very public airing of all of SHIELDs dirty laundry. Well initially, eventually, disgusting as it was, the horrors carried out against Enhanced Individuals contained in SHIELDs archive were a boon to try and soften the harsh attitudes that eventually gave rise to the Accords. Tony had never been sure if he should thank Agent Coulson, or hit him for his involvement in those horrors, the information had been so useful, yet utterly repellent.

With T’Chaka’s backing, and the support of the socialists in the European Union and Scandinavia that so terrified Ross, the first draft of The Accords that was ready to be signed and handed over to Enhanced Individuals to debate amongst themselves had primarily been a force for good. Oh, in a rough and ready sort of way of course, none of the proposed laws were enforceable until everything was ratified, and Tony had been very careful to make sure that in the very tenets of the document it was stated that Enhanced individuals had to have a seat at the table, and veto power to any proposed laws. Not to mention constant reminders about the UNs own basic statement of human rights, with particular emphasis on the right to education, freedom, and bodily integrity, reiterated at dozens of
key points throughout the document.

Upon being presented with that first draft, Rogers had stormed his way across the world, railing against ‘agendas’ and ‘governments’ and ‘control’. Raging incoherently about matters he clearly didn’t understand like some idiotic troll dug out of one the darkest corners of the internet who thought a term as hilariously outdated as ‘cuck’ was still a valid insult. Tony *still* couldn’t believe how naïve Rogers had proven about the sheer inertia of international politics.

The man had somehow been convinced that by signing up to that initial declaration of intent, that they’d immediately be subject to a set of imaginary punitive rules that would dictate their every action. It was as if the hundreds of countries that had signed up for the international agreement were all secretly Hydra. Now admittedly, Thunderbolt Ross had somehow gotten himself appointed as the official US representative for the accords at the UN, and subsequently had done his damndest to give the fools every impression that this was indeed the case. Foolishly Tony hadn’t believed his ridiculous ‘I am in charge of all of this’ schtick would work; the Accords had been one of the key things that cropped up on the political section of the news for *years*, alongside the equally slow moving G20 summits, and the Paris Climate Accords.

And yet somehow, despite Rwanda’s loud and well documented insistence upon making sure that there were provisions in place to protect Enhanced individuals from ethnic documentation, and the risk of genocide, or being used as an international mercenary force… And the resultant massive diplomatic row with France that lasted for *months* as they made aspersions about just who was to blame for the recent genocide that Rwanda were still recovering from as a nation…

…Despite the huge amount of furore that *every* decision had caused, with talk show hosts on everything from Graham Norton, and Cohen, to the Late Late Show making jokes about it all… With Norway (the country that shamed the world with their debates about whether lifetime imprisonment, with daily breaks to play football with his guard, was too *inhumane* a sentence for the man who had massacred the children of the country’s ruling elite) piping in that they would side with the Enhanced Individual’s rights to personhood, fulfilment, and *bodily integrity*, with a pointed look at Ross which had had Fox News making threats against the little nation for months. …Somehow the idiots had bought into Thaddeus Ross’s charade hook, line, and sinker.

Rogers had managed to rage his way across the world, killing dozens of civilians and members of law enforcement in sovereign territories where he had absolutely no right to be. Not, no right to be as an individual citizen, but no right to be acting as Captain America.

Over the course of one long idiotic weekend, in one fell swoop the damned fool had managed to undo all the hard work that T’Chaka, Norway, Tony, Rwanda, and anyone else on the UN international council set up to deal with the Accords, who saw the severe risks to personhood that the Accords potentially posed if mishandled… He undid all their hard work, proving in an instant that all the worst fears being spewed by representatives like Thunderbolt Ross were valid.
The harsh clauses of an earlier nastier draft (one that Tony had hoped so dearly that he’d headed off at the pass) were hastily enacted upon the active Enhanced members of society, and idiots like Scott Lang were swept up in the great political machine as the US, Germany, and Nigeria succumbed to outrage over the Avengers’ idiotic actions. After all, the clauses that Tony, T’Chaka and anyone with even a smidgen of compassion had been campaigning for all those years, had yet to even be enacted. The accords were not finished yet, unratified, unenforceable. Replacement clauses laid down to head off the more ridiculous punitive suggestions were still in a completely up in the air ‘to be decided upon further debate with the individuals themselves’ state.

The earlier draft thankfully wasn’t anywhere near as draconian as the document that the Accords had been hastily drawn up to replace, the SRA. The Superhero Registration Act was a truly evil piece of legislature worthy of the atrocities carried out by the Nazis and Kenpeitai. It called for mandatory re-education, imprisonment, and depending on how ‘useful to science and mankind’ the individual’s enhancement was, vivisection of anyone found to be enhanced.

Tony had gotten a hold of a copy of the SRA and had nearly vomited when he saw the brutality laid out in harsh black and white, it was worse than anything the industrial evil of the Nazi war machine had carried out, worse even than the infamous Unit 731. Worse still, it was being called for by Tony’s own country. Not some distant foreign evil, like those damned Huns, or the Nips as Howard had occasionally called them when he got angry and forgot himself, but that country that prided itself on being the world’s greatest and finest democracy; the United States of America.

The accords had been a reaction to that great festering evil, an attempt to step in and come up with some much-needed legislature to head off the era of might is right that had clearly been looming around the next corner. At some point either the Avengers were going to fuck up on a catastrophic level that made the near miss at Sokovia look like a picnic, or worse, escalation, as Vision had termed it. Someone new was going to come along, who no one could possibly deal with. And that was only if individual world governments didn’t decide that enough was enough, and in reaction to the Avengers rampaging their way around the globe on a weekly basis, declare that it was illegal to be an enhanced individual full stop. On pain of death. There had already been mutterings.

There needed to be proactive protections in place, mutual protection to ensure that the scared and frightened masses didn’t react as scared and frightened humans were so wont to behave throughout history; and try to wipe out that which was different. Rogers had nearly undone all that hard work.

Frankly Lang didn’t know how lucky he was that Tony had managed to swing things so that he didn’t end up frozen in one of SHIELD’s crates, ready to be vivisected ‘for science’ at a moment’s notice. Whilst the effective community service orders, or rather the probationary trainee period, of the newer kinder draft weren’t in effect, thankfully the pre-existing international treaties between the US and the EU prevented certain parties in America from throwing the literal book at the man. Though Tony had been furious when he found out that Pym Industries had been caught up in the
international furore, oh not on behalf of Hank, or the corporation – but the thousands of employees who suddenly found themselves jobless in the aftermath.

The track ended, a wailed “V2 Schnieder…” ceding to tonal instrumentals, if the soundscapes summoned up could be called instrumentals. Tony realised that he’d clenched his fist so hard that he’d drawn blood, the four red crescents in his palm ached, especially since one of them overlapped with the only just healed scar tissue from the juice bar. The instrumentals proved to be a mini revelation, calming down Tony’s enraged heartbeat and giving him the space to just breathe, and try not to turn over the dying days of the Avengers quite so obsessively.

The music harkened back to the bleak atmosphere of the album Low without quite tipping into the desolate isolation of the previous album. The beautiful serene bleakness of the summoned realm was somehow reassuring after that unexpected anger, Tony honestly couldn’t put a finger on what it was about the rushing wind and strange atonal noises that calmed him, but something there did.

If he ever got to meet Pepper, he swore he’d never tease her over her taste in ambient music ever again. Tony felt like an ass. There was something to be mined here, the forever-present calculations and schematics that took up a good proportion of Tony’s conscious thoughts at any given time turning to the kind of peaceful purpose that he usually had to put effort into reaching.

As ever, Tony’s mind spun onto the ideas and schematics that absorbed so much of his waking life. Contemplating, and then dismissing an idea derived from his own designs for Hawkass’s arrows. The shifting winds of the music putting him of a mind to applying the heat seeking tech he’d already miniaturised for Katniss into far more benign search and rescue tech, capable of weaselling out people buried under rubble. Useful in areas where the solid weight of a human digging down would do more harm than good. The idea was a good one – and likely something Arc tech could use, and yet, many of the basic principles it was founded upon hadn’t yet been established. Did Tony have the right to commercialise other people’s work like that? When they hadn’t even come up with it?

Realising that he’d reached the end of the album Tony sighed, and began the short ritual of safely stowing away the disc, as he mulled the possibilities over in his mind. Tony was aware that international trade wasn’t quite what he remembered, not now. He was contemplating taking advantage of that fact – perhaps he could start up a firm that his father wouldn’t be able to get wind of on this side of the Atlantic.

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Maria was so proud of her son. She beamed down at her bambino as he wriggled uncomfortably. Suppressing the urge to smile at his obvious “I don’t want to be seen with my mom” attitude. Maria had to say that he looked adorable in the new suit she’d bought him from Harrods.
She hadn’t quite believed the state of her bambino’s wardrobe when he’d returned from the school - all strangely tailored suits, and uncomfortable looking denim trousers.

Maria had managed to hold herself back from replacing his entire wardrobe with decent Italian-made suits whilst they were home in Sicily. But the not so under the breath comments from her father’s family in Barcelona had pushed her towards adding several additions of her own to her darling’s… ridiculous wardrobe. As a result, her bambino had several Italian and Catalan made suits, and some off the rack wear from the department stores in London and Barcelona. Maria quietly hoped that her son would take the hint and start diluting the more exotic items.

Maria hadn’t resorted to throwing out her son’s strange choices of clothing, that brand of disapproving bad parenting was more dear Howard’s style. Though if Tony showed signs of still favouring the awful things during his next vacation, Maria might have to take steps.

She gazed around the tiny ‘city’ that was to be her son’s home for the next several years. It was so ridiculously… English. There were people cycling everywhere. Men in suits bicycling their way around the city, full of tiny medieval lanes that were so like, and yet utterly unlike the familiar medieval lanes in Sicily’s numerous hilly villages.

It looked boring. Boring and safe. Maria approved, may you live in interesting times indeed. Her life had been nothing but interesting ever since she’d had the misfortune to meet Howard in Los Alamos all those years ago. Maria was under no illusions that any son of hers wouldn’t lead an interesting life, interesting was the fate of her entire family. But this place might just hold off the inevitable, much as she was so happy that her son had finally met his extended family. Maria did not want him mixing with the family when the Ndrangheta and Cosa Nostra were so close to outright war.

Yes, Maria was happy that her son was going to be stuck in this dull, depressingly English, city for the foreseeable future.

In the centre of the medieval heart of the city Tony embarrassedly squirmed as his mom hugged him tightly, she’d been affectionate all day. No that was unfair. But for want of a better word, Maria was being clingy.

“Make sure you phone me Tony, and no more of your half-hearted ‘I tried Mom’ lies like during the blackout. I don’t care if the phones were down, you should have let me know you were safe
bambino!”

“Yes Mom…”

Squirming as she planted a gentle kiss on his forehead and trying not to look like he was appreciating the loving gesture too much, Tony hugged his mom one last time and hurried across the street to the imposing façade of the college that was to be his home for the next few years. Tony made it to the medieval wooden gate still feeling his mother’s beady eyes on his back as he made it safely to his new home.

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Ana smiled softly at her husband, darling Edwin was fretting, he kept shooting worried glances at the phone. He’d been doing so all day long.

She wasn’t sure what he expected to happen between the time Maria and Tony left their hotel and getting to Cambridge – but he was a worrywart. It was part of the reason she loved him so much.

Ana discreetly adjusted the hang of her headscarf, if asked, she always said that they made her feel like one of the 50s starlets – like Katherine Hepburn or Marilyn. Though of course, they’d had their own hair underneath their scarfs. Ana shot her husband a fond, if long suffering smile as she dumped his dinner on their kitchen table. That in itself was a sign of how distracted he was, Edwin never let her cook these days, and even before her …illness, Edwin cooked more often than not, complaining that she used too much salt and lard in her versions of the dishes he loved.

Edwin ate the meal without comment, obviously not tasting it at all (which was probably a good thing come to think of it, Ana had thought the original British recipe for beef and ale stew could do with some spicing up and had… Improvised, dropping in a hefty amount of paprika into the pot alongside the butter and onions at the beginning. Not to mention all that cumin that her new chemotherapy altered taste buds had demanded.)

The phone finally rang as they were preparing to go to bed that evening, Ana listened with half an ear to Edwin’s half of the conversation, relaxing in relief as some of the new lines that were now permanently etched into her husband’s face eased a little.

Their darling boy had made it safely to Cambridge.
Justin squirmed in the grasp of the older boy,

“Come on Fag – you’ve got to pay your dues.”

“I-I-I dun-“

“Aw, is the little yank missing his doughnuts? Come on doughnut-boy, you’ve got to work for your privileges here. Work hard enough and you’ll earn a fag of your own in a few years.”

Justin sniffled, he wished he’d begged harder to be allowed to go to school nearer Tony. His friend. Not this weird cold and mean place that Daddy kept insisting would make a proper Englishman of him. Justin didn’t wanna be English if it meant he’d be mean and nasty like the older boys.

Justin already regretted trying to follow Tony’s example, he’d been so proud when he came top of his class. The letter he’d happily posted to Tony’s new col-cu-school had been full of news, that the food at Eton was better than at Westchester, but weird and most of the desserts were made with strange tasting custard. And had funny names; like jam roly poly, arctic roll, Battenberg, Eton Mess, and spotted dick. That there were no Ty’s or Krelboynes or Mr Smythes to be mean and biting and frightening.

Then, as soon as he’d settled in, the whispers and hastily swallowed names that his year mates’ bit-back suddenly clicked into place and made sense. The reason no one in his class had dared touch him, was that they weren’t sure which of the older boys would claim him as their Fag. No one wanted to cross James “Buster” Braddock, even though Justin knew (in the same way that everyone knew not to let themselves stay alone in a room alone with Master Rochdale) that the Braddocks were suddenly poor, and James probably wouldn’t be at the school anymore soon.

Tony approached the Porter’s Lodge with his heart in his throat, it wasn’t that he hadn’t done this before, but somehow, he cared more this time. Undergraduate first-impression nerves a more pressing sensation than the mild jitters he’d felt entering the esteemed university with a few degrees already securely under his belt.
Tony noticed that for once the doorway was the exact right size, he didn’t have to duck to get through the small door built into the huge and warped ancient wooden gate that barred the way, but an adult most certainly would have to. (Tony somehow doubted that the huge outer gate would be able to open if anyone tried, the warped and bleached appearance of the wood made Tony think the thing would crumble to so much dust.)

Tony carefully stepped up, and into the entrance gate. To his left, three steep stone stairs led up to the entry to the little side-room built into the medieval gateway. The stairs were heavily rutted down to a slide-like groove by centuries of feet scuffling over them. Tony carefully picked his way up the slippery looking stone and entered the tiny room – the Porter’s Lodge. Disappointingly there was no one inside the cubbyhole bedecked chamber. The Porter’s Lodge smelled of old paper, wood polish and tobacco. With a distinct whiff of dog about the place. Tony peered around at the ancient wooden shelving, double checking that he hadn’t missed someone, and giving it up as a bad job, had to stretch onto his toes to reach up to the counter and ring the bell.

Still grumbling internally about the world not catering to the vertically challenged members of the population, Tony almost missed the look of patronising “lost child” that flitted across the Porter’s face,

“Hi. I’m Tony Stark – here to sign in as an undergraduate and collect my keys.”

Tony almost allowed himself to turn the statement into a question but caught himself before the infuriating questioning inflection entered his voice. No, he had to appear self-confident. Without Ben here to smooth the way (where was the erstwhile man?) Tony couldn’t afford to let the Porter feel a moment of doubt that he was supposed to be there.

After a surprisingly matter-of-fact checking of Tony’s ID (in this case his passport) against a list, the Porter, wearing the traditional bowler hat and penguin suit, passed over a set of keys. He explained that one set were for the rooms/windows, and another key for the numerous gates around the college, but that the Porter’s own master keys would override all locks – and that certain gates were firmly locked to past 1am so he’d need to keep his gate keys with him if he wanted to spend any late nights out. The look the porter shot him at this part of the info dump gave Tony no illusions as to his expectations of Tony’s lack of nightly activities.

Tony hurried through the medieval courts towards the staircase that was apparently his home for the year. He passed centuries old brick and sandstone accommodation blocks, the vastly oversized college chapel, the ancient hall (effectively the cafeteria), and numerous pleasant enclosed gardens. The gardens ranged in design from beautifully kept lawns with almost cartoon-like chequers mown into them (which, from experience, Tony knew students weren’t allowed to walk on), to far more thoughtful spaces apparently created during the Georgians’ and Victorians’ imperialistic zeitgeist to
explore the world and bring back all of the plants they could fit in the ship with them.

Finally, after what felt like an age, but in reality, couldn’t have been more than twenty minutes, Tony realised that “New Court” (built in the 1500s) was on the other side of the main road, that ran outside of the college. Not that this meant that Tony would have to leave the college grounds to get there, he had his pick of either a private subway that ran underneath the road, or entering L-staircase, hoofing it up to the 5th floor, and using the enclosed bridge that crossed over an alleyway and took him out on the other side at M-staircase.

Tony chose the subway, noting again that the ancient stonework was worn smooth and shiny in places, the stairs looking more like a slide than a set of steps. The underground walk was short, and surreally tiled in the sort of tacky but expensive blue and white patterning that Tony associated with knock-off Ming vases and people with more money than sense. (Tony recognised the irony of his opinion, but there was a reason he didn’t voice it out loud.) He was grateful for the wheeled trolley that the Porter had provided him with – but even more grateful when a pair of students helped him to shove his trunk up the stairs on the other side of the subway. Working out with Ben or not, Tony was painfully aware that he weighed much less than his luggage.

The literally medieval accommodations in Tony’s staircase (P-block) were as homey as they were claustrophobic. The walls were covered in ancient wainscoting, but where the faux-ancient designs back at the mansion were oppressive with their dark wood staining trying to emulate old wood, here the ancient oak had bleached with centuries of sunlight and wear into a pleasant worn brown patina that turned silvery in direct light. The faded oak warm rather than intimidating. Yet again, the stairs were ancient enough that there was a channel ground into the centre of them. Tony could tell that he’d never get any use out of the In/Out sliding signs next to his name A.E.Stark painted onto the wall in a flowing cursive script at the base of the stairwell, since he couldn’t actually reach them. At least he could reach the lock on the door.

Tony unlocked the outer door and trekked his way up to the fourth floor (or the fifth, since the first floor was labelled “ground” not 1st), and his room. Or rather rooms – since Ben was supposed to be in the adjoining room next door. After checking that Tony was safely ensconced inside his room, his two temporary able-bodied helpers both excused themselves. Presumably returning to their duty of helping other Freshers; who had been trickling in all day from their conversation.

Tony noticed that, unlike the six rooms to a floor set-up on the lower levels, here on the top floor, in what was effectively the attic, there were only four. One of those four was a Fellow’s office. Tony was quietly pleased that he’d only have to avoid one person in the evenings.

The room wasn’t as tiny as Tony had feared, it had a surprisingly sensible layout despite the ancient medieval stonework that was literally two feet thick, with windows that were charmingly quaint. Initially that is, until Tony realised that alongside the aesthetically pleasing way the dozens of tiny metal-encased panes of not-quite-flat glass warped the light outside, that only two of the dozens of
tiny 4”x2” panes that made up the window actually opened to let in a breeze. That would be unpleasant come summer.

Still, Tony had his own bed, own desk, plenty of shelves, and a small sitting area with a cheap looking coffee table next to an uncomfortable looking chair that had probably been a designer-brand when it was new. Though now, upholstered in hard-wearing coarse brown fabric, that was nevertheless scuffed and stained by the room’s numerous inhabitants, the coffee table corner looked sad indeed.

There were two doors in the room, the one leading into the corridor outside – and the shared bathroom, showers and ‘gyp’ that everyone on the corridor used communally, and the door that led to the adjoining room. Well, technically there were three doors. Tony had been surprised to find that behind the first door that his key unlocked, there was in fact a second door directly behind it. There had been a moment of puzzlement, until Tony spotted the rather large ‘spyhole’ the size of a letterbox way above his head.

Ah. Tony vaguely remembered that some of the other colleges had had this sort of thing last time, having the inner door shut meant do not disturb, or was it the outer? Tony couldn’t really remember. He’d enjoyed the modern post-doc accommodation out near Wolfson, and visits to other colleges in those PhD days usually passed in a haze of perfectly legal under-21 drinking, and sex.

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As soon as the big boys left, looking satisfied that James was treating his new Fag the right way, and showing the ‘yank’ the ropes Justin got the surprise of his life.

“Sorry about that, Justin was it?”

“-Wha?”

“I’ve got to put on a good show for the others. Uphold the old reputation and all that. Between you and me I hate it, but… Well. So long as we’re alone, you can call me James. And forget about the chores. Well, most of them. It’d be suspicious if you didn’t go down to the laundry room with all the other firsties.”

“Wh-Wh-Why?”
“Long held tradition I’m afraid.”

James’s face twisted into a sneer, it reminded Justin of Mr Smythe. Scary, but… It’d taken him most of the year… But not aimed at him. Justin hoped anyway.

“Look. You keep up this farce, and, apart from the laundry I won’t make you do fag duties ok?”

“Uh.”

“Just look suitably cowed and quiver your lips like you’re scared every now and again. And we’re golden.”

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Howard couldn’t quite believe the numbers that greeted his eyes.

Howard had just gotten back to the mansion, from his usual utterly fruitless search for Steve’s body – the blackout nonsense, and the boy’s kidnapping meant that he’d left late, and returned late. (The damned boat had almost gotten trapped in the sea ice as a result.) He’d been dealing with the hateful business of paperwork all afternoon. No rest for the wicked after all. And Howard had been extremely wicked indeed in his day. (Howard winced at the memory of just how often Ed had reported back that his gift had been greeted with a slap.)

Tony’s little hobby, Arc Technologies was already in profit. Albeit the boy was still insistent on the hippy crap and was plugging 75% of it straight back into the NGO branch of the company – providing water purification plants to third world countries and all that similar never-ending monetary blackhole that came with trying to do good.

That wasn’t even including the funds that came from the Starkbucks franchise. The coffee chain, of all things, was closely linked to the side of the firm that was deep in negotiations with international utilities companies, all trying to hash out exclusive rights to access the filter technology on a more industrial scale. Why the hell had his son decided to go into catering? Starkbucks branded water filters were already making an impact globally, as all those NGOs and charities handed out free goodwill publicity.

Still. Arc Film had rapidly shot to the top of the photographer’s toolkit as a must-have product. The
company had begun branching into lenses, with the help of Canon and Leica – a first getting those two companies to cooperate. Howard felt his incredulity rise; how on earth had the boy managed that? An unfamiliar and long-missing warmth suffused his chest. And just who was this Denisof, Tony’s business manager?

The next branch of the firm close to opening up product manufacture was… Video games? Why on earth was his son trying to get into arcades? AT Games was deep in negotiations with Sega, Encom, IBM, and Namco for something related to motors, for reasons that Howard wasn’t in the mood to fathom. The amount of money involved was far higher than Howard would have expected for something so… Frivolous.

Despite Howard’s misgivings about the boy’s ridiculous charitable endeavours, his son was proving to have a surprising knack for business. Perhaps Howard would be able to focus on reigning in Obadiah after all – he’d been pushing for deals with countries that weren’t allies of the US for months now. Something Howard hadn’t felt able to condone, even with the steady business that the increasingly frigid Cold War was bringing in, though Obadiah did have a valid point. Business wasn’t what it was. But… If the boy proved he could stand on his own two feet after all, perhaps Howard wouldn’t have to break his admittedly twisted moral code in order to give his only son a safe future.

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Tony made his cautious way towards Hall (effectively the cafeteria), and hopefully some form of supper as evening approached. A round jovial looking man genially waddled over, he was all bushy hair and moustache – putting Tony strongly in mind of the walrus from Alice in Wonderland.

There was a brief sparkle of that shade of whiteish blue that, despite himself, Tony forever associated with arc reactors and safety, but otherwise his third eye had proven blessedly unobtrusive over the chaos of the day. (Well, that or Tony had gotten far better at not reacting to the bizarre and strange sights that tended to flutter around.)

“Oh, young Mr Stark!”

A pudgy paw grasped Tony’s own hand and shook vigorously and enthusiastically,

“Professor Marcus Simeon, Norse History. I’m to be your tutor for your career here.”
Huh. Tony wasn’t too surprised – he remembered that tutors at Cambridge generally had very little to do with their supposed mentees academic lives, they were *meant* to look after welfare, but this usually amounted to a awkwardly sipping a cup of tea once per term.

“We’re so sorry! Your mentor, guardian? Ben Adams phoned ahead, he won’t be in the country until the academics begins next week. We meant to catch you as soon as you signed in but…” the already flushed man turned a deeper shade of puce, “it’s been a busy day.”

Dammit, Tony thought to himself. Wondering just what he’d have to do to explain away Ben’s absence. The erstwhile idiot had been one of the key clauses in Tony’s being able to come here.

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Ben trekked down the barely-there path, little more than an animal track really, towards the nearest hub of ‘civilisation’. He’d spent a charming summer reacquainting himself with the tenets of the ancient Buddhist faith, and the ancient living conditions that the monks willingly subjected themselves to.

Ben was dearly looking forward to getting back to running water, truly one of the marvels of the modern age. (Behind the mask of Ben, he reminisced about the hot baths that the Romans, and the Minoans had loved so much.) Ben considered the time up on the plateau of the world well-spent, he had a new appreciation for the hustle and bustle of life, and the antsy need to walk into the wilderness and disappear had faded, sated for the time being.

He’d trekked all the way up there to try and find that accursed monastery with all the Inducers – or Sorcerers as they were apparently calling themselves these days. Once Ben had gotten to the site of that venerable mystic teaching place however, there was nothing to be seen. Not even a hint that the foundations had been there once upon a time. If he hadn’t been blessed *cursed* with the perfect recollection that all his race shared, Ben would have been certain that he was in the wrong place.

Eventually he found a wizened old monk, who *wasn’t* sworn to silence, willing to relate what happened when the Chinese annexed the country.

Apparently, the strange old monastery had quite literally vanished overnight. Evaporating like so much mist.

The bald, and mostly toothless old man had cackled loudly at this, the soldiers had all been *very*
upset at that lack of temple to ransack. The neighbouring Buddhist monastery, an order that believed in frugality being the path to enlightenment, had very little to steal. And though the ramifications for the people, and village that lived to serve the magical monastery had been harsh, the very fact that they’d managed to cock a snook at the invaders had been payment enough.

Still, salted and yak buttered tea, and getting back in touch with his ancient-self aside. Ben had pretty much wasted his summer happily in the thin air, and simple living that the region pretty much forced upon its denizens.

Continuing the well-worn groove of trudging across continents Ben contemplated just how late he was going to be to his appointment at St. Cedd’s. He’d meant to leave three weeks ago, but one thing had led to another. There’d been that unwanted tell-tale buzz. And then, once he’d made sure he’d well and truly lost that potential threat, a squadron’s worth of Chinese Soldiers to avoid – themselves chasing the source of the buzz that he’d been avoiding so studiously. Young idiot, thinking that he could stroll into one of the most isolated and politically contested regions of the planet unaccosted just because he was ‘unkillable’.

Still, Ben would get there when he got there. As it had been since time immemorial.

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Tony shuffled awkwardly into place, in the front row of the group photo. Avoiding other people’s feet, and seemingly non-existent third eye entities, whilst trying to not look like he was avoiding things no one else could see. The haze of blue around Simeon was also around many of the other staff members, which, Tony was trying to not admit was very reassuring indeed.

The students were a more mixed bag of floating chittering creatures, and flashes of colour. Some that peaceful blue, others the yellow that Tony associated with Obie and mistrust, and others still flashing quite literally in all the colours of the spectrum, and beyond into colours that Tony quite literally didn’t have a name for. He’d never seen them before, if this Sight could be called seeing in the traditional sense.

Eventually Tony managed to filter out the worst of it, though due to his close, enforced, proximity, he couldn’t help but overhear the conversation going on directly behind and above his head. Trapped as he was, as the awkward sideways shuffle into the narrow stands continued all around him,

“Aw – did you hear? The new college Master labelled his dog as a ‘cat’ on the forms, so although dogs aren’t allowed as pets. He’s got one.”
The first voice absolutely lived up to every queer stereotype that Tony had encountered and embraced it knowingly. Tony liked the voice already.

“Huh. Old Carruthers would never have stood for that.”

The second voice was Old Money. Like the first, but unlike the first there were no friendly overtones to be found. Tony found himself wishing that the first voice would get a clue and tread with caution,

“How would you know?”

“Oh my older brother came here back in the day… Oh I say what’s that child doing here? Why on earth is there a little fag here? Did our young dog-loving Master make a mistake? Or is he the Master’s son?”

Tony shrunk in his seat. It wasn’t his fault that Simeon had grabbed him and forced him to sit front and centre “lest we lose you in the crowd!”

“You know… There’s two things I don’t like about you Sutton. Your face. So why don’t you be a dear and shut both of them?”

Tony turned and watched the source of the first voice, Tintin Jr dealing with the would-be snob with poorly disguised glee. Tintin was coming out with the type of one-liners that Tony wouldn’t have hesitated to use if he was still his adult-self. As it was… Well, those sorts of taunts were unwise when you came up to less than half the mass of your opposition.

Tony grimaced as the cameraman fussed with his ridiculous camera for a solid twenty minutes before he was seemingly satisfied with his shot. The entire new influx of students to St. Cedd’s had all signed the Matriculation contract in the hall, before being marched out to the crumbling gothic stairs that fronted the chapel where a set of stands had been erected.

Of course, Ben was still nowhere to be seen. The room next to Tony’s remained stubbornly empty.
Justin bit back tears as the blister that had slowly been growing on his palm the whole week burst, the suddy water burned as it got into the painful sore. But he couldn’t stop - James wanted his uniform to shine in the morning, and Justin had only just finished cleaning the older boy’s sheets.

Justin knew he had it good. That’s what made it worse. Tim’s boss had thrashed him until he could barely walk the next day, and Tim had still had to do all of William’s laundry, and help clean the dormitory.

At least Justin only had to do washing. It wasn’t so bad. And, and, James wasn’t so bad. He’d never hit him, or made him do any of the really horrible jobs like clean the toilets. Or try and hide the secret beer… Or that other job that no one talked about.

But… Wincing again as the pain in his hand flared up, Justin wished he’d never been sent to this horrible school. Even the nice people were mean.

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Tony didn’t know what to do with himself that evening. Term proper, and thus teaching, hadn’t started yet. And the mad dash around the city in order to sign up for courses and to collect the pre-term paperwork was due to start the next morning. In theory he could have gone to one of the numerous ‘Ents’ that were being laid on for the freshers’ benefit. However, since most of them involved alcohol (the legal limit in the UK being 18… Sometimes 16 with provisions like adult supervision), Tony was probably going to be automatically excluded from entering anyway. Not that he actually wanted to join in. Nevertheless, knowing that it wasn’t even an option rankled.

Eventually Tony found himself in the near empty SCR (Senior Common Room– as opposed to the JCR; Junior Common Room, which was currently housing a ‘pub quiz’ and ‘Getting to Know You’ bop – whatever that was.) To his surprise there was a clunky colour TV set in the corner of the otherwise deserted space.

After a cursory flick through the available channels (All three of them.) Tony watched the news with a sinking feeling, now that he was out in the real-world as it were, no longer caught in a protective bubble that shielded him from the realities of the world by well-meaning adults… Well, the news story about the “Mutant Problem” was a hell of an eye-opener. Far more so than the sparse textbooks, full of euphemistic terms, and large spaces of nothing, that Tony had managed to find so far. It was yet another confirmation that something here was way to the left of the world he’d … Well, left.
Tony genuinely didn’t remember anything about mutants at all from his previous life, he didn’t think that even he had been oblivious enough not to have at least heard of them before. Yet, ever since that White House story, and the inexplicable presence of the Maximoffs forty years too early, and ten years too late, Tony had been wracking his brain trying to work out if he’d missed anything in either his previous life, or the things the adults weren’t telling the children in this one.

The news piece wasn’t really news piece per say, more the results of the Trask Trials with an expose on an old story tacked on to make up airtime. Some leaked documents from the trial, revealing Trask’s hand in unethical human experimentation on mutants had jolted a new interest in the public consciousness.

The old conspiracy theories (new to Tony) about the mutant involvement in the Cuban Missile Crisis were being rehashed on the political debate show playing on the small screen in the corner of the tiny SCR. Not to mention the one thing he had encountered already, the stadium landing on the White House.

Of course, being a powerful corporate head, an American patriot at that, who was supposedly actively contributing to the US’s international military relations with his firms’ products, it came as no surprise to Tony to hear that Trask had managed to get off on all charges. Whilst Tony himself had never been on trial for anything serious (he was ashamed to admit that he himself had used and abused his indispensable status with the US military machine in his time) Tony recognised the grease in the machine all too well.

Tony just knew that this ‘Mutant Problem’ wasn’t the only difference between this brave new world that he found himself living in and the one he had left behind. He dubiously supposed that, assuming Doom was telling the truth, without Thanos to introduce the Infinity Gems to Earth something had to trigger the …and Tony hated to use this term, but… If the news piece was to be believed many of these so-called powers defied a logical explanation, rise of supers. It seemed that whatever had triggered the change had happened earlier in this world than the one he knew and loathed.

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On the way back to his room Tony discovered a quick note from Ben in his pigeonhole at the p’lodge,

Hi Tony,

Sorry, my transport back from the plateaus of the Himalaya’s was unavoidably delayed. I expect you to keep up with your dance training in the meantime. Laps around college in the morning are still
Arc Tech’s negotiations with Encom and Namco are… Progressing. Damned ritualised politeness aside, I’ll tell you all about that meeting when I get back.

See you when I see you,

Ben.

Tony was deeply suspicious of the note, but… it was Ben’s handwriting all right. And it was certainly Ben’s sarcasm… And Ben’s alternate identity as Denisof talking too.

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Whilst running all over town, signing up at his departments for his courses, Tony took the time to check in on his finances. Since, Ben or no, he’d have to be mostly self-sufficient during this era. Which was more than fine with him.

Over the course of a very terse conversation with first the bank clerk, and then the bank manager, involving his passport, and a written affidavit by Howard granting Tony permission to access – well, not his trust fund, but a current account that had been set up to draw a monthly living allowance from his trust fund. Tony quickly found that he had a lot more cash to splash then he’d ever had during his time at MIT.

The news honestly surprised him. The first time around Howard had barely opened his purse strings enough to pay for the university fees. Well, the amount of cash he was allowed was broadly speaking the same this time around too actually. However, given the heavy subsidies the British government currently still paid into their university system in the 70s (sadly no more in the future Tony had come from), and the little fact that Trinity College literally had more money than they knew what to do with (so every year they dumped it on the other colleges at the university), meaning that they in turn heavily subsidised both their room and board… Well between the grants and bursaries that kept fees for even foreign students relatively affordable, Tony could more than make food and rent each term.

Similarly, unlike at MIT, with the responsibilities Tony already owed SI and thus the toing and froing back and forth between campus and the business district of the city, at Cambridge Tony really didn’t need much in the way of transportation. The small city was walk-able, though admittedly most people cycled.
By the end of the meeting Tony estimated that Howard had overestimated his costs by a whole $1,000 USD per month. Pretty much the exact opposite of his previous situation at college – which had been a shortfall of $750 per month. And given that this was the 1970s, and pre a whole hell of a lot of inflation. $1000 was a truly huge amount of excess. Even with the exchange rates. Tony ended up setting it up with the bank manager to have a current order in place to channel most of the excess money into a separate savings account.

Apart from reflexively hiding it from Howard, Tony literally didn’t know what to do with the cash; given that his usual relaxation techniques involved either an engineering binge, or a drinking binge, or often, both at the same time. Tony had no intention of taking up the drinking again, however, he didn’t yet have access to the graduate-level lab space that he really needed to be able to let go and just… Engineer. The undergraduate labs, excellent as they were for their main purpose of teaching, just weren’t equipped to deal with the stuff that Tony usually got up to. Well, that was Tony’s excuse. The other (main) reason was his (justified) paranoia about his designs getting out into the world forty years too early.

Tony needed to hire another lawyer, preferably one well versed in British patent-law, perhaps the cash could be funnelled that way, one with an eye to expanding officially into mainland Europe, and eventually Asia without the current need for deals with his competitors. Actually building something out there, instead of just signing partnerships with firms already well-established in those regions. He cursed the paranoia that meant Landman and Zach were out of touch for the time being, Tony could do with an international conference call right about now to clarify a few things, and of course check in on Arc Tech’s progress. If the information Ben had passed on was at all accurate, then Starkbucks at least had turned its first profit – albeit a tiny one that had been immediately plugged back into helping the farmers produce their coffee in an ecologically sound manner that puzzled and frustrated the pen pushers.

Tony had also spotted more than a few high-street shops in London carrying the new Arc Film cameras. With their new multipurpose adjustable depth of field lenses - made using a liquid film that could be adjusted on the go depending on need. So, presumably, business on that end was booming – though whether that translated to healthy growth or not was another matter.

On top of that, Tony was desperate to hear news about the coffee and water-filters side of things. On the basis of the filters alone the fledgling company had already been contacted by numerous far larger corporations – usually utilities companies – looking to do a takeover. It seemed that the water filter design had far more applications than the hazy daydream of coffee and clean water at CO₂ neutrality goal that Tony had initially envisioned.

Hell, he’d been leaning on Pepper for this sort of business expertise for decades now, it was hardly Tony’s fault that some of his corporate acumen had gotten a little rusty given that the world was usually at stake whilst he was avoiding board meetings. The knowledge that his outlook had become woefully naïve was frustrating. At times Tony fancied that he could feel that seven-year-old that he
quite literally embodied creeping up on his way of thinking, and this felt like the aftermath of just one such incident.

Thankfully, though, as ever, Tony was working on surrounding himself with not just good – but truly exceptional people. Genius or not, success/failure in the world often relied on the people you surrounded yourself with. And Tony was not about to let himself fall into another Obadiah Stane-esque pit of wilful ignorance and loathing this time around.

Tony had drafts ready to go, detailing the closed-box systems and contracts should the utilities firms agree to the specifics. Mostly focused on, should the filters pass all the necessary safety checks, that the companies leasing them were not to crack open the casings containing them, under pain of losing the right to rent the filters from Arc Tech. Which, given the drastic cut in energy required to clean up refuse water that the filters provided, would likely prove a death-knell to the company in question. Especially given the numerous clauses about what would happen should the technology for the filters be copied in any way, before the free-to-use term came into being. Once Tony’s charitable causes finally had a leg up, Tony was only all too happy to help stop the world from falling into the ruination that had been threatening even before Thanos showed up.

Of course, Tony reflected, the huge differences between London in Tony’s era, and London in the 1970s only highlighted the huge gulf of time between the current time and Tony’s loose forecast for when, or rather if Thanos, or if Doom was to be believed, someone equally as bad but different, showed up.

The familiar glass metropolis coupled with imperialistic European architecture that Tony remembered of the city was gone, or rather strangely changed. London in the 1970s had proved an uncomfortable mirror to New York’s degradation. Only, instead of decades of Central Government underfunding the city, London’s desperate state, away from the well to do neighbourhoods that Tony and his mother had stuck to, had been entirely down to post-war damages, burnt out sites hit by the Blitz… and the still ongoing attempts to replace the old Victorian era architecture with fashionable Brutalist concrete structures. The garbage on the streets due to union strikes and the remaining ramifications of the oil crisis were another matter. The UK had supposedly been hit less hard than the US by the trade war with the middle east due to the discovery of North Sea Oil and Gas… but, well most of the West was suffering in the huge global downturn that meant that the likes of Reagan and Thatcher were due to get into power any day now.

Still, London’s past, or rather present, only served to highlight just how little Cambridge had changed in the years between this time, and what Tony thought of as “his time” in the city in the early 90s. The only real difference that Tony had noticed, apart from the obvious changes in the fashions the students were wearing… Was the technology behind Cambridge’s infamous anti-car traffic control system. The one-way nonsense wasn’t yet reinforced by the rising bollards that had periodically lifted cars a metre into the air as they tried to sneak into the centre of the city directly behind buses, and other public transport that carried the correct transponders. Instead beleaguered police officers
had been roped in to become the city’s rather ineffective transport police.

The strange timelessness of Cambridge was a pleasant relief, a temporary reprieve from the ever-present awareness that the clock to doomsday was ticking down somewhere.

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Ben turned up just in time to accompany Tony to his first real lecture, having conveniently managed to miss all the bureaucratic box ticking and form filling. If the professors lecturing in the relatively small halls noticed the new addition who had missed all the ‘this is how to use the Departmental library’ and ‘these are the hours you are/aren’t allowed into the ‘labs’ talks, none of them said anything. Tony guessed that they’d all been warned beforehand that they’d have a child genius and the accompanying chaperone sitting their courses.

To Tony’s surprise Ben seemed interested in the contents of the mathematics lectures, making his own notes alongside everyone else in the relatively small room that made up the Mathematics Department’s first year undergrad lecture hall. The surprisingly modern buildings reminded Tony strongly of a videogame. What with their obsessively high levels of symmetry and perfect lawns that sloped up directly onto the roof.

In contrast to his behaviour during the ‘hard science’ section of Tony’s courses, Ben quietly laughed his way through the Philosophy and Ethics classes. But never loudly enough to earn the ire of the lecturer, only Tony, given that he was the only person in the room close enough to hear the quiet derisive chuckles.

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Tony tried out two routes to the Mathematics department, before deciding that, embarrassing or not, he really needed to buy a bike. Ben’s smug ‘I told you so’ grin didn’t help with the frustration.

The first route to the department had looked like it should be quicker, in a roundabout, no one else will be going this way, kind of way. A quick cut along the famous King’s Parade in front of, you guessed it, King’s College. Infamous communist haunt, and home of the Cambridge Five. A spy ring consisting of Kim Philby, Guy Burgess, Donald Maclean, Anthony Blunt, and John Cainrcross. (And come to think of it, Tony didn’t think they’d all been outed yet…)

Continue straight down Trumpington, ignoring the space where Corpus’s infamous hideous alien
cricket clock should have been, to Silver Street, past St Catharine’s and Queen’s College and their infamous rivalry. Remembering the mythical, and most likely untrue tale about the Mathematical Bridge that didn’t used to have any bolts holding it together. Until that is, curious students took it to pieces to find out how it worked.

Then walking past his old haunts at Darwin College (a small, pleasant grad college where Tony had whiled away many a fun evening with a willing companion, spending their time overlooking the waterways that backed into the Cam, before retiring to more… strenuous activity.) Hoofing it up Sidgwick Avenue, home to the weird little priest factory Ridley Hall, and opposite it, the Sidgwick Site. Home to most of the university’s arts departments. Not to mention Newnham College, another place that Tony remembered fondly from his first time here. The women of Newnham had always been incredibly intelligent, outspoken and outgoing - probably something to do with the college’s history.

On officially opening in 1871, to staunch opposition from the male academics that populated the university, a mob of students, and worse teaching staff, had formed outside of the college’s main gate and burned an effigy of a female student. Of course, the college had been around since before 1871, and it took decades for the women who studied the same subjects as their male peers at Cambridge to be acknowledged with the degree they’d actually earnt…

The squeeze between Selwyn College and the fat trees that took up most of the sidewalk on Sidgwick, before the long straight walk up Grange Road. Which took Tony past several dozen accommodation sites, like Selwyn’s ugly Cripps Court (there were dozens of Cripps Courts in Cambridge, the donor had apparently given a lot of money to a lot of colleges), and the bizarre octagonal rooms of one of Cat’s accommodation blocks; St Chad’s. (Octagonal rooms, that Tony remembered had walls that weren’t quite long enough to push the full length of a bed up against. Such that you were forced to have the bed occupying the centre of the small space.)

Past the brick modernist bulk of the newly opened this year Robinson College (and didn’t that little piece of weird just make Tony feel positively ancient.) Tony had to admit that the interminable length of Grange Road, once everything ceded to suburbia and sports fields was a welcome relief after the uncomfortable march down memory lane.

No, the damned alternative route hadn’t been any shorter, on Tony’s short legs the walk had taken nearly 40 minutes, with Ben smugly not saying ‘I told you so’ the whole way. Of course, it really hadn’t helped that this less touristy end of the city was filled with old haunts. This end of the town tended to be where all the science students ended up after all. Tony kept getting ambushed by wistful fond memories of hanging out with his Astronomy buddies all over this side of town. Come to think of it, the Institute of Astronomy was just around the corner from the Mathematics Department, and the squat brutalist bulk of Churchill college. Far enough away from the light pollution of the city proper to try and get clear images of the night sky.
The other, Tony had to admit it, more populated, and quicker route was to take a shortcut through the cobbled lanes and claustrophobically looming gothic-medieval architecture that made up The Backs. On his short stumpy little legs walking down Sidney Street past the entrance to Trinity College, Tit Hall and Clare, and then cutting up Grange Road, only ended up shaving off a couple of minutes from his journey, given how crowded the narrow medieval lanes in this part of the city inevitably got when absolutely everyone was trying to get to their next lecture. The crowded lane, studiously ignoring the place where Tit Hall’s modernist library should have been standing, and the difficulty Tony had in avoiding the much faster push bikes when the dreaded bell-ring sounded somewhere behind him made the journey much much more unpleasant than it should have been.

Tony got around this by cutting through Clare College, and on occasion Trinity when he thought he could get away with it, but… It was frustrating, once he was past the bottleneck of The Backs the journey was much more pleasant, with a quick walk past the grand faux-roman structure of the University Library and up… The boring suburban half of Grange Road.

Still, it was not an easy walk when you barely came up to most people’s stomachs. The need for a bicycle was inevitable.

By the end of the week the journey time was down to eight minutes from the college gates up near Parker’s Piece. The lack of stress was almost enough to make up for the sheer indignity of the fact that he had to ride carefully in Ben’s wake, like a miniature copy, on a bike that was roughly half the size of anyone else’s. Still it was a far better fate than the side car, wagon, or tandem – all of which Ben had seriously threatened. At least Tony thought he’d been serious, it was difficult to tell.

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Tony’s set up at Cambridge turned out to be nothing like his time at MIT, Ben’s assistance aside, the amount of “welfare” Cambridge already had in the 70s was rather ahead of its time, albeit woefully staffed. (Academics did not make for appropriate psychological welfare staff, they lacked the training for one thing, and well, like Bruce, the vast majority also lacked the temperament for it.) Then again, given that they were already contemplating installing a fibre-optic network, perhaps that erratically practiced long-view take on things wasn’t so surprising. Whilst the level of welfare was surprisingly similar to MIT’s, it attempted to focus on very different ideas of well-being to the prestigious institution in Massachusetts. Namely half-assed forays into the students’ mental well-being rather than any interest in their physical health.

Tony had weekly appointments with his “Director of Studies” (the college’s resident Geology doctor) and his “Tutor”; the overly familiar Marcus Simeon. The DoS’s job was to keep him on track academically, the Tutor, to keep him happy. Apparently, these meetings were usually once-per-term deals, but since he was so “young” they’d made an exception in his case.
Tony had to sit through painfully awkward sessions with each of them once a week. It was hell, treading the minefield that was the tightrope knife-edge dance of ‘normal’ child behaviour and Tony’s own bitingly sarcastic personality, honed by decades of adulthood. His third eye visions, whilst not an active hinderance to daily interactions anymore, thank gods, weren’t any help either. Despite Tony’s not so secret wish that they’d give him the cues that his sketchy read on body language still didn’t always pick up on. (Seriously what was up with the visions of fire and hares anyway?)

Simeon was personable enough, perhaps too personable. Tony was rarely able to get a word in edgewise. The man was often so caught up in relating embarrassing tales about the numerous institutions he’d worked for during the long course of his career, that he frequently forgot to listen to Tony. Their meetings usually consisted of Tony drinking too sweet tea and trying not to look too understanding about some of the more adult aspects of the anecdotes that were being related. Thankfully, with Ben sitting in, the utterly useless meetings were usually cut short before they could drag on for too long.

As far as teaching hours were concerned the university piled them on, as well as the lectures – at least three a week per course. The number of courses taken at any one time varied wildly depending on the overarching subject you were there to read (Tony was currently signed up for 12 courses). There were also weekly ‘supervisions’ that usually consisted of two/three students per teaching staff, per course taken. Classes – termed practicals, as well as larger group classes that were a weird midway between lecture and a more hands-on teaching style.

Tony’s decision to choose one of the lesser known, but more ancient, colleges at Cambridge; St. Cedd’s was for a multitude of reasons. Not least of which was the ancient college’s snobbish, but highly protective stance when it came to the privacy of both their students and staff. Tony had heard all about the eccentricities of Chronotis, and the way that the college put up with the man as much out of a sense of traditional, ‘well, he’s always been there’, as the fact that he had once brought the college some prestige with his revolutionary historical ideas. Hypotheses regarding the novel idea that the skeletons with wide hips that carried bows and swords just might be female – ideas which were then vindicated when the shockingly basic new chromosome tests were finally grudgingly carried out. The college would happily put up with nearly anything so long as you gave them enough back in return.

Taking the long-view about his plans for his time at Cambridge, there were also a host of options of room location available, or at least there would be in future. There were rooms all over the city; as well as the picturesque ones available in the medieval heart of the town, there was also more modern housing that was conveniently midway between town and the science departments that Tony was interested in; Mathematics and Physics. Which, for some unknown reason were out in West Cambridge, seemingly miles from anything useful. Given that it wasn’t yet the 00s, most of the science subjects were still taught in the centre of town. Though of course that would all change soon; Mathematics was already effectively in West Cambridge.

Tony was surprised by the subtly different atmosphere at the University of Cambridge to the competitive one he’d remembered last time he studied there. Though that may have had something to
do with the fact that at that point he was already well-known as MIT’s golden child, at least some of that competitive tone had to have come from the friendly rivalry between the two institutions.

Tony mistrusted the apparently welcoming atmosphere at the Mathematics department. Everyone was being too nice it was giving him hives. People had never been this nice to him unless they wanted something.

Tony found himself begrudgingly approving of the Mathematics department’s rather… eccentric take on encouraging academic cooperation and endeavour. The buildings at the Centre for Mathematical Sciences were a modernist’s dream, you could casually stroll up a gentle slope onto the roof from the gardens if you wanted. However, it was the interior that truly impressed Tony’s inner mad scientist. Every single flat surface in the place was fair game if an idea came. There were dry wipe pens everywhere. And he meant everywhere – the bathrooms included.

These were his kind of people.

Even Tony’s fellow undergrads didn’t seem to carry the same, well below the surface, nervous tittering resentment and fear that he’d become accustomed to at MIT in the eighties. Instead whenever he piped up in his small lecture hall both his fellow students, and the Professor listened intently. As if Tony’s contribution was important. Oh, there were a few snickering holdouts, there always were. But they weren’t a significant minority, and nowhere near a majority.

At MIT being a nerd was cool, at least if you were a certain type of charismatic nerd. Even MIT had had its hierarchies tainted by the fear of appearing too smart that pervaded everything in an academic world where sport and money had twisted everything. At Cambridge that type of rot hadn’t managed to gain a foothold. Being a nerd was normal, almost everyone was some variation of eccentric. Literature nerds, linguists, divinity experts, and history buffs all rubbed shoulders side by side with some of the brightest scientific minds in academia. It made for an interesting boiling pot, theologians at dinner at Hall often loudly proclaiming that nothing was more important than the study of divinity, to loud guffaws from the engineering set.

If anything, some of the Professors were too covetous of Tony’s time and attention. Old ‘No-sigh-I-don’t-like-pop-art-I-have-a-Field’s-medal’ Lichtenstein for one, often tried to turn the last five minutes of his lectures, that were supposed to be open to student questions/discussion, into “What does young Mr Stark think?” suck-up sessions. Fortunately, Ben usually took it upon himself to derail them utterly. Though he’d occasionally sit back with a smug grin on his face and let the scenario proceed – daring Tony all the while to fix it for himself.

Tony gradually came to realise that in part, the reason he was being left alone, or fawned over, was that the student body seemed to view him as some sort of trophy. A mascot. Cambridge was well used to child genii, the ancient institution liked to foster them, and its own reputation for taking in
any student that was smart enough. (Regardless of the actual truth of the matter. That it really helped your chances if you were, wealthy, white, went to one of the ‘right’ schools, and male.)

Occasional embarrassing incidents of brown-nosing aside, it wasn’t all sunshine and roses. There was a particular group of guys in his classes that Tony learnt to avoid like the plague. They never threatened… But his internal danger radar, already sharp long before high school ended, and further honed after years of being an Out Superhero would ping crazily whenever they were near. He’d caught them sending him uninterpretable looks more than once. It was unnerving.

Oh, Tony didn’t have many friends in his undergrad class, the apparent age gap was too profound for that, and the actual age gap even greater, but he found common ground with his fellow misfits – the small group of female students in multiple fields, that in the 70s were overwhelmingly male. (Not helped of course by Cambridge’s shamefully still extant, in this recent but admittedly backwards decade, 1 in 10 quota system for the proportion of female to male students.)

Cambridge’s brand of academic rot came from the fact that the institution was ancient and slow to change, reliant on selecting the bulk of its student body from a school system that was deeply divided by class. That ancient evil, that still divided Britain. The accents that Tony was surrounded by on a daily basis were overwhelmingly plummy and nasal, the sort of voice that could cram three extra syllables into the word ‘hello’ and possessed no chin.

It was perhaps predictable that Tony’s three best friends at Cambridge formed a mismatched little group. He met the three in a disparate set of scenarios, only realising after they’d been hanging around together for most of a term, that he was the one who’d brought them all together. Ben had grinned mockingly at him when Tony had had that stunned realisation.

The first member of the trio of Cambridge first years that Tony befriended, was an incredibly privileged young man who Tony quite literally bumped into in the corridors of New Hall at St Cedd’s. He was quite possibly the most closeted gay man Tony had ever met, old, old money (and Tony had long experience of how the Old Money made damned sure you were self-aware that you were New money), posh, slight, and short, with no muscle tone to speak of. It was Tintin – the kid that had so amused him at the Matriculation photo.

Tintin, like his namesake, was blonde with cherubic curls fighting valiantly against his relatively short hairstyle, a round face, small upturned nose, pale milky skin, and clear blue eyes (so like Steve’s and yet not). He was a sworn in member of the Conservative party, a true blue through and through, the right-wing boy (Tony knew he was technically younger-in-body than him, but he didn’t think he’d ever been this young) was already a member of the infamous Pitt Club in the first week of term. His name was James, but he introduced himself with a jovial,
“Please, call me Reggie. My middle name is Reginald. Only mommy calls me James. And there’s three other James’s at Cedd’s in our year already.”

Tony had liked him despite himself, they’d met during a mutual lull in Cambridge’s so-called “Freshers’ Week”. (More like Fresher’s Three Days.) Tony really wasn’t sure it could be called a Fresher’s week when most of the time was spent running from one end of town to the other signing up for courses at numerous departments. Often with allotted timeslots 5-minutes apart, and 3 miles distant (with the ban on undergrads owning cars very much in place even in the weirdness of the past). Not to mention hours of filling in administrative paperwork. Though of course Tony’s opinion was coloured by the fact that he hadn’t touched a drop of the alcohol that had been so freely available at the numerous ‘Ents’ that had been organised to welcome the new influx of Freshers.

Tony had been surprised about how hands-off Cambridge was with the students on this, most universities held the student’s hands through the process, with plenty of signage and lots of communication about how to sign up to other important things such as doctors’ and dentists’ practices and the like. Cambridge just posted a great big list that apparently applied to all new students, and you had to be clever enough to pick out which details were relevant to you.

Tony wasn’t sure if he appreciated the amount of trust in his intelligence that this approach showed, or if he thought it was slightly callous dumping quite so much on these children’s heads to sort out in the three days before the actual business of teaching began. Despite the fact that the majority of the new intake were technically, legally adults. To Tony they were children, youths trying too hard to be independent and grown-up, and making all the same mistakes that children make when they’re first stepping out into the world.

Tony had quite literally run into Reggie coming out of the corridor bathroom, the taller boy had been wearing nothing but the horrible light ‘Cambridge-blue’ and monogrammed towel wrapped around his waist, water dripping from his pale blonde curls sticking to his long neck.

“Oh! Sorry!”

“Oh no please, excuse me.”

Gods, the guy was the real-life version of all those awful stereotypical gay-men that had been the only representation of the LGBTQA community on TV for much of the 90s, the screaming queers that he remembered flinching at on those awful sitcoms Rhodey had made him watch whenever they’d hung out. From that uncomfortable era where you were never sure if you were supposed to be laughing with the characters or laughing at them because they were gay. Gods he’d have to live through all of that all over again…
Maybe that’s why so much of the 90s had been lost to that coke-binge, even his no.1 man had been insane that decade, he couldn’t believe his (admittedly holey) memories of Rhodey watching them with every sign of enjoyment, what had those shows been called again? Chums, Biers? Sex and Will? No, Tony was muddling things up he knew it. Tony thought there might have been a perpetually drunk middle-aged woman inexplicably hanging around with a bunch of fashionable twenty-somethings’, but the name of the sitcom utterly escaped him.

Eh, either way, Tony was looking forward to corrupting this one. He’d start off gentle, introduce him to Queen and the wonders of Freddy Mercury (hey if his closeted-self had appreciated Queen in the early 80s this guy would, right?), maybe ease the way with some Bolan, then move on to the crypto-homo-rockers, Lou Reed, Iggy Pop, and David Bowie. Of course, now that he and Justin were separated by hundreds of miles, Tony no longer had access to the vast majority of the LPs that he wanted to show the young man. Damn.

Tony couldn’t wait to introduce him to Hedwig and the Angry Inch when it finally happened. He’d been blackmailed into seeing that show as part of a publicity thing for SI by a vengeful Pepper, he couldn’t remember what he’d done to incur her wrath, but he’d owed her. Tony had been thoroughly surprised when he’d loved it. Tony probably should have taken the hint about new musical genres to be mined given how heavily he remembered the terrible trio featuring in that particular stage play, but eh, he’d found out for himself now.

Over the course of a charming indolent afternoon tea at Fitzbillies, “this fabulous quaint little place I found, really you must come and see it” the first of many they’d shared at the ancient eatery, Tony learnt that Reggie was studying Arc&Anth (Archaeology and Anthropology). The Tintin-esque blonde really was the epitome of poor little rich boy slumming it at Cambridge. Tony privately thought the only way he’d manage to become more stereotypical was if he instead chose the infamous Land Economy course, and took up rowing, or perhaps if Reggie decided to start carting an oversized teddy-bear about with him everywhere a la Brideshead (or the technically decades from fame, Grayson Perry).

The second member of their trio, and Tony’s other St Cedd’s college-based Cambridge friend, couldn’t be more different to the pair of privileged young white boys who’d claimed the third floor of Staircase P as their own, she’d been a pleasant surprise in more ways than one.

Molly Fitzgerald; Tony remembered the name as a being attached to an utterly brilliant political speaker and lawyer specialising in international law.Whilst not a child prodigy like he was, apparently her status as a woman at the newly-co-ed college, and worse an Irishwoman studying in England at the height of The Troubles marked her out as an outcast. Tony didn’t learn much about
her home-life during that first meeting, but he got the impression that her father was incredibly proud of his brilliant daughter’s education, though she didn’t like to talk about it very much.

Tony had heard of her work, largely thanks to Maya’s and Sal’s influence during their long, pretentious chats about just how they intended to change the world. He’d known she’d been to Cambridge a few years before he had in the original timeline, but with everything that had been going on he hadn’t put two and two together.

St Cedd’s College was one of the many that had gone co-ed in recent years. They’d fully opened their doors to female students in 1973, a somewhat shamefully late date, but sadly not an unusual one in this ancient, and inertia ridden, institution.

Tony had been shocked when he’d bumped into Molly at Hall, but not for who she was. At first, he hadn’t recognised her, only recognised that there was another student sat inside the natural bubble of isolation that came with being an outsider. His third eye intrusively flashing symbolism at him that Tony was in no mood to try and interpret really hadn’t helped with the recognition either. (What was up with the nearly dead tree anyway? Seriously why had everything gone from weird, to really disturbingly weird??)

The recognition came much later in that awkward introductory conversation, Molly Fitzgerald, reading Law (In Britain of all places because of some shenanigans regarding Cambridge’s exchange systems, and wasn’t that a familiar excuse?), already with an eye to taking things into international Law. Molly was enamoured with the new and interesting directions of just how she intended to extend the reach of the international bill of universal human rights. The gleam that lit up her face when she waxed lyrical about the progress that had been made in the past few years by giving numerous countries back their independence spoke volumes to her motives.

Once the conversation had gotten flowing, Molly had stared at Tony in unwarranted awe, obviously mindful of the fact that he was apparently seven. Which had of course triggered Tony’s need to overcompensate for his intellect, the surge of guilt at that undeserved recognition making him babble loudly about all sorts of inane bullshit. That is until Reggie swooped in and came to Tony’s rescue, enthusiastically introducing himself to Tony’s new friend and inviting the pair of them to a JCR meeting being held by St Cedd’s Christian Society. Tony and Molly had looked at each other in utter dread then, until Reggie revealed that he only wanted to go for the free food St Cedd’s Christian Society was offering as a bribe for turning up.

The sheer insanity of that evening – and getting through all that atheistic Church of England moralizing with their dignities intact ended up making the trio nearly inseparable. Leaving the little meeting room that the St.CCSoc had booked for the evening to make their cheese toastie bribes, all three of them looked at each other. And burst into nearly hysterical laughter.
Molly cemented her place as his friend when she’d come across Tony having a quiet anxiety attack in a hidden corner of the college. Whilst such things had become far more infrequent of late, to Tony’s chagrin and frustration they still very much just happened sometimes. And the afternoon Molly found him, crouched behind the arch of the staircase at the bottom of P-block was just one of those days.

Instead of flitting about in a panic, of trying to soothe him with trite nonsense and oh so ‘helpful’ advice… Molly had matter-of-factly sat down under the staircase overhang right next to him, but outside of Tony’s bubble of don’t-touch-me personal space and ungrudgingly been there.

When Tony had calmed down enough to notice what she’d done, he was embarrassed, and grateful, and didn’t know how to begin to express the guilty turmoil that he’d just wasted gods knew how much of her time by being an utter flake. Of course, the fact that the attack had been triggered by looking up at the too-blue sky, a sky that was so reminiscent of the air after Thanos’ finger click and being utterly incapable of working out how to voice that in any way hadn’t helped.

Molly had surprised him, by giving Tony a look that didn’t speak of pity, or sympathy or worse derision – but merely a knowing sort of tiredness.

“So, my Pa used to get these awful flashbacks.”

Tony hadn’t been expecting that,

“He was in a militant branch of the IRA.” To Tony’s incredulous surprise she spat as she said it, “The fool.”

“Wait what? But aren’t they fighting to free Northern Ireland from the Brits?”

“Oh, yes.”

“But.”
“I – My brother died in one of their freedom bombs.”

“Oh. Oh I’m so sorry.”

“Nah, it was five years ago. Ages. Side’s, not your fault, nothing to do with you. Nah, my idiot Pa, he tried to split with them then. They weren’t having that, traitor to the cause they said.” Her voice took on a sing-song edge, “Collusion is not an illusion”

“Gods.”

“He moved us from Dushaghlin right up to the other side of the border. I hated it. Middle of Unionist territory. Quiet little place but none of the beauty of the countryside, everything’s grey up there, and the accents are all harsh and wrong. Pretty much a neutral town though. Not unionist or nationalist. Couldn’t be further from the troubles, and the Derry bombings. Didn’t do them any good either way, you see. Place is a shitehole.”

Tony tried to work out what emotions were playing across her face, but all he could see was a horribly familiar resigned numbness.

“There was a murder. Different branch of the Provisional IRA from the one my dad was in. He had nothing to do with it. But… The guy they hit, he was just a dentist, hadn’t gotten involved with the unionists… But he was a Protestant. And that was enough for them.”

Molly swallowed with some difficulty,

“When the police went ‘round the town trying to narrow down suspects, well, see. We were new in town. And it soon came out that Da- that he was an IRA man.”

Molly saw the look on Tony’s face,

“Oh don’t look like that. He’s not in jail if that’s what you’re thinking. I used to get it you know, why he was so angry? Bloody Sunday. It-”

Her fist clenched.
“It was awful, the British had no right. Not after they’d already oppressed Ireland for generations and gotten away with genocide. The fucking feckers!”

Tony risked taking her hand in his own, feeling that she needed it.

“But. That dentist. He had nothing to do with anything. He fixed people’s dodgy teeth for a living. He had nothing to do with the damned UVF or any of it.”

Molly angrily dashed her tears away before they could fall,

“Just – I dunno. When he came back, after they’d worked out he hadn’t done it - after the arrest, they’d done something to him, the British Army. And he came back, different again, like the bad old days when I was a kid. He’d go into these panics, and if there was a loud noise, he’d think he was somewhere else, try to push me to the ground like he was expectin’ something terrible to happen.”

Molly heaved in an explosive snort, sucking back the tears by force of anger,

“He had to convince me to leave him alone up there. All by himself. With his shellshock and his flashbacks and the Protestants. So yeah, I get it. Justs as I don’t get what either side is even fightin’ for anymore. Not after living up in Loyalist country – there’s just as many who don’t want to join Ireland as don’t want to be British – and no one wants to keep fightin’ anymore. But the killings keep on happening. And Ireland is just caught up in it all. And it just keeps getting’ worse.”

Tony wasn’t sure if a hug would be welcomed, he settled for squeezing her hand,

“So’s yeah, if sittin’ still with you will make you feel better? Well I’m not selfless, it’ll make me feel better and all.”

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Tony was even more surprised when he ran into the third and final member of the trio, an old friend from what he’d come to think of as his old-life, Amara Perera. He spotted her in the front row of one of the first-year physics lectures he’d snuck into the back of. Tony hadn’t been sure if he should attempt to strike up a conversation with her or not. They’d never met, and he was a creepy little child
genius in a class full of adults as far as she was concerned.

Tony should have realised that he was underestimating her, he’d always managed to do that, he thought ruefully.

She sought him out after the lecture, of course she would. She was one of only a handful of women in the room, and to top it off, she was one of only two non-white people. She’d probably seek out another odd duck. Even if Tony was only included in that group of oddities by virtue of age, not race or gender.

Certified genius or not, Amara had had to battle against both her family’s expectations for her, as their youngest daughter, and the establishment’s expectations for women. Even more so women of colour. Amara had been forced to enter Cambridge at the standard entry-age, even though Tony knew her genius in her field was damned near unrivalled. Amara was a solid 11 years older than Tony and had already been well-established in her career of academia when he’d met her the first time around, so long ago; a lifetime and a universe ago now. Tony had been completely stunned when he spotted her, ended up spending more time watching her pay attention than listen to the lecturer.

Their conversation after the lecture was even more dazzling than Tony had come to expect from his one-time flame. If the excitement that made her flush a deep red, that was vividly noticeable on her very round brown cheeks, as she discussed the advances made in understanding how chirality effected drugs in recent years was anything to go by, she was probably still destined for great things.

If Amara found it as weird as Tony did, that there was no apparent triggering reason for their burgeoning friendship, she didn’t show it. Amara was even more brilliant than Tony remembered her being, her personality sparkling and vibrant. Not yet worn down by decades of being purposefully overlooked for research funding, career prospects, and promotions. The fire that Tony was so enamoured with, that urge to help the world, and do what’s right was still recognisable. Burning as strongly as it ever had.

Falling back into friendship with her was one of the easiest decisions that Tony had ever made. Though it helped that the blue Tony associated with trust shone as strongly from her… aura. (Okay, dammit he was learning the terminology even though he hated it.)

Ben finally deigned to fully carry out his assigned job a full week after the controlled chaos of Fresher’s Three Days was over. Tony had already settled into the overfull schedule that the
Tony was still grouchy over the fact that he’d spent Fresher’s “Week” running from one end of the city to the other, signing himself up to doctors’ offices, dentists, as well as the all-important sign-up dates for their courses and the sheer awkwardness of the Matriculation day photos at St Cedd’s. Tony’s front row position in that huge group photo, uncomfortably sandwiched between the Professors due to his diminutive height, would come back to haunt him, he was sure of it.

Tony had spent much of the time without Ben’s “chaperoning” covering for his mentor in all things sneaky, intonating to numerous concerned professors, doctors and students that his assigned adult was just around the corner. By way of payback, Ben had declared that Tony would have half of the first term free from their more strenuous brand of physical training – though of course Tony was expected to keep up with both the running and the M-word side of things, such as they were. It was as close to an apology as Tony was likely to get, so he took it. Though not before Ben commented that he expected no drop off in Tony’s skill level, especially since Tony now had first-hand experience now of just how important being able to handle yourself in a fight was. (Tony had wondered how Ben would react to the Blackout incident over the summer, he really shouldn’t have been surprised when the infuriating man’s reaction… was a complete non-reaction.)

Tony accepted the non-apology with grace, though not without his own mild form of payback.

Tony side-eyed Ben’s look of dismay expectantly, making little effort to conceal his own poorly hidden glee.

The Gyp room was a disaster of a space. There was the sink, the fridge, and a tiny two-ring, antique even by this era’s standards, camping stove stood balanced precariously on the grotty work surface.

Not that Tony had noticed. Despite the leaps and bounds of progress Tony had made over the course of the summer thanks to Maria’s careful guidance, he was still a novice in the realm of cookery. And besides, the college had made it quite clear that they didn’t want their resident child prodigy burning the place down because he couldn’t reach the stove-top.

Tony had entered the Gyp only as a means to stake out his shelf in the shared fridge, and to sidle out of Reggie’s way as they awkwardly passed each other in the passage towards their shared showers/toilet cubicles.
Therefore, the distinct lack of facilities in the tiny, airless, box of a room had completely passed Tony by.

Tony sniggered as Ben muttered despairingly,

“Not even an oven.”

Reggie interjected with his own jocular form of commiseration,

“Or a decent hob. I say, poor show on the college’s part hey?”

Running a hand down his face Ben looked downright ancient for a moment, before shuddering and seeming to pull himself back together. Tony personally thought it was a bit of an overreaction but…

“Yes.” A sigh, “I should have expected this really. After all Cambridge is old enough that the old-ways still hold sway here.”

“Old Ways?”

Reggie asked the question, though Tony suspected he knew the answer already he made a point of looking like he was paying attention to the response,

“Yes. You were either rich enough to afford the fully catered multi-course meals that the college cooks provided, or you were too poor to attend the university. The lack of private cooking facilities for your servants,” at this Ben sneered derisively, “was intended as gentle encouragement to act like a civilised man and join your fellows at Hall to eat, drink, and make merry. Of course, the 20th Century World Wars, and the rise of the red brick universities supposedly did for that attitude, but the infrastructure remains.”

Tony wondered about that turn of phrase but let it be, Ben was looking downright morose after that little speech. Even Reggie, who’d only known Tony for a couple of weeks, and had only just met Ben seemed taken aback by it.
To Tony’s chagrin Ben whipped up an \textit{interesting} concoction with apparent ease, despite the state of the facilities. To make matters even worse, he and Reggie rapidly decided that they were friends. Almost immediately they were trading tales of posh public boarding-school life, and what it was like to have family in the military. Reggie seemed very impressed by the things that Ben wasn’t saying – seeming to understand the unspoken language of what Ben couldn’t say far better than Tony did. (Tony guessed it was because they were both British.)

The one pot meal was edible, and probably better than the fare at Westchester, but... The flavour combinations were utterly alien, even to Tony’s internationally travelled palate. Still, it was nice that his friends got on, right?

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Tony glared down at the stupid rock in frustration. He didn’t think he was any closer to achieving the glowy dusty bullshit that Ben had requested of him, months ago.

To make matters worse, beyond Ben telling Tony to concentrate on the idea of walls/shields/barriers for at least a few minutes per meditation session, Ben was outright refusing to offer any tutelage on the whole magic front.


Tony couldn’t believe that after all his oblique warnings about eldritch beings out to eat his soul that Ben was being remarkably laissez fair about the whole scenario, especially given how damned weird his third eye visions had gotten. (Hares? What the hell was up with the hares?)

Tony glared down at the stupid rock.

Any minute now Tony was going to start spouting off such gems as, ‘not all who wander are lost’, or ‘\textit{wingardium leviosa} not \textit{leviosa}. Hell, Tony had turned around to Ben and rattled off the line about miserable dunderheads in a fit of pique, but the line was subtle enough that Ben’s arched brow in response was only in disbelief as he sipped at his insipid tea.

Still glowering, all attempts at meditation forgotten Tony started to mutter another infamous chant, something in him wanting to ward off the feeling of creeping dread that built a little more every time he failed to get past the hurdle that the damned stupid rock represented,
“I must not fear. Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration. I will face my fear. I will permit it to pass over me and through me. And when it had gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path. Where the fear has gone there will be nothing. Only I will remain.”

Tony huffed out a cynical bark of a laugh at his own stupidity, if anything was liable to summon an eldritch abomination from a demon dimension it was something quoted from the same twisted brain that thought all-knowing prescient God-Emperors were the same thing as giant omnipotent disgusting sandworms mixed in with holy Jihads. Trust the m-word to bring out his inner, secret, disgustingly wants to be something more than human, ego.

Tony shook himself out of his foul mood, brought on by a combination of boredom, and frustration – the university work, even at an institution as world-renowned as this one for being tough and stringently demanding of its students was … Well it was boring. This was highlighted by the way Tony’s brain was currently obsessing over his activities in the early-90s, the awkward fumble from his MIT years to trying and failing to be a productive member of society. Then the sudden rise that came with his unexpected promotion to CEO that resulted from his parents’ …untimely death.

Giving up on the magic for the time being, recognising that the spin of his thoughts had gone dark on him – Tony got back to the job of mentally cataloguing the patents that he was planning on releasing. Releasing, but not via Arc Tech. Tony needed viable alternatives to the Arc Reactors, he intended to trickle in the green energy. He needed to take the softly-softly approach so as not to attract the ire of the numerous international powers that relied on oil, and the powerful lobbying of the oil corporations. It was infuriating but introducing viable highly-efficient solar power was a gentle first step on the way to arc reactors. Hopefully a stepping stone on the way to more efficient cold fusion drives with their powerful, arc-reactor backed-up, magnetic containment fields. The powerful and above all clean sources of energy were so necessary for the long-game that Tony was only just beginning to realise he’d been subconsciously putting together for months.

Nasa, Hubble and the International Space Station were all well and good. But Tony intended to get early warnings if anything like the Chitauri ever came knocking on their door again. Portals were not the only method of travel. The Starkanium laced arcs Tony was planning, and, much as Tony hated to admit it to himself, the Wizards like Strange and Wong would hopefully be proof against the portals. Something in Starkanium was inimical to magic, or at least that’s the conclusion they’d been hesitantly beginning to reach before that last desperate gambit. No, Tony intended to build a base, several bases. Mars, Ganymede, the Asteroid Belt. (Quite apart from its magnetosphere, Ganymede would be a handy spot to keep an eye on Titan too.)

If anything came knocking, Earth would be prepared to answer.

Tony hoped that first contact this time would be mutually beneficial. But he was preparing for another incident like the Chitauri.
That evening Tony dug out the stash of ludes that had been niggling away at the back of his mind ever since Peter had given them to him. Popping open the top of the bottle Tony stared down at the 717 stamped pills contained within for a long moment. Deciding ‘to hell with it’ Tony pulled one out, snapped it in half, and swallowed the small portion he’d allowed himself dry.

The now familiar urge to sleep came and went, and then Tony was staring in blissful reverie at the play of light through the warped panes that made up his window.

It was a better way to spend the evening than wondering just why even university level work was a chore. The peaceful here and now, I am me and I am here sensation that the drug provided, usually anathema to a mind as future focused as his was, was as ever, strangely pleasurable.

A much-welcomed distraction from his worries for the future of the world, and just what would happen when, inevitably, something happened (probably Rogers). Something that would trigger the old worries that had been pushing the world to the brink of disaster even before Thanos came along and ended everything.

Nah, Tony grinned up at the ceiling, all that stuff was for future-him to worry about.

Tony had been resentful of Ben’s constant presence, no, not resentful, fearful that the man’s constant supervision would prove a hurdle too far for the very few people indeed that would be willing to hang around a prepubescent during their university days. He needn’t have worried. Tony’s little group of weirdos had gravitated together regardless, and if anything, Ben’s presence seemed to ease some of the inevitable abrasions, not worsen them.

Ben’s quietly sarcastic humour may have initially clashed with Amara’s sense of what did/didn’t constitute a rude interaction… And if Tony was being honest with himself, Molly’s too from the initial, alarming way her expression had drawn close, gone thunderous and dark in the face of him sniping back at her muttered under her breath comments about British Army stooges. But… Somehow Ben managed to charm his way into their good graces.

Well, with Molly there was no somehow about it. They’d been sat together in the JCR, enjoying
each other’s company, talking about how outrageous it was that Rosalind Franklin had effectively been written out of the history books like so many important women before her, with Reggie contributing that far too many pop-artists had been written out of existence purely because of their gender.

In fact, he had a whole list, each name was accompanied by an enthusiastic description of their style and merits – Pauline Boty, Marjorie Strider, Rosalyn Drexler, Idelle Weber, Sturtevant, Sister Mary Corita Kent, Evelyne Axell, Marta Minujin, and of course Marisol. The woman who had apparently given Warhol his whole ‘say nothing’ schtick and yet who’d been shamefully pushed aside and ignored where Warhol’s star had only continued to rise.

When Ben had asked why on earth Reggie had such an apparently comprehensive list of female pop-artists rattling around in his brain, Reggie had flushed bright pink, the heat rushing upwards to the tips of his ears, and embarrassedly replied that,

“Well… They’re cheap. And I like the artwork."

The quartet had happily been minding their own business, when a boorish blonde idiot, all of 6’4 and nearly as wide across demanded,

“What the fuck is the help doing in here?”

It seemed that someone hadn’t gotten the memo that the college had gone co-ed.

Unnoticed behind the classist and sexist bigot, who was quaking with misspent rage, Ben calmly and quietly stood up and clamped a hand down on the junction between the man’s neck and shoulder – such as it was. (The man apparently had no neck he was so ridiculously bullish.)

With apparent ease that made a mockery of the size difference between the man-mountain and the skinny looking Ben, Ben turned the idiot around. Once Ben was sure he had his full attention he sneered at him down the length of his nose,

“What do you think you’re doing young man?”

“What do you care? She’s only the help. They’re not supposed to be in here when students ar-”
"I care because a student of this college is being verbally abused by… "Ben sneered and raked his gaze pointedly up the hulk that was still looming, "A throwback from the Cro-Magnon era."

A puzzled blink was the only sign that the fool had heard Ben’s sentence. Where they’d previously been quietly braying at some joke or other in the corner, the idiot’s friends were looking distinctly embarrassed that they’d been seen in his company.

“What’s a skinny streak of piss like you doing in here anyway? You like jailbait old chap?”

Tony stared wide-eyed up at the coldly furious gleam in Ben’s eye.

“I’m here to protect the students in this room from coming to any harm.”

“Indeed? Well I’m not doing any harm. And I’m a student.”

The smug ‘so there!’ was written loudly across the broad face, the idiot made a move, grabbing at Molly’s upper arm. Molly gasped in pain as the club-like hand clenched violently, that seemed to be the signal that Ben had been waiting for.

Tony didn’t quite see what happened next, one moment the beefy jock was obviously on the verge of doing something unpleasant. The next he was on the floor, grasping for breath, as his… well, probably not friends, jeered at him mockingly from the pool table in the corner.

Ben leant down and whispered, just loudly enough for Tony to catch the words,

“Who dares wins.”

Tony wasn’t sure what about the phrase was so familiar, something military? Tony was ashamed to admit he’d leaned heavily on Rhodey for most of his interactions with them for SI back in the day. Apparently, the muscle-headed idiot knew what it meant, he paled dramatically.

“Don’t you dare threaten another student. I’ll be watching.” Ben raised his voice, “And that goes for
your friends too! I catch you bullying anyone, and you’ll be sent down!”

Tony knew what that threat meant, being expelled from the university. He grinned evilly down at the still gasping meathead from his position on the sofa. The guy’s not-friends were still braying nasally at him from their corner, though their previously showy laughter had taken on that nervous tittering edge in the face of Ben’s obvious rage.

Ben grinned, apparently completely ignoring the scene behind him, as the not-friends berated their embarrassing companion, and said in a voice designed to carry,

“Could have been worse, I could have told the idiot that he’s got a face like a bulldog chewing a wasp.”

The shocked mocking laughter coming from the corner, and the sudden look of confusion on the face that had clearly been hit with a ball once too often said it all.

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Edwin was pleased to see that the reports from Ben, and the staff at St Cedd’s were glowing. Their boy was doing them proud. He’d made friends too, which Edwin had to admit was a relief, and quite a weight off his mind. Though Ben was less than polite about their treatment at the institution. It seemed that Tony had fallen in with his fellow ‘outlaws’ as Ben put it. Much of the rest of the letter was taken up with a rant about the racism and sexism that Ben had rather harshly from the sounds of it, put a stop to several times.

Edwin only wished that he could join him in his task of keeping an eye on Tony and his newfound friends, but it was physically impossible, and besides, Ana needed him. Edwin sighed wistfully. The world was so grey these days. Ana said that the chemo made her feel more unwell than the cancer had, and that the enforced time off because of it was completely maddening. Edwin was painfully aware that only a couple of years ago Ana would likely be told that since it was cancer, it was all in her head, and she should go to anger therapy to try and treat it… So… Edwin was counting their lucky stars, but he sympathised with his darling wife’s restlessness. Edwin knew too well the feeling of uselessness.

Edwin was doing his utmost to ease the difficult time, case in point, he’d set-up their old LP player in the tiny kitchen cum dining room so that his darling could listen to their old favourites in the relative warmth of the space near the stove. Ana had always coped with chilly weather better than he had, but these days she claimed that the cold cut straight through her. And Autumn had long since settled into the harsh winters that came with living in New York state.
At the moment a copy of one of Sister Rosetta Tharpe’s albums was spinning away in the corner. Her bluesy-rock harkening back to a better decade, when the world was gently hopeful, despite the hardships that everyone still faced. Tharpe had been a mainstay favourite of theirs since the bad old days of the 1930s,

“Didn’t it rain children…”

The homey cheerful tone set by the music complimented Edwin’s self-appointed task. His darling’s taste buds had seemingly reacted to the new medical regime. Ana currently found Paprikash, and many other staples they’d previously enjoyed completely repellent. The dinner he was preparing had many small alterations carried out to it, to hopefully appeal to Ana’s waning appetite.

Whilst apple torte – with its rich buttery pastry was out – Edwin made a mean stewed pear. And the little shop that Edwin bought their groceries from had had a glut of them lately. Smiling softly at his darling wife, wrapped up in her elegantly patterned headscarf against the frigid Autumn weather, Edwin dunked the pears into the mixture of soft cider, cinnamon and cloves that he’d prepared earlier.

Ana was reading Ben’s missive, whilst tapping along to the rhythmic music, the bony new lines of her shoulders as close to relaxed as Edwin had seen them all day. Edwin hated this waiting game, hated what the chemo was visibly doing whilst they waited to find out if it was working, and hated that they couldn’t spend what time they potentially had remaining to them with their… Their son. Edwin had to admit to himself that it helped greatly to hear that their boy was doing so well. He got back on with the cooking, the fragrant broth for the pears now hot enough for his purposes,

“Ana darling?”

“Yes dear?”

“What do you think Tony would like to receive for Christmas?”

Ana smiled, the tendons standing out in her newly thin neck as she did so,

“Probably another record dear.”
“But Bowie hasn’t got anything due – I checked with S-“


Ana paused to think about it for a moment and then said musingly,


Ana’s eyes wrinkled up fondly, her newly translucent skin crinkling delicately,

“From the way he’s been lapping up every album he’s been given so far I’m sure he’ll appreciate a new genre to enjoy.”

Edwin smiled in fond reminiscence back at his frail wife, the shared pleasure of music had always been a source of joy for the two of them.

Howard had always teased Edwin for liking the ‘slave music’ as he’d so tastelessly referred to it, only deferring and calling it ‘colored music’ (as if that was any better) when Edwin had tersely pointed out that Howard happily slept with enough women of colour to make his objections hypocritical in the extreme. Ana and he had shared a love of band-music and jazz, in an era when black music simply wasn’t played in the ‘reputable’ music halls in the US. They’d both been saddened when they’d come over to the country and realised that they’d have to search high and low to find the music they so adored.

Howard’s teasing had taken on a different tone, when in the British R&B boom of the 60s, blues and jazz were suddenly what the next, altogether too young, generation were all listening to, making tasteless jokes about cradle-robbing. Ana had found their youthful enthusiasm joyous, Edwin had been of the pleased opinion that they had good taste. But it was a damned shame that it had taken Chris Barber, and the British Invasion for most people in this great, but altogether strange country, to recognise what was in their own backyard.

Then again Edwin had been completely horrified with his own encounter with the legally enshrined racial divide in this vast country. It must have been, oh, the mid-50s, when Howard had had unavoidable business down south of the Rust Belt… The legal segregation that Edwin had been
confronted with that day in the South made his blood boil. Worse, he’d been powerless to do anything about it, uncomfortable as it made him, he was an unwilling ‘beneficiary’ of a foul system that was enforced with extreme violence.

Back then Edwin had still been hopeful that he’d be able to return to his home country someday. From the correspondence Edwin indulged in with those members of the old regiment that had been sympathetic to Edwin’s plight, he was well aware that in old Blighty there were plenty of bigots alright. But it wasn’t enshrined in law.

Quite the opposite in fact, that sort of separation had been thrown asunder when the government had all but begged people from the Commonwealth nations to come and bolster the much-depleted population after the War. People from India, the young new nation Pakistan born out of the Empire’s bloody folly, Bangladesh, the innumerable Commonwealth nations in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. People from across the globe were begged to come over and make a new life in the UK, and they did.

Sadly, shamefully, the greeting they were met with from the local population was often less than welcoming. Edwin had been… tired and appalled by the reports from his old regimental chums of the sort of violence, and tasteless “No Dogs, No Coloured, No Irish” that had apparently infected small-businesses around the country.

But in its own, vanishingly small way, it was still heartening to hear that there hadn’t been anything near the scale of what he’d witnessed in The South. Though Edwin had to wonder about his fellow countrymen sometimes. It was as though the moral outrage as the foul realities of, and the subsequent banning of slavery in 1807, and further in 1833, hadn’t happened yet. Some of the letters he received from back home painted a vivid picture of how well (not well at all) the less salubrious members of society had greeted the new arrivals to their ‘fair land’.

Yes, Edwin thought, there was hope yet. Every town in the small nation apparently had at least one ‘curry house’ and Chinese takeaway. The restaurants popping up alongside the more familiar fish and chip shops and pubs, vindaloos and chow mein becoming the norm. That next generation with their enthusiastic love for the music that Howard so denigrated… Well, Edwin knew from experience that music, and food were the great levellers, perhaps if people were willing to share their respective cultures, soon more things would soon change for the better.

After all the Civil Rights movement over here had achieved so very much in a scant few years. Edwin had dearly wanted to become an active ally to the cause, but to his perpetual shame he’d had been terrified to try and join in that fight for fear of reprisals; his own tricky immigrant status possibly getting the very people he wanted to support into hot water. Nixon and his ilk were ruthless about politically crippling his opponents, by making aspects of their very culture illegal.
Edwin mused some more on the vagaries of army life. The pros and cons of both nations that he thought of as home, one way or the other. There was a damned good reason Dum Dum Dugan (Edwin often wondered why no one called that man out for nicknaming himself after the deadly, and banned, hollow point bullets that the Imperialistic forces had taken great pleasure in using against the native populations that they were subjugating in the 19th century… But he’d never quite worked up the courage to ask.) had chosen to remain in the US even though with everything he’d done for the British army during and after the war, he could have remained in Britain as an acknowledged hero. Fed up as he was of the British Isles class-based hypocrisy, Edwin had to agree that the Boston MA raised Brit had made the right choice. Though if Edwin had been given the chance at the dual citizenship Dugan owned, he’d have jumped on it.

Despite Edwin’s own misgivings about the state of old Blighty, he also remembered that alongside the other British members of the Howling Commandos; Private Percival ‘Pinky’ Pinkerton (again where did that boy come up with his nickname?), and Brigadier (now Lord) James Montgomery Falsworth. That the German member Eric Koenig, and Private Gabe Jones had both chosen to naturalise in the UK after the war. Gabe Jones remarking to Edwin at the time that he had a better chance to make something of himself in a country where the colour of his skin didn’t automatically bar him from using the same bathroom as his squadmates.

He really should try and get back in touch with the Commandos… Edwin was sure that Falsworth would love to dote on -

“Edwin? Edwin. EDWIN!”

“Yes dear?”

Psizzle!

Glancing down at the noise Edwin realised that the pears had boiled over. He yelped, and hastily mopped up the mess, waving off Ana’s attempts to help with the increasingly sodden tea towel in the process.

“Sorry dear, wool-gathering.”

Ana’s response was a typically arch,

“Clearly.”
Smiling gently at Ana, Edwin realised with a start that he’d drifted off down dark avenues, avenues that really had nothing to do with (hopefully) good food and good music.

“Sorry I never replied, did I? I think it sounds like a wonderful idea darling. I’m sure Tony will love whatever you choose.”

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Tony was exhausted when he got in that evening. It was the first day of Week 3 of Michaelmas term, a Thursday, due to Cambridge's ancient calendar choices... Already he was getting fed up of the work. It didn't help that he’d spent a frustrating morning at the Mathematics department trying desperately to remember precisely when certain latter-day 20th century theorems became common-knowledge. The frustrations of the morning were followed by a truly irritating afternoon with a smugly grinning Ben who did absolutely nothing to help, whilst Tony tried to work out just where the CompSci labs that he’d signed up for actually were. Well, Tony was fed up. It had been a relief when Ben had disappeared before dinner, the man had been infuriating that afternoon.

Tony was horrified to find Ben sat in his room with a face like thunder. Next to him on Tony’s bed was a small mountain’s worth of pills. Specifically, the 717s that Tony had been quietly popping every weekend, and if Tony was being honest with himself, increasingly often, every evening, laid out all around Ben. Disappointment all but dripped from his words,

“When were you going to tell me about this little development?”

Tony gulped, fear and rage boiling up inside him into a hot potent mess of emotion. Despite his own furious question, Ben didn’t let him get a word in,

“Ludes? Really? How could you be so stupid? Do you have any idea? If it had been hash or booze I might have let it pass, but skipping straight to the hard hallucinogenic drugs? Tony. I thought you knew better. At the very least wait until your brain has stopped growing, for fuck’s sake! “

Ben tailed off, worked the top off the large bottle, and started swallowing its contents. He literally tipped the bottle up as if the contents were water. To Tony’s creeping horror, that gradually increased to outright terror as Ben. Kept. Going. The man proceeded to eat Tony’s entire lude stash. Ben scooped up the handfuls that had already been laid out on the bed and pretty much inhaled them too.
There… Well, given the size of the bottle that Peter had thrust into Tony’s hands – there were hundreds of pills. With a steady hand, and a coldly furious gaze, Ben systematically and rapidly, worked his way through all of them.

“Ben, Ben? What are you doing? Are you mad??”

Reality kicked in, and Tony unfroze, he rushed over and tried to wrest the bottle from Ben’s hands. Infuriatingly Ben merely held the bottle out of Tony’s reach and carried on eating.

In desperation Tony tried to climb up Ben’s legs to grab the damned hateful stuff. But, the man who’d been training him for all these months was better than him, larger than he was, and was obviously still in practice, unlike Tony. He calmly turned, as if he hadn’t just eaten enough Ludes to kill a whole roomful of men, and said,

“I’m showing you just how dangerous these drugs are Tony.”

Chapter End Notes

This one was supposed to be a bit of a breather for Tony and co - just giving him space to be, and to plan (though of course plans are frequently what people do instead of thinking), and to settle down into his new era... (Mwahahaa!)

In case it wasn't obvious - sorry guys this chapter is mostly scene setting and establishing what this new academic world is like before Tony gets dumped into the actual plot of this section!

End Notes

Archive warnings may change as story goes on - I have the basic plot fleshed out, but this is very much a WIP, and is the first fanfic I've dared to post in over a decade so please be gentle with me!

Obviously I don't own anything to do with these characters or Marvel.

This piece hasn't been beta read, so all mistakes are my own.
Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!