

Reset the Universe, It's the Only Way to Be Sure

A Marvelous Therapist Simulator

Prologue: A Genius Snaps

“- October 02, 2023 .-“

Everything was the same save my treeline.

It was still there, but the poplar, oak and cypress were replaced by cottonwood, green ash and sycamore.

Either this was a dream or I wasn't in Greece anymore.

One the one hand, I'd never before remembered (or fantasised?) about past lives outside of dreams before.

On the other hand, I'd not suffered any discontinuity of consciousness since going to bed last night. Coupled with what all my senses and cognitive behavioural exercises told me, all signs pointed to me being very much wide awake.

Right then.

First thing, take stock.

I drew a puff of my cigar, nothing felt unusual there. I turned from the window and inspected the room. My study looked unchanged, from the old reference texts of my military psychologist days, to the computer displaying the excel sheets with the family finances. Looking through the books, I had no trouble reading any of the words or remembering them. On walking to my desk, I determined that Meredith's sesame bread rings and honey donuts were as delicious as always too.

Sitting down in my chair, I went on the internet and looked up a video I'd never watched before and set it to play. At the same time, I downloaded an app on my smartphone which I'd also never seen or used before. No issue with either. A *hard* strike against the idea of being asleep – generally speaking, the sleeping mind had to go roaming a fair bit further afield than usual in order to gain entirely new information, and even that was usually disjointed and vague. Just ask the CIA.

So why did I remember a whole past life as an extraterrestrial? Or the bunch of variations of the same from before that one?

And what does any of it have to do with my treeline?

Never mind that my latest handful of lives featured disturbingly accurately in one or more forms of entertainment media somewhere, all but one of which depicted me in a very unflattering light. Which was *mostly* fair, but the plotlines really lost touch with reality in later issues. I'd not care so much if it weren't my kid reaping all the terrible consequences thereof.

I phone called my grandson and got a 'phone number is unknown' alert. When I dialled it manually with code 30 added at the front, I got a beeping error sound and then the call ended. Strange and disturbing. Even if he was on duty or outside signal range at sea, Peter was too dutiful a man and too high in rank in the navy for anything short of an aide answering on his behalf. Frowning, I tried my daughter next, this time getting an 'unallocated number' result.

Pursing my lips, I called my son. Even if we were estranged on account of him marrying that gold-digging harlot and never having the balls to face any of us again after she divorced him three months in and took his house and money. And half his ongoing income as alimony too. This time, someone did pick up but it wasn't anyone I knew. Either it was more of reality being strange, or the brat had changed his number without telling anyone again.

On a whim, I dialled my landline, making sure not to forget the country code this time. Some woman picked up on the other end. After commiserating with her about incompetent phone companies and reallocated numbers, I ended the call and tried to get my head around the fact that my home in Greece apparently belonged to someone else now.

Oh look it's twilight outside, how appropriate.

I got up and wandered downstairs. The house looked the same. My wife was in the middle of her afternoon nap on the rocking chair on the porch. There was a weird light coming out of my barn. Despite this being off-season. Which meant the power cord to the shed – I went around the back of the house to check – yep, the power was not plugged in, so there shouldn't be any light in there. Certainly not several colors of it.

I roused Meredith and told her to go inside and call 112. I left her the rifle and grabbed the shotgun, then carefully wandered over to the barn. And because I wasn't an idiot, I peeked in through the window first-

I ducked out of sight and cursed under my breath for a good ten seconds.

What the fuck is Iron Man doing in my shed?!

My brain stalled at the words I just thought, then I carefully peeked over the windowsill and blinked at what I saw. Hard. Several times.

The world ended in the middle of my barn.

It looked like reality had burst a hole across dimensions all the way into the nebulous orange afterlife of the very fictional Earth-199999, through there were very pointed red and yellow hues in front of that, with purple flickering in and out of the edges. No green though. No blue either for some reason. Despite who was in the middle it all.

Anthony Edward Stark was kneeling in the Mark LXXXV Iron Man armour, Infinity Stones glimmering on the back of his hand and his fingers frozen mid-way through the Snap.

I ducked back down and looked at my shotgun.

Yeah, this won't do shit.

I went back to the house. My wife met me in the entrance hallway, holding the rifle tightly. I experienced uncommonly mixed feelings at seeing the safety still on.

“112 didn't work,” she told me. Her voice wavered. “I got some strange error message and a robot talking to me in *English*. Jason, what's happening?”

Commercialized science fantasy seeping into the fabric of reality. “We're not in Grevena anymore.” I pondered my shotgun, but decided against leaving it behind like I would do... back home? If my suspicions were right, gun laws were a lot saner over here. “I'm going to scout our surroundings. I won't be long. You might want to steer clear of the shed, your heart will thank you.”

Ignoring her questions and protests, I got into the van and left the property down the path I remembered from the life immediately before this one. Ten minutes later I drove past the welcome sign to St. Charles, Missouri USA and began having rather disconcerting thoughts about the sheer deluge of transmigration stories drowning the internet as I knew it. But they all worked in reverse of whatever this was shaping up to be, I was pretty sure.

I stopped at a couple of shops and spent half an hour in the local pub, tossing the shit with the locals until I was as sure as I could be that they weren't fake people. Then I drove back home and comforted my confused and frantic wife who, of course, had not heeded my wise advice not to peek through the barn windows to her heart's discontent. Thankfully she used the telescope on the balcony instead of going over there.

I returned her hug and pat her on the back until she calmed down.

When she pulled away, she looked much more in control of herself. Relatively speaking. “What the hell is happening, Jason? What does this mean? It’s insane, Jason, that’s a-a *fictional character* in there, what are we going to do? Why is he here, how, why, why us, why-am I dreaming? Are we dreaming? Is this a shared delusion, are we dying and this is our neurons last misfiring, Jason talk to me.”

“... Set the table. If I don’t come back in an hour but you can still see me alright with the telescope *and* you don’t hear or see any gunshots or explosions, you can come looking for me. Maybe bring tea and cake?”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I am.”

“... Jason, what are you planning to do?”

“Talk to God.”

This time I left my shotgun behind on the entryway table.

The shed doors groaned as usual when I threw them open and strode in like I still owned the place. I felt a tingle over my skin and goosebumps in my *bones* as the world took a slightly more yellowish hue, my intuition sat up as memories of handling the Cosmic Seed and Medea’s Tiara came forth from two different past lives. Hm.

Tony Stark watched me, his armor every bit as ragged and his face just as bruised and bloody as it was in the film, and all of him visibly aged much further than any images I’d ever seen of him. He didn’t speak first though.

So I did. “Is this whole world a simulation?”

“The world yes, the people no.”

Great. “And the one up until an hour ago when my home was in Greece instead of here?”

“The *universe* yes, the people no.”

I took my time considering the implications before deciding what to say. “Is this simulation entirely mental?”

“It’s all happening inside the Mind Stone, so yes.”

Well. I'll need to chew on that for a while. Next question. "Why are you here?"

"Because you're a therapist."

...

Oh.

Well.

Didn't see that one coming.

My immediate impulse was to make the objective observation that there must be many better than me, but obviously he would already know that. And... If he really was here for therapy (oh boy), an insult to his intelligence would be a terrible way to start. Still though... "Why this therapist specifically?"

"Because you're the only one I found who also has a history of successfully overcoming being a bigger fuckup than me."

Well. That was nicer to me than Stark because circumstances helped my life a lot, this time around. I didn't have to deal with being emperor of an interstellar polity on top of my heir getting kidnapped and gaslit into a ruin by alien lowlives. After the wife I abandoned with non-consensual amnesia was murdered by yet more alien lowlives. Never mind the ludicrous things that came after.

Anyway, best not to make this about me. "Okay, first off, the point--"

"-Is never to relate to trauma, yes, I know."

Did he really?

Clearly the usual approach wouldn't work if he was already interrupting me. I considered offering guest right, but Xenia might muddle interaction a bit too much depending on how much Stark's understanding of the concept differed from mine. Still, there were non-binding versions of that too.

"... Can I offer you a seat? A drink? Snacks?"

"All the same to you, I'll be staying right here and moving as little as possible."

Yeah, that was pretty much the answer I expected. If he chose to appear like this, the likeliest reasons I could think of were either restraint (in which case there were factors involved I didn't

know well enough to question) or self-flagellation (which was rarely a good idea to be the first thing you poked). Otherwise, he'd have just rung at the gate or appeared in my living room or something.

So. "How much time do you have?"

"All the time in the universe."

"Alright. Can you... give me an hour? To put my thoughts in order?"

"You only need an hour?" Stark's surprise seemed entirely genuine. "You sure you don't want me to, I dunno, jump forward to tomorrow or something?"

You mean fast-forward the mass illusion? "Does that mean no time will pass for you?"

"Sure does."

"... In that case, I'll take you up on your offer. Say this time next week?"

"See you then!"

And he was gone. Along with the hole in reality and its many ominous lights. Looking outside I saw that my treeline was still the one from America, so at least there was incontrovertible proof for me *and* my wife that we hadn't just shared a manic delusion. Or still were sharing the same delusion, same difference. Which also meant the reality was much worse.

Well then.

I suppose this means I could finally have that existential freakout and no one and nothing was going to get in my way.

"Jason? Are you alright? What's going on in there?"

Except that.

“-. .-“

When Tony Stark appeared on the following Tuesday, I was waiting for him in the shed on my favorite chair, fresh from a comics binge, a movie marathon, and the longest wiki walk in the history of mankind.

"Hey doc, no time no see!"

“Stark. I’d say welcome back, but I think I’m the only one that moved.”

“Well, you’re not wrong.” Stark looked appreciatively at my chair, then at my equally decadent therapy couch. “I want to lie down on that thing so much right now, but I just don’t feel like moving.”

So it’s depression? “Can I give you a hand up?”

“You don’t want to stand in this with me, trust me.”

“I do.”

That struck him silent.

“What about the couch, can I push that over or will it puff out of existence?”

“It won’t *puff* but yeah, soulless mental constructs don’t do well over here by themselves.”

Thanks for confirming my first suspicion of how all this works.

“Anyway,” Stark said. “You got your ducks in a row yet?”

“Actually I was done by the day after. I appreciate the extra grace period and I especially appreciate the time you gave me with my wife, but I got my opinions on this well enough figured out over the years.”

“Yeah, that’s another reason why I came to you.”

‘Another’ reason, not ‘the’ other. Sounding ominous already, is he? “Alright, I’m ready to begin.”

Tony Stark watched me, his face a mask of good humour.

“Since this is our first session, how would you like me to address you?”

“Call me Tony. All my friends do.”

“So do all your abusers.” I made sure to only perfunctorily acknowledge how visibly that startled him. “And it wouldn’t be professional. But I’m willing to compromise with you in this case, so…” Calling him Edward would certainly make our relationship unique, but the goal was always fewer hangups, not more. “How about Antonios?” It was pronounced an-daw-nee-aws, so it should make for be a fair but not excessive dissociation from the usual.

“Now we’re getting onto familiar territory.” Stark grinned. It was a weirdly fond, knowing look like he was in on some secret joke involving me. When I gave him a look back, he shrugged. “Rest assured that your actions in that particular iteration of reality only reflect on you positively.”

Because that bomb doesn’t undermine my role here at all. “Right.” I said dubiously. “Why do I feel like *this* universe is setting me up for revenge then?”

“I don’t know, I *am* this universe and I’m not feeling particularly vengeful right now.”

Yeah, that kinda became part of your problem later on. But does him being here, doing... whatever this is, mean that he didn’t like how that version of things turned out? “Stark it is then.” He didn’t expect that either, apparently. “Best if we dissociate our professional relationship from whatever frame of reference that is as well, just in case.”

“... Sure. You’re the shrink.”

For all that’s worth in this situation, which is next to nil.

Right then. “... How accurate is the MCU?”

“Completely, up to Endgame. Except Captain Marvel, she was there during the battle but I didn’t make the movie happen, it and everything after Endgame had nothing to do with me so I had no part in any of the assassination of history, physics, metaphysics and characters therein. Same with the TV series and everything else tangential, and any comics had absolutely nothing to do with me.”

Well, that meant stuff about me had nothing to do with him either. Since a lot of them *were* largely accurate, then past life memories must resurface all on their own. So I couldn’t completely dismiss the terrible later phases of Marvel as bad fanfic either. Or everything that came later. Which could mean there’s something really rotten in the void.

Or they were events from another place and time badly transposed into that one by overcrowded lowest common denominator writer’s rooms? Or even just total fantasy.

Not the topic right now, either way. “I did always think that you would do more with the Stones than go along with the normie’s idea of a patch job. Or anyone else’s idea, really. I can’t imagine you didn’t consider options and scenarios all those years. Is that what’s happening here?”

“I’ve got a summary of findings, if you care to hear it. I can download everything into your head too, if you want. And every detail of my simulations too, if you want to be thorough. I can make it seem like having watched a documentary to keep the psychological influence minimal.”

“Yeah, no. My sanctity of self has already been violated enough, thank you, several times over apparently.” Stark’s smile became fake, but such was life. “Just give me the summary. I trust you to be objective.”

“... That’s something I haven’t heard in a while.” Stark looked at me strangely.

“Only because you’ve been gaslit to high hell for all of your adult life.”

Stark gaped. Briefly, but he did, wide eyes and everything. “Wow, talk about coming out swinging. Whatever, I can dig it. The Infinity Stones have all the powers you could expect from their names.” Deflection, thy name is Tony Stark. “There’s considerable overlap depending on how laterally you conceptualise power application, but their core attributes are quite distinct, and their scope is ultimately limited by the scale of the cosmos itself. In practical terms, what’s most relevant for this, us, right here, is that I can use the Mind Stone to simulate the entire universe, but can’t do anything else because that’s the maximum limit of its memory and processing capacity.”

This all sounded weirdly familiar. “I could probably draw a lot of implications from that, but I’m sure you’ve already done that and even solved all the ones you could before now. What’s the hold-up?”

“The Snap isn’t the first time the stones were used to warp reality, not by a long shot. It will certainly shock you to learn that scrotum chin and everyone else who ever used the Infinity Gauntlet weren’t particularly smart or well-intentioned. That’s where most of the other timelines that surfaced as entertainment media come from. The stones don’t just stay where they are either. When you try to go maximum scale changes, gauntlet or no, they need to spread out over the cosmos. Thanos thought he destroyed them, but you can’t actually do that. They just spread out to do what he actually wanted, which was to make his changes permanent. It was like a patch archive decompressing and applying itself to the master program – the stones *became* the patch, new files that then spread across the entire universe, while also being their own hardware too.”

“I follow you so far.”

“The Mind Stone doesn’t store anything past its runtime, it just processes what Reality and Soul have in storage, or whatever they – the *universe* – were like at whatever point I choose in Time, every moment in time is basically a System Restore point. This means that if I simulate the entire universe, the Mind Stone can’t do anything else. I can pick and choose the parameters, but I certainly can’t *test* them. If the universe is a computer, the Mind Stone is the CPU and RAM all in one, but not the storage, and it has an upper limit.”

“I knew it!” I slapped my knees triumphantly. “I knew it, I knew there was no way it wouldn’t have occurred to you of all people, it’s too simple! You don’t need to turn back time, you just need to use the Time Stone to record with the *Mind* Stone how the universe was at a particular point in history, then use Reality to reset it all to that! No timeline bullshit or multiverse nonsense required, as if that even made any sense, I’d much rather keep free will and self-determination, thanks.”

“You and me both,” Stark said dryly. “Unfortunately, if I rely on inanimate factors to control things – like meteor strikes, natural disasters, pathogens and the like – this makes it way too likely that Chaos Theory will kick my ass like it did everyone else who did an Infinity patch job, as some lunatic always gathers the stones every time. I *thought* of making people do what needs to happen, but apparently the Mind and Soul Stones can do everything to a soul *except* make an entirely new one. Which means I’d literally have to mind-control or soul-rape everything from individuals to entire societies for anything meaningful to change.”

Yeah no, way to drive yourself into a corner, how exactly are those your only options?

Stark, unfortunately, misunderstood my hesitance. “I’m not talking out of my ass here. I tried reducing the scope of the simulation to impose a tweaked version of, say the Milky Way galaxy. Everywhere not affected did nasty things regardless of whether I messed with them that way. If I go really big and change the laws of reality – like making it so particular sorts of mad experiments or moral degeneracy always backfire or fail – societies either stagnate forever or mass demoralization leads to dystopias everywhere. If I go small and keep it at, say, Earth, the change to space, time and history won’t be subtle at all to those with senses, technology or, ugh, *magic* to look. There are places, entities, cosmic anomalies and what have you that will detect or recognize something of what happened, and they always start a race for who can take advantage or ‘correct’ things fastest. Patch jobs aren’t any less obvious when they’re metaphysical, who knew, right?”

A true catch-22 when proceeding forward from the Snap is an equally bad option, if not worse. The ‘snap everything back’ plan left so many things to go wrong and *stay* wrong. Like everyone who died as a consequence of other people getting dusted. People died on battlefields, during crimes, in police operations, on the operating table, people snapped back to existence in freefall because they were on an airplane when they vanished. People suffered and died because of discoveries, inventions or heroics that never got to be. Suddenly losing half of your gut flora would have wreaked havoc as well. Among many other things.

And that’s assuming everyone didn’t all rematerialize in space because planets move.

Stark was a genius, so he’d obviously have accounted for all that. But accounting for and fixing were different things. And that still left the sudden overpopulation after *everywhere* adjusted for less than half the prior economic output. There was probably a single-digit percentage of societies that didn’t entirely collapse into barbarism when half of their citizens vanished.

But all that was secondary to the little issue that Tony Stark was rambling, which was always a defense mechanism for him. *Not conducive to therapy in the least.* “How bad are we talking about here?”

“I’ve simulated fourteen million six hundred and six scenarios. None of them turn out any better than the Blip.”

Precisely one more than Doctor Strange. “Well.” I said. “That’s not good.”

“No it’s not,” Stark agreed, completely oblivious to the second half of what I was really worried about.

Well, the therapeutic relationship *should* ideally be authentic. “You aren’t reading my mind right now, are you?”

Stark’s face slackened in surprise again, then moved to deliberately transparent faux outrage. “Of course not! You think I want my poor mind to *shrink* even faster, what do you think I am?”

“My personal feelings don’t matter until the treatment’s over.”

Stark lost his words again, looking at me in that weird way I apparently lacked an entire reality’s worth of memories to really understand. *Besides* the lives I could remember.

“You were wrong about one thing, just FYI,” Stark said eventually.

“And that is?”

“It *didn't* occur to me.”

I blinked and sat back.

“Yeah, that’s the thing – resetting Reality to be *like* a point in the past instead of twisting Time into knots *didn't* occur to me – and I’m being a lot more literal there than you think. You’re right, it’s simple and straightforward. But I didn’t think about it.” Stark shrugged idly, as if this didn’t bother him anymore which was clearly a total lie. “By extension, I can’t be sure that the problem isn’t *still* with the master of the simulation instead of everyone and everything else. Or the simulation itself. So, as a certain spider so bluntly put it no matter how much I disagreed at the time, I am letting go of my ego for one goddamn second and seeking a different opinion.”

Oh boy, I have my work cut out for me don't I?

I looked at Iron Man. I crossed my arms. I pretended to think about that even though I considered what I’d say to Tony Stark a long time ago because the big, tough, no-nonsense military therapist degenerated into a no-good, filthy fanfiction writer in his twilight years. You know, like Virgil. And Chrétien de Troyes. “You said this simulation is of just this planet?”

“Before this you were in the entire universe under parameters that can be summarised as ‘magic and mad science don’t exist’ but that led to a much emptier cosmos and many lives stranded in the Soul Stone. But then I noticed the ‘fictional’ renderings of past times and events and played into that, as I told you. Then I did the zoomer thing and sunk my teeth into fan content, which is where I found the answer staring at me all along. You’re not the only one who came up with it, but still. And you even wrote a story about it! Sorry about the missed opportunity there by the way, I promise I had nothing to do with that either.”

That *was* true, but... “That story was for Star Wars.”

“And it’ll work perfectly for us too! Or it will if we come up with a workaround for this bottleneck – which is why it’s unacceptable that it didn’t occur to me!”

Well, you’re half-right about that. “But right now it’s just a simulation of Earth?”

“That’s right. What are you thinking?”

“Does that mean you can simulate other things right now?”

“Yep.”

Well.

This vastly expanded my options in terms of experiential therapy, didn't it? "Simulate everything that happened during the first 24 hours after Thanos snapped, but with the you from right after the 'I am Iron Man' press conference."

"Huh, didn't see that coming, but alright, if you say s-" Stark's voice died with a look of total, unrestrained stupefaction. "Holy shit."

Yes, that's pretty much the reaction I expected.

"Holy shit, it's literally the *first* thing he thought – that *I* thought of, how the fuck?"

"Mhm."

"How the hell did you...?"

"Stark. You're a scientist and engineer whose primary self-made tools are artificial intelligence and holograms. Simulated scenarios would logically have been the first thing you thought of. If you were in your right mind, that is."

Stark was lost for words.

I took that that to mean that my approach was working. "Now simulate the airport fight, same difference."

Tony Stark stared at me for a whole minute, then at nothing for just as long.

"Well?"

"... This is the me that was already entering the early stages of palladium poisoning?"

"Yes. So. How did it go?"

"... He – *I* took out Maximoff first with a sonic device like Stane used on me, then put her hands and feet in metal cuffs. Rhodey easily took out Barton, because bow and arrow against modern equipment, never mind *my* armors. I used the Uni-beam to cut one of Sam's falcon wings before catching him and cuffing him too. Rogers and Barnes still made for the jet, but Rhodey took Widow out with a knockout dart and cuffed her while I used an EMP to stop the jet before it even left the hangar. I then used the sonic paralysers again to take out both Rogers and Barnes. I never involved any teenagers, Lang ran away on antback without us even realizing he was there, I used a knockout dart on Maximoff just to be safe, the task force hauled everyone off. I went home, destroyed Ross's career in the same breath where I publically withdrew from the Avengers – none too friendly either – and then..."

I waited.

“I proposed to Pepper.” Stark frowned in raw, earnest incomprehension. “And she said yes.”

Ah.

Yeah, that’ll do it. “You didn’t know you were getting fatally poisoned by heavy metals yet.”

“No, that’s not the point. It’s Pep, I don’t get it. She hated me being Iron Man, that’s why it took me completely stopping before we, ‘us’, actually worked.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but she asked for a *break* the first time, not a permanent breakup, and her reasons were that she couldn’t handle all the splash effects from you being Iron Man on top of everything else.” I gestured vaguely. “This was you cutting off a big chunk of everything else.”

“... How the hell is that me so different? So much...”

“Better?”

The word hung judgmentally in the quiet.

“Youth is *one* part of it. Having just *half* of your PTSD is another part of it.” I rose from the chair, walked over and sat on my knees in front of him so we were on equal footing – well, lack of footing. “Stark, do I have your permission to consider the media you had a direct hand in as confessions and testimonials for the purposes of our professional arrangement?”

With some difficulty, Stark refocused away from whatever he saw and did out of my sight and gave a terse nod.

Only Tony Stark would use omnipotence to make movies out of his life just so he could treat the resulting fan wars as a form of therapy, instead of the most unreliable incarnation of the court of public opinion. *I’m here for the long haul, aren’t I?* “Thank you. Now. Because I believe you when you say that the films and whatever else are as objectively accurate as you could make them, I’m going to make a number of objective observations of my own, which I will ask you in advance not to – no, you’ll definitely interrupt, you can’t help yourself-”

“Hey!”

“-so just make sure you let me finish. I’ll say when I’m finished, very specifically. Do I have your agreement?”

“... Sure. Knock me out.”

Be careful what you wish for. “The Avengers came together by happenstance. SHIELD picked the members based on battlefield capabilities, not personality or common sense. Let’s pretend, for simplicity’s sake, that there was nothing sinister behind you not knowing anything about SHIELD until 2008 despite your father being one of its founding members. If you really didn’t know about SHIELD, then Widow’s corporate espionage wouldn’t and shouldn’t have been taken lightly. The consequences of corporate espionage tend to be catastrophic.”

“That’s true,” Stark said, not entirely just to humour me. “Pepper certainly felt that way.”

“SHIELD asked that you work with the spy in question, even after she not only put your company in jeopardy, but also insinuated herself into your inner circle, created tensions in said entourage that wasn’t there before, betrayed you to her true master when you were at your lowest – by stabbing you in the neck as if your PTSD wasn’t already bad enough – and condescended to you alongside said master forever thereafter, as if you were a child instead of a man dying of heavy metal poisoning that was clearly responsible for every single self-destructive excess that you had committed since Afghanistan. All of which they knew the whole time. These are all, objectively, fact. But more on that later.”

“Oh no,” Stark said woodenly, staring at me intensely. “Do go on, I insist.”

I ignored him because context is important. “They asked Steven Rogers, an American soldier from the 40s, to fight alongside a former KGB assassin and mercenary trained by the Red Room that was, ostensibly, allied with and possibly destroyed by him alongside Hydra back in the 40s. Note that Widow was in her 20s in 2010, or at least looked it, raising questions about whether the Red Room – and thus Hydra, by association – could still be active.”

Stark frowned.

“Objectively, Rogers and Romanova were at potentially greater risk of not getting along than him getting got along with you. Yet somehow, despite all these tensions that Bruce Banner so aptly described as ‘a ticking time bomb’, you were still persuaded – easily – to become the Avengers’ -” *enabler* “- financier and public relations manager. Despite *not* being a member, just a consultant, which also meant you were deprived of any and all input on decision-making, never mind veto power.”

I let him chew on that for a while.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but Stark Tower began work years prior to the Chitauri attack, and the living floors had been intended for the Stark Industries employees, right?”

“I can see what you mean,” Stark said, though his tone didn’t entirely fit. “A lot of it went through one ear and out the other at a time. You gotta admit, though, the letters falling off the tower to leave only the ‘A’ in place was pretty providential.”

“I’m not going to argue providence with God.”

Stark grimaced. “Fair enough.”

Progress? “And as I said, I’m just making observations as objectively as I can, which you promised to...”

“Let you finish.”

I checked my notes. “Did Miss Potts ever consult with a therapist about how good an idea it is to put the living space in the same place as the workspace?”

Stark looked aside, as he seemed to do when he was using the stones. He frowned harder. “Pep... actually talked to an entire army of therapists and the HR division. They told her a healthy daily life relies on the physical separation of working and living spaces, said how even the people that work from home like to have a room set up for just that. But she opened with how they told her about how and why it’s bad for coworkers to share the same living space. When I heard that, I panicked thinking she was going on a roundabout way to dump me and I changed the subject.”

I’m not even surprised. No, I was surprised, but only by him being so honest with me about it.

“And after the invasion?”

“I told her the Avengers weren’t mere coworkers.”

“You barely knew each other for two hours.” *And Banner was the only one who didn’t hold you in contempt, but that’s just my personal observation.*

Stark looked at the mid-way Snap with a very disconcerting intensity.

“After Thor left, Rogers went on a field trip on his bike, and Romanoff and Barton went back to whatever SHIELD had them do, did you ever revisit the topic?”

“... You’re saying they stayed up until I agreed to be their sugar daddy and then showed their asses after they got the unlimited credit line they were really after.”

“Is that what happened? It’s outside the events depicted, so I can’t really judge.”

But Tony was talking to himself now. “And I couldn’t argue about anything because I’d already accepted not having any decision-making power over the Avengers Initiative. I was just a consultant. Iron man yes, Tony Stark not recommended.”

I personally believe that abandonment issues would have made it even easier for Romanoff to manipulate you, if they took. They didn’t, but could’ve. Apparently. But what I personally believed didn’t matter. “Still not speculating.”

“Damn, and I thought I had you that time!”

And deflection remains your most ingrained emotional defense mechanism. “How do you feel, now, about your reasoning of back then?”

To his credit, Stark gave my question some actual thought. “I was the only one who saw what was beyond the portal. The stakes were too high for my personal issues to get in the way. We needed to be ready.”

Romanova called this egotism. “In that case, wouldn’t people not give a damn about personal feelings regardless? Existential threats don’t discriminate any more than survival instinct does.”

Stark opened his mouth, closed it and his face went through several emotions before he settled on contempt. It was more than enough to know who he was thinking about. “I want to disagree, but later events agree with you 100%.”

At least Maximoff’s karma houdini act can still be used for something. “Simulate the airport fight but with the you from just after seeing the tape in Siberia.” I watched him wince and wondered if he was also seeing himself die to Maximoff’s car barrage. That he didn’t at *least* break his spine like Rhodes had been complete luck. “Simulate the fight during Vision’s awakening if your breastplate had flown in half a second later.”

Stark didn’t wince this time, but his aimless gaze turned very frigid.

It was *likely* that peak human reflexes let Rogers see that the armor would get there before him, so he adjusted his strength mid-way through the attack. But he still aimed for the thing keeping Stark alive, instead of his face which would have much more easily knocked him out. “Review all the instances of each Avenger being attacked by one or more of the other Avengers with lethal intent and/or force, without mind control being involved.”

I didn't need to see his face to know what he found, and more importantly what he *didn't*.

And now I had a very small time window to pre-empt the ensuing emotional spiral, unlike what *some people* would do.

“Did you know that psychoanalysis was debunked in the mental health field decades before Crews wrote ‘The Making of an Illusion’?”

Stark blinked at the apparent non-sequitur, though I could already see his mind running circles around what I had only just begun to say.

“Carl Jung was an out and proud serial adulterer who said that a happy marriage requires a ‘license to be unlawful’, and his empathy for children was such that his cruel pranks on his own kids left one of his daughters permanently deaf in one ear. Anything he had to say on empathy and relationships is therefore suspect. I won't disregard everything *not* related to psychoanalysis that he contributed to the field, a lot of what he wrote is still foundational to all education and training in psychology. But the good stuff barely figured into Widow's assessment of you, now didn't it?”

Wonder of wonders, Tony Stark didn't pretend it wasn't a rhetorical question as he was wont to do.

“Meanwhile, Sigmund Freud was a literal fraud. He got pretty much nothing right. The Oedipus complex is nonsense, the Elektra complex is nonsense, psychoanalysis is all a bunch of things he completely made up, sometimes on the spot, often to cover for his own perversions. The man seriously presented a theory where the cause of paedophilia was not adults preying on children but the child itself lusting over his parents and seeking sexual gratification thereof. Incidentally, his grandson raped a bunch of kids.”

Tony Stark *gawked* at me.

“It wasn't Widow's fault that nobody told her whose ‘expertise’ they were teaching her, and it's certainly not her fault that SHIELD used the same playbook too. But, *objectively*, her psychological profile was complete nonsense even before we get into the whole ‘you were cognitively impaired by heavy metal poisoning and dying’ thing.”

Iron Man opened and closed his mouth, blinked rapidly for several seconds, then his stance visibly slackened before he went stiff again with a wary glance at the mid-way Snap.

“That concludes my objective assessment of events as I know them. Or as objective as I could be based on entirely recorded evidence.” I crossed my arms and looked at Stark evenly. “Now, in light of all this, how do you feel about everything that led to this moment?”

Stark looked at me in disbelief for a long, long moment. Then he looked away. His eyes began moving every which way, occasionally blinking, pausing, closing and opening them in chagrin before the whole process repeated. Again and again. I wondered how many simulations he was running every second, now, and how many had to do with things I *didn't* notice but he now could.

I wrote a note that I'd be right back and went to the house to visit the facilities. I'm a professional, but just because I can hide it like nobody's business doesn't mean that whole talk wasn't extremely stressful. Or that I wasn't still in the middle of an existential crisis one week later, because seriously? This? All this? What the flying fuck, over?

When I was done, I made sure not to share any confidential matters while I reassured my long-suffering wife that everything was still going perfectly fine, *really*, before I made my way back outside.

Tony Stark still wasn't finished reassessing all his life's choices when I got back to the shed, so I grabbed my phone and whiled away the time by continuing the most frantic wiki walk of my life.

I was going point by point through the 1990s section of the timeline when Tony Stark finally came back to himself. “Fuck my life.”

Yeah, that was pretty much the reaction I expected.

I put aside my phone and went back to my spot, though I sat cross-legged this time, my knees were aching.

Finally, Stark slumped and wiped his face with his free hand. “When I came here, I didn't think my therapist's idea of treatment would be to turn me against the other Avengers.” He looked at me seriously over the mid-way Snap. “I definitely wouldn't have thought it would work so well.”

“If it were any of them here instead of you, I'd treat them with unconditional positive regard too.”

Stark obviously didn't expect that either.

But as I said, I was a professional. “We’re definitely making progress though.”

“How do you figure?”

“We’re moving past the things I can be entirely objective about, but since you came to me of your own initiative, I’ll assume you put at least *some* stock in my judgment.”

“More than I do in mine, not that it’s a particularly high threshold these days.”

Yeah, that’s your other big problem. “Summarise your conclusions first.”

“... The well was poisoned from the start and we never stopped drinking,” Stark finally admitted reluctantly. “The footage of my birthday party turned Rogers against me from the beginning, Thor cared more about his absolutely batshit evil brother than us or himself, Banner was always a flight risk, and I never forgot that, for a little while there during my house arrest, I *hated* Romanoff and absolutely *despised* Nick Fury, he... they-“ Stark’s voice wavered, then his lip curled in disgust.

I couldn’t tell if it was aimed at himself or not. “When you’re ready.”

“They invaded my home repeatedly, shut down JARVIS to destroy my sense of security, they knew I was dying, they knew the heavy metal poisoning was impairing my judgment, they waited until the last second to give me *my father’s stuff* that he had left *specifically for me* and which they *stole* and *kept from me* until they could hang it over my head from a position of absolute power. They gave me just enough rope to hang myself.”

Not quite the ‘secret organisations lacking in oversight or transparency are an inherent plague on freedom and self-determination’ that I was hoping for, but close enough.

Stark wasn’t looking at anything anymore. “After that I... Well. I guess I was their dancing monkey, as Rogers would say. And then Ultron happened, Sokovia happened, and they had the nerve to curl their lips in disgust at me for daring to say we needed accountability.”

“Hmm.”

“Oh come *on*, I’m still not getting it right? What will it take with you people, give me *something* to work with at least!”

“We people, meaning?”

Stark closed his eyes and made a few unpleasant expressions before his face smoothed back into its bruised and beaten self. “Point taken.”

I took my phone and double-checked a certain bit of information. “I’m going to say something that will upset you, but before that I want you to look over the UNESCO guidance document 10.YYYYYY/XXXXXXXXX. Pay particular attention to sections 3.1, 7.1. and 7.2.”

“Sure, doc, whatever you s-“ Stark’s eyes blanked suddenly, they his whole face twisted in revulsion. “What the *fuck* is this?”

A big part of why so many people also believe we live in a simulation. “The doing of the UN.”

“... No, you know what? Forget it. I am not touching that. I am not even going to *remember* that, I’ll scrub it out of my mind, please and no thank you Gandalf.”

Oh, I’ve gone from being conflated with SHIELD to Doctor Strange? “Given everything we’ve gone over, how do you feel *now* about Rogers saying the safest hands were still your own?”

Stark’s eyes snapped to mine, but the rest of his knee-jerk reaction was blessedly absent.

He stayed silent though. For a long, long time until it was clear he was refusing to answer the question. It made me wonder about all those other simulations he ran, but it was a pointless mental exercise.

Resistant patients were a dime a dozen, this was nothing new. “Stark, you’ll hate hearing this, but you and Steven Rogers share one big characteristic – you overreact. The only thing setting you apart in that regard is which way you face. Steven Rogers had a very *measured* reaction to a *real* threat to his autonomy – which it was, don’t deny it, Thunderbolt got the lead on that for a reason and they already had the Raft and power-suppressing collars, never mind that all enhanced were supposed to give their DNA. I don’t believe for a second you didn’t realize that was there solely so clandestine agencies could genetically splice and breed their own living weapons.”

Iron Man was gearing up to say something in protest, but the last bit made him bite back whatever it was.

“The fact Rogers barely skimmed the *obstructively overlong filibuster* doesn’t change any of that. But he had already, previously overreacted to the *imagined* threat to Barnes’s life, the last thing in his life that was still *his*. In so doing he protected Hydra for two years while he kept the Barnes’ issue secret from the authorities and you, conflated the two threats to become an international terrorist, and later took Maximoff as his pet project – at your, Banner’s and everyone else’s expense – for reasons I’d need *him* on my couch to figure out. He undermined

all your personal commitments, and in so doing crippled Earth's defense prospects against extraterrestrials and other existential threats.”

Stark looked mutinous, but he didn't interrupt.

“Conversely, you completely overreacted to your *partial* responsibility in the Ultron affair, except in the other direction. You began to mistrust your capabilities in your field of specialty despite Dum-e, U, JARVIS or FRIDAY never betraying you even once. You began to believe the ongoing gaslighting more than your *actual* friends and allies, until you judged them – and yourself – to be less reliable than a bunch of unelected busybodies from an international organisation with no enforcement powers of its own, and whose members are all political appointees *assigned* by the USA or Russia or Wakanda or Havana or what have you, based entirely on how well the current administration thinks they'll dance to the tune of their campaign donors. You undermined all your *professional* commitments, and in so doing crippled Earth's defense prospects against extraterrestrials and other existential threats.”

Somehow, Stark managed to listen through all that without interrupting at all, this time.

I was very relieved, not that the alternative would have made me any less blunt. You didn't pussyfoot around God's sanity, if he's already crazy the odds of him doing something unspeakable to you wouldn't change much regardless of what you did, probably.

And Stark still watched me without saying anything.

That was fine. ‘Steve Rogers did what the Tony Stark of 2012 would have done and vice-versa’ was a bit too much to expect during our first session. If he already had that kind of self-awareness, he wouldn't need therapy. “Stark, why did SHIELD cover up for Stane?”

That, finally, seemed to get a reaction from him again. “Let me double-check.”

He was simulating the past. *I've gone and made him mistrust his memory of events too, now.* But what even qualified as the right approach here? I'd chosen that particular wording very deliberately. Giving God therapy is not an exact science.

“Best I can figure, they actually thought it would be an olive branch to me. Agent Agent didn't ask or threaten anything, only gave me the script about Stane going down with his yacht in a tragic accident. He was angry when I revealed I was Iron Man, but I did play along with the rest.”

“Why?”

“I guess I just wanted the mess to be over.”

“Simulate you blowing the mess wide open.

Stark did so, and his eyebrows climbed very high. “What the *fuck*.”

This time I *was* surprised by the strength of his reaction.

“SHIELD was *pissed*... But...”

But they don't even live up to the satire that is Machiavellian logic because their means tended to be much worse than the results the bad guys did on purpose. “When you're ready.”

“But the military went from betrayed and angry to just angry, my reputation was revitalized thanks to the public outpour of sympathy, and...” His eyes moved wordlessly for a few good moments, before his face soured. “And I didn't keep the palladium poisoning secret from Pepper and Rhodey. Pepper worked with me instead of in spite of me, and the both of them helped me keep a hold of myself, even persuaded me to prepare a press conference about it instead of spiralling. This pushed SHIELD to return my dad's stuff early, and they couldn't get away with putting me under house arrest either. I created Starkanium with time to spare and Pepper called them out on their gaslighting with me right there. The well that got poisoned was completely different, but...”

I watched and waited as the man watched whatever the simulation showed him, his face losing tension and gaining wonder and disbelief with every second that passed. I waited until he was finished. Until he just sat there without saying anything. “But?”

“But my life would have been so much better, happier, Pep and I – we'd have been married in 2012! And the Avengers still came together and fell together and...” I watched his wonder drain out of him. His next words were bitter. “And the world ended up in the same place anyway.”

Did it now? Time for some cognitive-behavioural therapy because that was just absolutely *fascinating*. “So the universe didn't need you to be miserable.”

Stark jerked in place.

“SHIELD didn't need to take over from Stane as prime gaslighters in order to for the universe to unfold as it did.”

“That’s not what they-“ Stark grit his teeth in frustration, simulated *something* and- “Okay, I’ll give you Fury but Widow was *genuine* about considering us a family, she-“ But the recap or whatever it was went on, and his resolve didn’t. “*Fuck.*”

I didn’t know where this reaction came from this time, so I didn’t say anything.

“Natashalie’s motivation was expunging the red in her ledger, and I guess she was willing to do anything to achieve that.” Stark said with a resigned air. “I guess that never changed, really.”

This I *could* deduce. “Civil War?”

“Natasha was all about keeping the new family she’d found, by that point.” Stark said sadly. “I guess she was willing to do anything to achieve that too.”

Do anything. Betray anyone. “Are you saying her betrayal wasn’t personal?” His silence didn’t tell me anything, but I could see enough on his face to get the idea. “Does that change how you feel about it?”

Stark stared at nothing, then me, then at whatever he saw beyond the fake world, he ran... I couldn’t tell how many simulations before he looked at me again. Opened his mouth and closed it without saying anything several times.

Then he sagged and his right hand dropped with him, the world wavering alarmingly in my sight as the mid-way Snap almost...

I didn’t even know.

“I’m so tired.”

The greying hair, the lines on Stark’s face looked sharper than ever, more so along the black eye and other scrapes and bruises. More than ever, I was acutely aware that I was looking at a grieving, exhausted, beaten up fifty-three-year-old man.

“So tired that you can’t convince yourself to fix everything anymore?” *Even yourself.*

“I know what it would take,” Stark said. “I know how it would, *could* work out. Well, at least better and longer than what we got.”

“What’s that?”

“With a me that’s not *me.*” He gestured vaguely in a way that indicated everything else but somehow still conveyed he was only talking about himself. “A me that’s not *this.*” When he

met my eyes, his grin was all fake again. “Maybe with a little help from the friendly interstellar empire a galaxy over.”

“The Large Magellanic Cloud has some very interesting points of interest, I can’t deny that.” I decided to go with deflection this time too, temporarily, because I didn’t want to give his self-loathing an opening if he was entertaining world conquest, never mind selling Earth out to a foreign power. But his statement niggled at my brain – wait. “Earlier, what you said – that *iteration* that reflected on me positively. You called it an iteration of reality, not a simulation.”

Stark, for some reason, looked vindicated. “That’s right.”

No deflective humour, no sniping, no trace of a quip anywhere in sight, just a frank admission and whatever that was. “... Didn’t you say the stones would vanish and reconstitute somewhere else if you used them like that?”

“For resetting history – or, well, reality in this case – they’d appear in the spots they were at in that point in time. But it wasn’t *all* reality that time, just the solar system and a few things besides that as they came up.”

“Ah.”

“It was...”

I waited.

Tony sighed but seemed to sit a bit easier for a moment. “It was a reprieve. Sort of a vacation from... all this.” He met my gaze and held it this time. “I didn’t really program any of the beats, just cherry-picked a few people with interesting stuff going for them from the Soul Stone and... let things happen. Time and Reality mixed some really weird backstory into things, but it turned out surprisingly refreshing.”

“I guess this is the *other* other reason you came to me?”

“It’s the only reason I’m bothering with this at all.”

I felt a chill go down my spine. “Stark... How many times have you inserted *yourself* in-”

“Just the once and then I came straight here.” The chill got stronger. “Because, you know, starting to do anything remotely like Maximoff is a sign that you’re on a one-way ticket to Loonyville.”

“I see.” I didn’t know what else to say.

The silence went by for so long it got awkward for both of us because holy smokes and cigars, how do I even begin to figure out how to untangle this mess?

Finally, I cleared my throat. “I won’t claim to understand what you’re going through.”

“You don’t have to. As you said before, the point isn’t to relate to my baggage. If everyone could relate we’d all be brainwashed and crazy.”

Morbid, but accurate. “...Now that we have what I hope is sufficient trust and rapport, what, exactly, are you trying to find or do with all these simulations? You said it yourself, Chaos Theory-”

“Chaos Theory doesn’t care about Earth.”

“Ah.” Now *that* I definitely related to, even if my priorities were naturally a little different since Earth wasn’t *my* home. Or shouldn’t be, except Stark seemed to be focusing on simulations that all start after the point I got stranded here. “I am calling and end to this session.”

“If you say s – wait, what?”

“We’ve been stretching the boundaries of professionalism for a while, and if you’re as familiar with me as you say, that’s a hopeless endeavour anyway. At best we’re two people that used to be at least moderately acquainted, but one now has amnesia. Please give me a bit to think about everything and re-adjust my approach.”

“Okay?”

I nodded, got up and went back to the chair to do a bit more thinking.

“Should I wait or go? Because either is all the same for me. And I’m sorry about this I guess, kind of a big bomb to drop on you on top of the living in a simulation thing-“

“Yeah, no, you can stop right there. Just because the session’s over doesn’t mean downward spirals are suddenly acceptable.”

Stark didn’t seem to know what to do with that.

Oh for fuck’s sake, how blunt must emotionally-focused therapy even be? “Stark, listen to me very carefully – you are a *good* man. If you were willing to accept that about yourself things would be a lot easier on everyone.”

Stark grimaced as if... No, like *I* would have done after telling him that one too many times before. As if *he'd* heard that from me one too many times, what the hell happened in that version of things?

I sighed. "Regardless, this is where we part ways for now."

"It is, huh?"

"Yes." I stretched and climbed to my feet. "Thank you for your honesty, we made a lot of progress this session. Now if it's still open, I would like to again take you up on your offer to come back later. Say another week? And don't just skip to next Tuesday this time, take some time to think and rest, insofar as you can in this state."

The silence was the longest this time and the look he gave me... "Sure doc, whatever you say."

"Maybe leave a written summary of whatever else you think is relevant to this situation for me to look over until then?"

"Sure can do, doc, see you in a blink!"

"See you next Tuesday."

But he was already gone. The only trace that he was ever there was a stack of prints in the spot where he'd been.

Alright.

Time to develop new aims and objectives because pussyfooting around Stark's is going to run into a wall very fast.

“-. .-“

Over the following sessions, Tony Stark turned out to be that very rare kind of patient that's both fully cooperative but somehow also the most difficult case of your career.

Shocking, I know.

And that's before you factored in the whole him being God thing. Although, contrary to what many liked to think, he didn't have a god complex. Actually, he didn't have any complex except

guilt. He was just dishonest – possibly including with himself – about why he was really putting me through this.

Yes, me, not himself.

The therapy he was getting was secondary to him. Though it took me until the fourth session to realize it, he was actually treating this as a *job interview*.

For me.

Unfortunately for his ulterior motives, malicious compliance isn't really malicious when it works to my patient's benefit, so I pretended to not realize his deception. Even as he dropped more and more hints in a bid to avoid having to outright spit it out. Guilt complexes could be like that, unfortunately.

Sometimes Stark got combative "Maybe I should've made the others think I was against the Accords, then they'd have thought they were a fantastic idea!" Stark spat, waving wildly with the mid-way Snap as he laid on a shimmering red replica of my sofa. "But no – since Tony Stark the Devil Incarnate agreed with them, then clearly they were evil and not worth the paper they were written on!"

When this happened, I'd wait him out while paying very close attention to how the colours of infinity looked and felt every time his attention shifted.

Sometimes he got defensive. "If Cap had put more than ten seconds effort to think about the Accords, he'd have seen what a gift they were. It would've kept people like Ross from having sole and unchallenged authority or power over the Avengers and other similar entities."

When this happened, I did my best to be ready in case the defense was a poor one. "You didn't present it that way," I said mildly, while paying even closer attention to how the colours of infinity looked and felt every time his self-control wavered. If I paid close attention to my intuition, I could even predict their patterns before they happened. Sometimes. More and more with exposure. I'd been moving my chair closer to the rip in the world each new session too, something Stark had yet to comment on. "Did you believe it would actually turn out that way in reality?"

"It *could've*, if not for Zemo and Barnes. The last thing Ross would've wanted was for the Avengers to become an international asset, he didn't want to lose the control that he could get over us. And what do you know, Rogers and the others played into his hands perfectly!"

Yeah, sometimes he even sounded reasonable, when it was something I lacked sufficient insight to comment on. Which this *wasn't* the case, seeing as Ross championed the Accords like no one else, but Stark wasn't in the headspace to respond well to that. "You didn't present it that way either." When this happened, I had to come at things sideways. "Stark, do I have to tell you to simulate that talk with the you from 2012? Or earlier?"

Tony Stark had a very emotive face when he trusted you.

Incidentally, his grip on the powers he was constantly wrestling with wavered every time his core beliefs did, and there was never any consistent time frame for how long it took him to reassert it. Consciousness is power intensive, especially when you're actively keeping billions of souls hooked into a mental simulation in an increasingly soul-grinding bid to try and figure out a way to pre-empt an alien lunatic's version of the Rapture.

Or whatever comparable or worse outcomes Chaos Theory threw at you, apparently.

I wasn't entirely sure if Stark realized the extent of his vulnerability, but I *was* fairly certain by session four that he didn't care.

By session twelve I was strongly inclined to believe that he didn't entirely understand the extent of *my* options, now that I was, for all intents and purposes, a self-aware soul in the middle of a lucid dream.

Too bad it wasn't *my* dream.

Or maybe not, depending on how much trouble the stones were causing Stark that he didn't let me see.

No pressure. "Stark, the you from 2008 fought to kill – and succeeded via delegation – Obadiah Stane, a man that you knew practically your whole life and was also your godfather. All because he was threatening Miss Potts, people and yourself. In contrast, the you of 2010 let SHIELD get away without a fight after corporate espionage – never mind everything else – which can *maybe* be excused by the heavy metal poisoning. But the you of 2013 said 'we create our demons' and accepted the blame for Aldrich Killian becoming a terrorist... for the high crime that you blew him off at a conference way back. You know, like all the hundreds of other randos with 'the greatest idea in the world if only someone else does all the work' that didn't become supervillains over it."

Stark gave a hard squeeze to the make-believe stress ball in his non-Snap hand.

“You, Stark, only use your hindsight when it serves your guilt complex. If you stopped to think even just one step beyond that, you’d realise that your younger self holds many of the answers and solutions you’re looking for. You’re letting your past die and it’s destroying your future.”

“Yeah yeah, I’m the universe’s most egotistical narcissist, I already know that, can we move on?”

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard you say.”

Stark balked and flailed on the couch to stare at me, aghast.

The limits of my professionalism *might* be fraying, a little bit, but Tony Stark clearly needed the bluntest possible approach during emotionally-focused therapy. “Stark. Define arrogance for me.”

Tony Stark looked at me with completely different eyes than before, but he answered me anyway. “The condition or quality of being arrogant, a manifest feeling of personal superiority in rank, power, dignity, or estimation, the exalting of one's own worth or importance to an undue degree, pride with contempt of others, presumption.”

“Okay. Now define egotism please.”

“I assume you mean the psychological definition? The drive to maintain and enhance favorable views of oneself and generally features an inflated opinion of one's personal features and importance, distinguished by a person's amplified vision of one's self and self-importance. Often it includes intellectual, physical, social, and other overestimations.”

“Now describe narcissism.”

This time, Stark went on a long, involved, ten-minute lecture on the condition and its various signs and symptoms. Just to spite me, I was sure. Unfortunately for his self-deprecation, he continued to barely fit *two* items on the several pages-long list.

“The key word is *undue*, Stark. A man is only arrogant, never mind egotistical, if he *doesn't* live up to his own hype. The man who hired Potts for correcting his math and threatening his guards was not arrogant. The man who let Rhodes beat him up at his own birthday party, and let him steal an armor that would have broken his limbs if it hadn't been redesigned for him to begin with, was not egotistical. It's literally impossible for the man who bonded with the soldiers in the fun vee in the space of two sentences to be narcissistic. And really, most of the time you weren't even condescending, or even dismissive, anyone who told you otherwise was

spinning yarn. Fact is, people aren't equal. When everyone around you *is* inferior, that's not you being arrogant, that's them feeling uncomfortable with reality."

Many debates have been had over whether or not all people are *born* equal, but there was a reason even America's founding fathers never tried to argue more than that.

"Wow," Stark said with forced cheer. "You're firing on all cylinders today, aren't you?"

"Stark, how long has it been since you convinced yourself false modesty isn't just another form of lying?" No answer. "You were never arrogant. What you *were* is *unapologetic* about being objectively exceptional, and inferiors always hate that, especially inferiors who want to control you. The only case one could make about *egotism* is that your ego stayed the right size while your sense-of self-worth was gaslit out of existence. Alas, Romanova and Fury conflated your guilt complex with a superiority complex that did not exist, and their stubborn conviction about that – helped along by the constant push from your father's *other* great legacy – eventually wore you down until you started to believe it too."

Honestly, if anyone was egotistical in the Avengers it was Widow, she bought into her own hype more than anyone else. Just because nobody called her out on the Dunning–Kruger effect doesn't mean it wasn't there.

"Well," Stark coughed. "I appreciate the unconditional positive regard?"

"I'm sorry, would you now like me to list the negative traits you do actually have?"

"Yes please."

"Self-deprecation, self-flagellation, tunnel vision, impatience, you *were* young and horny." Stark gave a startled laugh. "You took it as a personal offense when someone who *did* have the potential to become your intellectual peer didn't also possess a commensurate level of charm. You have no responsibility for his choices, but you were an asshole to Aldrich Killian for no other reason than that."

"He was creepy and cringe!"

"Like 95% of all the nerds employed by Stark Industries?"

Stark made a face. "Your uncompromising sense of fairness is cutting."

Someone's has to be. “Bottom line, what you were and still *are* is impatient and rude, increasingly so the more you feel attacked,” I concluded. “Well, except with me, so thank you honestly for that consideration.”

“I’d say you’re welcome, but being respectful towards my therapist has turned out to be a very minimal strain on my self-control.”

“Does that mean you’re finally running out of deliberately condescending sarcasm?”

“Actually, I do have some left, but how about a question instead? Because I don’t get it – how is all that *not* egotism?”

“Okay, let’s use Romanova as an example.”

“Aaand I already hate where this is going.”

“Romanova’s motivation was keeping her new family together, which by her interpretation meant having you all in one place and watching each other’s backs. But her *actions* showed that whether or not those relationships were at all healthy was a secondary concern at best. By that token, it makes perfect sense that she would consider all her own betrayals irrelevant or forgiveable as long as her objective was achieved. Certainly she considered any issues *you* had with her actions – or anyone else’s – to be a you problem. If we believe she was not, in fact, a psychopath – which her self-sacrifice for Barton would seem to support – then she was both arrogant and egotistical far beyond the worst she ever claimed of you. Arrogant and egotistical to the point of self-delusion, because you have to be *objectively* self-deluded to be honest friends with someone and still gaslight them.”

I wonder if she ever realized what kind of abuser she was by the end, to her self-proclaimed ‘family.’ Natalia Romanova and Steven Rogers weren’t Tony Stark’s enemies, they were his bad friends.

“It must be hard to shake the whole double agent thing,” Stark murmured, sounding everything *but* vindicated as he repeated his own words on that balcony. “Sticks in the DNA.”

Well... “Epigenetics *are* a thing.”

Stark barked another laugh, just as startled as before but darker, grimmer. Sad.

It was unfortunate that it had come to this, but sometimes you reach a point in interpersonal therapy where wholesale disposal of the unhealthy relationship is the only reasonable option

left. I loved Natasha Romanoff as a character, but as a person she could charitably be described as odious.

The waves of Mind, Soul and Reality blended chaotically at the Boundary of the world as Stark aimed all his thoughts inward, so I aimed all my attention on them while I had the opening. With my sharpest focus, I willed the energies to settle down and shut up because this house, this yard, this land and everything in it, this speck of make-believe in the Mind Stone was *mine*.

The rip in the world stopped churning and smoothed out at the edges.

I carefully didn't smile. This still wasn't my dream, but I wasn't completely powerless either. More importantly, I now knew I – we – had options that Stark hadn't considered, if the stones worked at all as I thought they did. As I thought and remembered.

It would normally be a very long shot, but all odds were sure odds when you had God on your side.

"I'm bringing an end to our professional arrangement."

"Eh?"

"I also, *Doctor Stark*, respectfully decline whatever job offer you've been using all this as an interview for."

Stark cut himself off from what he was going to say. For a moment, he looked stricken before he hid his emotions again. He carefully got up from the make-believe couch and looked very intensely at me. "How long have you known?"

"Since eight sessions ago." I stood from my chair and walked over to stand face-to-face. We both became acutely aware that Tony Stark was a rather short man. "Stark, do you want to hear my first-hand evidence that you're neither a narcissist nor egotist?"

"I'm sure it's just amazing."

"You know I'm planning something. It can't have escaped you that I've been moving my chair closer to this rip in the world. My fascination with the stones' powers also can't have slipped past you. But you haven't done shit about it. If you think I've no chance, you chose not to lord it over me or punish my hubris. If you *do* think high of the risk I pose, then you're betting on trust or otherwise putting yourself at risk for my benefit, however small it may be."

"Maybe I'm just giving you enough rope to hang yourself."

“Are you?”

Stark stepped back but he never took his eyes off me, the look he gave me... well, whatever it was it was very soulful. “No.”

Of course he wasn't. “Look, Stark.”

“Yeah?”

“This whole thing.”

“What about it?”

“You're not planning to keep your memories once you reset for real, are you?”

Whoever said funerals were quiet had obviously never attended one, but this here, this was what I think they would be like if that saying actually held any water.

“I thought so,” I nodded. “For what it's worth, this I do understand.”

“You think so?”

“No more fucks to give except three?”

Somehow, the look he gave me this time was even more soulful, if that was possible.

Peter Parker, Virginia Potts, Morgan Stark. “That's all I wanted to know.”

“Sure could've fooled me.”

“I forgive you for all these ridiculous hoops you made both of us jump through, but for reasons both moral and practical I can't countenance this pretense any further.”

“Wow, that's the nicest way anyone's ever told me to go fuck myse-“

I stuck my hand through the boundary.

“WHAT THE FUCK?!”

Agh, the pain! It-it was and wasn't pain, I could feel pain that didn't feel like pain, even as my hand *shredded* itself into lisle and yarn right in front of my eyes.

“What the hell do you think you're doing!?”

“T-taking a chance on you.” I smiled tightly through the soul-shredding pain. “You'll rewind me if things go too badly, right?”

“Holy shit, holy shit, holy shit-“ Stark babbled as he paced frantically in front of me. “What is even going through that crazy mind of yours right now?!”

“Iron Man yes, Tony Stark very strongly recommended even at Iron Man's expense.”

“That – you can't be seri – you're serious, you really think – fuck you old man, don't play on my emotions you asshole!”

My hand was gone, but it was all an illusion, this world wasn't real, it was a mental construct imposed on my soul without bulwark or buffer, it was never real.

“The fuck does that even mean, you refuse my job offer, you don't even know what it is you bastard!”

My hand was never more than a mental construct imposed on my soul without bulwark or buffer, no more or *less* real than anything I imagined *myself*, so it could reweave itself from light and vibration because I *want* so.

“I've been gipped, my own therapist dumped me, unbelievable! You can't just do this, I need at *least* another lifetime's worth of help!”

“You don't need a lifetime of therapy, you need a life period.”

“Just because everything you say is the truth doesn't make it good therapy!”

He was outright contradicting himself now, but he didn't stop me, didn't push me, throw me, teleport me, didn't rewind the world even as I pushed forward all the way to the shoulder, ahhh the p-pain... wasn't.

There was no pain, there was only my *imagination* of pain, a fantasy, a dream whose only purpose was to end once you let go, there was no pain, there was but revelation.

“Quill, you're really scaring me right now, do I need to get you a mirror?”

“S-shouldn't you b-be omniscient?”

“I simulated it and I ended up doing jack shit, I didn't even undo the Snap!”

The mental construct passing itself as an arm peeled back all the way to my shoulder, like strips of bark off a fir tree as make-believe forces buffeted them all back in my face, but it was still all there, still hanging by a myriad threads. “A-and h-how do you f-feel about that?””

“What, the fact that even *my* ego isn't big enough not to get a clue at that point is somehow a glowing endorsement?”

“Or you were just demoralised by how much worse everything is than you could objectively improve at your best, because such is the curse of pioneers when the universe is full of shit, you *dumbass*.”

Tony Stark reeled away from me, stunned.

“Zemo blamed the Avengers for his family dying in the Sokovia Disaster, somehow decrypted millions of files to find two specific pieces of information, somehow found Barnes's handler, somehow got the activation codes, drowned the handler, somehow guessed that Rogers would be against the Accords, somehow guessed you'd be for them, somehow successfully bombed the signing without anyone seeing him, somehow successfully framed Barnes for it without anyone catching him, somehow guessed Rogers would go charging in to stop Barnes from being arrested-“

“Er, Quill?”

“-somehow guessed you'd pull them in, somehow killed and impersonated a head shrink for Barnes to turn him into the Winter Soldier, somehow was actually left alone with a prisoner considered highly dangerous, somehow knocked out the power in your facility and sent Barnes on a rampage, somehow guessed Rogers wouldn't tell you about the other Winter Soldiers immediately, somehow knew that all the Avengers would be called in – including a bunch of extras he didn't know existed –“

“Hey Quill!”

“- somehow knew everyone but you, Rogers, and Barnes would be knocked out of the fight or arrested, which included somehow knowing that Widow would betray you, somehow he knew none of you would call the Russians on him, somehow he knew all three of you would follow him to an abandoned HYDRA bunker in Siberia, somehow, somehow, somehow, somehow, *somehow*, there's something really rotten in the universe and it isn't you, Iron Man, it's complete *bullshit!*”

“QUILL!”

“What?! Should I go on a tirade about all the *other* contrived nonsense indicative of a malicious over intelligence or three?” And I didn’t mean that poor excuse of a Kang pretender, that was not fucking canon!

“Your arm’s gone!”

“No it’s not!”

“Yes it is, just look at-“

I glared at the orange sameness, a searing burning in my eyes like if you stare at fire long enough, do that you’ll start to see colors change and your eyeballs will feel like they’re burning even if you’re too far for the heat to touch you. This was something like that, except in reverse because I sure as hell had all my parts and no dumb rock was going to tell me otherwise!

Tony Stark stared at me in wonder. “How did you *do* that?”

I clenched my spiritual fist and grinned viciously as the power of the Soul Stone began pouring into it, seeping into me, filling me, strengthening my [SELF] so that [I AM] more than before with each moment. “A fundamental power of the Soul Stone is to revert beings to their natural state, of course the soul can do that to itself, that’s why the power exists to begin with, that’s why it’s the *soul*. The soul is your foundational self-concept, the seat of your will and self-image down to the smallest particle, the holder of memory all the way back to your first life, the entire basis for decision-making, the soul is your *identity*. That’s why you’re so fucked up, the whole point of gaslighting is to chip and cut away that foundation, and you’ve been gaslit to so much and so long that you chose to trust and believe the people gaslighting you over the very anti-gaslighting alliance of Jarvis and *your wife*.”

“Hey!” Stark weakly protested. “No need to rub it in, man, not cool.”

“... I apologise.” It was my own outline that wavered this time, but it was a small price to pay for my lapse. “Current duress may be impairing my judgment some.”

“You think?!”

The ripped ribbons of my self-image still flew in my face, so I decided to experiment. Even if the simulation worked by one-way uplink from the Soul Stone to Mind, there had to be a reverse link *somewhere* for Stark to exert control, and it was probably this very place.

Earnest Demand, Confident Expectation, Positive Will.

A dozen scraps of my fake body crawled forward through the boundary into my hand, forming as perfect a replica as I could of a certain paper I had in my pocket.

I held it out for a confounded Tony Stark to take. “Written recommendation for a professional, in case this doesn’t go as well as I want.”

“You madman!” But Stark took it and speed-read it in an instant. “The Old Guy, of *course* it’s him you want, I should’ve known after last time.”

Oh good, I was worried ‘the real Ancient One instead of Replacement McCheap’ would be too vague, good to know I was wrong.

“... Quill, there’s a whole bullet list of stuff here and I gotta tell you, I’m not sure I like what all is on it-”

I pushed my leg through next.

“Of all the-! You can stop any time, Quill, whatever point you’re making I concede! I waive, yield, renounce, relinquish, I give up, I surrender!

Ahhh-agh, hng-*gh*, the soreness of self-actualisation is the best kind there is, believe it!

“Look man, just tell me what initial conditions you want and once I Snap-“

“*No*, Anthony.”

The word rung in the Boundary to the echo of sleep-addled Gods and Jotnar.

“... Can you at least explain what you’re doing? Maybe why, too? You know, so I don’t need to go all omniscient on you.”

“Don’t pretend you can’t just read my mind-“

“Actually, right now I can’t.”

My outline wavered, for a moment, as my self-concept experienced the most diagram-shifting self-actualisation. “Well now, isn’t that absolutely *fascinating*.” My unravelled limbs began to re-gain definition and color the more [I] asserted myself as my [SELF]. The psychic energy making up my make-believe body kept unspooling like ribbons, but failed to escape the grasp of my will, following me instead *into* the Soul Stone like a cluster of dancing gossamer threads, each one flowing into and growing out of my [SELF], each tendril rooting back in, linking and

branching like nerves, knitting through the gaps between where my cells would normally be, fusing, wrapping into a make-believe projection that was all my own, this...

This feels strangely familiar.

Like I was treading old ground, repeating things I had once done, remembering a manifest ordinance of [SELF]-hood I'd been made to forget.

*What the hell **happened** in that iteration?*

Finally, I noticed that my limbs looked like limbs again now that the threads of my mind had woven together around and through them without Stark having any hand in it. That was when I noticed that Stark had vanished.

He reappeared the moment I thought about it.

“Quill? Are you aware of your surroundings again or should I fast-forward some more?”

What did he – oh. “How much time did that take?”

“Enough that I had to call in a *third* opinion, and your wife has made it a habit to carry her rifle around in almost as threatening a manner as her frying pan.”

“What?” Turning my head I saw Meredith sitting on my chair, hand over her mouth and eyes full of tears. “Oh. Hey there, wife. Don't worry, this'll all be over soon, gone away like a dream.”

“Don't give me that! You were burning and *shredding apart*, Jason, you've been-you've been screaming for days!” She burst into sobs and buried her face in her hands. Next to her, the sofa that had up to now gone unused held an old, kindly Tibetan man dressed in gold and purple silk and cashmere.

“Well,” Stark hedged with a cautious look at my poor woman. “More like roaring, technically, it was quite ferocious!”

That was when I also noticed that I was surrounded by a sprawling mandala scribed from Mind and Soul in letters belonging to one or more writing systems I couldn't name, a complex, sprawling arcane formula that I felt like I should understand but didn't.

I grunted. “Sorcerer Supreme. Welcome to my home.”

“Thank you.”

“What’s all this?”

“A ritual of power tapping, of the sort I’d normally use to call on the might of gods or other similar entities, but adapted to the Soul Stone and... adjacent marks. The Honorable Iron Man provided permission in your stead.”

“... You’re *soul-draining* me?”

“One cannot *drain* an empyrean perpetuum mobilae composed of abstract concepts overlapping the most Sublime subtle matter. However, you were taking in too much... soul substance, for lack of a better word. It was not harming you per se, but having your self-concept take up less than half of your total [SELF] is an easy path to self-destruction. This rite diverts a portion of what you pull in before it has a chance to integrate.”

“He means multiple personality disorder and schizophrenia,” Stark supplied helpfully. “With a side dish of traumatic shattering into independent entities and *possibly* possession. All over the place.”

“Which you likely would not have suffered because your self-concept is quite thoroughly realized,” the Sorcerer Supreme politely disagreed with God even more readily than me. “Even if not potent enough to make proper use of the potential you would have amassed.”

“I couldn’t – didn’t want to risk it,” Stark said quickly, looking away from me. “I’m not apologising.”

Yao inclined his head, but it was perfunctory. “I respected your wife’s decision on the matter.”

I flexed my [SELF]’s new arm and leg, feeling at the rate of assimilation. I *felt* fine, but also apparently lost track of time and surroundings for days. “It’s fine. Even just this progression should make enough by the time I’m done.”

I waited for Stark to explode with ‘done with what’ but it never came. Either he’d overcome his aversion to omniscience, or Yao had deduced and explained everything to him already.

“Stark.”

“Yeah?”

“Now that I’ve confirmed this is actually working-“

“You mean you didn’t before!” “Jason, are you mad?!”

“I was never in any danger with you here.”

Stark swallowed. I don't know how he managed it, but the look he gave me was more soulful than all the ones before combined, which *should* have been impossible but what do I know?

“Anthony.”

Stark grit his teeth angrily. Anxiously.

“The whole point is to obfuscate the change in initial conditions, right? If managing the consequences of Chaos Theory depends on using the stones to change as little as possible, then it should logically follow that the ideal outcome is not to use the stones for that at all, isn't it?”

“I didn't ask you to do this.”

“Charity is the death of self-attainment.” I opened and closed my fist. Almost there. “I'm not some homeless cripple starving on the streets, I'm a man with a want and the will to make my own means. Are you going to hold it against me that I want to earn my way? And my friendships?”

Stark looked... I had no other word for it besides heart-struck. “You bastard, you already refused my job offer, what do you think you can do? When do you even want to go? Either way I won't remember jack shit, there, I admit it, I've given up. Are you happy now?”

No you havent't. “Did you check out the stuff in my note?”

Tony Stark looked at me, then down at the note I'd made from my own psychic energy... days ago, now. “I'm really starting to wonder about you, but yes.”

I watched him carefully. “I admit a lot of that is long shots, but if any of them applied in the world we knew-“

“There are records of a Charles Xavier. There are photos of a James Howlett. There *was* a company called Transigen when the Snap happened, but only from 2000 onwards, though its parent company dates to much earlier, Essex Corporation.” Stark's tone turned cooler. “Captain America is located at 85°01'18"N, 56°41'26"W, North of Greenland in the Lomonosov Ridge, give or take a few dozen miles in every direction depending on how the ice moves by the time you get there. I vote for never but who cares about what I want? Richard and Mary P-“ Stark's voice broke for a moment, before his tone hardened. “There are records of a Richard Parker

and a Mary Parker nee Fitzpatrick, CIA, died in an operation gone wrong in Schengen, Luxembourg, 1985.”

“So I was right.” I watched and felt my [SELF] actualize into an even more self-assured form. Such a charged place and time, it’s precisely the sort of thing you’d expect of the Spider Totem’s backstory. “The world doesn’t care how loose it needs to be with the beats of Spider-man’s life as long as it gets him.”

Stark looked like he might be sick, with worry or horror, I didn’t know. Or hope.

Speaking of which. “Dare I hope my hunch about old Thunderbolt paid off too?”

And now Stark looked like he was chewing razor blades, but he made a print appear in his hand and read woodenly. “Our ‘performance’ in Vietnam War is enough to call the entire U.S. Army doctrine into question. Westmoreland’s attrition strategy was a waste of American lives with little to no likelihood of a successful outcome from the start. Our ability to train foreign forces is likewise called into question. The whole war was a cesspool of dishonesty by officers and commanders due to promotions being tied to Westmoreland and McNamara’s body count system. To his credit, Secretary of Defense McNamara admitted having doubts about the war in his memo to President Johnson. The picture of the world’s greatest superpower killing or seriously injuring 1,000 noncombatants a week, while trying to pound a tiny backward nation into submission on an issue whose merits are hotly disputed, is not a pretty one.”

I wonder if there’s going to be a catch to being right all the time.

Stark tossed the papers. They dissolved into threads and sparks and then nothing. “I triple-checked the words and dates myself and I still can’t believe what I’m hearing. How the fuck is that Thunderbolt Ross? How? No, never mind that, how the hell did you know?!”

“I didn’t, I just wanted to see if my guess was right.”

“What ‘guess’?”

“That his start of darkness wasn’t Vietnam.” I looked at Stark seriously. “It was 9/11.”

Stark deflated. “Oh.”

Yes, oh. “Thanks for going through the trouble, I wish it didn’t come at your expense.”

“Everything does.”

Not untrue when it counts, unfortunately, but I didn't say that because one should never encourage downward spirals, especially in almighty God fresh from sacrificing his wife and children for the benefit of you and everyone else. I turned to Yao instead. "Sorcerer. I'm sorry but I don't think I can manage anyone else."

"Not to worry." The man stood from the sofa and walked to stand in the middle of the *second* sprawling mandala. "I've syphoned off more than enough from you to make my own means, as you'd say. Only my astral form will make it through, since I am not alive in this era, but that should only be a temporary impediment."

"Unbelievable," Stark rubbed his face, pacing back and forth. "It took me becoming God after *half the universe died* to finally find people with more than two braincells to rub together, how is this my life?"

"To answer your *previous* question, I want to go to the day when my daughter gave birth to Peter." I looked at Stark seriously. "That's not too late, right? Or too early?"

Stark was *very* unhappy. "Even with this, you won't get away without someone noticing. I hope you realize that."

But it's better than anything else. "Look, Stark, worst comes to worst I can always learn magic, right Sorcerer?"

"Actually," Yao said idly. "There is enough excess potential here that some minute adjustments to the *order* in which the new cosmos is manifested will allow me to 'go back' a bit further. I can use that time to set up wards around you in the astral plane. The last ripples of this joyful defiance will be diverted into the Earth's mirror dimension, to fade unnoticed by anyone and anything not specifically informed of what they are looking at. My own re-emergence in the new cosmos will send ripples as well, without such precautions, so I have self-interest driving me in this as well."

"Well isn't that convenient," I huffed. "Let me guess, you can use the head start to get yourself re-established as well?"

"I would not mind the opportunity, no. A coma or lobotomy patient will not be too difficult to find for the meanwhile. I promise to see their souls safely to the hereafter first, if it eases your worries. Possession is no more a trifle than ritual reincarnation and past life regression."

Stark's head snapped to the sorcerer as if slapped, eyes wide and heartbreakingly hopeful.

He was right, this was unbelievable. “Where the hell *were* you all of last reality, if you can do stuff like this? We could have used you.”

“Yeah, see, funny thing about that,” Stark replied instead, racing to bury his emotions under the sort of disdain that led to regime changes. “The moron who last reset the cosmos decided he was too ‘problematic.’ He’s been locked up in the Soul Stone all this time.”

Stark’s emotions were very much *not* hopeless, thank you very much, why did he *think* I was going all in on Soul here? Honestly.

“Others of like perspective with myself are also thusly sealed.” Yao said grimly. “I suspect the trial on Vormyr was set up the way it was for the same reason. Anyone willing to make the sort of sacrifice demanded by the planet would almost surely possess morals entirely antithetical to ours.”

I hung my head in frustration. “At this point I’m not even surprised.”

“I hear that,” Stark grunted.

“Right then,” I said brightly. “Meredith, my dear and equally decrepit wife, come give me a kiss for good luck!”

“You-you insufferable daredevil!”

But she came with all her outrage and tears and the rifle held tight in her fists to give me my good luck kiss because I know how to pick ’em.

“Stark.”

Tony Stark looked at me. I don’t think I ever saw him so conflicted but also so earnest. “What?”

“See you on the other side”

I set my feet, clenched my fists and pushed into the Soul Stone the rest of the way.

“-. September 23, 1980 .-”

The Snap woke me up in the hospital waiting room to the sound of my grandson’s first, loud newborn cry.