

Artifact

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Artifact

by [roboticonography](#).

Summary

Maria Stark contemplates her son; Tony Stark contemplates his assistant.

Notes

Artifact:

1. In archaeology, any item made, modified, or used by mankind. These items are generally perceived as having a cultural interest or significance.
2. In science, an unexpected anomaly in the perception or representation of visual or aural information.

The first clue that something is amiss in Maria Stark's tidy kitchen is a pair of mournful brown eyes.

The eyes—set in a ruddy, apple-cheeked face, framed by a tumble of fluffy brown hair—are peeking at her over the far end of the green-and-white Formica countertop. They are the eyes of her mother, of her brother; they are the eyes Maria herself sees when she looks in the mirror. They watch, with indescribable sadness, as she presses a rolling pin into a wedge of chilled dough.

Very little escapes the notice of those eyes, as a rule.

Maria doesn't say anything, but continues to work the dough, flattening it out over the counter. She can't waste time, or the pastry will suffer for it. She doesn't often bake, so she's a bit of a perfectionist when she does. She savours the way the long rolling pin slides in her hands, the velvety feel of the flour-covered wood—she thinks about Mama, pictures her doing the Sunday baking in her faded black housedress with the pink carnation print, the slightly musty smell of rising bread dough filling the kitchen.

The eyes are now joined by ten tiny fingers, curling over the rim of the counter. Those restless, inquisitive fingers have created a world of worry for Maria over the past five years. Over the past five *hours*, even.

Maria keeps one eye on the dough and the other on the little hands, one of which is creeping tentatively across the counter's marbled surface.

"Anthony," she cautions, her voice low and stern. It's the international semaphore of motherhood: full name means business.

The hand recedes.

Maria lifts the sheet of dough and drops it into the pie tin, carefully trimming the edges—*fastest piecrust in the west* was Howard's admiring description. He'd once confessed, in a rare moment of sentimentality, that her hands were the first thing about her he'd noticed, that they'd captivated him right from the start. That he'd fallen in love with her a piece at a time—atom by atom, as one might expect a nuclear physicist to do.

People seeing her exceptional son in action always assume that his talent comes from his father, and certainly it's true that Maria knows very little about engines or computers. But no one who had ever observed her in the kitchen could deny the deftness of her long, elegant fingers.

Tony loves baking—the finite measurements, the constant motion, and of course, the delicious results. He knows all the ratios and reactions involved, and approaches the entire process with an endearing scientific exactitude—it's the closest she's going to let him get to that chemistry set he keeps asking Santa for.

Normally, Maria lets him work alongside her at the counter, carefully molding dough scraps into dinosaurs or rocket ships. Not today, however.

"You're grounded, mister."

"I'm sorry," he chirps—but she can tell he isn't listening, not really, not even to the sound of his own voice. He's too busy watching her. The boy is a magpie, captive to his own curiosity. Maria once saw Tony so keyed up about the prospect of going to a rocket range with his father that he dashed headlong out of the house with his shoes untied, making it almost to the end of the driveway before he was foiled by his own feet.

Howard claims the boy lacks focus—that his entire thought process is *ready-fire-aim*. Maria's response: what five-year-old's isn't? Her husband sometimes forgets that, for all of his special gifts, Tony is still just a child. One who needs *more* attention because of his brilliance, not less.

In any event, Tony obviously had more than enough focus to dismantle her brand-new alarm clock when the mood struck him. He's capable of concentrating when he chooses. When there's something he wants.

Case in point: the hand starts to slide inexorably over the counter again, fingers splayed, grasping for the discarded curls of dough. Tony hooks his little chin over the counter, his entire body straining, reaching. Maria gives his errant fingers a sharp little tap with the back of a wooden spoon—not enough to sting, just enough to deter. She remembers Mama doing *that*, too.

"*Why* are you sorry?" she prompts.

"Because I'm bored of being in my room."

It's a struggle, but Maria manages to keep from smiling. Her son may be too clever for his own good, but he's always honest.

"If that's the only reason, I don't think you're ready to come out."

"I disagree." Tony is an excellent mimic. When he argues with her, he sounds exactly like his father: measured, precise, logical. She's been told that little Tony's use of language is roughly equivalent to that of a sixteen-year-old. Like any fond mother, she suspects that the professionals have gravely underestimated her child's ability. "*I think I am* ready to come out."

"Well, tough. This house is not a democracy."

"I know, it's a dictatorship," he mutters.

"What's that, mister?"

He changes tactics. "I can tell you don't like me very much," he informs her, heaving a dramatic sigh.

"What makes you say that?" At this exact moment, she is dropping the filling into the pie in heaping handfuls—strawberry rhubarb, his favourite. Not exactly the actions of a wicked fairy-tale mother. She was making the pie because she regretted being so strict with him, although now she's starting to think perhaps she wasn't strict enough.

"Because you're being so unfair." She can hear the impatience building in his voice: there's a temper tantrum on the horizon. "I *told* you, the gear rolled away. It wasn't my fault. End of discussion."

She wipes strawberry juice from her fingers and laughs. She can't help it; *end of discussion* is Howard's rhetoric, and Tony pronounces it faithfully, like a formula.

"It's not funny," he sulks—Tony *hates* it when adults find him precious or charming. "I'm bored. I want to help. It's just a stupid *clock*," he adds angrily, and pounds the counter with a tiny fist. "Why are you always so *mean*?"

Maria takes hold of him by the shoulders and spins him around. "You've done enough 'helping' today. Get back upstairs." She punctuates the order with a brisk swat to the backside.

He stomps up the stairs with the force of a whole gang of five-year-olds, pausing on the last step. She knows, without looking up, that he is shooting her a treasonous glare.

"*Now*, Anthony." She says it without turning around or raising her voice any more than is necessary for it to carry.

More stomping, until at last his bedroom door slams shut, the vibration of it momentarily suspended in the air—and then, silence.

Maria sighs.

Her son is still very young, but she worries that his intellect is far outstripping his conscience. Howard refuses to see it, refuses to admit that what's best for Tony right now is rules, and boundaries, and discipline—he's so delighted by the boy's remarkable abilities that he really only engages with him on that level. It's left up to Maria to be the mean one. The bad guy. The wicked fairy-tale mother.

Tony needs to understand that good intentions alone aren't enough, that being a genius doesn't excuse him from responsibility for his actions. He needs to learn that the world isn't his for the taking—before people like Obadiah Stane start telling him otherwise.

Maria carefully slides the pie into the oven and wipes the counter clean. If she can raise him right, she thinks, her boy might just be president someday.

*

"I'm just saying, you could stand to declutter a little."

Pepper is perched on the end of Tony's old desk in the workshop, supervising as he sorts through a miscellany of solder wire, old car magazines, defunct cell phones, Pink Pearl

erasers, and a number of items that would not look out of place in Dr. Frankenstein's laboratory.

They've agreed that the PA needs her own workspace in the basement—or, to be more accurate, Pepper has agreed, vociferously, lining up her arguments neatly and pinpointing each one with devastating accuracy. He rarely even uses this desk since the most recent upgrades; he does most of his design work at his 3-D drafting table, and pretty much everything else at his workbench. He has a television and a couch and a cot and a kitchenette down here; in the grand scheme of things, Pepper doesn't think that a drawer for her stationery and a dock for her laptop is too much to ask. She had no desire whatsoever to invade Tony's space; she's simply trying to do her job more efficiently.

Tony, having reluctantly conceded Pepper's rhetorical checkmate, slouches insolently in his rolling chair, legs splayed, stubbornly clutching a grubby little cube of molded white plastic. He, by contrast to Pepper's immaculate suiting and artful hair and makeup, is in an off-white undershirt and cargo pants, bare feet shoved into half-laced workboots. He resents that she's dragged him away from working on the suit for this. He briefly considers fabricating an emergency.

Still, being seated at the desk provides him with an excellent vantage point from which to contemplate Pepper's long, shapely legs, demurely crossed and dangling just out of his reach. She's wearing an impeccably tailored pencil skirt, the soft grey fabric taut over her hips and backside.

Despite this tantalizing display, Tony finds himself increasingly fascinated by her feet: the elegant curves of her high arches, the long, concave lines of her slim ankles, the glimpses of painted nails (hot rod red) through the open toes of her sleek black patent slingbacks. He's never thought of women's feet as particularly attractive, but Pepper's are downright sexy. They're the sexiest part of her—which seems absurd, given the spectacular nature of the other parts up for consideration, but there it is. Undeniable. Fact.

He recalls perusing an article on the internet which posited the intriguing theory that women who habitually wore high heels were better in bed—the action of walking continuously at a 15-degree angle apparently does wonderful things for the pelvic floor muscles. He considers mentioning this, as a point of entirely academic interest, but decides against it in the end.

The part of his mind that produces a constant background stream of physics-related chatter absently estimates the surface area of soles and heels, gauges the approximate amount of pressure in her step. He's tempted to ask her how much she weighs.

Pepper, meanwhile, is watching things emerge from the desk drawer with mingled curiosity and apprehension. There's one object in particular that looks vaguely clinical, which Tony calls a "third hand" and which Pepper desperately hopes is not anything sex-related. The magazines all have slightly grimy pages, and most are folded open to photos of bikini models draped over engines. Pepper resolves to get out the hand sanitizer after all of this. Maybe even an extra-hot shower when she gets home.

Tony is distracted, unfocused. He keeps staring at her shoes, squinting slightly, in that way that usually means he's calculating something. She wonders what part of the suit her feet

remind him of, which mechanical process her body is unconsciously imitating.

Taking advantage of his preoccupied state, she reaches over and tries to take the broken alarm clock from Tony's hand. He refuses to relinquish it.

"*Not* this," he insists, his fingers enveloping hers and squeezing steadily until she lets go. Her skin feels raw afterwards, the way it always does on those increasingly frequent occasions when Tony touches her; his hands are like sandpaper. She wonders, idly, whether he has any fingerprints left.

"It doesn't even work." Pepper politely refrains from pointing out that it is also absolutely hideous: kitschy lime green plaid in a white plastic casing. It's the type of thing that wouldn't have been out of place in her grandmother's kitchen when she was a kid. "It's covered in grease. It's been in that drawer for years—it was here when I first started working for you."

Unaccountably, he lifts the clock to his ear, as though listening to a seashell. Slightly, unintentionally ludicrous, in that way that he is when only Pepper is around: Tony Stark, the clock whisperer. The canting of his head exposes the ridge of his trapezius, which she occasionally dreams about licking. Just once. Just to see what he would do.

Not to be deterred, Pepper refines her approach. "These can go, though, right?" She swiftly palms the erasers, her hand hovering over the trash can.

"I need those—" He takes the bait, setting the clock down on the desk even as he makes a desperate lunge for her arm.

Pepper snaps up the clock, a split-second before Tony realizes he's been played.

"They take tarnish off of printed circuit boards," he explains, in a dire tone that suggests she ought to be ashamed of herself for such a dirty trick. He's still holding her by the wrist. She surrenders the Pink Pearls, and his grip relaxes, allowing her to slide her hand slowly through his.

Unable to resist the siren call of curiosity, Pepper holds the clock up to her own ear. Nothing. She gives it a gentle shake—it rattles, more so than it probably should.

"The escapement gear is missing," he informs her. "It rolled into a floor vent. It's an easy fix."

"So fix it." She tosses the clock in the air, and he cradles a hand at his chest to catch it. She doesn't get what the big deal is—he's normally so ruthless when it comes to replacing outdated technology. He doesn't form sentimental attachments to objects the way most people do; it's taken her years to accept that it isn't personal, that it's not just *her* gifts he throws away. Just last week, he was urging her to get rid of her laptop, despite the fact that it's only a year old and still perfectly serviceable.

He turns the alarm clock over in his hands. She's right, of course; it's a piece of junk. And he has plenty of his mother's things—all of them, in fact—in a carefully curated storage unit back in New York, which he has yet to visit even once. But something in the deepest,

dimmest recesses of his brain keeps insisting that he should hold onto it. That it's *about* something.

He picks idly at a crack in the clear plastic over the clock's face, thinking to himself that maybe it deserves to be encased in lucite, like his first RT. *Proof that Tony Stark had a mother*: Except, of course, that the proof already travels with him—in the darkness of his eyes, the cleverness of his fingers. In that inexorable desire to *do the right thing* that eventually led him to become Iron Man. He has no way of knowing for sure, but he'd like to think she would have been proud of him.

Pepper is watching him steadily, drumming tiny fingernails on the edge of the desk. For the first time, Tony regrets that she never had the opportunity to meet Maria. And vice versa.

He opens the now-empty desk drawer, places the clock inside, and slams it shut with an air of finality. "End of discussion," he tells her. He always says that, as though the discussion will ever really be over between them. As though they could have possibly said everything there is to say.

He stands, and Pepper is startled by how rapidly he seems to fill the space around her, as though he radiates. She wants to tell him that he's going to trip over his own feet if he doesn't tie his shoelaces. He's beaming now, completely ingenuous, and she feels a faint crackle of static in her chest—that slight, tingling charge that warns her he's getting a little too close. She's never quite certain whether it's the RT having that effect, or simply the nearness of Tony himself. For just a second, she weakens, and seriously considers giving in to the urge to lean in and kiss the dimple in his cheek.

Just once.

Just to see what he would do.

Before Pepper can say or do anything, however, Tony derails her entirely by asking if she's ever baked a pie from scratch.

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