The Invincible Iron Man
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Summary

A fan novelization of the Iron Man Trilogy. Weapons developer Tony Stark is taken prisoner, by men using his own weapons. Upon his escape, and forced to reconsider his life, Tony Stark vows to redeem himself, as the invincible Iron Man.

Notes

Okay, so here's how this works. I had written the first movie in three large chapters, and almost nobody read it on fanfic.net until much later. Everyone was posting new stories, and a three chapter bit was swept down the list very quickly by the constant updated. When the second movie came out, I adjusted the chapter length, so expect later chapters to be shorter than the opening three.

There were some things in the trilogy that didn't make sense, and a few plot holes; so I made some minor changes.

This is posted on fanfic.net, but I'm migrating my fics over here. If you notice any points where there's a contradiction to the MCU, bear in mind I wrote this when the first Iron man came out... eight years ago. Oy.

Read and Review!
When Rhodes had found out the Ceremony would be at Caesars Palace, he had left strict instructions with Happy Hogan that Stark be there on time and wearing pants.

Las Vegas was not the most dignified place to hold an award banquet, but the city knew how to entertain.

Entertainment was on the minds of many present at the Apogee Awards Ceremony, but Rhodes was not one of them. Benched though he was from front line duty, Colonel Jim Rhodes was still a career soldier. He had open to him opportunities and prospects that others in his profession could not hope to achieve, but it was because of nights like this that he sometimes wondered if he had been promoted from Air Force Colonel, to CEO babysitter and Press Agent.

As the lights came down, Rhodes allowed himself to slouch at little in his seat, once nobody would be looking. He found himself hoping that Pepper had written the video montage that would introduce the Awards presentation.

Whatever the situation, Rhodes knew that Tony would at least fake a measure of decorum. Most of the time. When it suited him. The whole banquet was organized to give Tony a prestigious award, which was likely the only reason he'd attend. With a little luck, Tony would let that be enough to satisfy his ego.

The voiceover began dramatically as an image of Tony Stark came up on screen. "Tony Stark, Visionary, Genius, American Patriot."

"So much for that. Rhodes thought to himself without the slightest surprise.

"Even from an early age, the son of legendary weapon developer Howard Stark, Tony quickly stole the spotlight with his brilliant and unique mind," The voiceover continued dramatically.

The video montage showed a few images of Howard Stark. Rhodes had never met him personally, but his work was required learning in every branch of the Armed Services; and Tony spoke about him often.

"At age four his built his first circuit board. At age six, his first engine. And at seventeen he graduated summa cum laude from MIT."

Rhodes craned his neck and saw the image of a young Tony Stark next to a robotic arm. Tony had built two of them. His prize winning project, now his household assistant. As Rhodes watched, the montage transitioned from the graduation picture to the scan of a familiar headline, reporting the stock drop as Tony's father died. Mr. and Mrs. Stark killed in tragic road accident.

"Then, the passing of a Titan. Howard Stark's lifelong friend and ally Obadiah Stane steps in to fill the gap left by the legendary founder." The image shifted to Forbes Magazine, with an image of Stane, now a good bit older, with a beard and bald head, standing over a globe of the earth.

"And at 21, the Prodigal Son returns to and is anointed the new CEO of Stark Industries." The image on the screen was of a younger Tony, sans his usual mustache and short beard, on the cover of Forbes.

Rhodes inwardly noted that Stark was never a Prodigal Son. He and his dad were great together.
"With the keys to the kingdom, Tony ushers in a new era for his father's legacy, creating smarter weapons, advanced robotics, Satellite targeting. Today, Tony Stark has changed the face of the weapons industries, by ensuring freedom, and protecting America and her interests around the globe."

The screen closed the presentation with a long image of Tony looking heroically into the distance, with the flag waving behind him in a brilliant patriotic breeze.

The audience applauded wildly, as the spotlights focused on the table next to the podium.

Rhodes stepped up to the podium, with the silver and glass statuette in one hand. "As liaison to Stark Industries, I have a unique privilege of serving with a real patriot. He is my friend, and he is my great mentor." Rhodes wouldn't have added that last part, but Pepper had written the toast. "Ladies and gentlemen, it is my honor to present this year's Apogee Award to Mr. Tony Stark!"

The audience applauded wildly, and the spotlight swung away from Rhodes to the main table, at an empty seat. Rhodes felt his heart stop. Tony, not again...

Next to the empty seat sat Obadiah Stane, the Chairman of the Board for Stark Industries. At least that was what his business card said. Rhodes had been working with Tony Stark and his company long enough to know that Stane's real job was to beat the rest of the shareholders and Board of Directors into submission while Tony made them uncounted millions. Such a job gave him money, practical authority, and very little recognition to those who weren't in the know. Except for nights like this of course.

The audience applauded and Rhodes sighed as Stane came up to the stage took the award off him. "Thank you, Colonel. This is beautiful. Thank you all very much. This is wonderful," he posed with the award for a moment, and then nodded, as if admitting a great secret. "Well, I'm not Tony Stark," he said in a false-modest manner, as if letting them all in on a private joke.

Amused laughter from the audience.

Stark just can't be counted on, Rhodes seethed, and not for the first time. Rhodes didn't really mind that part so much because he was a civilian, and a damn brilliant one at that. But if Tony had been a soldier, he would have been bounced from the Armed Forces pretty fast.

Stane continued easily. "But if I were Tony, I would tell you how honored I feel, and what a joy it is to receive this very prestigious award."

The fact that Tony didn't mind making fun anybody at all was amusing most time; making fun of Rhodes and the army, Stark's own bread-and-butter, was irritating, but Rhodes had known Tony long enough not to take that personally.

But even Rhodes couldn't believe that Stark was missing his own awards ceremony.

As if Stane read his mind, he shrugged elaborately. "Tony, you know, the best thing about Tony is also the worst thing-he's always working."

The audience laughed and nodded knowingly. Rhodes did too, but didn't bother looking like he knew what Stane meant.

Always working. Rhodes scoffed. Working the high roller tables at Caesars Palace.
Rhodes did a quick scan of the floor. Poker required patience. Roulette didn't give the opportunity let the tension build for all those watching. Slot machines were cheap and easy, and Blackjack was played sitting down, somewhat limiting the number of women you could have clinging to you while you gambled.

Rhodes ran this checklist through his head and headed for the craps table, glancing at the small signs near each croupier for the maximum allowable bet at the table, quickly bypassing anything with less than three digits, occasionally glancing overhead in search of directions to the High Roller Parlor.

And sure enough, there he was. Tony Stark himself, with security ringing the small crowd of supermodels, celebrity watchers, and fellow gamblers. Stark himself was holding the dice with his left hand, and a movie star with his right. Rhodes had seen her in something popular before. Typically, she looked like a Million Dollars.

"Baby, be my good luck charm," Stark said to her, and she playfully blew on the dice just as Tony noticed Rhodes coming up on his left. "Hey! Rhodey, don't tell me they roped you into this thing?"

Stark rolled the dice, and up popped a sweet eleven. The watching mass of adoration cheered.

"I'm supposed to be presenting you with the award tonight," Rhodes said with thinly veiled frustration. "They told me you'd be honored."

Tony still didn't look away from the craps table. "I am, I am, I will be. When are we doing that?"

Rhodes handed him the statuette. "Congratulations."

Stark didn't even blink before taking the statue and striking a pose for the movie star. "Deeply honored and touched."

The movie star chuckled without taking her hands off him. What was her name? Rhodes was pretty sure she'd won an Academy Award at some point...

"Let it ride!" Stark said to nobody in particular and the woman purred at him as she blew on the dice.

"Six hundred thousand," the croupier reported.

Stark held the dice out to Rhodey, who gave the billionaire his most withering look. "C'mon!"

"I am not blowing on your dice," Rhodes said darkly.

Stark gave him a wounded look, which got him nowhere. He held out the dice to Rhodes again and had his hand batted away. Tony opened his hand at the right moment and grinned. "Rhodes' roll!"

Snake Eyes.

Everyone looked disappointed. Except Rhodes and Stark.

Tony pointed at the table. "See what you did?" he accused. "Ah, well-that's the worst thing to happen, we're O.K.," Then he turned to the croupier. "Settle me up!"

The croupier swept up the pile of chips that Tony had just lost. Stark tossed him a loose chip and left his adoring throngs staring slack-jawed as he walked away.

"Six hundred thousand dollars?" Rhodey couldn't help but repeat as he followed Stark away from
the table. It was more money than a career soldier saw in a lifetime.

"I don't know what's better," Stark grinned as he walked off. "The fact that I won that high, or the fact that I don't care I lost it."

Rhodey calculated the odds of making Tony see the light about attending his own award ceremony and decided to use the opening to move on to new business. "Good luck runs out, Tony-sooner or later you've got to take something seriously. Like, for instance, going to Afghanistan tomorrow. I know you don't care, but the US Army is paying a few convoys of soldiers to play bodyguard so that you can demonstrate your new weapons systems. Two-Star Generals are actually going to be in a hot zone for this, and if you don't show up, there will be a bunch of Generals..."

"Pay back Caesar's things to Caesar; I get it!" Tony promised, and demonstrated the noble spirit of the sentiment by promptly giving his Apogee award to a nice man by the slot machines in a sequined toga. The man took the statue with a confused look.

Rhodey couldn't help but smirk. Only Tony Stark could make the guy dressed like Julius Caesar seem confused without trying. "Seven thirty, tomorrow morning, I'll meet you at the plane."

Tony was already waving him off. "Till then."

Stark headed for his car. Happy was already holding the door open for him.

"Mr. Stark?"

Tony didn't turn. His security had already blocked her. "Tony Stark! Christine Everheart, Vanity Fair magazine," she called out.

A reporter. He glanced over at Happy, who nodded briefly. "She's cute."

"She is?" Stark turned and took quick stock of the woman behind that voice. She looked like she had just stepped out of a catalogue. Young, blonde, preppy. Worth his time.

Tony walked back to meet her. "Hi, yeah O.K., go."

Christine took a second to collect herself at being face to face with him "You've been called the DaVinci of our time; what do you say to that?"

"That's absolutely ridiculous, I don't paint," Tony was quick with the modesty.

Everheart's face changed and Tony suddenly realized he'd been baited. "And what do you say to your other nickname, the 'Merchant of Death'?"

Tony grinned lightly. She had spunk. "That's not bad," He looked her over again, and the disdain on her face increased. "Let me guess? Berkeley?"

"Brown, actually," Everheart shot back.

Same difference. "Well, look, Miss Brown..."

She rolled her eyes again.

Tony didn't even bother to react. "It's an imperfect world. The second weapons aren't needed to keep the peace; I promise you I'll start manufacturing bricks and beams for baby hospitals."
Everheart was unmoved. Somehow the disdainful, predatory look worked for her. "Rehearse that in the mirror much?"

Tony didn't hesitate. "Every night before bed."

"I'm sure."

"I'd love to show you."

Everheart rolled her eyes in disgust. "All I want is a serious answer."

Tony moved on to his next piece of pre-prepared sound bytes. "A serious answer? No problem. My father had a saying; 'peace means carrying a bigger stick than the other guy.'"

"Funny, coming from the guy who's selling the sticks." "Next time I come to a casino, I'll have to bring my shield and sword. "You know my father helped stopped the Nazi's. He worked on the Manhattan project. Some people, including your professors at Brown would call that being a hero."

"Some would call it war profiteering," Everheart shot back.

Tony was actually interested enough to take off his designer shades. "Tell me, do you plan to report on the millions we've saved with our medicals advancements? Or kept from starvation with our intelli-crops? All those breakthroughs? Military funding."

"You've never lost a moment's sleep in your life have you?"

"I love to lose some with you."

Everheart rolled her eyes in disgust. Again. Does he really think that he's gonna get anywhere with that routine?

It was a four hour drive from Vegas to LA. Plenty of time for an interview.

The trip only took three hours when Hogan was driving.

Not long after that; Stark and Everhart were back at his place, in the middle of a very explosive make-out session, with her on top, forcing him down into the bed underneath her.

It seemed to Tony that Everheart was aggressive in many different ways. Rolling both of them off the bed was the most effective method of getting her to relax that he could think of. He was right, it made both of them laugh like teenagers.

Christine woke up the next morning, reached over, and found she was alone. She kept her eyes shut and briefly entertained the hope that maybe the night before was just a very sexy nightmare.

"Good morning," The voice of an impossibly cultured English butler said.

Christine woke up fully in a hurry and pulled the sheet up to cover herself. The whole room lit up, as the walls themselves turned transparent all around her, revealing they were actually polarized windows. One of the windows suddenly had a TV signal projected onto it from somewhere and started playing CNN. The window next to it projected a touch screen computer with a list of
appointments and house climate controls, with a few personal photos running on a loop.

"It is nine am; it's 72 degrees in Malibu, with scattered clouds." The butler's voice continued. "Surf conditions are fair with waist to shoulder high lines; High tide will be at…"

Everheart tuned it out when she realized there was nobody in the room. In fact there was nothing in the room. The bed was the only piece of furniture; which seemed completely in Tony's character.

But for the technological wonders of the windows; it was the view that floored her. How had she not noticed this on her way in? The house was at least three stories, set into the cliff with ocean views and LA across the bay.

Everheart couldn't quite bring herself to admit it, but she was impressed by the house. Stark Industries had its technical and production plants in California, and the business side of it, including the offices and administration were closer to the money in New York. Tony had told her on the way here in the limo that he had the industrial complex here in California because he lived here; and he found New York too cold to find attractive sunbathers all year round.

But of course, Christine hadn't found that to be charming at all.

Her clothes were gone. A fact that made her skin crawl slightly; but mainly because she was certain she had them when they came into this room the night before.

His shirt was the only thing within reach, and she quickly put it on. The windows were probably opaque from the outside, but she felt stripped naked enough without dressing in front of a view like that.

The entire top floor was the bedroom, and Christine padded downstairs to the main house. "Tony?" She called.

No answer. She wondered where a girl could get some breakfast in this place. Maybe she could track down the butler that voice belonged to. Still no sign of her host.

Christine tiptoed past the loveseat, (which she remembered vividly) then past the indoor water feature, (which she simply couldn't believe as it sat right next to the downstairs staircase) "Tony?" She called again, getting nervous now. She still despised him and everything he stood for, but there was still no sign of anyone. In a way, that was almost stranger than having house servants in the bedroom bringing her coffee and newspapers. Isn't that how wealthy people lived?

Over to the left of the hallway, opposite yet another stunning view was a panel that Everheart didn't recognize. It was lit with a blue glow, and had something that was either a dial, a button or a speaker on one side. Christine figured it must be the house intercom and slowly approached it, trying to figure out how to use the thing. She was beyond embarrassed at how the evening turned out by this point and just wanted her clothes back.

"You are not authorized to be in this area!" Snapped the butler voice; it came from everywhere and Everheart jumped back from the panel.

"That's just Jarvis."

Everheart jumped and spun in the same movement. A slim woman, in a good business suit, with light-red hair, had come into the room silently behind her. "He runs the house," She continued. "I have your clothes here, dry-cleaned and pressed, and there's a car and driver waiting outside to take you anywhere you want to go."
The way the woman dealt with Christine was professional and purely routine; and Everheart felt her pride stung again. This was clearly just another day working for Tony Stark. The red-headed woman was known to anyone who knew Tony Stark personally. Everheart had noticed her in some of the pictures in the bedroom. And even if her face wasn't familiar, the Bluetooth headset under her somewhat messy bangs and the dry-cleaning bag over her arm would have been a fair indication.

"You must be the famous Pepper Potts," Everheart said, slipping back into unimpressed reporter mode.

"Indeed I am."

The disdainful look was firmly in place again. Maybe it lost something given her current outfit. "All these years and Tony still has you picking up the dry-cleaning?"

Pepper didn't flinch. Inwardly she had as much disdain for the reporter as Everheart seemed to have for everything; but she fought to keep from laughing in the woman's face. Blondie, She said to herself. It takes a very special kind of arrogance to stand there after getting caught by a complete stranger wearing nothing but my boss's shirt and still managing to look down your nose at the woman holding your only clothes.

Keep it professional, Pepper. "I do anything and everything Mr. Stark needs me to do...occasionally that includes taking out the trash." Well, mostly professional. She smiled sweetly. "Will there be anything else?"

Everheart flushed and took the dry-cleaning bag off her with a grimace.

Pepper waved her out of the room and went downstairs the private stairwell behind the fountain to Tony's workshop.

Everheart darted back upstairs; found the bathroom and seethed. She took a moment to get her footing again. She still despised Stark and everything he stood for and made money from. In fact her opinion of the man hadn't changed in the slightest during the entire night. If Stark thought she was going to be more favorable to him in her article just because...

Everheart suddenly realized that she had clean forgotten about the interview. Oh hell, how am I going to explain this?

Virginia 'Pepper' Potts went down the stairs to the workshop door, and keyed in the code at the keypad projected onto the glass. Before she even got to the door, she felt her eardrums vibrate from the heavy metal music playing. She scanned through the glass wall and door halfway down the stairs. As usual, the boss was studying a schematic on a touch screen.

"Give me the exploded view please," Tony said to Jarvis while keying some commands into the 3D sketchpad.

The screens showed the engine design open, and make each part visible. "There is still low pressure in cylinder three," Jarvis reported.

Tony sighed and started tinkering, when the workshop door opened and his music switched off. "Don't stop my music," Tony said without turning around from his design pad. He already knew who it was. There was only one person other than him that had that code.

"You are supposed to be halfway around the world," Pepper told him.
"You trying to rush me out of here?"

"Your flight was scheduled to leave an hour and a half ago."

"That's funny. I thought with it being my plane and all; that it would just wait for me to get there."

And so begins round three thousand two hundred something of the ongoing fight between Tony 'Tiger Shark' Stark and 'Pepper Spray' Potts. Pepper reflected internally. "Tony, I need to speak to you about a couple of things before…"

"I mean, doesn't it kind of defeat the purpose of having your own plane if it departs before you arrive?" Tony continued, shutting down his 3D sketch pad.

Pepper sighed and moved on as he stood up and headed to the other end of the garage; keeping in step beside him. "There are a few items I need you to-"

"You trying to rush me out of here?"

"Larry called," Pepper pressed, trying to keep him focused. "He said that there's a buyer in the wings for the Jackson Pollock, do you want it yes or no?"

"What did you think of it?" Tony put the question to her, mostly to see if she'd react. "Is it a proper representation of his Spring period?"

"Well, actually the Springs is the neighborhood in East Hampton where he lived and worked, not 'Spring' like the season, and um...I think it's a good example, I think there are others that are better representations of the..." Pepper floundered. "I think it's ridiculously overpriced," She finished.

It was a Jackson Pollock. For someone with as much knowledge of the art world as Tony, one piece of impressionist art was indistinguishable from the other, but Tony had not quite been able to impress on Pepper that 'ridiculously overpriced' was rich folk code for 'better than the other guy.' "I need it. Buy it. Store it."

Pepper sighed and moved to the next item on her list.

"The MIT commencement speech-"

"Is in June!" Tony shot back, remembering that one. "Don't harangue me about that."

"Well, they're haranguing me, so-"

"Then absorb and deflect don't lay it all on me."

"So I'm saying yes. Now there's-"

Tony made it to the espresso machine against the far wall, grabbed a cup and glanced over his shoulder at her. Her usual standard of banter was off today. "Why are you trying to rush me out of here?"

"I'm not, it's just-"

"What, you have plans?" He was more interested than he should be, but he wasn't really sure why...

"As a matter of fact I do."

"I don't like it when you have plans."
"I'm allowed to have plans on my birthday," Pepper protested.

Stark blinked. "It's your birthday?" he said before he could help it. "I knew that," he covered, and knew she wouldn't buy it. "Already?"

Pepper flushed. It's not like he had any reason to remember. He probably would have forgotten his own more often than not if it wasn't for the fireworks display. "Yeah, isn't that funny? It's the same day as last year."

Stark's poker face was back in place. But inwardly he felt panicked for a reason he couldn't really place. Omigod! I forgot! "Well get yourself something nice from me," He said aloud.

"Oh, I did," Pepper said blandly.

Stark relaxed. It wasn't just that Pepper was the only woman he kept on speed dial, and it wasn't the fact that she had been in his life longer than anybody else, and it wasn't that she alone had the power to send him to Antarctica for a month with nothing but sunscreen in his luggage. He was glad she wasn't mad at him. "And?"

"It was very tasteful, very elegant," Pepper blushed, a little shy suddenly. Her voice hadn't lowered shyly when faced with the mostly naked woman upstairs but now it did. "Thank you, Mister Stark."

"You're welcome, Miss Potts," Stark returned in the same quiet tone, more relieved. He always had the best taste in birthday gifts when Pepper did his shopping. He tossed back the espresso and gave her the small cup. "I have a plane to catch."

Pepper briefly wondered if he'd run into the reporter when he got dressed to go. But then, Tony hadn't even asked about her.

It's because he's already forgotten her name. Pepper thought, not even noticing the look of relief on her face. Same as always.

Rhodes was standing at the door to Stark's Private plane, checking his watch for the fourth time in as many minutes, when he saw the silver Audi come screaming up from the other end of the airport.

At least he has the decency to look like he's in a hurry. Rhodes thought, when the black Rolls Royce from the night before came charging after it.

The Audi was belting at a pretty good clip, hugging the ground like it was on rails, even when it spun into a perfect slide.

Both cars came to a halt about fifteen feet from the plane, the silver car at least five seconds ahead of the Rolls Royce.

Rhodes got the point and made his way down the staircase to meet them as both cars' drivers' door opened. Tony was driving the Audi, and his chauffeur 'Happy' Hogan was driving the Rolls.

"I thought I lost you there about ten minutes ago!" Stark whooped.

Hogan was laughing too. "You did sir, I got blocked by the lights; had to cut down Mulholland Drive."
"Three hours late?!" Rhodes snapped.

"I got caught doing a piece for *Vanity Fair,*" Tony explained, ever so reasonable.

"For three hours?"

"I'm here now, let's go."

Rhodes sighed darkly as Hogan handed Stark his bag; and Tony led the way up the stairs and into the plane.

Tony sat down in one of the four seats the private jet had, and Rhodes too the seat opposite him as the plane's engines spooled up for takeoff.

Twenty minutes later, the stewardess was bringing around hot towels and drinks. Tony took one easily.

Rhodes sighed in disappointed disgust without looking up from his paper.

"What you reading, platypus?" Tony asked.

Rhodes shook his head without meeting Tony's eyes. "Nothing."

"C'mon sour patch," Tony prodded. "Don't be mad."

Rhodes kept shaking his head. "Don't do that. I told you: I'm not mad, I'm indifferent."

"I said I was sorry!" Stark protested. He turned to the Stewardess. "Really! I told him I was sorry."

The Stewardess dutifully nodded in agreement.

"I mean you don't respect yourself, so I know you don't respect me."

"I respect you!"

"I'm just your babysitter, so hey; you need your diaper changed, let me know and I'll get you a bottle O.K.?" The stewardess brought around the tray of hot towels and Rhodes took one without losing stride.

"Heat up some Sake would you?" Tony called after her.

She nodded and went back to the front of the plane.

"We're not drinking, we're working right now!" Rhodes hissed. "And you are constitutionally incapable of being responsible."

"What?" Tony said as Rhodey glared at him. "It would be irresponsible not to drink now."

Stark meant it too. They were going to be in the air twenty hours and it was going to be noon the whole time.

Rhodes waved off the young woman as she offered him a drink. Rhodes was a military man. Discipline and duty were the keys to his entire way of life. Having a private plane with two passengers and three flight attendants was laughable. Racing two cars to get to a flight you were two and a half hours late for was disagreeable. Drinking hard liquor before ten am was frowned
upon. And in the military, 'frowned upon' was code for 'don't let the door hit your ass on the way out.'

Stark shook his head wearily. *Rhodey needs to loosen up for his own good. Why does it always fall to me to make it happen?*

*Then again.* Stark noted. *Since when do I need a reason?*

An hour later, Rhodey was merrily drunk, and reflecting on how brilliant Tony was to have a retractable dance pole and a disco ball in the plane. The Stewardesses seemed to think so too. Tony had been feeding them liquor at about the same rate as he drank it down himself, and they were more than enjoying the party.

Still, Rhodes felt it to be his responsibility to teach the man that there were such things as boundaries. To that end, he was drinking a beer, and *not* hot Sake; no matter what Tony said, he'd had one beer after another in open defiance. He also needed to teach the man a few things about responsibility. "Look Man, like I told you...it's like I said...When I put this uniform on, you know what I think; it means every guy who ever put on- Are you listening to me?"

"You aren't just a little bit interested in the show going on right now?"

Rhodey was, but still, there was a principle at stake.

In the clarity that came with being pleasantly smashed, Rhodey noticed that Stark Stewardesses sounded like a great name for an escort service, and then he became aware that there were three such lovely ladies dancing around in front of them. A blonde, a brunette, and a redhead.

Tony always did like to have his collections complete.

"Hey-y-y-y Tony?" Rhodey said happily over the 70's disco music.

"Yeah Rhodey?" Tony slurred back; more interested in the show going on in front of them.

"Did you design the uniforms too?" He said pointing at the stewardess of the left of the pole.

Tony chuckled. "Nah-h-h-h. You'd be amazed how easy it is for a flight hostess' uniform to look like a stripper costume once you put them next to a metal pole," He leaned over and whispered conspiratorially. "It's the little hats."

Rhodey cackled, finding that hilarious. "Confess man, these girls have never worked for an airline in their life have they?"

The stewardesses found that to be as hilarious as Tony did.

Stepping out of a climate controlled airplane to the middle of the Afghanistan summer sun was always a shock. Rhodes felt sweat break out across his back.

Stark was wearing an actual three piece suit and tie, plus a bullet-proof vest underneath, and if he even noticed the temperature it didn't show.

Rhodes could never believe it when this happened. In the space of time it took to step out of the plane, to the moment he reached the bottom of the stairs, Tony Stark became crisp, professional, precise and impossibly persuasive, even when shaking hands with Generals and Afghani Peacekeepers.
Rhodes was struggling with a hangover every time he finished taking a trip with the man, the three Stewardesses still hadn't woken up after the party; but Tony knew when he was 'on'.

The consistent ability to come to attention with almost military efficiency was one of the very few reasons Rhodes had yet to shoot his friend.

Stark always was spectacular at selling his own greatness.

"Is it better to be feared, or respected?" he had put the question to the assembled military brass at the test site. "And I say, 'is it too much to ask for both'? With that in mind, I humbly present the crown jewel of Stark Industries' freedom line. It's the first missile system to incorporate our proprietary repulser technology. 'They' say the best weapon is one you never have to fire. I respectfully disagree. I prefer the weapon that you only have to fire once. That's how dad did it, that's how America does it," He waited for a perfect beat as the General's swelled about a size. "And it's worked out pretty well so far," he finished.

With a flourish he directed their collective attention to the Tri-Missile Launcher.

"Find an excuse to fire off one of these, and I personally guarantee you that the bad guys will be too scared to come out of their caves," he nodded at Rhodey, who hit the button and one of the Three Missiles roared to life and soared into the air.

The Missile arced high, and every eye followed it. Stark did not. He was counting down in his head.

Right on cue, the Missile fuselage splinted into two dozen smaller pieces, and glided into perfect formation, a straight line of micro-missiles, with the centre massive charge still on target.

"For your consideration..." Tony raised his voice dramatically, and he spread his arms, as the missiles detonated against the ground behind him in a perfect row of fire and smoke. "The Jericho!"

Tony bowed his head without lowering his arms, taking a bow, just as the shockwave hit them, blowing the soldiers caps off.

The blast was impressive, he delivery perfect, and the missile was big. Tony already knew that he had them.

Some of the soldiers had bottles of champagne with them. Tony wasn't about to drink it. He waved over a large weapons case, and flipped the latches open. A wave of dry ice rolled out into the desert heat. "Throw one of these in with every 500,000 purchased," He quipped to the generals, as he pulled out a tumbler full of scotch on the rocks. "To Peace," he toasted lightly.

Tony's Sat-Phone rang, and he answered it. Obadiah was on the vid-phone screen; still in bed, barely awake.

Stark did the math in his head and figured out the time difference. "Obie, what're you doing up?"

"Wanted to see how it went."

"I think it's gonna be an early Christmas."

"That's good," Stane answered, already putting his own handset down. "See you when you get back."
"Stane?" Tony asked, making the other man pause. "Why aren't you wearing the pajamas I got you?"

Stane hung up on him.

By that time, Stark had made it to the convoy. Three soldiers were waiting in the Humvee already. Tony got into the back, tumbler still in hand, and shut the door. Rhodes was running up to catch them before they left him behind.

Tony stuck his head out the window. "Oh I'm sorry; this is the 'Fun-Vee'." He waved his friend off. "The 'Hum-Drum-Vee' is back there."

Rhodes would have been outraged, but had to admit that a few hours with the 'Tony Stark Show' in front of his subordinates would probably be enough to drive him nuts.

Stark saw the same thought behind his friend's eyes and grinned. "See you soon."

An hour later and Tony felt like he was in an isolation chamber. 'Back in Black' by AC/DC was playing from the CD player that somebody had brought, but it still felt like suffocating silence. His guards were not talking, to him or each other. They were all largely identical to each other. In a tailored three piece suit and tie, to say nothing of the scotch, Tony stuck out like a sore thumb. The soldiers were all bundled up in heavy combat gear, standard issue and somewhat disconcerting. The one on his left, probably all of nineteen, with a GI Joe helmet that didn't really fit and 'Forrest' on his nametag was sneaking nervous glances at him...What had the other soldier called him on the way in? Jimmy?

Tony understood that soldiers in Hot-Zones were pretty tight-knit, and the sudden inclusion of an outsider, a civilian no less, and for that matter a billionaire, wearing clothes worth more than any of them got paid in a decade had to be a cramp in their usual style. Tony figured they were keeping it professional around the civilian, and made a scene of studying his tumbler; letting them get used to his presence. A fine film of frost had collected over the glass, the result of coming out of a chilled case into the Afghanistan sun.

"He doesn't sweat," Pratt, the soldier directly in front of Tony whispered over to the driver. "I never saw anyone who don't sweat. The ice in his glass isn't even melting!"

Rameirez, the driver, shushed him as quietly as possible. They were the first words spoken in almost an hour.

Tony caught Pratt's eye in the rearview mirror, and took a long sip of his tumbler.

Pratt looked hard at the dashboard suddenly, embarrassed that he'd been caught.

"For crying out loud, what am I the school principal?" Tony thought in disbelief. These guys are worse than Rhodey. "I feel like you're driving me to court martial. This is crazy. What did I do?"

"No, we can talk," Forrest said, next to him, and then looked embarrassed that he had dared to speak.

"Oh, so it's personal then?" Tony pressed. One or two smirks.

"Nah, you intimidate them," Ramirez volunteered from the drivers seat.
"Good god! You're a woman!" Tony exclaimed in apparent shock. "I'm mean; I honestly could not have picked that."

Even Pratt chuckled this time. Rameriez seemed tickled too.

*Work the opening Tony, work the room.* "I mean, I would apologize," Tony continued. "But isn't that what we're going for here? I thought of you as a soldier first."

More smirks, a little stronger this time. Ramirez fought for professionalism again. "I'm an airman."

"Well you actually have excellent bone structure there," Tony started laying it on thick. "I'm having a hard time *not* looking at you now. Is that weird?" He batted his eyes at her dramatically.

It was enough. They all burst out laughing and the atmosphere in the Humvee relaxed instantly. Tony took another sip, proud of himself. The gang was relaxed, chuckling, making jokes with each other.

Pratt finally gave in and turned around in his seat. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Yes!" Tony said, pleased. "Please do."

"Is it true you went twelve for twelve with the Maxim cover girls last year?"

"That is an excellent question," Stark had to grin. Almost everyone had asked him that one at some point. Even Pepper wanted to know, though for her it seemed to be disgust and not awe. "Yes and no. March and I had a scheduling conflict, but the Christmas cover was twins."

Jimmy on his left had slightly raised his hand.

Stark gave him a perturbed glare. "Are you kidding me with the hand raised here?"

Jimmy grinned. "Is it cool if I take a picture with you?"

"Yes," Tony said without any hesitation. "It's very cool."

Jimmy Forest slid over next to him, and handed a digital camera forward to Pratt.

"I don't want to see this on your MySpace page," Tony told him firmly.

Forest nodded and put up a Peace Sign.

Tony and Stane had spent a good amount of time chuckling that the Peace sign was originally a war slogan. *V For Victory.*

"Please, no gang signs," Tony told him sternly, and Jimmy very quickly dropped his hand. Tony smirked. The kid was still a little on edge. "No, I'm kidding, put it up!" He joshed. "Peace. I love peace. I'd go out of business for peace."

Jimmy grinned and raised the V again.

Pratt was having trouble with the camera. It was Stark Industries issue, but Tony waited patiently while Jimmy warned his friend about hitting buttons and changing settings...

An instant later, the jeep in front of them exploded.

Tony felt his eyes bulge. The soldiers were stunned too, but they snapped to work.
Ramirez worked the wheel, but the wreckage in front of them was blocking the road too closely.

"CONTACT LEFT! CONTACT! CONTACT LEFT!" Screamed Ramirez, but into a radio or two her passengers was hard to tell.

"What's going on?" Tony said, and couldn't hear his own voice.

Ramirez opened her door, rifle first, and was cut down before even getting a foot on the ground.

Ramirez was dead. Ramirez was the driver.

The driver was dead. The Humvee had stopped.

"Jimmy; Protect Stark!" Pratt snapped and suddenly there were rifles everywhere.

More explosions, this time from behind them.

Gunfire, fast and harsh.

Pratt was out of the Humvee, crouched behind the hood, firing steadily, when suddenly his face disappeared and the windshield shattered in the same instant.

Jimmy saw this and worked his rifle again. "Sonofabitch!" Jimmy hissed.

Tony caught a glimpse of himself in the rear-view mirror. Who's that? Oh. That's me. Is that me? I don't look like that, do I? My mouth is hanging open; my eyes are too big and round...

"Get down!"

Tony ducked as the last of his escort had to join the fight.

Wait! Don't leave me! Don't leave me alone! He could hear the terror in his thoughts, and a second later in his voice. "Jimmy! Waitwaitwait!"

"Stay! Here!" Forrest yelled at him as he slammed the Humvee door shut.

He stepped out of the Humvee, guns blazing.

And instant later, Jimmy and the wall of the jeep had been ventilated by a spray of bullet-holes that came right through the Army Vehicle like it was made of paper.

Get out of the Humvee. The thought came to him. Get out of the Humvee!

Tony got out of the Humvee fast. He didn't know where his legs were going, he didn't know down from up...

The whole convoy had stopped, they were firing like mad at something, but Tony couldn't for the life of him figure out what.

More gunfire. Smaller arms this time. The jeep mounted weapons weren't firing any more.

Tony backed away from the jeep as fast as he could, off the trail, to the rocks.

He threw himself behind a rock and yanked out his Sat-Phone. Obadiah's number is pre-programmed. Or Pepper! Call Pepper and tell her-

Thunk.
Tony spun at the sound. A Mortar shell had dug itself into the sand near his rock. It was a smooth cylinder with two rounded ends...

Tony actually had to step closer, disbelief and adrenaline shutting his brain down. It had the Stark Industries logo etched on the side in plain English.

A low electronic whine came from the mortar.

Stark Industries anti-personnel mortar. Tony thought. Works from a timer, instead of exploding on impact. Drives the target out of hiding before the blast throws shrapnel-

Appropriately, the mortar shell exploded right as that thought hit him.

Tony felt his body get picked up by half a dozen tiny agonizing pins, and suddenly Tony was airborne...

He didn't feel himself hit the ground. He looked down at his chest and saw holes in his shirt. He clawed his shirt half open to see if the bulletproof vest held.

As blood bubbled up from underneath the vest he passed out.

In a nightmarish delirium he was aware of his body being cut into again and again. He screamed hysterically from the agony and the panic as some people tied his body down and somebody else was screaming orders.

A cloth covered his nose and mouth and a foul smell made the world spin.

Only half conscious, and feeling the room spin, Tony felt cloth over his face. He would have panicked, but he was too out of it to move, when whatever was covering his face was removed, and Stark was suddenly staring into bright lights.

There was a camera in front of him, and Tony could feel his entire upper body weaving back and forth, punch drunk from the trauma and the chloroform.

There were people surrounding him, they were armed.

My personal stylist must be present at all interviews. He thought distantly, confusing this nightmare with an old negotiation regarding an interview with People Magazine.

The shouting continued, and the bag got put back over his head, and Stark passed out before he was able to wake up enough to be sure this was really happening.

Pain.

Tony Stark awoke to pain, delirium wiping out the memory. How had he come here? He remembered there was fire, he remembered there was darkness. His chest hurt like he was having a continuous heart attack.

Tony gasped for air, got nothing, choked and gagged on nothing. His hands flew to his face on instinct and he choked again. His arms hurt like they were in fire. His hands touched something that didn't belong, and he grabbed it. His mind was too fogged to remember his own name, but he knew that there shouldn't be a tube up his nose; and he started pulling.
He gagged again, at least twice as he pulled the plastic tubing from his nostrils. The tube was much longer than it should have been. *How long have I been out?* Tony wondered. *They're feeding me through a tube going up my nose and down my throat.*

With the tube gone, Tony started gulping air. It was a bit easier to breathe now. Just the pain stopping him now, and he collapsed backwards against the cot.

There was a calm, almost cheerful whistling noise coming off from the left, incogrous with the dark Hell Stark found himself in.

*I'm dead.* Tony thought. *I'm dead, and I'm in hell, and there isn't a single appropriately attractive immoral woman to be seen.*

No. Not hell, it was far too cold. Every panicked breath created a cloud of steam.

His fingers were painfully numb.

There was a mug with water on it next to his cot. He reached for it, but his arm spasmed and he knocked it onto the ground.

He reached over further and felt a tug on his torso stopping him from turning over. There was something attached to his chest.

The merry tune being whistled was punctuated by a light buzzing noise.

Two wires were hooked up to the bandage over his chest, and Tony followed them to a car battery.

Horrible images of torture by electrocution filled Stark's mind, and he reached for the wires.

His chest hurt like he was having a continuous heart attack. His fingers clutched at his torso, and he pulled at the wires.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

He fought to turn his head. An older man, impeccably neat, was shaving with an electric razor. How could anyone be clean and neat in this place?

Stark returned his attention to the bandage and pulled at it, the thin material parted under his nails...and his fingers touched metal. He ripped his shirt open. A round metal plate had been cut into his skin, just beside his heart

Tony felt the panic grabbing at him again, and his steamy brath came faster. What had they done? They had cut him. Cut *into* him.

The thought got stuck in his head. They had gotten to him. They had cut their way into him. Inside him. He couldn't escape because they had put something in him. Bomb? Tracking device?

The thought ran around his head endlessly, and after a while Tony had exhausted himself with the terror. He fought to sit upright.

The old man was still across the cave, and Tony took a look at it. The room was large, filled with benches and assorted debris that he couldnt begin to guess at.

His companion in this place was tall and thin, with close cropped hair and a neatly shaved face. This clothers were neat and clean but clearly the only ones he had, for the colours were faded and there were rips at the seams. Nonetheless, the man carried himself with utter calm and poise.
Tony didn't much care however. He sat upright on his narrow bunk, tracing the circular lump of metal that had been forced into his chest.

"What the Hell did you do to me?" Stark gravelled. He could barely make his tongue move.

The old man was stirring a pot with some kind of stew in it, over to one side of the cave, where a hollow had been cut into one of the rock ledges and a fire lit inside. Until Stark spoke, he had been whistling merrily, and Stark almost hated him for appearing cheerful. "What I have done is to save you life," He said easily. "I removed all the shrapnel I could, but there's a lot left and it's moving into your atrius septum," He pulled a small dirty jar out of his pocket. "Here, wanna see? A souvinier!" He tossed the jar to Stark.

Tony looked in the jar and winced. The pieces that weren't shattered and broken were triangular shaped, and had grooves cut into the flat sides. He recognised the design. He had been the one to design it. He wasn't hallucinating then; it was a Stark Industries Mortar.

"I've seen many wounds like that in my village," The old man continued. "We call them the walking dead, because it takes them a week for the barbs to reach the vital organs."

Tony remembered. He had come up with that innovation for urban warfare. Civilians and friendlies would go to a doctor, escaped enemy combatants who did not turn themselves in would be...

Tony stopped thinking like that. "What is this?" he pressed, tapping his chest.

"That, is an electromagnet, hooked up to a car battery. And it's keeping the shrapnel from entering your heart."

The scientist in Tony was impressed. The engineer in Tony started laughing. He could have made this better.

The prisoner in Tony saw a small red light up above and followed it to a CCTV camera mounted in the corner.

The old man saw the direction of Stark gaze and nodded agreeably. "That's right. Smile." He said cheerfully.

There was a quiet moment as the surgeon stirred the pot. Tony could feel his stomach growling, but was acutely aware that there weren't likely to be any cows or chickens or sheep nearby. The meat he could smell coking could have come from any number of things, and the more possibilities Stark came up with, the less he felt like eating it. He also knew that if the old man didn't offer him any, he fight for it.

"We met once you know. At a technical conference in Bern," The man said.

"Don't remember," Stark mumbled sullenly.

His doctor found that amusing. "You wouldn't. If I had been that drunk, I wouldn't have been able to stand, much less give a lecture on integrated circuits."

"Where are we?" Stark interrupted again, calculating how long it would take Rhodes to find him.

A hatch opened in the door suddenly, and an order was shouted at them in a foreign language.

The old man rushed over to Stark. "Do as I do!"
The older man put both hands on his head in a classic surrender pose, and Tony mimicked it with great difficulty.

The door opened, and in came a somewhat heavyset man, with a neatly trimmed beard, and a guard on either side. His manner was flamboyant, and the way he spread his arms too wide and grinned too widely made Stark think of the way Genghis Khan must have been. Even so, his men glanced back and forth at each other as he flaunted himself, rolling their eyes slightly.

But Stark had focused on the weapons they were carrying. He recognized the scopes on top and the barrels as his own design. "Those are my guns," He whispered harshly. "How did they get my guns?"

Kid-Khan, as Tony dubbed him, whoever he was, made his way to Stark, and spoke in some rapid-fire language that Tony couldn't hope to follow.

Fortunately, the old man could. "He says welcome, Tony Stark. America's most famous mass-murderer."

More rapid fire orders, and the old man started giving a simultaneous translation. "He is honored. He wants you to build him a missile you were demonstrating. The Jericho Missile. For him," Kid-Khan handed him a photo. It was a promotional line photograph; exactly like the ones he had told Rhodey to send his Generals.

Tony's eyes flashed. "I refuse."

The veneer of over-the-top joviality dropped from Kid-Khan's face with impossible speed.

It seemed like only seconds later, when Tony was being taught the error of his reasoning.

Stark once discovered that dunking his head in a bucket of water was the fastest possible way of waking up in the morning. Having his head held under the filthy water in this cave was enough to make him swear off ever doing it again.

He was held down a bit longer than expected and freaked out. Thrashing to raise his head got him nowhere.

Panic! No oxygen!

For a second, he thought he heard a woman call him name. She sounded familiar.

The terrorist let him up enough to give him half a gulp of air; before straight back down under the water again. They shoved him down too far and his head slammed against the bottom of the tank and his mouth opened in reaction.

Panic! No oxygen!

For a second, the thought his was seeing spots before his vision, but they resolved themselves into shapes. He saw his chest plate, a memory from when it was being put in his body. He remembered the operation. The chest plate being burned around the edges to cauterize the wounds...He could make it better.

They let him up for a gulp of air; giving him just long enough to scream; before shoving him straight back down under the water again.

Panic! No oxygen!
The word floated up into his mind. *They have the power. I have no power. I have the power of a car battery that will only let me live a week. I need more power, give me back my power!*

And with that, came the idea.

A moment later he was upright, and a bag was put over his head. He felt something pushed into his hands. It was the car battery; and he clawed at it, clutching it to his stomach madly. If he dropped this thing he was a dead man.

The two guards who had his arms in their grip were dragging him down a stone corridor, and he stumbled along with them, blind inside his mask, but squinting through the burlap, he could see light ahead. *Go into the light, huh? No, that only happens at the end if you were a good boy, so at least I know I'm not dying right away…*

Several feet later his arms were released, and the bag was yanked off his head. Tony fought not to scream in the bright Afghanistan sunlight after feeling his way around the cave.

Someone batted him forward, and the old man was there, helping him walk forward as Tony's vision cleared. They were in a cleft between two stone mountains. The entrance to the caves was right at the back, far from the narrow canyon out, wherever that led.

Between the canyon and the caves was the rest of the camp. Everything in the open was covered by camouflage netting. Tony felt his chances sink. Finding this place from the air would be very hard. Fining it from the ground would be impossible. Sandbags, mounted guns, at least fifty guards, a few vehicles...

And everywhere he looked, he was surrounded by Stark Industries weapon crates.

Tony felt the pit of his stomach go cold. They were in possession of some very lethal toys. The sort of things that were marked military only...

Kid-Khan was talking spectacularly again. The Surgeon translated. "He wants to know what you think."

Stark was thinking many things at that moment. Most of them violent. He opted for honesty. "I think you've got a lot of my weapons."

"He says you'll have everything you need to build the Jericho missile. He wants you to make a list of materials. He says for you to start working immediately and when you are done, he will set you free," The older man translated.

Stark gave a relieved smile, held out a hand, and shook the man's hand like a blood brother. Abu smiled at the agreeable American.

"No," Stark said to his translator in English, still smiling. "He won't."

The surgeon was smiling too. "No, he won't."

An hour later, Stark was at the lowest point he had ever been. He was going to die. He, Tony Stark, a man on the top of the world, was going to meet his end at the hands of terrorists, in a cave at the corner of 'no' and 'where', killed by his own weapons.

*The old man said he'd seen a lot of wounds like mine.* Tony thought. *Now I know where.*
"What do you say to your other nickname, The Merchant of Death?"

Tony shut his eyes. *What have I done?* Tony closed his eyes. *I should be dead.*

*And nobody would have missed me would they?* Tony considered. Tony had the majority of the company's stock. Once he was declared dead, they would all be up for grabs. A drop in the stock prices. A bidding frenzy over the company. That would be it. The board would find some kid they could control and declare victory. Stane would try to keep a lid on it, but ultimately his loyalties would be to the company itself. The Stark name, not the Stark heir.

The rest of the people he knew were either soldiers who cared little for him personally, or socialites and CEO's who lived and died by the most pointed question there was. 'What have you done for me lately?'

Pepper. She'd be going nuts. Stane would back her. Hogan wouldn't give up, but wouldn't have much influence over things. Rhodes...He didn't even know if Rhodey was alive.

Stark was sickened to realise that he only had three or four friends.

"I'm sure they're looking for you, Stark. But they will never find you in these mountains," His doctor was saying. "Look. What you saw out there? That is your legacy. Your creations, in the hands of those murderers. Is this the last act of defiance of the great Tony Stark?"

Tony heard not an instant's sympathy in that voice as his own thoughts echoed back at him and responded with the only thing that came to mind. "What does it matter?" He heard his voice say, weak and timid. "We're both dead in a week."

"Then this is a very important week."

Tony couldn't believe his calm nature. *Is that how you survive here? You just find a place in your head where they can't reach? A way of doing things that give you a centre and they can't stop?*  

*Tony, you've got very few people to count on. You've got very little to hope for. You've got nothing left to believe in.*

But at least he had something to do.

*Just buy yourself time Stark. Rhodes and the others will be looking for you. Buy yourself time, cooperate with their demands, stay alive, don't antagonize your captors; wait for rescue. That's what you do. You're a hostage, and that's how you save yourself.* Tony told himself firmly. *But on the other hand...nah.*

The surgeon was immediately next to him holding the car battery close enough that Tony could stand, right up in his captor's face. "I will cooperate, if you can give me the tools to do it correctly."

Kid-Khan apparently didn't need the translation and agreed, smiling broadly. He started to say something to that effect...

"All right!"

What followed was the most flawless negotiation that Tony had ever undertaken.

"This will be my workstation," With the sweeping movements of an over dramatic orchestra conductor, Tony took off at a fast stride, circling the cave room. Holding the car battery, the old
man hurried to keep up. Struggling to follow what he was saying, Kid-Khan and his guards rushed after him as he waved at each and every item in the room with impatience. "I will need all that removed, I will need these cots over to the far side, away from the forge, I need a smelting cup, and the ..."

He kept up the running litany of demands, the old man rushing to translate, and Kid-Khan snapping the orders out at the same pace. The move was perfect. His captors weren't asking what he wanted it for; his captors weren't considering what else it could be and everyone in the room was rushing to obey his slightest whim and command. Tony felt his fragile plans hardening as the room responded to his control again.

Work the opening, Tony, work the room. "I need workman's gloves, a miner's jacket; I also need welding equipment, acetone or propane, I don't care. I will need a welders mask, I will need precision tools, needle nose pliers, I will need electrical cable. I will require small munitions; I need more light and a working generator to run it."

Kid-Khan actually looked a bit overwhelmed, and he was rushing to keep up with what his prisoners wanted. Tony came to a certain realization as he quietly watched. Kid-Khan, whoever he was, was used to taking orders.

Once, while on business in Reykjavik, Tony got himself completely drunk. Pepper knew that he wasn't going to make it to the next public appearance on time, so she had given his speech to Hogan, and told the Russian hotel staff that he was Tony Stark. Hogan had screeched in horror at the thought but Pepper had a way of convincing Happy to do these things.

Once Tony had regained consciousness he had taken over, claiming security concerns as a reason for the decoy.

Pepper had been bought a new car not to tell anyone. Hogan had been given Tony's hotel room and the specifically requested hotel staff for the entire stay. But for over six hours that day, Hogan's name had been whispered with some level of anticipatory fear by those in the know.

Tony recognized the tone. One word had been whispered back and forth, and every time it was mentioned, someone would glance at the prisoners.

"Quickly," Tony whispered to his surgeon. "What does 'Raza' mean?"

"Raza?" The older man seemed surprised. "It is a name. Why?"

Tony glanced over at Kid-Khan. "Because I don't think it's his."

Stark suddenly decided that he had enough to start with and ordered everyone else out of the room.

Even the surgeon was startled by how fast the room vacated. Apparently their captors had figured out that if you wanted Stark weaponry, it was best not to interfere with Stark the weapon-er.

Stark went straight to one of the missile pallets and picked up one of twelve Guided rockets from the stack. He started unscrewing the top of it with laser focus.

His doctor licked his lips as Stark causally started throwing huge sections of the missile over his shoulder, working his way deeper through the components, till he got to the guidance system. Then he picked up a pair of needle nose pliers and started fiddling.

"Pretty good with the languages," Stark observed, not for the first time, but for the first time out loud.
"Not fluent, but enough for this place," The doctor answered him. "They speak Farsi, Urdu, Arabic, Turkish, Russian, English, Persian…"

Too many languages to be a military faction, Stark mentally noted. "Who are they?"

"They are your loyal customers," The old man explained, with neither malice nor pity. "They call themselves The Ten Rings," The doctor had spent the entire operation standing and staring at him. "We might be more productive if you let me in on what you were doing."

Stark didn't hear him, or at the very least didn't answer. He threw the rest of the device lazily over his shoulder. "Don't need that."

The older man came over, and looked at the small computer chip in the pincers. "What's that?"

"That," Stark said calmly, "is palladium. About 1.6 grams of it, but we need 12.9 grams at least, so would you mind unscrewing this other ones?"

The operation didn't take too long, and soon the small computer chips were all in a stone cup over open flame. They melted into a mercury mess. Stark was making a mould in a small bowl out of sand. Once he had the sand packed tightly enough, he started slicing out a precise circle, six inches across. Satisfied, he set the mould down, and went over to the forge with a set of grips, and froze as he faced the small problem of how to pick up a cup full of melted metal, when he had to carry the car battery, and shaky hands and legs. Finally, he had to turn to his companion, who got the point without a word and picked up the grips himself.

"Careful," Tony told him. "We only have one shot."

"I have steady hands," He chortled. "It's why you're still alive."

Tony couldn't help the smirk. "Right."

The older man started pouring the molten metal into the mould, creating a flawless ring.

"So what do I call you?" Stark asked quietly.

"My name is Yinsen."

"Nice to meet you."

Another three days passed, and Yinsen had come to the conclusion that he was out of his depth. Stark had incredibly nimble fingers. He would have made a fine surgeon, but Yinsen had no idea what the man was working on.

It was circular, about two inches high by six inches wide. In fact, the dimensions were pretty close to the electromagnet that Yinsen had scavenged and put in Stark's chest. As if to demonstrate that point, there was also a thin electrical cable extending from the base.

The ring of Palladium was apparently the centerpiece of this small construction. Once it was done, Tony had connected it to the rest of the mechanism, and almost immediately pulled his hands away.

The small device suddenly lit up with a glow of clean and pure light, flaring into brightness in the dark firelight of the cave. Stark leaned back to admire it; apparently finished in his task.

"That doesn't look like a Jericho Missile," Yinsen observed.
"That's because it's a miniaturized Arc Reactor," Stark told him, leaning close enough to fill his face with the glow it let off. "I have a big one powering my factory at home."

"What is the output?" Yinsen asked curiously.

"If my math is right, and it always is, about three gigajoules," Tony responded. "Per second."

Yinsen leaned away from the device instinctively. "That could power your heart for about fifty lifetimes.'

"Or something really big for about fifteen minutes," Stark said with pure iron in his voice.

Yinsen sent his fellow prisoner a glance, looking worried for the first time. What was the weapon-eer up to?

Performing the surgery on Stark had been a relatively simple task. The housing for the electromagnet was smooth and solid, so Stark had actually been able to talk him through it. Angling his body so that the camera could not see the Arc Reactor going into his chest had been largely a symbolic gesture. The reactor was the first thing anyone noticed when they looked at Stark.

Another two days passed, and Stark continued to work day and night. At times, Yinsen wondered if he was always like this, or if it was the circumstances that made him so driven. After a while, Yinsen had stopped asking what he was doing, and after a longer while, stopped offering food.

At these times, he also wondered if Stark had created the Arc Reactor for no other reason than to give himself a personal headlight dead centre in his chest. Its glow was unending. The guards had inspected it thoroughly, and Stark had patiently explained that a Jericho missile was very complex, and would take longer than a car battery would give him.

Kid-Khan, rather than admit that he had no clue what the thing was, simply told Stark that his deadline had not changed, but at least he could work by his own nightlight now, and walked out.

Stark had paused to eat only twice, and Yinsen's role had changed from making sure the man lived, to making sure the man stayed alive. The Arc Reactor had needed a few adjustments with regards to its housing, lest it slip out when Stark leaned forward, and for all the attention that had to be focused on the shrapnel in his chest, Stark had been pretty close to the blast. Enough so that he had damage done to his body all over the place. With the exception of his liver, he was in good shape, but around day six his hands were shaking.

It had taken Yinsen a while to notice the effect it was having on Stark's blueprints, and another day to realize why.

Stark hadn't had a drink in almost two weeks...

Yinsen had no way to prescribe anything to help but nevertheless, the Detox had served to force Stark into accepting help.

And so it was that at the start of the second week in captivity; that Stark put both of them in the camera's blind spot and laid out the seven sheets of thin paper over each other. Each page had a design for various components, to which the untrained man would never be able to guess. It could be a missile. It could also be a washing machine.

But with the pages laid over one another, the pieces came together to demonstrate a complete
Yinsen's first thought was that it was a robot. But he looked a little closer and saw the controls, all of them internal.

Stark was building a suit of armor.

Yinsen considered it. Clearly the man was insane.

Then he looked again. The components were all diverse and confusing. Their watching captors would not understand what they were looking at until it was fully constructed, and Stark had the power source to make the thing move implanted in his chest for all to see. Their captors had already studied at and declared it safe to keep.

If they could make it, it could work.

"Not bad," Yinsen admitted.

It took another few weeks for the shakes and the nausea to pass. If Stark had learned anything about his life or his habits from the detox process it hadn't changed his personality or his plan at all.

But the weeks in question had not slowed the work.

Yinsen had never even made an attempt at metalworking. But surgeons learn things fast, especially things that required working with their hands, and he had taken up welders and pliers in place of scalpels and sutures.

Stark in the meantime took his mind off his body and its betrayals by focusing his energies on the larger aspects of the project. One did not need a steady hand to hammer iron in a forge, and Tony went to work on that.

The constant exercise sped the detox. Living off little food and water, sweating out over the fire, developing muscle with hammer and iron, the final product came together.

In separate components, of course.

Tony's first personal design was to rework the engine in his father's Hot Rod. His father had taught him all about the engine specs, and Tony knew in a heartbeat that he could make an engine that would work much better.

The magazines said his first engine was made at six, but personally, Tony didn't think that counted, since it was only for a soapbox derby car. His first real engine was for the Hot Rod.

He was just a kid at the time, barely eight years old, and was supposed to be working on getting thrown out of an exclusive private school in England. His father had shown him the car when he was on a brief vacation between semesters back home in New York. His father had taken off for a business trip, and Tony was meant to go back to school. But he couldn't let the thought go, as happened with supremely intelligent, good looking people, (or so he had told his dad) and he had spent weeks in the garage.

After a while, that arrangement was inefficient, so he dragged the couch into the garage and slept there. When he started the car for the first time, the engine had come to life with a roar, and then promptly exploded, coating everything in fumes and smoke. Horrified and expecting disaster, he
had spent hours trying to clean up, then another few hours trying to find a mechanic that could put the engine back the way it was, when he looked at the clock, and realized it was Four in the morning.

Then he looked at the TV, which had been set to CNN the whole time, and discovered that it was Thursday.

He had worked in the garage for almost a week, and hadn't stopped for anything but short naps when his vision started blurring, and food from the refrigerator, which was now empty.

Tony had spent another few hours debating phoning the school and making an excuse of some kind explaining why he hadn't shown up after break, and phoning his father, throwing himself on the mercy of the court.

His long and nerve-wracking ruminations, led him back to the engine, wondering what had gone wrong. He had taken the engine apart and made new filters from scratch completely, and it had blown up in his face, literally. But it was easier to think about the engine that what his father would say, and after a while Tony realized he was starving. Ordering food gave him another half hour to think it over, and he brought the takeout Chinese back to the garage. He was halfway through an order of sweet and sour shrimp when he suddenly realized what had gone wrong.

He had left the meal half eaten on the couch and ripped the destroyed motor out of the car with his bare hands and went straight back to work with an almost manic intensity.

The next time he noticed his surroundings, it was Saturday morning, and his father was looking at him in shock from the garage door.

Tony stammered out the whole story, and his father looked into the engine, got into the car, and started it up. It purred like a contented tiger, and his father waved him into the car. He had driven them to the nearest restaurant. Tony was starving. He got his first sip of champagne to celebrate; and then was promptly told that he was expelled from school. The next day his father had patented the new engine design in his only son's name.

This was the maniacal focus with which Tony had thrown himself into his new project.

Tony had almost forgotten the current circumstances. He had thrown himself into the simple process of completing the task, not even thinking of what would happen once it was actually finished. Working while hungry wasn't anything new. Working while filthy wasn't anything new.

"Stark, you need to eat."

"Not hungry, Pepper," Tony said over his shoulder, and then looked up, suddenly aware where he was.

Yinsen was looking at him in amusement. "We don't have any pepper. No salt either I'm afraid."

"Sorry," Tony smirked. "Thought you were someone else,"

"Eat," Yinsen said. "This is your doctor talking."

And, having further flashbacks to feisty arguments with a certain redhead he really missed, Stark gave in and set down his tools.

An hour later, Tony and Yinsen were hunched over a makeshift Backgammon board, using washers for pieces.
Tony had put his finely honed dice skill to use for the first time in months; and they came up 6 and 5.

Yinsen smirked despite himself. It wasn't the first time. "Good roll."

"Sheesho Besh," Stark said easily, glancing at his new friend. The phrase was one that Stark had picked up on a demonstration in Israel. It was Persian slang in backgammon attributing to a roll of 6 and 5. 'Sheesh' was '6' in Persian and "Besh" was '5' in Turkish.

Yinsen smiled wider. He got both references.

*He speaks a dozen languages, but not fluently. Enough to talk to displaced Middle Eastern patients.* Stark realized. "So where you actually from?"

Yinsen didn't look up from the game. "Small town called Gulmira."

Tony wondered briefly what his father would have thought of this. His dad had created the Arc Reactor, and now Tony had made another, in a cave no less. His father would be impressed by that. His mom had a strong sense of empathy. She was the one that had pressured his father to take up more humanitarian causes. She was the one that had come up with the School Refit program. She would have liked Yinsen.

"You got a family?" Stark asked without thinking, surprising himself.

Yinsen smiled "Yes, and I will see them when I leave here. And you, Stark?"

Tony Stark felt lonely suddenly. "No," He said quietly.

Yinsen actually had a look of pity on his face for the first time. "So you're a man who has everything, but nothing,"

And presented with the life he had now, Tony admitted that Yinsen was hitting closer to the bone than was comfortable.

For some reason, Pepper came to mind right then. He remembered last Christmas, Tony had sat at the head of the table for the office Christmas party, made a toast, and then ditched them all, disappearing back to his office with Pepper, Hogan, Stane and Rhodes. The little sub-party had lasted half the night with them exchanging anecdotes about each other. It was nice.

It was a sobering realization. He had millions of dollars; he ate in five star restaurants and drank sixty year old scotch, almost by the pint. But take them away, and he was eager for tepid ground water and Yinsen's goat-and-rat meat stew. He had a private plane, drove sports cars and classic Hot Rods. Take them away and put him here, he would have given his left arm for a horse and a ten minute head start. He slept with supermodels and actresses. Take that away and put him here, and he was glad to have Yinsen just to talk to...

His father had never flaunted his millions for his son. His mom had stressed that point with them. In fact, Tony could remember plenty of occasions when his dad would blow off work to work on some project that Tony had come up with.

Tony had a private workshop that almost rivaled the MIT Engineering department. Take that away and put him here, and he still threw himself into his work obsessively.

If he wanted it all back, he'd have to fight for it.
Watching two men do things that nobody could understand twenty four hours a day for three months was one of the most tedious things a soldier could think of.

And so it was that for the majority of that time, these four men who had been tasked with watching their prisoners movements, actually spent most of that time watching in rotation, and playing cards the rest of the time.

But a poker game was better with four players, and having the same four players over and over required as many interesting elements as possible.

"What're they doing?" One man asked after a while.

The one nearest the camera glanced at the screen. "Working."

And that was the end of the conversation till the door opened, and in strolled someone else.

The guards were watching the CCTV camera very intensely all of a sudden.

This new man came into the room, and looked at the screen with them. Stark had something wrapped around his foot. As he slowly tapped his foot up and down, a lever on the table followed the moments precisely.

Nobody quite knew what that had to do with building a missile, but it looked like the machine was under Stark's direct physical control.

The hatch on the door opened; and the command to prepare for their entry was shouted.

Stark and Yinsen had been ingrained to obey this one without thought. But inwardly, Stark seethed. He knew that testing the motion transistor was risky when the camera was there, but he and Yinsen had gotten away with more. Their sentries were clearly losing interest in their prisoners.

They had pushed it too far, as the door opened, and in marched more guards and guns than Stark had ever seen.

But what caught Stark's focus was that Khan was not standing in the lead, he was standing dead centre, looking as worried as the rest of them. Heads were going to roll today it seemed, and every flunky in the place was terrified it was going to be theirs.

Then a new man entered and the crowd parted for him. It was the one that Tony had noticed weeks before when they were soaking his head...the bald man with the humongous jeweled ring...

He stepped forward, in no particular hurry. Every eye followed him. Even the guards. Nobody thought for a second to tell him anything.

When he spoke English clearly, Tony was sure.

This was the man in charge. This was Raza.

"Relax," Raza said easily.

Raza slowly circled the cave, taking in everything. Unlike Kid-Khan, he didn't waste any effort pretending he knew what he was looking at; he merely went through the work in progress. He stopped at the plans, and picked up the pages, flipping through them. If he had held them a little tighter he would have seen the suit design.
Tony didn't move, but sent a glimpse over at Yinsen, who was typically unflappable.

Raza spoke again, calm and collected. "Once, a bow and arrow was the pinnacle of weapons technology," He said. "It allowed Genghis Khan to rule everything from the pacific to the Ukraine. An empire four times the size of Alexander the great. More than twice the empire of Rome," He turned back to the prisoners. "But now, anyone who owns Stark Industries latest weapon will rule," His half-smirk was very pointed. "As it will soon be mine."

And then Raza turned to Yinsen. "What is he making?"

Yinsen didn't flinch. "A Jericho Missile. It's taking some time. It is very complex."

Raza took measure of the doctor, and glanced at two of his guards, who grabbed Yinsen and shoved him skull first into one of the workbenches.

"What's going on? What's happening here?" Tony could hear the worry in his voice and he hated it. He felt like he was back in that convoy watching Jimmy get killed right in front of him.

Raza had gone over to their furnace and reached in with the blacksmith tongs, pulling out a small round coal.

The two of them spoke in a language that Tony couldn't place...Arabic maybe? Mongolian?

"Open your mouth." Raza told Yinsen, who refused.

Raza brought the coal closer. "What is he building?"

"A Jericho missile." Yinsen maintained.

"What is he building?" Raza repeated harshly.

"A Jericho missile." Yinsen maintained.

"WHAT IS HE BUILDING?" Raza suddenly screamed.

Yinsen jumped. "A Jericho Missile!"

They weren't speaking English, and it was driving Tony mad, not knowing what was being said. Raza was playing this perfectly, trying to separate the two fellow prisoners without even putting them in different rooms, trying to goad Tony into snapping and revealing something.

Talking in different languages didn't cinch it. The hot coal inching toward Yinsen's face did.

"What do you want?! A Delivery date?!" Tony yelled and took a step forward. Every guard pointed a gun, except for Kid-Khan, who held out a hand. They all shouted warnings; worried that if he acted out of turn they were going to get the blame.

Tony froze. Raza had stopped moving the coal forward.

"I need him." Stark said finally.

Raza and Stark were staring at each other.

"He's a good assistant." Stark volunteered finally.

Raza believed that and gestured to his men. Yinsen was released.
But the warlord was not mollified. "You have until tomorrow to finish my missile."

And everyone stormed out.

Left alone, Yinsen and Stark traded a look. They did not speak. They didn't have to. Jig's up. Time to get out of here.

There were very few sections of the suit that could not be pre-prepared, until final assembly. The head piece was one of them.

Obadiah Stane was fond of saying that the weapons trade was one of the oldest and most innovative in the business, it had been creating new things since the days of Agincourt.

But now, removed from his home and taken back to the options of cave tech, Stark was left to the most basic and honest methods of weapons manufacture for three hundred years. Blacksmithing.

His arms and shoulders had become heavily muscled from the hard labor in this place. Two men trying to do the work of twelve. He brought the heavy hammer up, over his shoulder, and down hard against the Iron. Over and over.

CLANG!

The lump of Iron was becoming real, becoming new. The metal was smelted and every impurity burned off, till the result was stronger, cleaner, harder, and under Tony's hands, it was given form.

CLANG!

Looking down at the iron as it formed, Tony caught a reflection of himself in the water bucket. Three months in this place and his shoulders had broadened from the labor; the sweat pasted his hair down, and his face gave a look of absolute calm. Every distraction had been burned away, every flaw in habit and unnecessary affectation had been beaten out of him, and pure efficient serenity was left.

CLANG!

If a new prisoner had been thrown in here, sobbing from fear, Tony would have been able to whistle a tune from the irony alone.

Like Yinsen. Like the iron.

CLANG!

The metal had every flaw, every dent, and every impurity beaten out of it, burned away to nothing, forged in a white hot flame.

Tony smirked and smashed the mask into the water bucket. A cloud of steam rose from the surface.

A moment later he pulled the tongs out and brought the mask over to Yinsen, placing it before him.

An iron face gazed up at the doctor from the table.

Raza came in and looked hard at the screen, scattering the card game again.
Yinsen did not care about his men being derelict too much. Giving the American a deadline had forced both his hand and his prisoners'. If Stark had been building the missile this whole time as he claimed, then he would be working feverishly to meet the deadline. If he had been wasting time, or trying to deceive his captors, then this would be his moment to take a chance and try escape.

And yet his men were not smart enough to realize that on their own; and increase their vigilance.

On the screen, Yinsen was clearly visible. A large piece of equipment was mounted on an upright framework, with a large metal shape, and several other metal shapes nearby. Yinsen was fitting one piece into another.

In fact, it looked like the missile was being constructed in entirety at last; except for one thing.

"Where is Stark?"

The four guards all studied the screen and agreed that their leader was indeed correct. Stark was not visible on the screen.

Raza sighed. Terrified underlings never showed any initiative. "Well, go and look!"

Stark was in the metal framework, suspended upright as Yinsen put together all the connections for him, putting the suit together around the pilot. The boots and leggings were already on, and the chest piece went next, now that the iron supports were on. The welded sections met in a hollow circle around the centre, and the Arc Reactor glowed in it.

Stark couldn't move. The suit was a hundred pounds of welded together iron until it had power.

"Say it again." Yinsen commanded him; like a coach making sure his star quarterback knew the play.

"Thirty Five feet to the central corridor." Tony recited. "Turn left; forty feet to the entrance. Remember, you stay behind the checkpoints till I clear it out."

The hatch on the door slid open loudly, and orders were shouted in.

"Answer them." Stark whispered quickly. "Stall."

"They're speaking Hungarian!" Yinsen hissed. "I can't speak the..."

"Give them something!" Stark hissed back.

Yinsen yelled out something, but the look on his face made it clear that it wasn't going to get them much.

And it didn't. A second later, the hatch closed and someone tried to open the door.

The door opened, and the propane tanks from the welders' equipment, and the trigger line attached to the nozzle were opened with it.

The explosion blew the door and everything on the far side of it. Everything down that hallway for about fifteen feet was immediately caught in a blast of flame.

Yinsen raised his head from where he had taken cover behind Stark's new metal body, and kept working, attaching the leads to the Arc Reactor, and he fitted the arms to the torso section.
The plan had turned to dust in Tony Stark's hand. Raza's men had tried to force the door too soon.

"Start the power-up sequence." Stark ordered, trying to keep the game plan moving.

Yinsen rushed to the laptop computer. "Tell me how!"

"Ctrl-I to Ctrl-Enter!" Stark ordered, and Yinsen's nimble fingers started tapping out the keys quickly. "Tell me when you see progress bars!"

Yinsen was sending worried glances down the now visible corridor. Voices were floating in toward them. "They're coming…"

"Tell me when you see progress bars. There should be one!"

"They're coming…" Yinsen stepped back from the screen so that Stark could see. The power readouts were scrolling on the screen. Very slowly.

There was noise. Footsteps, yelling, guns being loaded.

"We need more time!" Yinsen hissed.

Tony saw where the man's mind was going and shook his head fiercely. "We've got a plan. Stick to the plan!"

Yinsen picked up the rifle. "I'm gonna go buy you some time."

"Yinsen! No, what are you doing?!!"

The older man had seen more guards coming and fired a burst of gunfire over their heads.

Stark seethed. The plan been tossed already. He strained to see the Laptop screen. 54 Percent and rising slowly.

*Come on! He urged the machine. Come on!*

Yinsen had snatched up the nearest rifle and fired a burst just above their captors. He was under no illusions as to what was coming. He was no soldier, and he was vastly outnumbered. Add to that the fact that he wasn't even firing at his opponents, but rather over their heads, driving them away from Stark and his weapon.

Not used to having someone shooting back at them in these caves, put on the defensive by the explosives at the door, the two guards were content to run for it.

The chase went on through the entire main corridor, with Yinsen blasting the air after them, howling like a lunatic. Until at last they entered the chamber which led to the outside, and the guards posted there.

Over ten of them. Including Raza.

Yinsen could have fired and killed a few.

But Yinsen was not a killer.

Tony heard the gunfire and felt his stomach leap into his throat. Idly, he wondered how it got past
the metal tube next to his heart.

The progress bar finally reached the end of its loading cycle.

His suit was powered up.

The lights went dim before dying in respect. The rules of the game had changed completely.

Gears worked, circuits sparked...

And Tony Stark stepped down from the harness, raised a massive arm over his head and pulled down the faceplate. An Iron Knight; ready for war.

With one of the two prisoners dead, five of the guards went charging back toward the last room in the cave to finish the off other one.

The sudden drop in lighting worried them. This last prisoner was Tony Stark, tools of death and destruction was his trade, and he had already slain three of them. Who knew what booby-traps he might have worked up?

One of the guards had realized this, and sent the other four ahead of him as the stone walls around them became dark and scorched.

Once they got to the door, they paused. There was no sign of him. It was entirely possible that Stark had been killed by his own booby-trap on the door.

One man, closest to the door, inched his way in.

He came to the worktable. The machinery parts had been taken away. He edged around it. There was no sign of a body. He made his way past the forge, toward the living space, further from the camera. There was the sound of machinery, and something swung into his midsection with enough force to explode his ribcage and send him flying across the room.

The other four had seen their scout hurled across the doorway and opened fire in unison, filling the room with bullets.

The shooting stopped. Silence.

Then there was movement.

It was a heavy metallic thud.

A second thud. Closer to the doorway.

The guards glanced at each other.

A third thud, they were coming faster, and it suddenly became clear to them all what it sounded like.

Footsteps.

And out came a monster.

It was not a man. It was machine.
It was a huge figure, built like a linebacker, seemingly carved out of grey metal. It was humanoid, its head seemed strangely small on its shoulders but it had an unmistakable form. Two eyes, mouth, invisible inside, completely inscrutable. At the centre of it's chest glowed a fierce white light.

For a frozen beat, everyone in the tunnel just stared at it. Had Stark built a robot?

Gears whirred, pneumatics hissed, and a huge metal arm came up, and slugged the nearest guard, very nearly folding him in half.

The sight of one of their own being knocked down hard, spurred the others into action. Six AK-47's lifted, pointed at him, and fired.

It took the sound of gunfire, the flares of the muzzle-flashes to even make the Iron Man aware he was under attack.

Three steps, and another guard was knocked halfway through the stone wall. Another two steps; slow but balanced.

The guards were still firing, backing away as the Iron Man's steps came faster, till it was marching toward them purposefully.

They finally broke and ran, rushing down the hallway to the cross corridor, slamming the interior steel plated doors shut.

One of the four didn't make it through.

He hit the closed door and started screaming to be let out at the iron behemoth moved in on him.

On the other side of the door, the three survivors had regrouped, taking up positions against the walls, guns ready, as the one that didn't make it screamed for help.

Then there was a metallic cruch and there was silence.

The three of them were breathing hard, gripping their rifles desperately.

WHAM!

Everyone jumped. Something hit the door hard enough to actually bend the plate metal out.

WHAM!

A second hit, the door frame was starting to break.

Surprise wore off, terror took over.

WHA-RUNCH!

And the Iron Man was charging them again.

The guards opened fire. Sparks flew off the impenetrable skin.

The first two dropped almost instantly. The third knew that running was a temporary escape and moved in close, too close to reach with the Iron fists.

The Iron Man took a step back to get room and swung. Nothing. He jerked hard, and nothing
happened. He had to turn half his upper body to see. His arm was caught in the stone wall. He had swung too hard and dug himself into the stone.

The attacker saw his opening, drew his handgun, and pointed it pointblank at the metal head.

The gun went off, and ricochet, straight back at the shooter, cutting him down.

Stark hadn't felt so charged in years. The suit worked perfectly. Even as he moved he felt the razor sharp instincts coming to bear! Engrained responses that made him one of the most sought after designers and engineers in the business were quickly giving their attention to this perfect merge of intellect given form.

*Reaction times too slow.* Stark noted. *Plating is strong, but heavy. Visual range far too small.*

Even as he pulled his arm free of the wall, he was already redesigning the suit, making modifications, drawing blueprints.

There was daylight up ahead...and a body on the ground. "YINSEN!" Stark yelled.

Impossibly, the old man was alive, and looking at Stark, and the corridor to daylight behind him. "Look out!" he shouted hoarsely.

The Iron Man spun and saw Raza himself, with a RPG launcher aiming at him.

The grenade screamed toward him, and Iron Man threw himself to the left.

Inside, Stark reflected ruefully. *Threw* is not the correct term.

But it was enough. The grenade flew past his head and into the tunnel, where it exploded, spraying debris everywhere.

*You keep saving my life Yinsen.* Tony reflected, and hit a button on the inside of his wrist guard. As much as he would have loved a suit-of-armor glove, he had to settle for the thick leather gloves for dexterity and longer wrist guards for protection. A small missile ignited on Tony's forearm, and whistled toward Raza. He missed by about two feet, but the explosion was enough to clear the entrance to the outside, and knock Raza down. The entire left side of his face was shredded.

Tony checked. He couldnt tell if Raza was breathing. Bending down would probably topple him permanently...

Yinsen was the priority now. Stark would have liked to finish Raza for sure, but with his friend wounded, the math had changed. He flipped up the facemask and stepped over to Yinsen.

Yinsen was still breathing. Tony clung to that, trying to make the older man focus. "We gotta go. Come on, move with me," Yinsen didn't so much as lift an arm. "We got a plan, and we're going to stick to it." It was already over and Stark knew it...they were still surrounded by enemies. The suit didn't make Stark fast, and wouldn't protect Yinsen while moving...and there were still bad guys around...

Yinsen knew it too. "This was always the plan, Stark."

Tony ordered him to move, frantically. "Come on, you're going to go see your family again."

Yinsen had a look so serene that Tony nearly broke. "My family's dead," He whispered, weaker. "I'm going to see them now, Stark. It's O.K. I want this."
Tony racked his brain, finding the right words to stop the inevitable; but they just wouldn't come. Finally, he settled on honesty. "Thank you for saving my life."

Yinsen smiled. "Don't waste it."

Tony wanted to say something else, wanting to stretch the moment before the inevitable end.

But after a few moments, it was too late to try.

Yinsen was dead.

Tony Stark never cried. It wasn't out of any macho desire to seem strong; it just wasn't in his nature. But at this moment, he wished he it was. This moment sent him cold. It was like he felt when his parents died. After getting captured by these people, after being saved by one man, after three months in a cave, after fighting his way past more than a dozen of them...and Yinsen still died, killed by a Stark Industries weapon. Tony wanted nothing more than to break down in tears at that moment from the shame.

Tony could hear movement outside. Weapons being loaded, things being dragged around, orders being shouted angrily back and forth...

Shame was strong. Grief was stronger. Rage was Pure Iron.

Tony shut the face plate. His world went darker again. He stalked past Raza's motionless body, and the gaping hole he had ripped in the rock.

*Targeting sensors.* Tony made a mental note. *So I don't miss next time.*

The Iron Man stalked out of the mouth of the cave with calm deliberate steps. The glowing centre to his chest was muted by the sudden glare of daylight.

The last of the soldiers were surrounding the entrance in a semi-circle, hiding behind solid cover. They all opened fire at him.

The bullets slammed into the mask, the chest plate, his waist. Hammer blows that rang out like a hammer to a steel drum, hundreds of them.

The fusillade ceased finally, and within his mask, Tony Stark gave a cold grin. "My turn."

Iron Man returned fire. Literally. Great gouts of flame burst from his hands, casting fire down on all of them. He targeted the fuel drums, conveniently placed next to vehicles. He targeted the sandbags, with the ammo feeds leading into the machinegun emplacements.

And then he walked forward.

The soldiers that he'd missed backed away quickly, trying to reload their toy weapons.

Stark let them go. He was after a different target.

Everywhere he looked, he saw his own name staring back at him. His name written on the weapons, piled high in easy reach.

Iron Man lifted his flamethrowers and annihilated it all.

The fire was quick to catch and a massive explosion consumed it all.
Stark embraced the flames from within his armor, almost hoping it would end him. Justice had a funny sense of humor that way. *To Peace!* he toasted.

But the flames spread, circling him; and he survived within his tank.

More of the terrorists had found hiding places, and started shooting again. The small arms still did nothing, but Kid-Khan still lived, and made his way to the ridge. He was sitting at the controls of a very old mounted gun. Tony hadn't seen it before, couldn't get much more information now; but the barrel was huge, and mounted on a pivot that allowed the man to aim it down at Stark.

He opened fire and Stark could hear it through his armor, over the flames, over his own gear, over the screaming bad guys...

A millisecond later he could feel his armor starting to break, the welds were holding, the metal itself was starting to crack under the barrage.

*What the hell...is that an AA Gun?* Stark thought in disbelief.

Off to his left, someone had reloaded a rifle and flanked him, opening fire again. One of the bullets must have hit a pneumatic hose of control cable, because suddenly Tony couldn't stand.

Stark was dying inside from the heat of his own flames, he could feel his gloves melting, his chest was killing him, his head was pounding from the noise, he was down on one knee...but he did not falter from his purpose. He kept torching the weapons stores.

More explosions, more fire, more heat, but finally, he did not see his name staring back at him any more.

His captors could see him weakening and pressed the advantage. So desperate were they to cut him down, they ignored the flames catching on some of the larger weapon crates.

Driven down under the brutal assault, Tony Stark forced to play his last card. He got his feet under him, and flipped the switch hidden under his left wrist plate.

His legs felt like sledgehammers were hitting him, but from his iron boots came a terrific thrust, kicking him up.

The boots jets were made from leftover munitions, which were provided by their captors, but had the explosive charges removed. Tony had intended them as a last ditch defensive move in case he tripped and needed to be able to move fast in any direction.

He had wondered if it would give him an escape route, but had resolved never to test the theory, as it would leave Yinsen trapped and helpless.

Yinsen was dead, Tony was getting cooked alive in his suit and the fire was catching on things that frankly didn't react well to extreme temperatures and blunt force. He fired the jets for no other reason that having nothing left to lose.

But somehow, it was working!

A massive eruption of pyrotechnic death rattled Tony's jaw and overloaded his eardrums, and consumed everything.

But out of the mushroom cloud came a manned missile. A humanoid shape that trailed fire from its feet powered up into the air.
Inside, Tony Stark marveled. It was beautiful up here...

The suit jets weren't really meant to repel gravity for long though, and finally his boots ran out of power.

In a parabolic arc, drawn in smoke with such perfection that the Maestro would have admired it, the Iron Man fell.

Tony yelled in horror as he fell headfirst toward a sand-dune.

Luck was with him yet again, and the sand dune was soft enough to shatter under the weight of his armored head and body, and Tony found himself buried in the sand.

Tony came back to himself a few minutes later. After so many weeks in the caves, he was blind in the sun as it beat down on him.

But he was not confused or disoriented; he knew automatically where he was. The few seconds of flight had filled his dream. "Not bad."

The armor was torn up pretty badly. He wasn't hit, but there were breaches all over the surface. He was able to slip his hands out of gloves and free himself from his armor.

He was free.

He felt like laughing. Had Yinsen been there he would have.

He had fought his way past his guards, destroyed their weapons, cut down their soldiers, and escaped without pursuit.

Pursuit. He looked back the way he had flown/fallen, and was able to find the camp fairly easily; there was a mushroom cloud of smoke and fire rising from the rock behind him. Stark calculated that he had traveled about a mile.

Raza had probably survived. If he escaped the explosion and the fire he wasn't that badly hurt. If he had a transport, or for that matter a horse somewhere that hadn't burned, which he probably did, Stark might have company soon. The suit jets had left a contrail behind them. Raza wouldn't have any trouble tracking his direction.

There had been no wind when he was flying in the sky, so the smoke would linger.

The thought stopped Tony dead. 'When he was flying in the sky.'

He had built, not a graceful thing of the air perhaps, but it flew, and it took him along, and he survived the return to ground level. No wings, no wheels...

No control. Have to make some upgrades. Get moving, Tony!

Stark stood up and started hiking. Survivors were supposed to travel by night in the desert, but Raza wasn't likely to give him that long.

The distance he had flown surprised him. A clean arc up and down, he had covered the distance faster than he would have thought possible.

He wrapped the blacksmith jacket around his head to keep the pounding sun off, and started walking.
He didn't know how long he had been walking when his vision swam. It was inevitable. He had no water, he had been knocked over the head about thirty times, he was hiking in the desert without any protective gear, and the sun was pounding his head like a massive drumbeat.

*To go through all that, go to all that work, and now at the last to die of thirst?*

Tony knew he had to keep moving. Traveling in the desert had brought him such good results lately. He fought to keep his mind clear. Dehydration was blurring his vision, making his throat dry, making his head pound...But his head was clear.

So why was he still hearing their voices?

"I've seen a lot of wounds like that."

"What do you say to your other nickname, The Merchant of Death?"

"You are a man with everything and nothing."

"Don't waste your life."

*Oh my God.* Stark thought, the realization making him finally lucid again.

*The only thing you ever built to save life was to save your own. And you killed twenty people doing it.*

*Not again.* Stark told himself. *Done now. No more shrapnel into hearts, no more flamethrower fire consuming people, no more Merchant of Death.*

"I've seen a lot of wounds like that," Yinsen had said.


*Blood money Stark! Blood money and you drank it down.*

How had he not seen this happening? How had he not known where those weapons were ending up?

*But then, your father taught you that too, didn't he?*

When Tony was nine years old, he went with his parents on a business trip to Osaka, Japan. His father had left his mother and him with the hotel room. The TV held no interest. The only channels in English were the ones he had at home. The food and the clothes fascinated his mother. The buildings and the streets fascinated him. There was nothing built with slide doors and paper walls in California. It was where he had gotten the original idea for making the walls in his room polarized. Two days later, with the business completed, his father came back and took his family on a wide ranging tour of the country. Tony had never seen anything like Japan before.

Then, a tour group was leaving the Tokyo markets while The Starks were there. One of them said, loud enough to be overheard, that they were going to Hiroshima. They detailed some of the attractions there, including the war memorial, from the site of the first atomic blast.

Tony had asked his parents if they could go too.

It was the only time he had ever known his father to say 'no' without explaining why, or his mother to yell at her son when pressed for details.
It took a full year for Tony to realize why.

Dad, he wept silently as sand filled his eyes. You didn't want me to see.

Weapons were needed. Keep the peace; stop the world from falling into chaos. Tony knew all the reasons. Two Nukes ended the bloodiest war in history in an hour. Two shots; with a weapon his father had helped to make. Tony had argued all the reasons. Even now he believed them. I prefer the weapon you only need to fire once. That's the way dad did it.

Carry a bigger stick than the other guy. Tony thought. I know dad, I believe it. But Raza stole the sticks we made and used them to kill my friend.


Like those soldiers in your convoy. Nobody mentions them, I'll bet. Just because they died trying to protect you. Just like Yinsen.

Those bullets had come straight through the Humvee. Stark manufactured Armor piercing rounds.

Tony had watched footage of the London blitz. Thousands of bombs dropped, massive devastation and more often that not hundreds of civilian casualties. And even then they were known to miss their targets. Stark Industries had changed all that. Weapons were his father's trade. Weapons exports were the family business, and Tony had taken up the trade his father had left. But Tony had re-invented it. The weapons Tony Stark had built were clean, were focused and precise. War had become a precision business thanks to him. Less than fifty years ago, innocent bystanders were half the casualties. Now, a single civilian hit made the news.

Unless it happened here.

The only things of substance you have created are better guns. Even Yinsen picked up a gun with a Stark Industries logo on it. Yinsen! Yinsen picked up a gun and got himself killed protecting you!

You're not a weapon designer, you're a Death Dealer. You, Obadiah and the Grim Reaper sitting around the card table discussing exports and shipping schedules. But you were spared. You were spared by the blood of people you knew ten minutes, people who treated you far better, and people like Yinsen.

And why had that been enough? Because Raza wanted him to build a missile. Another weapon. A bigger stick that you only needed to fire once. That was his only worth to the world. To his country, his friends, his enemies even. To be a Killing Machine Maker.

Tony had to stop when that thought hit him. The final revelation. And it'll be fresh on your mind when you get to Hell. Was that why? To kill Raza's men? Then to die of thirst at last? Have you survived this long only so you could see what your life hath brought?

Why couldn't your weapons kill you too, Tony? The symmetry would be perfect. The irony would be a tale of justice straight from an old Greek Tragedy. The 21st century Frankenstein story. The mad inventor; slain by his creations.

Why aren't you dead, Tony?

Sounds. Tony couldn't even see straight. The sand was too thick between his eyelids. He tried to blink. Too dry. His eyes actually hurt from the feel of his dry eyelids dragging over them.
The wind was picking up at last, blasting more sand at him.

And finally, Tony could bring enough willpower to focus his vision.

*Helicopter.*

It was a helicopter. It wasn't Raza coming after him. It was a helicopter.

But it wasn't coming for him, it was following the contrails. It was heading directly for the cloud of smoke hanging gently in the distance.

He raised his hands over his head with a strength he wasn't aware he had. "HEY! Down Here!"

The helicopter went straight past him.

But the helicopter was being followed by Humvees.

And they were all carrying American Flags.

The first Humvee slowed down.

Slowing down. It was slowing down. It had seen him. Tony dropped to his knees in disbelief.

And the first set of boots out of the Humvee belonged to a familiar face.

Jim Rhodes himself, weapon in hand and outfitted for war came charging from the vehicle, to his side. The relief on his face was palpable. "So how was the 'Fun-vee'?" Rhodes quipped.

Tony collapsed.

"What do you say to your other nickname, The Merchant of Death?"

Tony didn't even remember her name, but he answered her silently at last. *I say, that those sales made my fortune. Those sales made capital. I say, that all these things I have made, all the things that have benefitted people, things that feed the hungry and heal the sick were financed by weapons. I say, that I was able to look the other way once, and now, I can not. I say, that the money served its purpose, and selling these weapons, brought me here.*

Rhodey was giving his friend a hug, relieved beyond measure to see him safe. A moment later he was barking orders, commanding someone to bring him water, someone else to bring blankets, a third to bring a gurney. Stark didn't speak.

"What the Hell is this thing in his chest?" Someone asked.

"I don't know, but it doesn't look like a bomb."

"We can't take him in the chopper with something like this."

"Why not?"

"Might blow up."

"Tony? Can you hear me? If that thing in your chest is safe to move, squeeze my hand."

Tony did so weakly.

"We're taking off," Rhodey's voice snapped with no room for argument.
"Sir-

"We're taking off. Have the Medic's standing by at the forward base camp, and have the airlift standing by on the pad too. Give me that canteen."

When the helicopter came into land, and Rhodes started pouring sips of water into his dying throat, he accepted the fact. He was going to live.

_I say, when a man like Yinsen had to turn to a gun for the sake of your life, you damn well better leave something better than a body count in return._

And as the helicopter lifted, Tony swore he would.

"Does that radio have Sat-Phone hookup? Give it to me. I've got a call to make to the States."

"Now?"

"Right now," Rhodes voice actually sounded nervous.

Tony finally managed to smile. _Pepper gave you Hell didn't she?_

Pepper had found out about the attack on the convoy when Rhodes had led five federal agents into Tony's office without so much as a call. The FBI had gone right to work on the phones, preparing to trace any incoming phone calls. Rhodes had taken her aside and explained that her boss had been kidnapped.

Pepper was about ready to tear him down to his clusters in outrage at the failure to keep him safe. Rhodes had matched her reaction with icy calm, focusing her on what was needed. They were expecting a ransom demand, and Pepper suddenly cooled her jets, focused again.

Ready as she could be, Pepper waited with them for the call, cool as a cucumber. She was fully prepared to offer herself in Stark's place, planning to bring along a baseball bat she could personally beat all the kidnappers to death with. It had taken her a full two minutes to realize that she had gone a little insane and make herself sit down to talk to the FBI agents that Rhodes had brought. A brief conference with them about the nature of the people they would likely be dealing with, the sort of demands they might make, and what her job would be when the call came in.

At exactly the wrong moment, the editor of _Vanity Fair_ had called, asking if they could try rescheduling Tony's interview, as their star reporter Christine Everheart had apparently 'misplaced her copy of the transcript' and needed to be able to check her facts.

Pepper had been expecting ransom demands, and had politely told him that his star reporter had not taken any notes as far as she knew, and went on to describe some of Everheart's birthmarks and freckles in detail so he could _personally_ double-check the facts for the article with her, and calmly hung up on him.

Rhodes and the FBI agents had stared at her with their jaws hanging open.

Pepper had merely nodded professionally to the FBI Agent. "You won't need to trace that call."

But the ransom demand never came, and after a while, the FBI had left.

A day later the CIA appeared at the office, and had taken Tony's laptop apart for clues. Not long after, she had taken them to Tony's home and let them in with her key. Jarvis had nearly blown a
fuse.

But the computers and phones gave them nothing useful, and they had left, warning Pepper that any contact from the kidnappers was likely to come to the house and not the office. Pepper had seen the logic of this, and essentially moved into Tony's house, sleeping on his couch so that she wouldn't miss the call if it came.

The silence was one of the scariest things that Pepper had ever experienced.

It had taken all of a week for word to leak out that Tony was kidnapped. It wasn't odd for him to disappear without warning for a few days, but one of the fallen soldiers had apparently called home before getting into the Humvee, and mentioned who the passenger was. Once that happened, Pepper had stopped posing as Tony Stark's personal assistant, and accepted her place as a full-fledged ringmaster at the most expensive three-ring circus ever conceived.

After three hours of unconfirmed news reports, Stane had come to see her at Tony's home, since she hadn't been in at the office, demanding details, and promising to help. And he had. The Press were informed quickly at a hastily arranged Press conference, and board and the stock market were beaten into submission soon after. Pepper was still left with the press after the conference and a few less than scrupulous bankers trying to assume control of his estate and private accounts had to be dealt with.

Since then, she had spent the last three months holding everyone away from Tony's house, his job, his possessions, his money and in the case of one reporter who quickly regretted it, his garbage; with a whip and a chair.

In every spare second left to her she had been on the phone to Rhodes demanding updates. There had been nothing for weeks. The military wouldn't give her anything since it was an active investigation into a hit on a US Military convoy in a hot-zone.

Another few weeks and people started sending condolence baskets.

Realizing that the world had written him off for dead, Pepper went back to the office for the first time and found Stane working hard in Tony's office. She had all but thrown him out; and grabbed the phone. The military wouldn't tell her anything since she wasn't a relative. One Major in particular made it clear that even if that wasn't the case, a 'sweet little girl like you shouldn't get so worked up over a man, and don't worry your pretty head about it, you can leave war to the professionals.' Pepper had responded by calling a Senator that Tony knew on the Armed Force Services Committee, and had the Major in question transferred to an Arctic Research base.

His replacement was an old friend of Rhodes and Pepper had personally gone to him for help making this one talk. Rhodes had also tried to give her the runaround, for reasons of procedure and chain-of-command regarding sharing that kind of information with civilians. Pepper had merely waited, staring at him silently. Twenty minutes later she had been fully informed on the investigation.

After all that effort, there was very little information anyway. Tony had been snatched. But they only knew that because there was no sign of his body. The rest of the convoy was all dead, from very professional weapons, the kind that you didn't typically find from the local warlords and terror groups.

The investigation had been shifted to include Mercenary groups and the local government teams. The military had moved swiftly to cut off any ways they could have snuck him out of the country, but there was a lot of dangerous territory to search. It wasn't like having a national park searched
for a missing man, or even a manhunt by the FBI. Any search team that kicked in a door could be gunned down, and a soldier gunned down could tip off a bloody retaliation elsewhere.

After getting the sobering revelation that nobody had a clue where to look, Pepper was ready to kill someone.

Right on time, Happy had let himself into Tony's office and essentially ordered her to go home and get some sleep. She had managed to unload the entire buildup of frustration on him in the space of four minutes, and he took it on the chin without backing down or retaliating, until Pepper finally exhausted herself.

Conceding defeat, she had let Hogan drive her home, and she was stunned to discover that the apartment was clean, her messages were collected and organized, there was food in the fridge, and freshly brewed coffee in the coffee machine.

She had given Happy a hug in gratitude; which he had eagerly accepted.

After sleeping for almost twenty hours, Pepper had gotten back onto the phone to give Rhodes another earful about keeping up the search; only to find that Rhodes had taken a leave of absence from the Air Force.

It had taken Pepper a full hour to find out why. Rhodes had gone back to Afghanistan.

A few days later there was an Email from Rhodes, explaining to Pepper that he was asking questions and shaking down informants personally. He had found two names. One man, one group. The email asked Pepper to start a search for a group named 'The Ten Rings', led by a man named 'Raza'.

Pepper had passed that to the military, and the DOD contacted her the next day, and had told her that it was a known group, but their whereabouts were a mystery at the time.

Another two weeks, and Rhodes had called her collect from somewhere, and told her to get him a strike team organized in the time it took him to get back to base.

It had taken some work; but Pepper had incriminating details on enough Generals from Tony's distinguished career in weapons exports to shame them into giving Rhodes enough men for whatever he needed.

The next morning Rhodes had called in. Tony Stark was alive, and he was safe.

Pepper had thanked him endlessly, promised him a few things she probably shouldn't have, and called Stane and Happy.

Two days later, the phone had rung again. Tony had answered the endless stream of questions from the military and intelligence committees; refused further treatment, refused physical therapy, and chartered a flight back to the United States without telling anyone.

Rhodes had made sure she was somewhere private and had described the Arc Reactor to her and what it did. The fact that Tony was keeping some details of his escape and captivity private had some people worried, so Rhodes commissioned her to keep an eye out for certain signs of PTSD, and other reactions to this kind of experience. Pepper got all this and understood, but focused on what it meant. Rhodes was bringing her Tony home within the day.

She ran downstairs to the street outside her apartment, where Happy was dozing in the car. She had woken him up, kissed him square on the mouth and told him the news. Hogan had taken her
straight to the airport right then. Pepper had contacted Stane from the car, and told him to hold off on telling anyone for a while. From the sounds of it, Tony had been through hell, and Pepper wasn't about to let the press at him as soon as he stepped off the plane.

Stane had agreed, and the press had been told that any statement would be made, not from the airport, but from the Stark Industries headquarters.

The C130 that carried the battered Tony Stark home landed without incident.

When the cargo hatch lowered and the two men were visible, it looked like Tony was shoving the wheelchair away. Rhodes gave in on that, but helped Tony down the ramp to the tarmac.

Pepper was surprised. To hear Rhodes describe him, Pepper was expecting him to be hunched over in a wheelchair, drooling on his shirt. But he was wearing a pressed shirt and tie; his suit coat covered the arm brace he wore in a sling. His face was bruised up and he had open cuts in numerous places.

He was walking with his head held high, moving straight for Pepper. His shoulders seemed broader and his arms more muscled than she remembered. They must have put him to work. He was thinner too, his face more angular. They hadn't fed him well.

But those things were transitory, those changes were expected. Pepper realized something was truly different. After a moment, she figured it out. His eyes. Her aloof uninterested boss was full of barely restrained energy, and had pure iron behind his eyes.

But despite the proud defiance he tried to keep on his face, and the open scorn he had when he waved away the gurney and the ambulance alike, Rhodes was clearly half-carrying the man down the ramp to the tarmac. Once he was on solid ground he waved Rhodes away too and walked slowly to Pepper.

"Your eyes are red," He observed. "Few tears for your long lost boss?"

Pepper was consciously stopping herself from either bursting into tears or throwing her arms around him. "Tears of joy," She covered professionally. "I hate job hunting."

"Yeah. Vacation's over."

Pepper reacted. She had just served him a straight line, and he hadn't pounced. He was heading for the car.

Hogan was holding the door open for him. "Welcome back, sir."

Stark gave his old friend a look that spoke volumes and got in; Pepper right behind him.

Once inside the car, everyone relaxed a degree. "Where to?" Happy called from the front seat.

"Hogan, please take us to the hospital..."

"No," Stark said firmly.

Pepper relaxed and tensed simultaneously. This was to be expected. "Tony, you have to go to the hospital, a doctor has to take a look at you."

"Pepper, I've just been in captivity for three months. I want two things." He looked Pepper over. "One, I want an American cheeseburger, and two-"
"Yeah, you can just stop right there," Pepper held up a hand. "That's not going to happen."

"Not what you think. I was going to say: And a Press Conference."

Pepper blinked. That was a surprise. "A Press...what on earth for?"


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Happy had taken them to a Burger King, and then straight to Stark Industries. Pepper had warned him that Stane had announced his return, and Tony was pleased with that because it meant the press was already there.

Pepper had called quickly while Tony was ordering some cheeseburgers. Stane was as stunned as she was to learn he was coming straight to the office, but promised to have things ready when they got there.

And sure enough, with the first of three burgers gone, and the Industrial Plant just ahead, Pepper could see the crowd of employees gathered at the entrance, Obadiah Stane leading the parade on his Segway, front and centre. The incongruous image of a man in a three-piece suit with a bald head and a huge bushy beard standing atop a geek's dream scooter was easy to pick out.

Hogan brought the car to a halt as the crowd started applauding, and Stane hopped off the Segway and spread his hand wide jovially. "You see this?" He shouted to everyone in earshot, as Tony stepped out of the car. The two old friends wrapped each other up in a tight hug. After a moment Hogan brought around the take-out bag and Tony grabbed the second burger clean out of it.

Stane hadn't stopped yapping all the way in. "Look at you, welcome back, great to see you; you look so good, oh sure, you had to have a burger. You get me one? We've got everything all set up for you in here."

Pepper fought to keep up as the crowd increased once inside the foyer. More employees began applauding, the photographers jockeyed for position, the rest of the press started shouting questions and Pepper found herself a spot out of the way as Tony, untouched by the circus, made his way with Stane toward the podium.

"Excuse me, Miss Potts?"

Pepper turned and found herself looking at a shorter man with thin hair and a fairly unimpressive suit coming to her. "Can I get a moment?" the gentleman continued.

"Oh, I'm not actually a part of the press conference, but it's going to start any second."

"That's O.K., I'm not a reporter," He handed her a card and she took it without looking. "I'm Agent Phil Coulson with the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division,"

"That's quite a mouthful," Pepper said dryly, never taking her eyes of Tony.

Coulson sighed, as though he had heard that before. Which he probably had. "I know. We're working on it,"

Pepper was in no mood to deal with another Government man. "You know we've already been approached by the DOD, the FBI, and the CIA."

"We're a separate division, with a more… specific focus," Coulson said with no particular ego.
"We need to debrief Mr. Stark about the circumstances of his escape."

*Funny you should mention that, Junior G-Man, because I was sort of hoping to do that myself.* Pepper reflected. *Thing is, Mr. Stark hasn't told anyone about the circumstances of his escape.* Aloud, she kept it professional. *I'll put something in the book, shall I?*

Coulson seemed satisfied with that. "Thank you.

Meanwhile, Pepper was happy to shake off the latest annoyance and find out what Tony wanted a press conference for.

"O.K." Stane was saying cheerfully. "Let's get...uh..." He trailed off as he realized that Tony wasn't next to him. In fact he was in front of the podium, sitting on the floor out of his sight, but had the entire Press corps staring at him in surprise.

"How would it be, if everybody all sat down huh?" Tony said, matter-of-factly. "Y'know, then I could see you; make it a little less, formal," As if to demonstrate that last point, he took a bite of his cheeseburger.

Everyone reacted with disbelief, but their host was waving them down, and so they all knelt awkwardly to the floor of the room.

Rhodes had slipped in the door behind everyone and was surprised to see the room on the floor. She slipped over and squatted next to Pepper. "What's with the love-in?"

"Don't ask me," Pepper said honestly. "I have no idea what he's doing."

Stane came around from behind the podium also, and sat down on the edge of the stage next to Tony.

Tony looked up and over at his old family friend. "Stane?"

"Yeah, Tony?" Obadiah said in a friendly way, putting a hand on Stark's shoulder.

"I never got to say goodbye to dad," Tony said soft as a psalm.

Hushed silence. Pepper was stunned. Tony was looking like, given the might motivation, he might begin to cry. It was a humbling experience. Tony's poker face was legendary; and now...

Tony had shifted his gaze to the press and nodded, like agreeing on an important point. "I never got to say goodbye to my father," he said, stronger now, folding the wrapper back over the burger. "There are questions I would have asked him. I would have asked how he felt about what this company did. If he was conflicted, if he ever had doubts...Or maybe he was every inch the man we all remember from the newsreels..."

The Press was in collective silence. Nobody knew quite what to make of the great and inscrutable Anthony Stark being emotional and introspective.

"I saw young Americans killed by the very weapons that I had created to keep them safe. And I came to realize that I had become part of a system that had gotten comfortable with the idea of zero accountability."

One brave reporter said what they were all thinking. "Mr. Stark...what happened to you out there?"

The question seemed to crystallize something in Tony, and he finally stood up, circling the podium
and coming to the usual place behind the microphone. "I… I had my eyes opened. I came to see that I have more to offer this world than just making things that blow up."

Loud silence, everyone starting to realize...

"Which is why, effective immediately, I am shutting down the Weapons Production Division of Stark International."

Anything he might have had to add to that was drowned out by the sudden uproar.

Pepper felt her jaw drop.

"Until such a time as I can decide what the focus of this company should be, what direction it should take, one that I am comfortable with, and that will reflect the highest-" 

The press went nuts, calling out questions, and then repeating them; trying to outdo each other.

Tony was saying something else, but Pepper couldn't make it out; and in all likelihood, nobody else could either.

Obadiah had moved to Tony's side and had pushed him to the left enough that he had the microphones in front of him. "Hey!" He said way too cheerfully. "What we should take from this is that Tony's back, and he's healthier than ever, we're going to have some more discussion-"

Tony was already making his way out of the room. Nobody was even looking at Obadiah.

Rhodes sent Pepper a grim look. Told you. People act out after traumas like that. Keep an eye on him.

Pepper sent a glance over her shoulder at the door as Tony walked past her, with the press pursuing.

Pepper imagined pulling out her whip and chair again; and started forcing them back from the door.

She was so proud of him.

Stane pushed past her and went after Tony.

Stane found Stark at the entrance to the Industrial plant, staring up at the massive Arc Reactor which had a place of prominence in the main floor, directly centre in the building by the entrance, where the most efficient place to spread power to the building, and to show it off to the tour groups was.

Tony was looking up at it. As Stane watched, he rolled his head back further at the Art Deco Skylight far above, the size and shape of the Arc Reactor. Tony had put that in, so that passing planes and helicopters overhead could see through the roof to the bright blue glow five floors beneath.

The spider web iron frame sent down such bizarre shadows sometimes, but that matched Stane's mood just then, looking at the younger man who was gazing at it like some holy relic.

"Well," Stane chomped on his cigar with pointed sarcasm. "That went well."

"Yeah," Tony said matter-of-factly. "So, did I just paint a big bulls-eye on the back of my head?"
"The back of your head? I'm worried about the back of mine," Stane quipped. "What do you think the over/under of the stock drop is going to be tomorrow morning?"

Tony ran the math in his head. Finding out the CEO was kidnapped, maybe dead, then back alive only to shutdown the whole trade..."Optimistically? Forty points."

"Ha!" Stane chomped another quarter inch of his cigar. "At least!"

A long, uncomfortable moment of silence passed between two men who had stood shoulder to shoulder for decades.

"Tony," Stane said quietly, as though the whole affair was a personal joke that he wanted to be let in on. "We're weapons manufacturers. We're Iron Mongers-"

"Stane, I just don't want a body count to be our only legacy."

"-That's what we do, and we-"

"My name on the side of the building…" Tony protested.

Stane hadn't shifted his slow patient explanation. "-keep the world from falling into chaos."

Tony met his gaze intensely. "Not based on what I saw. We're not doing enough, not from what I saw. We can do better. We're going to do something else."

Tony glanced up at the Reactor. "I think we need to take another look at Arc Reactor technology."

Stane remembered arguing that one with Howard when Tony was all of three years old. Creating it had solved a number of PR problems that they had at the time. The environmental groups were spoiling for a fight with the weapons plant, and Stark had suggested throwing them a huge bone by making the entire factory emission free.

Howard's only reservation was that a new energy source like this would be the next Manhattan project. For all the money that weapons made them; Stark didn't want to create the next arms race before the eighties at least.

Stane had agreed and kept the specs of the reactor as a proprietary technology. Nobody else had it.

And now, standing before the only one of its kind, was Tony Stark, who had quite possibly just made it the single most expensive monument to bankruptcy that a megacorp had ever made.

"Oh come on!" Stane said, finally fed up. "The Arc reactor is a publicity stunt. We built that thing to shut the hippies up!

"It works."

"As a science project! The arc isn't cost effective, we knew that when we built it."

"Could be," Tony said without committing anything.

"Arc technology is a dead end, Tony. We haven't had a breakthrough in what? Thirty years?"

Tony recognized his cue. That was the part where he was supposed to say: "Yes, we have. Take a look!" Instead, Tony tilted his head at Stane, the way he did when faced with any puzzling problem. "What did they say?"
Long silence. Tony and Stane looked at each other evenly.

Tony smirked. "Could you have a worse poker face? Just tell me, who told you? It had to be either Rhodey or Pepper."

"Never mind. Show me!"

"It's either Rhodey or Pepper."

"Show me."

"Fine, Rhodey," Tony sighed and unbuttoned his shirt, revealing his new fashion statement to the older man.

There was a silence, as Stane looked from the chest-piece to the huge factory generator and back again.

"It works," Tony pledged. *Let me build these. We can make this work again brother, let me do it. It's not cost effective, but it is a legacy. A better one than Yinsen's corpse.*

Stane gave a long suffering sigh, buttoned Tony's shirt, hiding the glow, and put a friendly arm around Tony's shoulder. "Now listen, Tony, we're a team, you understand there's nothing we can't do. O.K., like your father and I…"

Tony suddenly realized how badly the rug had been pulled out from under his friend. "I'm sorry I didn't give you a heads up," He said honestly. "But if I had…"

Stane was already waving him down. "Tony, no more of this ready-fire-aim business."

Tony smirked good-naturedly. "That was dad's line."

Stane nodded. "You're gonna have to let me handle this. We're going to have to play a whole different kind of ball now, and we're gonna take a lot of heat. I want you to promise me, that you're gonna lay low O.K.?"

Stark nodded quietly. He knew his friend was right. Tony was a good businessman, but a better inventor, and he had a tendency to lose his temper with the board, which was why he had put his father's oldest friend in place as chairman. With Tony at the plant in L.A, and most of the business dealings being done on Wall Street in New York, a certain symbiosis had been formed, with Stane keeping a stewardship at Stark International while Tony created new prototypes and rolled them out to prospective buyers.

Tony preferred it that way.

Now, however, they had no weapons to roll out, demonstrate and sell. It was, as Stane said, a whole new ballgame. Tony had to find new projects to work on. Things that he didn't want just for his house or for the military.

The Arc Reactors were tricky at best, but had practical applications.

Tony had one such application in mind since he had designed the Mark I.

No. Laying low for a while was not a problem to Tony Stark.

He had work to do.
Stark came into his home and went straight to the workshop. "Jarvis, you up?"

"For you sir, always," Jarvis responded as though Stark had just stepped out of the room for a moment, instead of being abducted for three months.

"I want to enter a new project. Title is 'Mark I'."

The design had been scanned into the holographic workstation, and Jarvis projected the 3D view. Tony picked up his light pen and started circling whole sections of the original armor for deletion from the hologram.

"Is this for the Stark Industries server?" Jarvis asked him.

Tony took half a second to consider that. Weapons designs had made it to men like Raza before. "No, for now keep this on my private server."

"Working on a secret project, sir?"

"Can't risk having this one fall into the wrong hands." Wrong hands. Right. Someone who couldn't be trusted to use this suit might start going around torching caves full of people. Stark shook that thought out of his head; and continued revising the basic design. "Maybe mine can do some good."

After a few seconds of removing huge cross-sections of the Mark I, he started making improvements.

Studying the screen, Tony prepared himself for the most original project he had ever undertaken. There was no precedent since DaVinci's time, and nobody he could learn from like with any other weapon or vehicle. This would require working from scratch, to create something that nobody had ever considered. This wasn't going to be like bionic prosthetics. His limbs were all still attached. This wasn't going to be like creating lightweight alloys so he could move. This suit would be powered. This wasn't going to be an assembly line job. Every component would have to be precisely tailored to whoever wore the suit.

He had a lot of work to do.

Raza knew he had a lot of work to do.

Stark had destroyed most of his weapons and vehicles, as well as taking down most of his fighters. Raza didn't know if there was a cruise Missile heading for what was left of his cave, but was a seasoned warrior and knew not to be around long enough to find out.

Hiding places in the mountains of Afghanistan were plenty, but concealable, fortified, bases were harder to come by, especially with his diminished manpower.

It was time to move his operation, and move fast.

The survivors of Stark's escape were falling over themselves to obey, convinced that Raza was going to take revenge on whoever was within reach any moment.

With his face mangled by Stark Munitions, hideously scarred for life, the idea was tempting. But Raza had something else on his mind.

For all its power, Stark couldn't cross the desert sand in a suit of Iron.

The desert sands were hungry, and Raza knew time was a factor. Waiting long enough for the
helicopters to pass, then a little longer to ensure they weren't coming back, and the wind had buried their objective.

Stark had left a clear trail behind him, and men experienced in surviving missile attacks from above knew how to read trails of smoke. There was only so far Stark could have flown.

Searching the desert sand was a short term arrangement by definition. The sun hit almost as hard and as hot as Stark's flamethrowers.

But after almost a day of searching, his underlings pushing themselves to exhaustion in anticipation of Raza's punishment, one man raised a hand and yelled.

And in his hand was an Iron mask.
Part Two: Tony Stark is home safe, and as his first order of business, he shuts down the Weapons Production aspect of his family business. While the press roast him alive, and Obadiah Stane vows to make the rest of the company fall in line with Tony's new direction, the billionaire designer himself becomes a virtual recluse in his home and workshop, obsessed with his newest invention, even as Raza, his former captor, manages to find the remnants of the Mark I Iron Man Armor, and begins making plans of his own...

The list of people that Pepper wanted to set on fire was steadily growing.

The latest to be added was the host of 'Mad Money', who had made Tony Stark his personal punching bag. Having to hear it was bad. Having to hear it in Tony Stark's own home was worse. Hearing it with sound effects was painful.

"Stark Industries!" he was yelling, a bit too loudly. "Here's my advice," he played a sound effect. "Sell!Sell!Sell!"

Pepper rolled her eyes.

"Abandon ship!" The host yelled. "Does the Hindenburg ring any bells?"

An animation of an attacking cougar and Pepper looked for something to throw at the screen. If the screen wasn't a projection on the glass window she would have.

"Here's Tony Stark's new business plan," He picked up a baseball bat and smashed a coffee cup with a Stark logo on it.

Pepper was disgusted. She didn't need this, and Tony sure didn't. He had barely come out of his workshop since getting back. He hadn't slept at all. Pepper was as worried about him as Rhodes was, and had largely moved in again to keep an eye on him. Aside from thanking her for coffee, she had been more or less ignored. Still, there were about a thousand press requests, and most of them had gone to Tony's private line. Stane could handle the official requests. Pepper could handle the personal ones, but in the absence of an interview, the press didn't let go of the story.

"Hey look!" The host crowed melodramatically. "There's a weapons company that doesn't make weapons!"

Pepper had heard enough and started plotting vengeance. Issuing a statement would be ignored. Arguing the point would seem petty. Calling the show producers would work if she could sufficiently worry them. Buying the station would not be cost effective. Hiring a hit man and having him shot would be overreacting.

Tony's voice came over the intercom. "How big are your hands?"

O.K., that was unexpected. Pepper turned down the volume. "What?"

"Your hands. How big are your hands?"

"I don't understand."

"Just get down here, I need you."
Pepper switched off the TV and hurried to the staircase.

She let herself into his workshop, and saw him over toward the computer workstations. His shirt was off, and he was stretched out on what looked a lot like a dentist's chair.

Pepper couldn't help it. She was staring. Not that the boss looked anything less than stunning bare-chested under any circumstances, but it was the first time she had ever seen the Arc Reactor that Rhodes had warned her about.

"Hey," Tony said cheerfully. "Let's see'em, show me your hands."

Pepper walked over to him slowly, holding her hands up, eyes fixed on the glowing circle in his chest.

"Oh wow," he said. "They are small, Very petite. I just need you to help me with something here."

"Is that the thing keeping you alive?" Pepper said in quiet awe. She thought it would be bigger.

"It was," Tony told her. "It is now an antique," He reached over to a tray, yet another dentist chair similarity, and picked up a small round generator, glowing brightly in his hand. "This is what will be keeping me alive for the foreseeable future. I'm swapping it out for an upgrade, I just ran into a little speed bump."

"Speed bump?" She was still staring at his chest, wondering idly what the usual bimbos would have made of it. "What do you mean Speed bump?"

"It's nothing, there's an exposed…wire… under this device and it's kind of…" While he explained patiently to her, he turned the circular machine in his chest counter-clockwise, and was rewarded with a few mechanical clicking noises, before the Arc Reactor jumped out of his chest, into Tony's hand, connected into the metal socket by a short cable. "It's touching the socket wall and causing a bit of a short," With that, he yanked the Arc Reactor clean out, taking the cable with it.

Pepper felt her own heart accelerating, as the heart rate monitors around Tony started to speed up slowly. "W-What do you want me to do?"

He handed her the reactor and she took it gingerly. "Just put that over there, don't need it anymore."

Pepper turned and set it down on the workbench, as Tony gave her new instructions. "I just want you to reach in, and gently lift the wire out."

He said it so matter-of-factly that Pepper was waiting for the punch line. "Is…is it safe?"

"Yeah," Tony was clearly in a bit of pain. "It's like Operation; just don't let it touch the socket wall."

"What's Operation?"

Tony rolled his eyes as though Pepper had just proved a long held belief about her ever having fun. "It's a game, doesn't matter. Just gently lift the wire, O.K.?"

*Keep it professional, Pepper.* She started to reach into the socket, and lost her nerve. There was simply no professional way of reaching *into* the boss' chest. "Tony, I don't know. I don't think that I'm qualified to do this…"

"No, no," Tony waved that off like she was just being modest. "It'll be fine; you are the most
capable, qualified, trustworthy person I've ever met. You're gonna do great."

*Is he even aware he's doing it?* Pepper wondered, feeling invincible suddenly. "O.K."

She took a deep breath, and slipped her hand slowly into Tony's Chest Socket.

There was no way the other PA's on Wall Street would believe this one. She was reaching into Tony's chest. There was something perversely intimate about the exercise, and Pepper fought an insanely strong desire to both turn around and run far away, or to burst into hysterical giggles.

Instead she squeezed her eyes shut as her hand touched something wet and squishy, "EW! Ewewew!" *I haven't said 'ew' since kindergarten.* Pepper thought distantly. "Oh, gross, there's pus…"

"It's not pus, it's a plasmic discharge. It's from the device, not from my body."

*Slimy is slimy.* Pepper, still feeling about six years old, squeezed her eyes shut. "Smells."

Tony's nose wrinkled too. "Yeah it does. O.K., now it's the copper wire."

Pepper was inside his body up to her wrist, and she felt the loose wire between two fingers. She started to pull it out. "O.K., I got it."

"You got it? Great, now just don't let it touch…"

Pepper heard an electrical buzz, saw the heart monitors go crazy for an instant and Tony howled. "AGH! The sides! Don't let it touch the sides…ugh, when it's coming out."

Pepper felt sweat break out all over her body as she fought to keep her hand still. "Sorry! Sorry! I'm sorry," She pulled on the dripping wire till it extended about two feet from his body.

"It's O.K.; now make sure that when it comes out you don't pull out…"

There was a sound like an electrical plug being yanked, and suddenly the wire came much easier, dragging a small metal ring on the end.

"Argh!" Tony grunted. "...the end of it, like you just did."

Pepper felt her eyes bulge out as his heart rate monitors all flat lined for a second, then started going triple time. "Oh god! Oh god! What do I do?" She started to lower the metal ring back into the socket.

"No! Don't put it back!" Tony stopped her quickly, growing pain etched on his face.

Pepper was horrified. "What's wrong?"

Tony would have shrugged if he was standing, she was sure of it. "Nothing, I'm just going into cardiac arrest, because you just yanked out…"

"WHAT?" Pepper screeched. "You said this was safe!"

Tony was so calm that it was starting to make Pepper sweat. "It is, it is; now we gotta hurry," He handed her the second Reactor. "Now, take this, take this, we've gotta switch it out really quickly,"

*I'm going to fix this. I have not just killed the boss after waiting for him for three months. Pepper commanded herself. "O.K., O.K."*
She took the reactor in one hand, the cable hanging from it with the other, and took a second to lean in close to him, putting as much reassurance into her voice as she could. "Tony, it's going to be O.K.! I'm gonna make it O.K.," I'm not losing you. Not after all this. Not because I screwed up. "I'm going to make this better, I promise."

Tony's face was twisting in pain. "O.K."

Pepper, without any hesitation this time, started threading the second cable into him, toward the only bit of machinery she could see, where the first one had been plugged in.

"Now," Tony said slowly. "You're going to attach that to the base plate, where the first one was…"

Pepper felt something fit into place and Tony yelled.

"YAAAAAA-ow!" He yelped as the heart monitors all returned sharply to normal, and he grinned lightly at her. "Now was that so hard? That was fun right?"

Pepper was trying madly to gulp oxygen as she fed the cable in and slid the second reactor into its socket firmly, where it attached with a click.

"Nice," Tony said approvingly.

"Are you O.K.?" Pepper was in shock, sweating, hyperventilating, with two slimy hands held out in front of her motionlessly.

"Yeah, I feel great," Tony took one look up her face and burst out laughing.

Pepper almost smiled, seeing he was O.K. "Don't you ever, ever, EVER, ask me to do that, ever again," She said, calming down.

"I don't have anyone else but you," Tony said blithely.

Pregnant pause. Both of them stared at each other during the unexpected moment of honesty.

Tony broke the awkwardness by standing up, and Pepper turned away from him trying to shake her hands off in disgust, when she noticed the bright glow on the worktable. "Oh, um...what do you want me to do with this?" She held up the first Arc Reactor.

"That?" Tony barely looked at it as he pulled on a shirt. "Destroy it. Incinerate it."

"You don't want to keep it?" Pepper asked him in surprise. Granted, Tony hadn't ever been particularly sentimental, but this thing had kept him alive. It had a place near to his heart, literally, for how long?

"I have been called many things, Pepper," Tony responded. "Nostalgic is not one of them."

Pepper couldn't help the wave of sympathy that came over her. "Will that be all, Mr. Stark?"

"That'll be all, Miss Potts," Stark returned equally professionally, already back on his feet.

Pepper headed back toward the stairs, looking into the glowing reactor in her hands as she walked. It was beautiful. She glanced back at him. He was already off on the next project, telling his robot helpers what needed to be cleared away. She looked back at the generator and kept walking.

Always knew some girl would be able yank your heart out with her bare hands and toss it in an incinerator sooner or later, Tony. Pepper said silently. Never dreamed it would be me.
Tony was not eager to repeat the old mistakes. Not when there were so many new ones he could make. But with each glance at the 3D schematic, he knew that he needed to risk it. This thing he was seeing evolve with each new idea had surprising destructive potential. The state of his skull when he was done flying around was proof of that. Everything he had seen screamed at him that he couldn't put this invention into production. He had the right to keep it quiet. The Arc Reactor was one example, Jarvis another...there were any number of things that the US Government didn't want to pick up the tab for.

But this was different. Stane were right. They were Iron Mongers by profession, but Stark knew better now. He knew firsthand where that would lead them. Nobody was going to get this invention. Men like Yinsen would see the value; men like Stane would see the profit. If it went into production, it would pass through a dozen hands and eventually fall to a man like Raza. Nobody was going to use this invention but him.

Tony was not a fool. He knew he wasn't objective, he knew that this whole endeavor was unprecedented, and he knew that the runaway boot jets in the Mark I could have killed him with the first use. If he got killed trying this new exosuit, then a lot more people than him would pay the price.

He also knew that this was the most original experimental aircraft/combat platform ever invented.

He was not some mad scientist, trying out the secret formula on himself. That was how the *bad* headlines got written.

He needed a test pilot. A good one. One that he could trust not to steal it, or use it on people like Yinsen's family.

There was only one name on the list.

One of Rhodes' regular duties was indoctrination. At Edward's Air Force Base, he led the newest group of Trainee pilots through on of their main hangers, demonstrating some of the latest UAV drones and remote operated vehicles, courtesy of Stark Industries. He also took the chance to explain to them some of the proud history that the pilots of the world had provided. The world was growing smaller, the machines were growing smarter, and more and more were humans being rendered obsolete. But as a career member of the Air Force, and witness to some of the most advanced technology, most of which hadn't even been put into production yet, Rhodes was in a unique position to speak on the subject of what a computer could do, compared to a living human being, and the Air Force was quick to make him their point man on the subject, not just for the new recruits, but for anyone who asked if pilots were soon to be replaced.

And so, as ten young men in uniforms followed him past the scout drones and UAV's, he started making the point. "The future of air combat," He explained to them. "Is it manned or unmanned? In my experience, no unmanned vehicle will ever trump a pilot's training, a pilot's experience, a pilot's instinct, a pilot's insight, and especially a pilot's judgment. That ability to look inside a situation beyond the obvious and discern the outcome-"

"How about a pilot without a plane?" Quipped a voice.

Rhodes recognized the voice immediately and turned. Sure enough, in his usual dark shades and expensive leather jacket, was Tony Stark, making his way toward them. "Look who fell out the sky. Tony Stark, everyone."
The class was appropriately impressed. A few shook his hand, one or two saluted.

Tony turned helpfully to the listening class. "Speaking of manned vs. unmanned, remember to get him to tell you about Spring Break his senior year, when he guessed wrong,"

Rhodes was sending him dirty looks. "Don't do that, do not do that,"

The class was grinning like idiots, enjoying the turn this had taken.

"Spring Break, '87," Stark sent Rhodes a questioning look. "That lovely lady you woke up with. What was her name? Ivan?"

"Take five, everyone," Rhodes said finally. He could act angry all he wanted, but the second his subordinates were gone, Rhodes grinned, glad to see Stark acting like his old self. "Look at you man. Good to see you walking around."

Stark gave a conspiratorial grin, the likes of which was only seen when he was immensely proud of himself. "Doing a little better than walking."

"Yeah?"

"I'm onto something big, and I want you to be part of it."

Rhodes could hardly contain himself. That was going to be good. "You are about to make a whole lot of people feel a whole lot better. You really rattled some cages with that Press Conference."

"This one isn't for the military."

Rhodes felt his face fall. He had seen this before. Tony was a weapons man, he was the best there'd ever been.

"Listen to me," He said firmly. "You need to get some rest, and get your head on straight again, and get back to work."

Rhodes had been hearing rumors that the top Brass were freaking out to have the best weapons designer in an enemy camp for three months. The fact that he had escaped under his own power was unheard of. The fact that the first thing he had done was shut down the US Military's source of advanced weapon technology was enough to make some of the Top brass think he had been turned during his captivity, a very real concern for soldiers and civilian's alike, and some suggested they should bring him in for de-programming.

Rhodes was convinced that it was simpler than that. PTSD made people reassess their lives and make dramatic changes without thinking. Rhodes had gone almost to the ends of the earth to find his friend; and he knew: The best way to protect his friend and help him recover from the trauma was to get everything back to business as usual.

Tony's eyes dulled slightly. Rhodes hated to see it, but it was necessary.

"Maybe I do need some time. Talk to you in a few days? We'll do lunch."

Tony held no malice toward Rhodes. The man was a soldier. A career soldier, with all that brought with it. His job was soldier, but his purpose was to liaison with Stark personally, and to see to it that the weapons he made went to no other buyer.

Rhodes was worried about the changes Tony had gone through, but even more worried about what
those changes meant for him and his masters.

Tony held no malice toward his friend. Rhodey always took his responsibilities, his duty, and his discipline too seriously. He was a part of the War Machine.

A machine Tony wasn't part of any more.

So...that left Stark with the question of who could test the prototype.

*Find a pilot; we have many of them on payroll. Someone you can trust. Work on autonomic function if you have to. There are plenty of qualified people who could do it, without giving them the secrets of construction, power, design...*

*It's a relatively simple process to find someone who can wear a suit and keep his head for a few minutes. Stark told himself firmly, before letting himself smile, just a little bit. But on the other hand...nah.*

Tony had the designs for the entire suit in his head, but there was only one aspect of it that he wanted to try before designing the exoskeleton.

Flight. The thought alone made him salivate.

Designing the actual apparatus had been easy enough. The Mark I jets had been cobbled together as the result of using disarmed munitions. Not enough to actually give him flight, quite so much as a massive kick in the butt to throw him upward.

But just for a second...He had been airborne.

He was hoping to do better than just a second with his revised prototype.

The Jericho missile system had provided him a chance to use his repulsor technology in a weapons system. The repulsors had guided the periphery missiles to their targets. Others had tried something similar, but the ejectors had always thrown the primary missile off target. Repulsors had made that a much smoother event. No solid propellant. Another intellectual patent exclusive to Stark Enterprises.

Fitting them into boots was just as easy. The hard part was making the boots wearable. The Mark I had been hard to walk in, and when he was forced to his knees by the AA gun he nearly broke his ankle. The ankle joints were no good. Finally, Stark had pulled out a copy of Grays Anatomy and made a study of the human foot. It was considerable eye-opener. A human foot was more complex than Tony gave it credit for. A shoe could get away with it because it was pliable. Making a suit of armor boot that could copy that, and still hold the repulsors in them was a mean feat.

Finally, he settled on a grid pattern, laying the gears over the foot, and around the heel and up the shin for stability, giving him something of a metal boot, without skin at this point, but each hydraulic 'tendon' worked back and forth, giving him the mobility of an actual foot. It was tedious work, and he longed for Yinsen's steady hands. His two identical household robots, 'Dummy' and 'Butterfingers' simply didn't have the skill that Yinsen's human hands did, and Tony largely took care of the soldering jobs himself.

He had spent hours with a soldering hour trying to make the grid properly spaced. Getting into it was going to be tricky. The solid base was going to take more than a shoehorn, so Stark had redesigned it to open from the ankle to the shin.
Putting on his new boots, he made his way to the far end of the workshop, where his cars were parked near enough for him to tinker with them. Walking in the boots was tricky since they made him about five inches taller. He found a good clear spot in the middle of the floor and threaded a pair of power cables up from the repulsors in his boots through to the Arc Reactor in his chest.

*I am the heart of the machine.* Tony told himself. *As it should be.*

"Jarvis," He said aloud. "Begin recording."

He woke up three hours later, in absolute agony, clutching at his head.

"I asked Dummy to bring you some ice, sir."

"Thank you Jarvis. And speak quietly," Stark croaked, as he accepted the icepack. "What happened?"

"If you would direct your attention to the monitor sir."

Stark dragged his body, heavy boots and all, from behind the Rolls Royce and looked at the screen.

He glanced over at the monitor, and saw himself from the perspective of one of his helper-bots, outfitted with a video camera.

"O.K.," He said on the screen. "First test. Monitors are recording, for lack of a better option, I have dummy on standby with the fire extinguisher."

The machine, affectionately dubbed 'Dummy' nodded it's arm up and down cheerfully. Tony had designed the software for it, and still didn't have a clue what went through it's brain sometimes.

"O.K., we're going to take this slowly," He spread his feet slightly. "First test at Ten percent only."

One moment he was on the screen, the next there was a flash of blue from under his boots and he was hurled from the ground, into the ceiling of the garage so fast the he couldn't follow the movement.

A moment later Dummy sprayed him with the fire extinguisher.

The screen went to black finally.

"Jarvis," Tony moaned, lying down carefully on the floor. "We need a new gameplan."

Tony spent most of his time in his lab, and found after the first three weeks that there were no humans that could keep up with him. Well, that wasn't true. Plenty could keep up, but very few were willing to go without sleep. That was why Stark had adapted Jarvis to work all the house machines. That included the holographic projectors. Jarvis was the only one in the house that could actually influence his designs. A few months after that, Stark got impatient, and had Jarvis hardwired to the fabrication machines. This made his home into a one man laboratory/workshop/factory floor/Construction centre.

This was unquestionably, the most upscale machine that Stark had ever fabricated in his home.

The idea of the flight stabilizer came when Stark made the connection between the boot jets and the pose that his body had been in the seconds before being flung against the ceiling. He had been
in a half crouch that most people got into when surfing or rollerblading.

The idea of surfing had fixed in Tony's mind. He had tried surfing once and found that it took some time to not look like an amateur. He wasn't going to practice that on a beach in front of people so he had built an indoor artificial wave machine that could keep him in a permanent pipe.

He studied the footage of that machine's test briefly and found he wasn't imagining the similarities in stance. He had his knees bent, head forward, and arms out.

Having the power under his feet alone was going to be impossible to control.

With that in mind, Tony went back to his holographic drawing board and designed a repulsor that fit into the palm of his hand.

Holding his hand in the holographic image so that he could picture the results properly, he knew that wasn't going to work. The repulsor would be strong enough to point his hand in every direction at once from the wrist down. So he went back to his touch screen drawing board, and designed a support frame for it.

Jarvis scanned the drawing on his touch screen and projected a three dimensional image of the 'sleeve' over the holopad. Stark had turned the projection end on, and slid his hand into it, making the projection something of a ghostly visualization.

Another few days, and that vision had become reality.

He heard the keypad on his workshop door beep a few times. He looked up but he didn't need to. He had given only one person that code in his entire life.

Pepper came in a moment later, with a large box wrapped in brown paper in one hand, and a coffee cup balanced on top of it. "I've been buzzing you on the intercom for the last five minutes," She reported as she set them both down on a workbench. "Didn't you hear me?"

"Everything's fine-" Tony started to answer before he caught up with what she was actually saying. "What's up?"

"Obadiah's upstairs, he needs to talk to you."

"Be right up," Tony promised.

Pepper stepped closer and saw the new invention her boss was wearing around his arm. A grid-like frame threaded with numerous wires which ran from the shoulder to the wrist, with a glowing circular disc strapped into the palm of his hand; plugged into the Arc Reactor in his chest. The thing looked like a sci-fi movie ray-gun. "I thought you were finished making weapons," She drawled.

"I am. This is a flight stabilizer," He told Pepper, pointing one arm out toward the far side of the room. "It is perfectly harmless," To demonstrate, he hit a button on his workbench to complete the circuit.

A second later the repulsor in the hand piece activated, and a pulse blast fired out, so strong and focused that Tony could actually see it moving away from him like a projectile. Pepper yelled in shock as the blast picked up everything lighter than a brick and hurled it all across the room.

The recoil flung Tony against the wall behind him. Pepper was looking down at him a moment later, aghast. "I didn't expect that," He said blithely.
She all but threw herself down next to him, but he was already getting up, and he grinned at her brilliantly. "O.K. Obadiah was upstairs did you say?"

"Yeah," Pepper squeaked nervously as he shook his arm out of the framework.

On his way out, Stark glanced over his lab. The entire left half of the room opposite the door had been trashed.

He sent a glance back at his arm piece as he went out to the stairs. The repulsors had more kick than he gave them credit for; and not just the ones in his boots.

As Tony came upstairs, Pepper fussing behind him, he heard a slightly mangled version of classical music being played. When he got to the living room, he found the older man at the piano. "How'd it go?" Tony asked, already having a pretty good idea, when he noticed a Pizza Box on the table. "Oh. That bad huh?"

"Just because I brought Pizza back from New York doesn't mean it went bad," Stane said, but his voice made the meaning clear. It had gone badly. "Would have gone a lot better if you'd been there."

"Ha!" Tony said, opening the pizza box. "You told me to lay low."

"Well yeah, from the press, this was a Board of Directors Meeting."

Tony looked stunned, and sent a glance at Pepper. "This was a Board of Directors Meeting?" he said in a shocked voice. Stane rolled his eyes, and Tony smirked reassuringly. "Look, just because the stock opened down 40 points-"

"56 and a half," Pepper put in from the couch.

Stark sent her an irritated glance. *How is that helpful, Jiminy Cricket?* "We were expecting that. The Board is just going to have to-"

"I'm just saying, they don't like this new direction you're…"

"Being responsible is a new…?"

"Tony," Stane interrupted. "They've filed an injunction against you. They say you're suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and they want control of the company."

Tony was stunned and somehow not at all surprised in exactly the same moment. "They can't do that."

"Well they can, they're the Board, their opinions matter..."

Stark wasn't worried. "Well, we own the majority of the company anyway, so what can they do?"

"Tony, you've gotta let me give them something," Stane gestured at Tony's chest. "Why don't you let our engineers take a look at that, take it apart and see how it works."

Tony understood the reasoning easily. Give the board a show and tell, make it seem like less than an impulse move by the brat-king and let them obsess over cornering the energy market instead of the weapons market. But images of Arc powered Hand grenades were unappealing to say the least. Tony wasn't about to trust this one to anybody till he knew where it led. "Nope. For now this stays with me."
Obadiah was clearly disappointed. "Oh, yeah?" He said darkly, picking up the pizza box. "Then this stays with me."

Tony put on a hurt look.

Stane opened the box. "Take a slice and go."

Tony dutifully did so, heading back for his workshop.

"Can I come down there, see what you're working on?"

"Good night, Stane!"

If he had stayed it would have seen Stane give Pepper a pointed look.

She just looked right back.

Stane sighed. No help there either.

The next full scale test took a while to work around to. There were many minor components that needed testing and completion before they could be put together for the overall purpose. But finally, wearing his new metal and wire frame 'sleeves', Tony turned back to the camera. "Day 11, Test 37, Configuration 2.0. For lack of a better option, Dummy is still on fire safety."

Dummy waved its fire extinguisher cheerily at the camera.

"You douse me again and I'm not on fire, I'm donating you to a city college!" Stark warned.

Dummy lowered his arm in apparent embarrassment.

Stark took a deep breath. "O.K. I'm going to start out real slow here. One percent thrust."

One percent was pretty cautious for him, but he had gotten massive blows to the skull from every component of his new flight apparatus, to the point where he had the power cables for his arms and boots encased in a bandolier that went around his Arc Reactor; for fear of the repulsors getting loose and tearing his pacemaker clean out.

The repulsors glowed, and...

_Holy of holies._

Tony was airborne.

He was a good four feet off the ground, hovering on a cushion of air. It was the most awkward position he had ever been in. At least when surfing he could find a balance on his feet. It was like trying to walk all over again.

_Come on Tony, figure it out. What are you doing wrong?_

Tony raised his hand further to lower his body, thumbed the power controls and hit the floor feet first, fighting to balance.

Dummy had wheeled significantly closer, aiming the extinguisher at him, point blank range. Tony waved him back harshly. "Please! Don't follow me around with it either. I feel like I'm going to catch fire spontaneously."
Stark studied his hands as Dummy obediently wheeled back.

Tony, with a lot of work; you stopped yourself from a face-plant. If you can't do that by instinct, the way you walk and run, then you don't belong in the air.

One major plus, he finally had a handle on what the power levels would do.

"O.K.," Tony said. "Let's bring it up to 2.5 percent."

He took off again. The takeoff was much smoother with the added power, turns were cleaner, if still unintentional. This time, he brought his knees up higher, tilted his hands up at give him lateral thrust.

A little too much lateral thrust.

Tony tilted his feet at the ankle like he was trying to find his footing on an incline, then suddenly found himself moving forward toward the wall.

Tony pointed both hands forward, checking his forward movement, and suddenly he was coasting backwards, frictionless on the repulsor wave.

Tony craned his neck to see behind him. He was in the far corner of the garage. "O.K., this isn't where I wanna be!"

Pay attention Tony! He commanded himself. Your feet and legs don't give you balance. Your hands do!

Left hand tilted down to keep him upright, right hand titled out to move him back to the centre of the room. Steering was not working, and he hovered his jets straight over the Hot Rod.

"No! Not the car! Not the car!" Tony willed himself to move faster across the car; swearing he didn't smell burning paint. Past the cars; to the workbenches lining his test area. Pens and paper flew in every direction.

Tony felt himself going into a gentle spin, and moved on instinct. He brought his feet together, straightened, and brought his hands in close. A vertical hover. For just a moment, it was smooth, it was instinctive, and it was easy. He caught a glimpse of himself on the monitors. *Tony Stark: The Man, The Myth, The Legend!*

He lowered the thrust as smoothly as he could, came to a foot above the floor, and cut the power. Almost spiked the landing; but there were no judges to tell him how awesome he was.

Except for Dummy, inching forward again.

"Ah-Ah-Ah-Ah!" Tony barked, and the machine settled.

Experiment over.

Tony was jazzed. His father had always told him never to let the other guy see your expression in moments of high emotion. It was a rule he had adopted as his personal motto. If it was blowing five million at the craps table or sitting across from the Bloodthirsty Board in business meetings, or charming some 21-year-old heiress out of her dress, his poker face never shifted once, not even a little bit.

But he hadn't felt this charged since the Mark I. The flight stabilizers weren't even necessary; Tony
could almost feel electricity flying from every limb.

His face didn't shift even a little bit. But something had to be said to mark the occasion.

"Yeah," He said blithely. "I can fly."

After that, the rest was simple. Giving the sleeves and boots a proper skin was relatively easy. Remembering the way he had come down headfirst in Afghanistan he had extended the skin to protective full body armor again, this time with Plexiglas eyepieces. Immediately tossing that idea, he redesigned it to use Diamond-iod coated tech-lenses, which could project a real-time image over the interior of any surface. A technical marvel used for concealable cameras and gun-cameras on the newest fighter jets, patented by Stark Industries.

Tony knew that for high-speed flight he'd need more control methods than throwing his hands around, and redesigned the skin again to include air flaps that could open and close under computer control. The more control the suit had automatically, the more the pilot could focus on the actual flights.

Designing a computer architecture would have taken him years, but fortunately, he had a highly adaptable AI on hand. "Jarvis, load yourself into the HUD. Import preferences from the home unit."

Jarvis loaded his AI program into the suit’s circuitry, bringing up the necessary information on the Heads Up Display. After a moment the HUD lit up with much more information. Jarvis checked the imported preferences and began reading Tony's eye movements, allowing the suit's eyes to focus on whatever Tony focused on and gave him useful information.

Testing the interface, Tony scanned his garage. Focusing his vision on the workbench made the suit focus on it, scanning each tool for details and projecting a blueprint on the display. Focusing on the cars brought up the vehicle specs and diagrams.

"Test air flaps and maneuvering thrusters."

Tony could feel each air flap open and close, testing ease of movement, his new skin coming alive and stretching its muscles.

"Sir, the suit test is complete."

O.K. Tony told himself. His suit was airtight. The joins all fit precisely. The air flaps worked. The moving parts were durable...

Tony studied the readouts. Internal temp. External Temp, heart rate, respiration, gyroscopes, power usages…the uplink to his computers said that they had a great deal of data to work with.

"Beginning shutdown," Jarvis intoned.

Shutdown. Tony thought, just for a second. Turn off the machine, get out of the suit, study the data methodically, go a little further tomorrow.

Yep. That's how experimental programs work, that's exactly what you do… Tony told himself. But on the other hand...nah.

"Tell ya what," His voice still hadn't lost that unimpressed quality, and Tony was even more amazed at himself than usual. "Do a weather and ATC check, start listening in on ground control."
"Sir, there are still a number of-"

"Jarvis," Stark said sharply. "Sometimes, you have to run before you can walk."

Jarvis gave no further argument, and the display before his eyes changed, projecting a few new readouts. The horizon line, aircraft locations...

Stark fired up his stabilizers first, the energy lifting his hands again. He brought them close to his metal skin, spreading his palms down, and deliberately tilting his body too far forward.

The stabilizers caught him on a wall of pure thrust and the boot jets picked up to roar like a wild animal unleashed at last.

The acceleration was unreal. It didn't feel like getting kicked from behind like in a fighter jet. Tony knew. He had been in a fighter jet. This was different, like his body was being stretched, like he was in a roadrunner cartoon.

*Wile E. Coyote, *Tony thought as his field of vision hurled itself toward the garage ramp. *I salute your fine example to experimental test pilots everywhere!*

Yelling, Tony jerked to tilt his legs to the left, rolling his stabilizers with him, and suddenly he was turning up the ramp.

*Just* enough.

His left boot scraped slightly on the edge of the garage entrance, and suddenly there was nothing but sky above.

And Tony was more than eager to get to it.

Tony had designed and piloted most modes of transport, everything from cars to planes to racing boats, but this was electrifying. He could feel the air rushing over his face, even through the mask, he could feel the power flowing through his hands and feet keeping him going ever higher, ever faster.

*O.K., let's go left.* He told himself, and suddenly he was spinning, almost out of control. The horizon level spun, as did the view.

*Ack!* Tony reminded himself just how he flew this thing, and put his hands out a little further, learning to steer the living missile he had become.

He pushed the jets just a little further, purely to see how fast he could go.

The acceleration snapped his head back, and his neck pressed against the inside of his suit by the G-forces. His feet were starting to go numb from the vibrations.

Already he was making revisions for the final product. He needed better vibration dampeners in the boot jets, he needed to adjust how the pitch and yaw worked, if he was going to do anything in the suit he couldn't get bogged down in the details of controlling this thing. The interior of the suit would have to be changed too. The G Forces were shoving him against edges he didn't know the suit interior had, and he'd built it.

The eyepiece lenses were not at all effected by the speeds involved, Jarvis cleaning up the digital image in real-time, giving him a crystal clear image of things almost a kilometer below. Tony idly wondered what the kids on that Ferris Wheel would make of him.
Tony had picked the moon as a reference point, and made a quick bet with himself on how close he could get to it. "Jarvis, what's the SR-71 Altitude Record?"

A picture of the SR-71 Blackbird popped up on his HUD. "85,000 Feet sir."

"Records are made to be broken."

He heard a creaking noise. His readouts were glazing over, and Stark woke up to the fact that he couldn't feel temperature real well. It was ice.

_Just ice. Harmless. I am invincible in this armor. Ice can't get me._

"Sir, the ice buildup on the exterior is getting serious."

Intellectually of course, Stark knew that too much ice on the outside of any aircraft could screw with any number of systems. Fluids could freeze, coolant could freeze, electronics could short out, vent and intakes could seal over solidify...

_Just a little higher._ Tony urged his new skin silently, when suddenly his HUD went blank.

Up was suddenly a good bit harder than it had appeared.

Down, however, was easy.

Tony threw his hands out to try and stabilize his flight, but he was in a flat spin. He had to get this ice off fast.

"Jarvis! Deploy flaps!"

Jarvis gave no answer. The HUD was still blank.

Stark started hitting at his suit, breaking off some of the ice. He was below the city skyline now.

_Had it taken this long to go up? "Come on Jarvis answer me!"

The HUD lit up, and his air flaps all activated. The spin worsened across three axis at once, and the flaps shattered the ice layer from underneath.

More out of luck than anything else, he managed to point his head down. The move put him into a dive, and only had to control the spin. Turning one hand over, he was able to produce enough counterthrust to make the world stop spinning.

But far too late. He was in a powered dive, straight for the freeway...

_Oh great, bug on a windshield! The fall of the great Tony Splat!_ He thought. _I promised Pepper an open casket! Please god, spare my beautiful face!_

Tony reared his head back, and the Mark II didn't have enough give across the spine, and Tony was suddenly bent pointing upwards again.

The suit jets had power enough make him pull out of the dive, a whole millisecond before hitting the road. Cars and trucks saw the living missile he had become and jerked left and right to try and dodge.

_Six inches before I hit?_ Tony saw from the readouts, screaming back for the sky. _Ha! Bags of room._
But the point had been made. There was more to flying this thing than the power in the jets and the stabilizers in the gloves. The ice was a problem too.

And Tony was already reworking the designs in his head. Surface skin, internal padding, pitch and yaw controls...

*Why the Hell am I flying around in this piece of junk?* Stark suddenly asked himself. *This thing needs an upgrade badly.*

Thus resolved, Tony angled himself back toward the house, swooped down over behind the air conditioner, and brought himself upright for a landing. Just as during the opening test, he brought himself to a foot and a half above the surface, then cut the power to all his jets and dropped.

The ceiling caved under the weight of his suit instantly.

Tony went through the roof of his home, through the interior ceiling, through the floor again, and Tony couldn't be certain, but it sounded like he went through the piano too. An instant later he was back in the garage.

For the third time in recent memory, Tony had to stop and wait for a few seconds to make sure he was still alive.

When he discovered he had folded the Mercedes almost in half he actually felt like crying.

His body had been pummeled against inside the suit by the flight, then the impact, but the Mark II hadn't been breached. Hadn't even been dented.

*Man alive I know how to build things.* He whooped victoriously.

The robot doused him with the fire extinguisher, which took a little something from the moment.

Out of the suit, Tony made his way back to the computer workstation in his workshop; with an icepack wrapped around his upper forearm. On the way to his coffee cup, he noticed the box that Pepper had brought down, still untouched from two days before.

*Hm. Now what would Pepper be giving me that needs to be sent in a plain brown wrapper?* Tony quipped to himself.

He unwrapped the package. It was a glass box, about a foot on each side, and inside, mounted prominently, was the Mark I Arc Reactor, glowing brightly, which it would for 50 lifetimes.

And etched around the circular outer frame, were the words *"Proof That Tony Stark Has A Heart."*

Tony couldn't help but smile, and gave the gift a place of importance, next to the picture of his parents.

*Pepper yanked my heart out, mounted it and sent it back.* Tony laughed silently as he got back to work. *How...appropriate.*

Raza fingered his huge ring and studied the horizon. His plans were coming together slowly. His Master had dispatched him to be leader to one arm of the Ten Rings. His master was not one to take incompetence lightly, a trait that he passed on to his own subordinates.

But he was merciful too. Some in his place would command executions for letting Tony Stark
escape, but Raza had taken part in the fight himself, and knew that his soldiers were outclassed. He had allowed his men to live, but made it clear that there was work to do.

The weapons that could make one man ouclass an army was something worth spending time on.

It would not be the first Stark Industries weapon that Raza had managed to get hold of, but he knew that this would not be a weapon available on the market for a while.

Having moved what was left of his supplies to open desert, he was able to see a long way in many directions. There was little fortification, but if the Americans had not struck back after three months, odds were they weren't going to.

Against that was another concern. If Stark did intend to sell suits like this, it was only a matter of time before Raza would have to face Iron soldiers in battle.

To that end, he needed something to bargain with. The original suit or armor had been scavenged, and Raza's men were busily trying to piece it together like a jigsaw, using Stark's original schematics.

He would also need a better base. His people could see an attack coming, but there was still little to keep them protected. He had sent his decoy and second in command to a local village, and commanded him to get a new base set up. The people there would be cleared out; and nobody with the force would have the will to intervene.

Americans were always so squeamish when CNN was watching.

Another two hours after his test flight, and Tony was preparing his final prototype, making notes on what he'd learned from the Mark II.

"The suit is not rated for high altitude," Tony said, as though struck by revelation. "Possibly due to icing."

"Very astute sir," Jarvis said.

*Did I program this thing to be sarcastic?* Tony wondered, turning the problem over in his head. *That's Pepper's job.*

"Use the gold titanium alloy from the Seraphim Tactical Satellite. It should maintain integrity to fifty thousand feet and maintain power to weight ratio."

"Shall I render using proposed specifications?" Intoned Jarvis.

"Wow me," He said to Jarvis as he shook up the Martini shaker.

The screen lit up with a concept sketch. The design hadn't changed too much, except for the outer skin alloys, and extrapolating that was an easy enough process for Jarvis. Tony looked at the screen. It looked like the Mark II, done over in gold.

Completely in gold. "Little ostentatious isn't it?"

"What was I thinking? You're usually so discreet," Jarvis retorted.

*Ugh. No. Way too Threepio.* Tony thought. *Anything worth doing is worth doing with style.* He scanned the room for inspiration and his attention went to the Hot Rod, and the red and gold flames decals emblazoned on the hood.
"Tell ya what," He suggested as he poured. "Throw a little Hot Rod red in there."

"Oh yes, that should let you keep a low profile," Jarvis mocked. Jarvis was silent a moment as he worked. In such moments, Stark wondered idly if Jarvis was laughing at him.

The revised concept sketch came up on screen. It looked sleek, looked dangerous, looked majestic...It was the sum total of every thought he had go through his head since getting captured by Raza.

And Tony wasn't even looking at it.

Instead, he looked over his martini glass at the Flat screen Plasma TV mounted on the wall. Had that thing always been on?

The woman on the screen was familiar. She was a society reporter for one of those celebrity watch programs. Tony had met her once or twice a year or more back. He couldn't remember her name, but remembered she wasn't a real brunette. The scrawl at the bottom of the screen provided her name obligingly and confirmed the building behind her. It was the Disney Hall.

"Tonight's red-hot Red Carpet is at the Walt Disney Hall for the third annual Stark benefit for the Firefighters' Family Fund has been the go-to Charity gala on LA's high society calendar."

*The Fireman's gala? Pepper didn't tell me anything about that, did she?" Jarvis, did we get an invitation to that?"

"Not that I know of sir," Jarvis responded. "Shall I machine the needed components sir?"

"Machine away," Tony said, still looking at the screen.

The TV had been programmed to run on idle, but would activate monitors whenever certain phrases were picked up. 'Tony Stark' was one of them.

"But though his name is on the gold-embossed invitations, Tony Stark has once again been a no-show. The billionaire hasn't been seen since his controversial press conference three months ago," The personality continued.

*Three months?*

"Feeding rumors that he is suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder; and is confined to a bed. Whatever the truth, nobody expects an appearance."

*In your dreams sister!" Tony thought. But the TV had a point. He had been missing everything going on. In fact, the more he thought about it, he suddenly realized that the usual people who would be ringing him up and demanding to know when the next party was, and where they could collect their complementary perfume models were not calling. Where were they all?*

It suddenly struck Tony that he hadn't seen anybody since getting back. In fact, with the exception of the Press Conference, and going to see Rhodey, he hadn't ever left the house, and only Obadiah and Pepper had come to see him...

In fact, Tony suddenly realized. Pepper had all but moved in when he got back. How had he not realized that? She was there every day. After thinking that though for a second, he realized he was hungry. He hadn't been hungry since getting back. Pepper had brought him three squares a day; not counting coffee.
It explained why nobody had contacted him. Pepper had been taking his messages. Odds were the ones he had been ignoring were only the one in ten that she had been willing to deliver as far as the workshop.

He glanced over at the Mark I generator, mounted in glass and engraved with his name.

Tony felt a wave of guilt. He had originally fought despair in Raza's camp by telling himself that Pepper wouldn't give up on him even if she had to steal his credit cards and buy the US military to keep up the search. And yet since his return, he had thrown himself into this suit; and never even thanked her. Pepper's been hovering like an overprotective mother-hen for months, worrying I've lost my marbles while I was away, and except for asking her to yank my heart out of my chest, I haven't even talked to her. Where is she tonight?

It was his third wakeup call of the year. He was getting obsessed with this suit. He needed to be seen. He needed to be out turning heads again. Whatever else he was, he was still Tony Stark.

The room came to life as his machines got to work. "Sir the rendering process should take five hours."

Good. Tony thought. Time enough to have a night on the town.

Now. Which car do I take? The Mark II is too showy for a black tie event.

"Don't wait up for me," Tony called to Jarvis.

Then he noticed that the black t-shirt and ice-pack corsage he was wearing wasn't really appropriate either, and headed upstairs to change.

After all, Tony couldn't help but think ironically. The clothes maketh the man.

The Silver Audi screamed up to the end of the red carpet, and Tony Stark, in full tuxedo, dressed to the nines, stepped out and tossed his keys to the valet without looking.

The camera flashed grew in intensity at his arrival, as was expected of them. Tony knew that the party was inside. The Red Carpet's real function was to show off for the press. The A-List were all here, but the ones that stayed outside were doing interviews and photo ops, and Stark wasn't here to be seen by cameras. Not primarily anyway. They would have their fill with his entrance.

One such member of the A-list, a beautiful woman whom he must have known once and likely only once, turned to meet him at the red carpet. "Hey, remember me?" She asked him playfully.

Stark didn't even slow his stride. "Sure don't," He made his way up toward the entrance, giving Hugh Hefner a wave as he walked.

And there, holding court at the door with a small group of reporters; was Obadiah. "Weapons are only one small part of what Stark Industries..."

The reporters lost interest instantly as Tony came up the steps to the door.

The reporters moved fast. Obadiah moved faster. "Didn't expect to see you here."

"What's the world coming to when you have to crash your own party?" Tony quipped. "See you inside."
"Take it slow," Stane warned him. "I've got the Board right where I want them..."

Tony nodded obligingly. He understood. No interviews, no impromptu soapbox speeches, just here to be seen.

Tony breezed in, many of the guests turned to him instantly, paying due tribute to their host. It was easy to find his footing among them again. Everyone who should be in this room was here; everyone who did not belong was safely out of sight. The air smelled of power and money, and rightfully so. Eveningwear, dance floor, expensive dining, socialites...

Music played cheerfully, the drinks flowed smoothly, and the lights were warm and motivated the idle wealthy to donate freely.

Tony drank it in. He'd almost forgotten how much he fit in here. The people in this room were elite, and he was the top of the chart. The people in this room were powerful. They had no idea the power he really had.

Swaying into step with the rhythm of this place, he made his way to the bar of course, and the bartender recognized him instantly. Tony waved him over. "Scotch please, I'm starving."

"Mr. Stark."

Tony turned around and found himself face to face with somebody he didn't recognize. "Yeah?"

The man held out his hand and Tony shook it. "Agent Coulson."

The name took a few seconds to track. He briefly remembered something about an incomprehensible company name. "Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, the guy from the..."

"Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division. " Coulson finished. He was clearly used to people forgetting the name.

That was it. Names don't come more incomprehensible than that. "Whew!" he said aloud. "God, you really need a new name for that."

Tony noticed someone across the room. She was getting some attention, and Tony could see why. Dark lavender dress, stunning without being less than classy. The dress was backless, showing a very well constructed back made of smooth creamy skin, offset by the bright red hair.

Tony knew he had to get a closer look. A much closer look.

"Yeah, I hear that a lot," Coulson commiserated; unaware that Stark was a million miles away.

Tony continued the conversation without looking away from the dress, and the woman wearing it. Then she turned around.

Holy god! Tony's famous indifference shattered. That's Pepper! Pepper's hot! Agh!

"Tell you what, Agent Coulson," He heard his voice saying. "I see my assistant over there, how about I go over and...make a date."

"Thank you," Coulson was apparently satisfied with that.

Tony meanwhile, busily fought down the instinct to put his eyes out. He had found Pepper to be attractive. Very attractive in fact. That couldn't be right.
Tony fought for his usual cool. *Get a grip Tony.* He smirked. *Good idea; the music's starting.*

_Waist or hips?_

Tony smacked that thought away. *This isn't some girl; this isn't some model, or a one night stand. This is Pepper. This is your Pepper. You can't see her as hot. She's too...too Pepper.*

Somehow, this internal screaming match didn't even slow him down from walking straight up to her. "Excuse me Miss Potts, can I get five minutes?"

She turned and the deer-in-headlights look she gave him was adorable. _Adorable? When did Pepper become hot and adorable?_

Pepper had been enjoying the party a fair bit. She had finally found an excuse to wear the dress she'd bought herself months before; and she knew she looked great in it. She had resolved to enjoy the night, and let her hair down for once, literally as it turned out.

It was the first time she'd ever done so. After seven years cleaning up after hurricane Stark, she finally realized that the only thing to combat those persistent rumors that followed her around whenever Tony's former assistants appeared in the tabloids; was the fact that she hadn't been fired yet. When Tony had returned, and she'd all but moved into his house again like she had during his captivity, she found herself identifying far too much with some of the characters in 'The Devil Wears Prada'.

Not that Tony would ever be deliberately cruel. Or even indirectly cruel. Not with her at least.

It was this sort of thought progression that had led her to buy the damn dress in the first place. She knew when she bought it that it was a rebellion to her entire lifestyle. This dress was made to be seen, and she was getting more than a few long looks for it.

In fact, she was pretty proud of herself for the way it had turned out.

So why did she suddenly feel like she'd been caught out doing something wrong when she heard Tony's voice?

"Hey!" She chirped before she could help herself. "What are you doing here?"

"I hardly recognized you. Where'd you get that dress?"

Pepper was well familiar with his voice when speaking to women at parties. He wasn't being lecherous, his tone was frankly admiring. In fact, a lot of people at this party had been checking her out, and until now she was feeling pretty good about it.

But she suddenly felt incredibly self-conscious. "It was a birthday present...from you, actually."

Tony grinned in realization. "I got great taste, don't I?"

_You do when I do your shopping._ Pepper thought. It was an old joke between them.

"You wanna dance?" Tony quizzed.

*Yes! No! Keep it Professional, Pepper! "Oh, no, thank you," She said politely.*

Tony grinned, as though he'd heard what he wanted to, which was probably the case, and he started leading her to the dance floor. "All right, come on."
Pepper wasn't quite sure what was going on. He wasn't dragging her, her feet were moving along quite willingly. He wasn't insisting, and he wasn't pressuring her since he was her employer...in fact she felt as though she was doing him a favor since he'd asked...But somehow Pepper was terrified and thrilled at the same time. She was telling her feet to take her off the dance floor, and yet it was like the dance was already underway, and Tony's was leading the waltz.

They reached the centre of the dance floor, he gave her a little twirl, and suddenly she was dancing.

With Tony.

_I am dancing with Tony. I am wearing a very elegant very sexy dress that I feel good in, at the place to be seen among the A-List, at the top party of the year and I am slow dancing with Tony Stark. I hope everyone is watching._ For a microsecond she let herself feel intoxicated in the moment, when suddenly it hit her. _Oh hell! Everybody must be watching! What the Hell am I thinking wearing this dress? I must be so obvious! Everybody's watching me dance with Tony Stark!_

Tony could clearly sense her growing panic attack and started distracting her. He was good at that. Even better at using the distraction to relax her. "Am I making you uncomfortable?"

Pepper started to babble. "Oh, no...I always forget to put on deodorant and wear a backless dress and dance with my boss in front of everybody."

_Babbling was a nervous habit for her, one that only ever came up with Tony, and even then, only when he gave her that look. The look he was giving her right now. The one that said 'who are you, where did you come from and what saintly thing did I do in a previous life to deserve you?'_

"Well, you look great," Tony remarked and Pepper could feel her face blushing as red as her hair. "You smell great," he continued and she could feel her blush going down her neck, and her bare back; "And if it'll take the edge off, I could always fire you."

Ah. Now that was a shot she could get a grip on. "I don't think you could tie your shoes without me."

"I'd last a week," Tony murmured.

Pepper smiled smugly. "What's your social security number?"

Long silence. Pepper didn't notice her movements becoming smooth and relaxed as they moved together in a gentle circle. "Um...Five," he said finally.

There was a gentle sway between them as she relaxed into it and they got closer. "You're missing a few digits actually..."'

"I've got you for the other eight," Tony smirked. He had an adorable look of..._whoa, down girl!_ She caught herself. _When did Tony become 'adorable'? And when did Mr. Stark become 'Tony'?_

He was giving her _that_ look again. They were almost nose to nose, and he was looking at her like she was...

Tony noticed her nerves returning. "Want some air?"

"Yes. I want air," Pepper said instantly.

Tony gave her that look again and led the way out.
She hadn't stopped babbling since they'd got to the roof balcony. She knew he found her babbling to be cute. It was why they had such a good dynamic, with him trying to fluster her; and her being more unflappable than anybody he'd ever met.

"That was totally weird," Pepper said for the seventh time.

"Totally harmless," Tony told her for the eighth time.

"It was totally, not harmless," She countered, hearing her voice go off on a tangent again. "In front of… you know; everybody…No! And you know why?"

"I think you've lost objectivity here," Tony was trying to calm her down. "We just danced.

Bless him, She thought. Always making the lady feel comfortable. Stop it! That's the point you twit!

"No!" Pepper would have shouted if she wasn't whispering. "It was not just a dance, you don't understand because, you're you, and… everybody knows you, and exactly how you are with girls, and all of that, which is completely fine," She could feel her brain screaming 'Shut up!' at her mouth, but her mouth wasn't listening. "But then, y'know, me, I'm me, and you're my boss, and I'm dancing-"

"I really think you're making too much of it..." Tony said soothingly.

"Makes me look like the one that's trying to…"

"I just think you're overreacting a little bit-"

Pepper was still babbling. "And we're here, and I'm..." She licked her lips, finally running out of breath slowly. "Wearing this ridiculous dress, and then… we were dancing, like that…"

Like what? She asked herself. Like a date?

She was staring at him, wondering briefly exactly what she was worried about. What if he was right, what if this was just a harmless casual, meaningless dance with one of the few people that Tony had in his life for more than ten minutes?

Her brain started screaming warning signals again, realizing just how close they were standing to each other.

Tony was giving her that look again. He was waiting for her to make some kind of a point, maybe define what the problem was...

After a fraction of a second, Pepper decided she had to know one way or another. She leaned forward, lips parted, a clear invitation.

And Tony leaned in to meet her halfway.

Whoa! Pepper told herself. BACK WOMAN BACK!

Pepper stopped herself at exactly the last second before their lips touched. And to her horror, she realized the he was drawing back slightly with an identical look.

There was an incredibly intense moment as they stared at each other like total strangers. Somehow she was very short of breath, as was he.
Pepper wasn't sure what was more horrifying. That she had almost kissed Tony, or that she hadn't actually kissed Tony.

What do I do? What do I do? What do I do?

Oh so now you want to think about what you're doing, do you?

Say something. Anything.

"I would like a drink," Pepper heard her voice say slowly.

"Got it." Tony said instantly. He seemed grateful for something to break the moment too.

Tony headed back for the door inside.

Ah Hell with it, the moment is over and he's paying. "I would like a-a vodka martini please," She drawled, sounding absolutely exhausted. "Very dry with olives, lots of olives; like at least three olives."

Pepper. She begged herself. Please. Just. Stop. TALKING!

Pepper almost sagged with relief as he left the roof and she could think again.

Thank merciful heaven she had managed to pull back when she did. If she had actually kissed him they'd probably be halfway to his place by now.

What the Hell were you thinking Tony? You can't just...kiss her. This isn't just some girl. This is Pepper. This is your Pepper. Tony repeated the Mantra as he headed for the bar. He just repeated the Mantra, over and over. This isn't just some girl. This is Pepper. This is your Pepper.

He made it to the bar and stuck a hundred dollar bill in the tip jar. "Two Vodka martini's extra dry extra olives, extra fast. Make one of them dirty will ya?"

The bartender saw the size of the tip and actually scurried to obey.

It wasn't as if Tony was unaware that Pepper was an attractive woman. She was beautiful. He knew it the first time he met her. The moment he hired her in fact. Somehow...He had forgotten to look at her that way over the years...

And it wasn't that they had to work together. Professional distance hadn't exactly been a deal-breaker for him with other co-workers...So why had this come as such a thunderbolt?

Pepper is different. The answer came. She's special. She's too...Pepper.

Tony smirked. He was the one that had given her that nickname; when he hired her on as his personal assistant. She hated hearing it at first, but he said she would get used to it.

And she had.

Tony came out of the memory and wondered briefly if she remembered threatening to use that Pepper Spray all those years ago...

He recited his mantra as the bartender came back with two martini glasses. This isn't some girl. This isn't some model, or a one night stand.
As if the fates had heard him, he turned around and saw a familiar blonde coming toward him like a laser guided missile. Oh help! I forgot her name! Is there nowhere I can go where I won't run into some hot blonde whose name I should remember? Other than Afghanistan that is?

He turned back to the bar and ducked his head as she closed in. He wasn't supposed to be here, maybe she hadn't noticed him.

"Well, Tony Stark!" She said, as if amused to see him.

Tony remembered what his father had told him about such situations. Never smile at a crocodile.

Tony searched for a nametag or a necklace with her name engraved into it. No such luck. He scrambled like crazy. Dig, dig…

"Carrie," He guessed.

"Christine," She said in the exact same moment, and finally Tony's memory of the night before leaving for Afghanistan came crashing back to him.

Christine Everheart. The predatory one with the fangs and claws.

Raza was your punishment for Violence, Tony. Everheart is your punishment for Vice.

Tony finally turned to face her fully and she put those sub-zero eyes right in his face. "You have a lot of nerve showing up here tonight. Can I at least get a reaction from you?"

"Panic? How's that?"

"I was referring to your company's involvement in this latest atrocity-"

"Hey, they just put my name on the invitations..." Glib wasn't working and he knew it.

"Y'know, for just a second there, I actually almost bought it, hook line and sinker," Everheart almost growled. He had heard her growling before, this was much less fun.

Tony was fed up. Everheart had hated his guts the whole time. Was she really expecting a second date? "I was out of town for a couple of months, in case you didn't hear?"

"Is this what you call accountability?" Everheart demanded, and handed him a sleeve of photos.

Relieved she was talking about something else; he took a look at the photos and went dead. Cold and hard. Iron and steel. He almost wished he had his armor with him. It would have suited his mood perfectly. "When were these taken?" He could almost convince himself it was months ago.

"Yesterday. In a village called Gulmira. Heard of it?" her tone said she was expecting him not to. But he had. Yinsen...oh no...

Each photo was another damning condemnation. They were Raza's men. Tony knew all their faces, and even if he didn't those thrice-damned Ten Rings Insignia would have been a giveaway. Raza's men, carrying Stark weapons. Undamaged, unburnt, Stark weapons, using them to march people to a wall full of blood and bullet holes...

Everheart was still talking. Tony almost didn't hear her. He was too busy staring at the 8 X 10 in his hand. Right there, front and centre, surrounded by a wrecked village, was a Jericho Missile system, fresh off the assembly line. Freshly fired too apparently.
Tony looked up from the photos, and suddenly noticed where he was. This was still Disney Hall wasn't it? It didn't look right. Who are all these people standing around?

"I didn't approve this shipment," Tony told her honestly.

"Someone in your company did," Everheart was merciless.

Tony wasn't feeling particularly merciful himself. Someone highly placed in his company was playing dirty, and there was a body count rising as a result.

"Well I'm not my company."

Obadiah. Tony thought coldly. *He's your lion-tamer on the board. Find him, put the screws to him, he finds the traitor, and then you can feed him to a shark. Tony Shark. That has a nice ring to it.*

"Come with me," He told Everheart.

Stane hadn't moved from the Red Carpet when Tony had all but bullied him into taking a break from his interviews and facing up to what Tony was showing him.

"Did you see these photos?" Stark pressed him; horrified that Stane was being so calm. If Stane was being calm about this, it meant he already knew. "What's going on?"

"Tony, you can't afford to be this naïve."

Tony was suddenly blazing with intensity. "You know what? I was naïve before, when somebody said to me 'Here's a line, we don't cross it. This is how we do business.' If we're double-dealing under the table… Are we?"

Stane looked at Tony and apparently realized that the younger man wasn't going to be forced off this subject.

Another camera bulb flashed, with the two men glaring electrically at each other.

"Let's take a picture," Stane said finally, and the two men turned to the ever-present photographers, putting their public faces on. "Picture time!"

Obadiah had commanded him not to cause a scene. Tony was agreeable to that, ten minutes ago. Now there was just a suffocating anger. It was a pounding noise through his head, like a heavy rock beat, played by a vengeful god, howling for blood.

"Tony," Obadiah said quietly, still smiling to the flashing cameras. "Who do you think locked you out? I'm the one that's filing the injunction against you."

Stark felt his head explode. There was simply no other way to describe it. His head was exploding, right here in front of everyone.

"It was the only way to protect you."

*Protect me?* The Paradigm Shift was painful. Obadiah was the one squeezing him out. With the stock his father had left to them both, he might actually have enough for a majority if he could wrangle the Board. The bastard had muscled him out of the company with his Name on the side of the building. With his *Father's* name on the side of the building. He fought to keep his expression even as he glared at his former friend. *You thief. Were you just waiting for your chance even with my father? Did I throw a wrench in your plans when I turned Twenty One? Were you waiting for*
The bastard had brought him a pizza. A New York pizza. Tony loved New York Pizzas. Like a friend. Like a pal. And it was a good pizza too!

Stane walked off back down the red carpet, toward his car.

Tony kept his poker face. It was the only thing he could bring any willpower to bear on; and only then because going ballistic in front of the cameras would be all Stane would need to have him committed. He certainly wasn't going to give the thief the satisfaction.

And somehow, all he could focus on was the photos that Everheart had given him.

Someone was double-dealing weapons under the table to Raza. To Raza! And he had thought it was one of the Bloodthirsty Board. And he had gone running to his old friend Obadiah, to help him identify the rotten apple, only to find...

Tony knew the second he had seen the pictures of the weapons. Whoever had filed the injunction was the one dealing weapons, because the injunction had been filed immediately after Tony had shifted the company away from weapon production.

Obadiah had filed the injunction.

Tony felt like going back inside and screaming at everybody there. *What is the matter with these people? People like Yinsen are dying, and you guys are in here fiddling while Rome burns! Let them eat cake! WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU ALL?!*

*The exact same thing that was wrong with you six months ago. Tony knew.*

He wanted his armor. The Mark III should be getting close to ready by now.

Tony nearly ran home.

He had forgotten Pepper completely.

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*Shut down Stane, Tony. He ordered himself. Stane is dealing weapons behind your back. If you can prove it, you can get control of your weapons back. If you can prove it, you can put Stane in jail, and stop the shipments.*

He looked back at the picture of the Jericho. There was a serial number on the side. He could trace that.

There was a family sobbing over a body in the background of the picture.

Tony almost crushed the photo in his fist, feeling the frustrated rage boiling over him again. He needed something.

His father had noticed Tony's interest in engineering, and had personally taught him about the tools they had use of. His first lesson was a pencil and paper. Howard Stark had told his son to draw his own hands.

It had taken Tony weeks to figure out how. The more he worked at it, the more complex his hands had become.

"Engineers are dreamers with tools," His father had said. "And your hands are the first tools given
to you. If you can't make them work, none of your other tools will do the job you want them to do right."

His father had taught him that weapons were tools too. His hands were the first tools given him, and he had learned their use well.

They were not equal to the task once; and he needed Pepper's hands to take up the slack. He wanted to get the gloves right above all others. If the gauntlet/gloves did not work correctly, then neither would the flight stabilizers, and neither would anything else.

Make a fist. The Armor. The Mark III glove might need adjustment. That would clear his head.

No such luck. The TV News had picked up the minor genocide going on in Yinsen's home village. And an hour later he was in cargo pants and white singlet, opening and closing his gauntleted fist. The red glove was hooked up to his Arc Reactor, the movements were smooth and precise, but they could be better.

"Recent violence has been attributed to a group of foreign fighters referred to by locals at the 'Ten Rings'," The report continued.

Tony didn't react. He just kept opening and closing his fist, making adjustments with a six inch screwdriver.

Find the proof, stop Obadiah, get control of your company back, get the shipments stopped, find where the last ones went, and shut them down.

"As you can see, these men are well armed, and on a mission," Footage of the Jericho missile appeared on screen. "A mission that could prove fatal to anyone that stands in their way."

And in the meantime, the killing goes on. Tony was boiling, but he just opened and closed his gauntleted fist again; made an adjustment.

Tony remembered his escape. He could have fired those jets sooner. Down on his knees, his armor getting ripped apart around him, he kept firing, but not at his enemies. He kept firing at the weapons. The Stark Industries weapons. He could see Yinsen's lifeless eyes staring back at him and roared. Yinsen had been killed by a bullet with a Stark logo on it.

Not my weapons. Stark growled. Not my legacy.

"With no political will or international pressure, there's very little hope for these refugees," the reporter continued. "Around me, a woman begging for news on her husband, who was kidnapped by insurgents. And nowhere to be seen is anyone who can answer a child's simple question 'Where are my mother and father?""

Tony remembered that first repulsor blast. He pictured what did to his lab. He pictured what it would do to a man like Raza.

As if to make sure he hadn't imagined it, he stood, slowly walked away from the TV like he was sleepwalking. Stark turned to face something at random, and lifted his bright red gauntlet.

I should be dead already. Unless it was for a reason. I just finally know what I have to do.

Tony remembered the recoil from last time and planted his feet hard.

"There's very little hope for these refugees. Refugees who wonder: Who, if anyone, can help?"
He opened his hand and triggered the repulsor, ripping one of the fluorescent lights clean off the ceiling; the recoil throwing his hand back over his shoulder.

A long moment as Stark considered the result with satisfaction. Then he turned and looked for something else to destroy.

Tony blasted the glass door to his workshop. It shattered most agreeably. Tony's fury blazed and he fired again at the glass wall panel next to it, and again, then once more, he moved with the recoil and spun like a gunfighter; till there was nothing left of glass in the room to smash.

The lab looked like a disaster area. Like Raza's camp. Like Yinsen's home town.

*Cut off the head Tony. Cut off the supply line, cut off Obadiah. That's how you do this. It's the law. And your armor aside, you aren't a soldier.* Tony told himself firmly. *On the other hand...nah.*

*You've been a weapon-eer all your life Stark. An Iron Monger, a Death Dealer.* He told himself angrily. *It's about time you deigned to get your hands dirty.*

Tony had used his garage to upgrade his cars since he was eighteen. In his house was all the necessary apparatus to fabricate design and construct a car from the ground up if he wanted to.

Once, while purchasing and outfitting an ATV factory, he had noticed the speed with which an automated machine assembly line could churn out a dozen cars.

Realizing the potential, he had a private assembly system set up on his garage. A move that needed some serious renovations to his home, but he was convinced it was worth it. The cars and their engines were his hobby. Something obsessive really, and getting his own assembly room had made Pepper happy as it helped him finish with his toys faster.

But now, with Jarvis at the helm of these machines, the assembly room had a different purpose.

*Not so different.* Tony reflected. *This suit is an All Terrain Vehicle. It's a transport, an armored car...*

*You've been called the DaVinci of out times, what do you say to that?*

Tony stood in between the machines that framed him; and spread his limbs, standing in a perfect spread eagle.

*I say, that DaVinci designed the Vitruvian man...Tony thought as the machines moved in to construct him. A human raised to perfect specifications, made greater than normal. Human made superhuman.*

The assembly machines worked fast and methodical. They fitted him with his torso. The chest piece was fitted into place, then the back, both halves screwed together into a seamless piece by the motorized equipment. The limbs of the suit were brought to him like personal tailors making him a new jacket. His arms slid into the sleeves, as smoothly as a dream. While his arms were being fitted, the machines raised him off the ground and locked the lower pieces of the armor into place from waist to toes.

The gloves came to him, the most familiar part of his new self. He was proud of the gloves more than any other part. They didn't restrict his movement at all. As it should be. Now his every tool had been upgraded by what he had created.
The machines released him from their protective hold and he dropped to his own freshly-armored feet. He checked his reflection in the windshield of the nearby hot Rod. He was still Tony Stark. From the neck down he was the machine. But he was Still Tony Stark. Still his face, and all that it brought with it.

The last of the machine arms fulfilled their purpose, fitting his neck into place, and the faceplate came with it. It was the most difficult decision to make, designing the head. Giving the Mark III a face was too 'Metropolis.' Making it a mask that pulled on from above was too 'Batman'. Finally, he settled on having the faceplate on a pivot, and it came down over his face like powerful metal jaws.

The construction was efficient, the result was perfection. His skin gleamed, his stance straight and casual in its power. Massive power. Dynamic power.

Red boots and gloves, golden limbs and face, over a hot-rod red torso.

*I am the Vitruvian man...* Tony exulted.

The mask closed over his face. It wasn't an exo-suit. It was armor. No other word applied. Stane was right. They were iron mongers by profession. The 21st century equivalent of a blacksmith, commissioned by the king to make their swords and shields. Nobody had worn a suit of armor in over a century. But he was wearing something elite. King Arthur would have handed over Excalibur in a heartbeat when faced with the Iron Knight he was.

Gold, and red. Colors of power and wealth.

He was wrong. Mark III was not a name for this. Mark III was cold, clinical, and totally wrong for how this felt. This was elemental. *He* was elemental. He had to think of something to call this.

Metallo? Taken.

Titanium Man? Too James Bond.

Gold Knight? Too 'Power Rangers'.

The Armored Man? Oh, *Hell* no!

*Focus Tony!* He ordered himself. *People are dying. And you're going to protect them.*


Tony leveled out as he flew, high enough to see the curve of the earth beneath him, and poured the power on. His altitude would keep him from being tracked or seen, and cut down his travel time considerably. Just up and over everything to his goal.

*Birds can't fly this high. Planes would have to work for it.*

The cold didn't hamper him any longer. Nothing did. Gravity, air, temperature, distance...those were other people's problems. Not him. Not what he had become. Not what he had made himself.

Tony was so entranced by the view, that after a while he had Jarvis take full control and rolled over to fly on his back, and looked up. The moon, the stars, the black between worlds.

The Iron Man was above it all, and beneath everything else. Whoever said getting there was half the fun knew what he was talking about.
He lost all perception of how long he had been flying. It would have been so easy never to land. He wanted his armor when Everheart had confronted him. Things were so much simpler within his armor. Much simpler than when on the ground.

Nothing for his earthbound self but old debts, incurred in blood.

Debts to be repaid.

_God?_ He prayed as he flew. _I know that this is a bit hypocritical given the way I've been...well, roughly since birth. But I've never asked You for anything before. Not when my dad died, not when I took over the company, not even when I was being held prisoner in that cave, watching Yinsen die. But now I'm asking._

_Please God, let Raza be there personally._

The man that Stark had dubbed Kid-Khan was having a difficult time of it. The people of Gulmira were not warriors, but had lived in a near constant warzone for most of their lives. Most of them had hiding places and hidden supplies prepared for a day just such as this.

Kid-Khan had needed to do some serious groveling to save his life once Stark had escaped. The fact that the Americans had discovered the Ten Ring's base camp as a direct result of Stark's hugely destructive getaway meant that a new stronghold had to be found.

If there was any hope of moving everything that had survived, and hiding the arrival of replacement supplies and weapons, the local populations had to be cleared out.

But though they were incapable of putting up much of a fight, the villagers were making it hard for him, darting in and out of houses like ghosts.

So followed the exhaustive process of methodically kicking in every door, and gunning down those who were hiding. This resulted in flushing out most of the others, who then needed to be captured.

Raza had given specific instructions on this point. The young men, and fathers were likely to be the higher risks, and they were to be executed immediately. The demoralizing effect would quickly motivate the women and children to obey.

One young boy had apparently missed the point, and broken free of his guards to run toward his father, who was on his knees waiting to be killed.

Kid-Khan couldn't stand for that. Raza was on his way and expected the matter to be closed by his arrival. With his patience gone, Kid-Khan shoved the screaming boy away and started taking out his frustrations on the father, kicking him as hard as he could.

Iron Man struck.

Kid-Khan looked up in shock as a sonic-boom filled the air. The American's had been staying out of the village because there were civilian hostages there, but something was clearly coming fast from the sky, and it was heading straight for them.

It flared its limbs out in the last moment before impact and came down with a clang, like a steel drum on stone...

And everybody stared blankly at it.
'It' was the correct term. It was not a 'He'.

It smelled of ozone and power as it rose from a deadly crouch to stand at over two-meters tall. Its body was polished gold and blood red. Its eyes flashed with white-blue fire from behind a faceless gold mask.

There was an electric silence, and the Army of the Ten Rings came back for round two, against the Invincible Iron Man.

Gunfire rang out, and sparks glanced off his skin. It was possible there were scuffs on the paint job, but nobody could get close enough to be sure.

The iron man stood there and let it happen for a few seconds, before pouncing forward with an uppercut that sent one gunman up, onto the roof of the house behind him.

Inside the suit, cool as ice, Stark surveyed the battle.

His HUD had painted all the targets

Kid-Khan clearly had a flash of Deja Vu. It was the second time he had faced a bullet-proof death machine coming for him.

The tactic worked the first time, so he apparently did it again. He sent his soldiers to fight and ran the other way.

Iron Man was content to let him run. There was nowhere to go.

Bullets glanced off his armor. For the most part, they were harmless. The skin of this suit was made from a gold-titanium alloy reserved for the Seraphim satellite, designed to survive impacts with space junk, micro meteorites...small arms fire meant nothing.

Iron Man raised an open palm toward the second man. A half-second whine of power gathering, and a repulsor blast sent him flying. A half turn toward his left and a second blast sent the next one head over heels. Two steps, and both hands fired a concentrated blast into the third, trying to throw him in two directions at the same time.

Iron Man spun again, both hands raised...

And froze.

His opponents had done the math. He had the power. He had the superior firepower, and they reacted in the time honored custom of terrorists presented with superior forces: They hid themselves behind human shields.

About half a dozen of the Ten Rings soldiers had hostages. The women and children were being held down on their knees, each of them with a gun to their heads.

Iron Man held his hands out to the sides, and made a show of letting the glowing power sources in his palms fade to nothing.

But invisible to them, Stark started marking everyone in front of him carefully.

**Classified Target: 8-12 Civilian.**

**Code Name:** Hostages
Classified Target: 1-7: Hostile.

Code Name: Terrorists.

Micro-Missiles: Online.

The iron man's shoulders seemed to raise themselves, and in the same second, exploded into movement as two dozen missiles the size of low caliber bullets sought their prey.

In the blink of an eye it was over; and each gunman dropped to the ground, all of them with a look of surprise.

One or two of the women covered their eyes, or those of their children.

The boy broke away from her and ran over to his father, who met him halfway emotionally.

Iron Man saw them looking at him, thanking him...

He was already moving.

Kid-Khan had retreated past the end of the street, and had doubled back to hide behind a stone wall.

He was almost positive that it was Stark, back for revenge, and if the armor was any indication, he was better prepared this time. The speed with which this armor moved had made it clear that there was no outrunning him this time. His best bet was to stay hidden and hope that Stark hadn't counted his opponents too closely.

No such luck. A blood-red glove smashed through the solid concrete wall behind him, caught him by the scruff of the neck, and pulled him straight through the wall, throwing him back into the middle of the wrecked town.

The man was rolling on the ground in agony, feeling his bones broken from going through the wall, and saw the death Machine glaring down at him.

Kid-Khan closed his eyes and waited for the end to come as his enemy's bright red gloves flared to a bright light.

But the final blow never came, and the air seemed to shake apart around him. He opened his eyes and saw their iron attacker lifting off.

"He's all yours," The man said as he started to fly away.

Lying on the ground, the last terrorist looked up weakly as his unchained prey started to close in on him.

Iron Man flew like the guided missile he was, moving in on the primary targets. His eyes found the Jericho Missile in the distance, his HUD put up the schematics helpfully.

Jericho Missiles. Tony thought savagely. Every major disaster of the last year has been because of these damn missiles. Let me show you what Stark Technology can really do.

As if to answer him, something hit him hard enough to pound his armor into the back of his body, bent inwardly against his spine.
The impact spun him hard and fast into the ground, powerfully enough to crater the ground.

Really annoyed now, Tony put a hand at the edge of the crater, and levered himself back to standing position on solid ground.

At the end of the street was a Tank, aiming a turret at him.

*Stark Industries motion trackers.* The design jumped up on his HUD. *Able to predict flight trajectories to varying degrees of accuracy; making it possible to hit one missile with another given the right circumstances.*

**Classified Target:** Hostile.

**Code Name:** Combat Tank.

**Cobra-Missiles:** Online.

**INCOMING. AUTOMATIC EVASIVE ENGAGED.**

The tank fired again, and Iron Man swiveled his upper body instantly. The shell missed him easily.

Iron Man lifted an arm. A small missile raised itself from his forearm, and took off, spearing down the street, straight down the Tank's Main Turret with a metallic *clunk*.

Iron Man didn't even bother to watch, turning toward the Jericho while the Tank erupted from within behind him.

*Oh I've gotta get a superhero name and patent it.* Tony exulted. *There's gotta be movies, action figures, comic books, video games...but first...*

Another five or six terrorists were protecting the missile launcher, and opened fire as he got closer. Tony didn't bother. He had just knocked down a tank without even looking. The small caliber bullets were nothing.

Iron Man launched himself to a hover; about fifteen feet up, and aimed his gauntlets at the missile launcher.

Unseen by the preoccupied Iron Man, Raza was approaching the village with two trucks worth of reinforcements; when the site of his future base-camp exploded.

And, as before, from the burst of cloud came a single straight line of fire and light, led by a humanoid figure in a metal suit. Only this time, it paused in midair, hovered over the battlefield, then hovered over to the village itself. Apparently satisfied with what it saw, the flying machine turned for the sky and took off with the speed of a jet fighter.

*Stark.* Raza thought darkly. *Not one to let things go, are you?*

The United States, even when not actively at war, was engaged in military action in various locations around the world. The air and oceans of the world needed to be patrolled and protected, and thanks to satellite technology and advanced secure communications, decisions could be made and active combat areas could be monitored around the globe in real time. Edwards Air Force base was the Air Combat Command Centre.
And on the screen, the small village of Gulmira, under surveillance, was suddenly hidden underneath a birds-eye view of a massive explosion. Colonel Sheppard, the officer of the watch was the first one on his feet.

"What the Hell was that?" Sheppard demanded. "Were we cleared to go in there?"

"No sir. We got word they were using human shields. We never got the green light."

Colonel Sheppard ran through the checklist, trying to decide which of the US military factions had decided to play without telling the other children. "Call State, they're gonna be all over this."

His men were working the checklist too. "Wasn't Navy."

Sheppard took that in without flinching. "Somebody get CIA on the line."

His second in command immediately turned. "I've got Langley now; they want to know if it's us."

"And it wasn't Air Force."

"Wasn't Marines."

"People, we need answers, can I please get eyes on target?!"

Another rapid burst of activity and the view screen lit up with Spy Satellite footage, showing a remarkably small, but Mach Speed aircraft, heading toward the ocean.

Nobody had a clue what it was.

With the checklist a dead end, and the bogey not matching anything on file, there was one option left. "Get me Colonel Rhodes from Weapons Development down here now!"

It took Rhodes less than two minutes to get to the Command Centre, during which time everyone confirmed what they already knew. This was not any aircraft that had been seen before.

"We ran an ID check, cross-referenced with all known databases, we got nothing," Sheppard briefed Rhodes; who immediately got to work.

"Any high altitude surveillance in the region?"

"Got an AWAC and a Global Hawk in the area."

Rhodes checked the recorded images. "This thing just appeared out of nowhere? How come it didn't show up on radar?"

It was a general question to the floor but the Radar operator answered him. "It's got a minimal Radar cross-section sir."

"Is it Stealth?"

"No sir, it's tiny. We think it's an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle."

A UAV? Rhodes studied the screen, and noticed the GPS. The attack had come less than five miles from where Tony had been held captive. Tony Stark had come to him a few months before saying he was working on something big. He said it wasn't for the military too. And now his captors or their allies were being blown up without permission or the knowledge of anyone in the Armed Services.
Tony, what the Hell are you doing?

Rhodes felt his face harden. "Let me make a call."

Iron Man was in the zone, feeling the wind rushing past him, feeling indestructible, especially given that he'd just been in a dustup with twenty guns and a tank, when of all things he got a phone call on his cell phone.

Damn things never let you finish a thought do they? He snaked to himself, and answered it. "Hello?" Somebody answered him but he couldn't tell what they were saying. "Who is this?" Stark called, a little louder. Jarvis obligingly checked the caller ID and put Rhodes' picture up on the HUD. Tony winced. He'd wondered if anyone would notice his arrival or his attack. If they had, there were very few people who could explain what was likely to be attacking, and it would only be a matter of time before somebody came to him.

Rhodes' said something. Tony could barely make him out. "Speak up please!"

Jarvis obligingly turned up the volume on the incoming call.

"What the Hell is that noise?" Rhodes asked.

Tony thought fast. "I'm driving with the top down."

"Well, I need your help right now."

"Funny how that works, huh?"

"Yeah. Speaking of funny, we got a weapons depot that was just blown up a few klicks from where you were being held."

Tony winced again. This was happening a lot faster than he'd anticipated. "Well, I'd say that's a hot spot. Sounds..." he sucked in a breath, tired from the slowly draining adrenaline, and the pain in his side from the tank's blast. "...like someone stepped in and did your job for you."

Rhodes suddenly sounded suspicious. "Why do you sound out of breath, Tony?"

"I'm not. I was just jogging through the canyon."

"I thought you were driving."

Oops. "Right, I was driving...to the canyon...where I'm going for a jog," Sure, Tony thought sarcastically. He'll buy that. It's not like an Air Force colonel is smart or anything.

"You sure you don't have any tech in that area I should know about?" Rhodes's tone was clear as crystal.

He knows. Maybe not that it's me, but at least that I'm the one behind it. Bluff it out Tony. "Nope."

"Good, because we got a lock on something in the No Fly and we're about to blow it to kingdom come,"

No Fly?

As if on cue, a pair of F-22's came cruising up behind him in the air. Iron Man glanced over his shoulder at them.
"That's my exit!" Stark said brightly and disconnected the call, before spinning off axis in a desperate evasive maneuver.

Both jets broke formation and pursued.

Iron Man flared his repulsors and took off, taking advantage of his smaller size and speed to spin in a short hard loop and blow past the pilots before they could react.

No such luck. They had read that move almost before he had made it. These were trained experienced pilots. Tony had only just taught himself to fly.

The two jets were cutting him off in classic pincer tactics, aware he could dodge, they parted, one above, one below, shifting left and right to cover every movement backward he could make, herding him forward into their gun sights.

"This is Whiplash One, I have the Bogey in my sights."

The bogey was small and fast on the screen. Nobody in the Air Command Centre had a clue what to make of it.

"Whiplash One, What is it?"

"I have no idea."

"Do you have radio contact?"

"Negative, completely non-responsive."

"You are clear to engage."

Rhodes watched the screen, feeling his adrenaline flow. There wasn't a combat pilot alive that didn't love the hunt, even if it was only on a screen; it was hardwired into their brains.

But this bogey was a new prey.

"Bogey just went supersonic!" Hollered Whiplash One.

The gun-camera blurred slightly as the fighter jet carrying it raced to catch up.

"I've got a lock! Fox Two."

A missile screamed away from the gun-camera, toward the small red target, which suddenly burst into a swarm of fireflies, and a massive explosion clouded everything, the wall of flame closing in on the camera. The pilot reacted, sending his plane into a fast looping swerve. "Bogey deployed flares!"

The lead jet was in too close to his own blast, and the ACC controller switched to the camera of the second plane, showing a clear shot of the bogey and the lead jet evading in opposite reverse spins.

The bogey was small but clearly in a freefall for several seconds, before its engines flared back to life and the chase was on again.

But the drop had cost it distance. The jets were right on it's tail now; the pursuing jets were in too close for missile lock. This worked fine for the pilots. Knocking down a target with tracer fire and cannons was much easier. Less room for the target to dodge.
The jet opened fire, cannons blazing across the sky. The target was nimble and slippery, but eventually, one of the massive bullets clearly slammed into it from behind and sent it spinning. That too was unusual. This target was too small to be punctured by the impact, its light frame being sent spinning by the blast.

Nobody wanted to say what they were all seeing on the screen. Whatever it was, it was shaped like a human being, wearing bright red and gold armor.

At that second, the human shaped aircraft spread its limbs and suddenly blasted off the screen, faster than anyone could follow.

"I lost it! Where'd it go?" One of the pilots shouted over the radio.

"Bogey just dropped off Radar sir!"

"Sat Visual has been lost!" Answered another technician.

The pilots radioed in what everyone watching had figured out themselves. "No way that's a UAV."

"Whatever it was, it just bought the farm."

*Look, up in the sky! It's a bird! It's a plane! No, it's...What is it?* Rhodes asked himself.

A pilot without a plane.

Right on cue, Rhodes' cell phone rang. He answered it. "Tony."

"Listen, about that thing in the sky you're chasing-"

Rhodes was about ready to reach through the phone and strangle the man. PTSD was bad enough without arming your own personal forces of revenge. "This is not a game! You do not do this, Tony," He told Stark firmly. "You do not send experimental civilian equipment into my active warzone."

"It's not a piece of equipment! It's a suit! I'm wearing it! It's me!"

"Rhodey you got anything for me?" Sheppard demanded.

Rhodes almost swallowed his tongue. What should he do?

"Whiplash Two! On your belly! It's looks like a…"

Rhodes turned to look at the screen in disbelief. The chase jet was following his lead as they started the return to base, and there, for all of them to see, was their missing target, clearly a human in red and old armor, clinging to the underside of the F-22.

*Well there's something a jet can't do.* Rhodes admitted to himself.

"You got a passenger! Roll! Roll!" The other pilot shouted to his wingman.

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Tony inwardly reflected that it was a good thing he was an adrenaline junkie. If Pepper had been in this suit she would have puked by now.

The horizon line was spinning in his HUD again, and after a few seconds, he couldn't hold his grip on the plane, and went spinning off.
He felt an impact across his stomach, and heard a crunching noise.

It took another few seconds to get control of his flight, and saw that the jets had forgotten him completely.

Once he had been tossed off the lead jet, he had been hurled, out of control, straight into the wing of his wingman, which had been torn off, and now the fighter jet had been knocked out of the sky.

Through the open phone connection, Stark could almost hear the pilots shouting at each other. "I'm Hit! I'm Hit!"

The doomed pilot couldn't stop the flat spin and ejected, but there was no chute. Tony scanned the sky and found the pilot and ejector seat, in horrifying freefall, and the HUD enhanced the image. The pilot was yanking on the chute lever constantly, getting nothing in return.

Iron Man didn't hesitate, he dove after him.

"Whiplash One Down!" Stark heard the conversation through the remixed phone line.

"Whiplash Two do you see a chute?"

"Negative!" The pilot reported. "I have a visual on the bogey!"

_Crap!_ Tony thought. _Come on!_

"Whiplash Two Re-engage, if you get a clear shot, take it!"

"Major we don't even know what we're shooting at!" Rhodey protested quickly. "Call off the Raptors."

"That thing just took out an F-22 inside a legal No Fly Zone. Whiplash Two, if you get a clear shot take it!"

Tony turned down the volume gain on the phone call and directed more power to his jets as he forced himself to outrun gravity. If the other jet fired at him, he might hit his buddy, probably invisible behind the suits trails…

*My weapons killed American Soldiers who were protecting me. I owe Rhodey and his people this one.* Stark countered.

"The other jet is re-engaging," Jarvis reported.

"Keep going!" Tony yelled.

He closed in on the falling pilot, still in his ejector seat.

Jarvis was making precision adjustments to the suit's posture, giving him all the control of a laser guided missile, far more perfect than Tony could do alone as he closed in on a small falling target, the speed involved making the attempt at intercept difficult at best.

There was no way to fly while carrying someone; he knew that. With his flight stabilizers in his hands, he couldn't carry anything. He powered straight down after the falling pilot anyway.

The pilot was still yanking on the chute lever, getting nothing in return.

_Ejector seats! That's something I could have the company build..._ Tony thought distantly as he air-
braked and caught the man neatly.

He slammed an armored fist straight into the chair's jammed lever mechanism and pulled.

A shock of air and movement!

Tony pushed off from his passenger as the parachute opened, and he powered away; keeping the chute between him and the second jet. By the time anyone found him again, he'd be far enough away.

Tony tasked his suit to fly below radar level till they were out of the hot zone. He threaded his way into a narrow canyon, too tight for the jet's to follow, and he headed for home, and suddenly realized that he'd been flying for close to twenty hours, and needed to go to the bathroom.

"Tony, you still there?"

A moment later there was a light crackle of static and the sound of deep breathing. "Hey. Thanks."

Rhodes was trying to contain himself for the benefit of those listening to his side of the conversation. "You're insane you know that. And you owe me a plane."

"Yeah, well technically, *he* hit *me,*" Tony protested cheerfully. "You gonna come by, see what I'm working on now?"

Rhodes glanced over at the radar operator. The bogey had disappeared off all their screens. The CO was demanding information and promising painful death to those who lied. "No, the less I know the better right now. In the meantime, I've got to explain this. What am I supposed to say?"

"Just call it a training exercise, isn't that the usual BS?"

"A training exercise? Are you kidding me? Nobody's gonna believe that!"

"An unfortunate training exercise involving an F 22 Raptor occurred yesterday. I am pleased to report that the pilot was not injured," Rhodes addressed the Press Conference early the next morning. "As for the unexpected turn of events on the ground in Gulmira, it is still unclear who or what intervened. But I can assure you that the United States Government was not involved."

Stane watched the Conference on his TV screen with growing disquiet. Rhodes was lying. Not about the US Government being uninvolved, but about the 'accident' and the intervention in Gulmira.

He didn't believe the reports that had come in from his sources about a metal man liberating Gulmira from the Ten Rings. He barely believed the reports about Tony's escape, but a cover story regarding the loss of a US Air Force fighter jet in the same combat zone at the same time couldn't be ignored.

The story was too fantastic to be believed.

But as Stane had always said, "Seeing is Believing."

Pepper felt bad about how she had stammered her way through her quasi-pick up date with Tony at the gala. Felt even worse when she found herself almost kissing him. Felt even worse still when she realized he was gone without even bringing back the martini.
The next day, she got a private phone call from her friend Roz in the New York legal department. Roz was quietly letting her know that the injunction against Tony Stark was going through, and that Obadiah Stane's name was on the top of the memo. Pepper was suddenly a lot more forgiving when she saw a picture of Stark and Stane in the society pages. The look on his face was painful to look at. No wonder he took off without warning. She was stung, but she had forgiven worse from the man.

Pepper was professional. Trained and true. One had to be when presented with things like Maxim girls once a month.

So the professional thing to do would be to resolve this situation with Mr. Stark. And it is Mr. Stark! She reminded herself. For now anyway.

It was the 'for now' that put a silly grin on her face from time to time.

She would settle the issue with her boss, and let him know that she had a can of gasoline with Obadiah's name on it.

And so, Pepper had spent most of the ride over to the Stark beach house rehearsing what she was going to say.

When she let herself into the workshop however, it all flew out of her head in a second. The piano had been demolished. There were splinters all over the place, and no sign of Tony anywhere.

On her way downstairs she felt her stomach drop. The workshop door, and the entire glass wall next to the stairs for that matter had been shattered completely, there was glass everywhere.

Tony! Pepper thought in horror, but relaxed when she heard his voice.

"Ow. Hey, be gentle will ya?" Tony was saying. "This is my first time."

"Sir the more you struggle, the longer this will take," Jarvis answered.

"I designed this suit to come off!"

Pepper decided it couldn't be what it sounded like and came further into the workshop, where it met the garage, and got a look for the first time. Tony; dressed in...something made of red and gold metal...was standing balanced on one leg, on a box, while his mechanical helpers tried to pull the...whatever it was...off his leg.

There was a helmet made from the same colors next to him.

Wake up Pepper, just wake up now...

"What's going on here?"

Was that her voice? It must have been. It was her question.

"O.K.," Tony said; his usual unfazed self. "Let's face it, this is not the worst thing you've ever caught me doing."

Pepper felt herself go buggy-eyed as she took in the suit. "Are those...bullet holes?"

Tony shook his head. "No. That's where the Tank hit me."

"The TANK?!!"
"Those are bullet-holes," Tony corrected, jerking his head over at the back of his shoulders.

Pepper turned and walked very purposefully out of the room.

"Pepper! Pepper wait!" Tony called after her.

And for once, she ignored him.

There were bullet-holes in her Tony. Big ones.

The sight had made her turn and run upstairs, pick up the phone, put it down, pick up the largest bottle from the wet bar, put it down, pick up the next one that wasn't seltzer, and pour herself a double.

Tony...She mourned silently. I lived and died with every news update, every phone call while you were over there, wondering when word would reach me about whether you were alive of dead; and the first thing you do...the only thing you do when you get back is go rushing out to get shot at again!

So. Pepper tried for rational. He built himself a powerful robot suit and has gone out fighting evil doers everywhere in it without telling anyone. Yeah. So much for rational. He's gone nuts. He's getting himself shot at. Holy...Tony was shot today! Why didn't you see this Pepper?! You're supposed to be the one indispensable person in his life and you didn't see this?! Holy...Tony was shot today! And he doesn't care. Why doesn't he care? why doesn't he care that he got shot? Oh hell, Rhodes was right. Tony is suffering from PTSD. His behavior is reckless, even suicidal...

Pepper felt herself getting choked up. He's going to kill himself. He's going to kill himself. He's going to kill himself and he doesn't care. Holy...Tony was shot today!

Pepper threw back the drink hard. Stop fixating on that dammit! What do you do Pepper? What are you going to do?

Call Rhodes.

No. He was a friend but he was a soldier, tasked with the job of getting Stark weapons patents for the US military. He'd want the suit, and worry about Tony second. Tony had to be the priority here. Besides, if he knew he's tell someone, and god only knew how many laws Tony had broken to get those bullet holes in his chest.

Call Obadiah.

Very much no. Obadiah was the one trying to squeeze Tony out. Telling him about this would be just the silver bullet the rat-traitor would need; and Pepper was damned if she was going to be the one to hand it to him.

Call a doctor. A lawyer. A shrink even.

No. Sooner or later, with all the rumors of Tony going nuts flying around, that would leak out. And who knew which Doctor would be on Stane's payroll anyway?

No. This had to be kept a secret for now. The only people who could help were the only people who had to be absolutely kept out of the loop.

Tony...she mourned silently. You're going to kill yourself, and so help me, I'm helping you do it!
The small tent city was nothing compared to the camp that Raza had seven months before, but apparently was the last option left to him. A fact that he clearly did not like, and it showed in the scowl on his heavily scarred face.

When the convoy of four black SUV's rolled into camp, his mood did little to improve, as Stane stepped out, impeccably dressed in a three piece suit; and his personal security force followed, armed and masked.

Raza knew that the wealthy man was in the superior bargaining position, but someone who wore a Ring such as Raza did, was not one who let weakness show; and he had one card to play. With that in mind, he approached Stane and smiled. "Welcome."

Stane took a half step to the left and saw the scars covering Raza's face a little more clearly.

"Compliments of Tony Stark," Raza muttered.

Stane had the audacity to look smug. "If you killed him when you were supposed to you might still have a face."

"You paid us trinkets to kill a prince," Raza retorted.

With barbs exchanged, Stane got to the point. "Show me the weapon."

"Come," Raza agreed. "Leave your guards outside."

Stane signaled his personal security, and they obligingly stayed near the cars until Raza and Stane entered the largest of the tents.

Inside the tent was a more comfortable set up. Well stuffed pillows, a pair of lounge chairs, and a table with a small kettle boiling on a camp stove. The room was functional too. The table was well lit and had the schematics for the armor spread over it. The Mark I armor itself, dented and torn though it was, had been mounted to the side, stood upright like a samurai armor on display. Stane went straight to it and stared into the eyes of the mask, as though taking it apart with his mind.

Raza let him look, and went over to the table. "His escape bore unexpected fruit."

Stane couldn't help the glimmer of pride. He had watched Stark grow up, seen his inventiveness firsthand, but he never could have pictured something like this. "So this is how he did it."

"And this is only his first crude effort. Stark has perfected his design. He has made a masterpiece of death. A man with a dozen of these could rule all of Asia."

He glanced back at Stane, who was circling the armor carefully; taking in everything.

Raza was under no illusions. He knew Stane had no particular loyalties to the Ten Rings. But the wealthy American did fear Raza's master. And as long as Raza wore His Ring, that would be enough to make their relationship businesslike. "And you dream of Stark's Throne."

Stane flinched and finally turned to look at him.

"We have a common enemy," Raza finished his warm-up and got to the bargain. "We are still in business. I will give you these designs as a gift." He poured two fine china cups full of tea. "And in return, I hope you'll repay me with a gift of Iron Soldiers."

Stane considered that, smiled cheerfully, and put an arm on Raza's shoulder. A moment later, Raza noticed that Stane's ears were glowing light blue.
There was a millisecond of confusion as he suddenly realized he couldn't move. The pain hit him a moment later. He could feel his ears exploding, he could feel every vein under his skin growing outward, like his head was trying to explode.

He tried to jerk away from the hand on his shoulder, but he couldn't move his body at all.

"This is the only gift you will receive," Stane responded in Raza's native tongue. He stepped back and Raza was finally able to see the small device, glowing red and giving a low electronic while, concealed in the wealthy man's hand.

Stane stood up and took the protective ear buds out of his ears. Raza stayed on the couch, frozen and helpless. "Technology. It's always been your Achilles heel in this part of the world," Stane told him thoughtfully. "Don't worry; it'll only last for fifteen minutes. That's the least of your problems."

Stane collected the blueprints off the table. On his way out, he glanced at the huge jeweled ring on Raza's hand and shivered; moving quickly from the tent. He didn't know why, but he suddenly felt like someone had walked over his grave.

The feeling passed as soon as he got outside. His security team had quickly and silently disarmed and detained all of Raza's men, who now kneeled on the ground with their hands behind their heads.

"Gather it up, the armor, all of it," He ordered. "Let's finish up."

His guards nodded and turned to their prisoners.

Stane got into the car, and pulled out his cell phone as the gunfire rang out briefly. He dialed home. "Set up Sector Sixteen underneath the Arc Reactor. Recruit our top engineers, I want a prototype right away."

Stane was not a fool. He had tipped his hand to Tony, and the man was already fighting a one man war against Stane's private customers, armed with this new weapon. But he was doing it alone in his house. Paranoia about his weapons had handicapped his production speed. Stark got there first, but Stane could get there faster.

_It's the immortal arms race, Tony. You started it, but I'm gonna win it._

All Stane needed to do was to match Tony's new weapon with his own. With that in his pocket, and the board of directors' loyalty to get him a majority ownership of the company, Tony would be neutralized, and the company could get back the business of keeping the balance of power where it belonged.

For a moderate fee, of course.

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End of Part Two
Pepper had only lost her legendary knack for taking things in her stride at work four times. All of them in the last six months. All of them because of Tony Stark. The first was when Tony had been abducted in Afghanistan.

The second time was two days after he got back, when he needed her to replace the Arc Reactor in his chest. She hadn't said anything given the circumstances, but she had never played a game of 'Operation' in her life. She counted that as her second time freaking out. The little breakdown she had when she finally got word he was alive and well didn't count in her book. Happy was a real hero about that, bucking her up the entire way to the airport.

The third time was several days ago at the party, when she had actually managed to get within lip-lock range of Tony, only to pull back at the very last second. She hadn't asked for the martini out of any desire to drink it, but rather for a few minutes to process the sudden and irrefutable realization that she was crazy in love with her boss, and had been for a while. A realization that horrified her twenty minutes after that; when it dawned on her that he had left the party; without saying goodbye. A clear Dear Jane if ever she had seen one. And working closely with Tony Stark, she had seen plenty of breakups handled with that much tact. She had ejected his paramours from his life personally. And then he vanished for days without giving her advanced notice…

The fourth time was two days after that; presented with the sight of bullet-holes in Tony Stark. Granted he was wearing a combat suit of some kind, and granted he didn't seem hurt, but nonetheless...

So when Stark finally called her down to the workshop a few days later, she was more than a little worried. She had clearly walked in on something secret. By now Tony had to know that she wasn't going to turn him in, but she got the impression that he was avoiding her deliberately.

She came into the workshop, feeling shy. She hadn't been this nervous to start a conversation with Tony since walking in on him in the shower. Granted, he hadn't even blinked about it, but somehow…

Stark was over to the side in the dimly lit workshop, illuminated by some working lights. The effect was spooky as Tony was sitting at the top half of his new suit or Armor, fiddling with something inside it. It was oddly chilling, seeing Tony kneeling before the reflective golden body in the dark.

When he looked up at her, he seemed nervous too, he wasn't looking at her directly, but he stood and came over. "Hey. You busy? Mind if I sent you on an errand?"
Well, he wasn't firing her, but his nervousness was making her worry further still. She nodded dutifully. He didn't see it; he still wasn't looking at her.

"I need you to go to my office," He said. "You're gonna hack into the mainframe and retrieve all the recent shipping manifests. This is a Lock Chip," He unplugged a USB key from a programming tablet and handed it to her. "This will get you in. It's probably under executive files, but if not, he put it on a Ghost Drive, in which case you'll need to look for the lowest numeric heading."

His voice was so cool and deadly that Pepper started to feel cold. "And what do you plan to do with this information if I bring it back here?" Pepper asked him, knowing the answer but wanting him to say it.

"Same drill. They've been dealing under the table, and I'm going to stop them. I'm going to find my weapons, and I'm going to destroy them."

And for the first time since she started working for him, she started to turn him down flatly. "Tony, you know that I would help you with anything, but I cannot help you if you're going to start all this again," She said, keeping herself calm through sheer force of will.

Tony Stark turned and glared at her, losing patience with her for the first time she could remember. "There is nothing except this. There's no art opening, no charity, nothing to sign. There's the next mission, and nothing else."

The words were harsh, the tone was savage, and Pepper felt her resolve harden. This was not Tony Stark. Not the one she knew.

"Is that so?" She said finally. "Well, then I quit," She threw the USB down on the table and turned to walk out the door.

He stared at her in open disbelief. "You stood by my side all these years while I reaped the benefits of destruction. Now that I'm trying to protect the people I've put in harm's way, you're going to walk out?"

Pepper spun on him, holding emotion back firmly. "You're going to kill yourself, Tony," he implored him, begging him to understand. "I'm not going to be a part of it."

She could feel his eyes following her as she stormed out. The closer she got to the door the better she felt about it. This was not the Tony Stark that mocked her about working too hard, and blew off Senators and Congressmen for a chance to go surfing. This was not her Tony. This was not the man who threatened to short-sheet the Pope's bed. This was not the man that got the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs to sing an ABBA medley on CNN. This was not the man she knew and...

"I shouldn't be alive..." Tony said quietly as she reached the door.

Pepper froze. The hard tone was gone. The energy was gone. This was the Tony that had spoken at the Press Conference. The small and introspective one.

Pepper couldn't help it. She turned to look at him, to listen to him make his case.

"Unless it was for a reason," He continued. He sounded exhausted. "I'm not crazy, Pepper. I just finally know what I have to do."

Pepper had a flash of Deja Vu to the airport. Who was this man and what had he done to her Tony?

"And I know in my heart...that it's right," Tony finished, looking small.
And I can't do it without you. He could have said it. It was unnecessary, and they both knew it.

Pepper stared at him, feeling her heart break. **Who are you kidding Pepper? You aren't going anywhere. And you can't turn him down, not like this. He's right. You looked the other way the whole time he was making money off death, and when he got back you were so proud of him for shutting that down...So now you're going to blame PTSD when he does something you don't want him to? You pretended everything was fine for months while he set this up. Hundreds dead on the far side of the world, and he wants to stop it.**

**What's your argument? Better them than him?**

Wishing she had the nerve to keep going, she felt herself turn around, walk back to the table and pick up the USB. She stared at him for a moment, never feeling more lost. "You're all I've got too y'know."

Pepper had never been more relived to reach the executive offices of Stark Industries in her life. Had this building always been so intimidating?

She thought she would feel better once she got to Tony's office, but she didn't. The entire wall behind the desk was nothing but glass. She had never felt so visible in her life.

She remembered the first time she came into this room. She had been working out of the adjacent office, on the phone to the boss telling him about a message that a local priest had sent, regarding a protest petition about weapons production; and whether he remembered anything about it. Tony told her to cut it out and just go into the office and check his desk. Pepper had taken the phone with her and made the comment that with a view like that, it was no wonder the Priest wanted to see him, he wouldn't need to pray, he could just lean out the window.

Tony had responded that it would have been a waste of time, as He was always leaning in.

Pepper had made it clear that in her opinion, Stark was not God.

Tony had responded that if she was willing to pretend otherwise, she could get business cards that read 'Virginia Potts, Right Hand of God.'

Pepper gave no audible sign of amusement, and had spent more time working at his desk than hers ever since.

The office was empty, and Tony's computer was switched on, which it had probably been for the entire time since Tony had been away. The screensaver was a scrolling image of the classic Hot Rod that Tony had built with his father. No matter what he said, Tony was nostalgic about some things.

She plugged in the USB, and ones and zeroes scanned over the screen quickly.

"Ghost Drive Found," Appeared on the screen.

Pepper let out a breath. Tony was right, and this would be finished quickly. She began copying all the files. A progress bar appeared as the files downloaded. As always seemed to happen, it moved slower than ever since she was in a hurry.

The files flashed up on screen in rapid succession. A Stark programming innovation, so that the user could see if the correct files were being copied. They moved so fast that Pepper privately thought that it was merely a bit of showing off.
Nevertheless, she could make out certain images. A lot of shipping manifests, just as Tony had predicted. Some personal correspondence. There were pictures. Some design schematics, a few of weapons, but several of them were bizarre. They looked like designs for robots. All of it seemed geared toward construction and shipping, at the Industrial Plant itself…

"Sector Sixteen?" Pepper murmured. "What are you up to Obadiah?"

Pepper flashed back to the 'suit' she had seen Tony trying to pry himself out of and shivered.

One file was much bigger. It was a video file, but the filename seemed to be in Arabic.

Waiting nervously for the files to finish copying, she opened it.

The image she saw first was a flag with ten interlocking rings on it in a circle. The second thing she saw was a group of men with guns, surrounding a man with a cloth bag over his head and a car battery in his lap.

Pepper felt her stomach lurch.

A second later the bag was ripped away and sure enough, there was Tony Stark. He looked...so scared. He was nearly dead, he was being ridiculed, and he was beaten to a pulp, covered in his own blood. His eyes were wide and full of terror, and they waved back and forth helplessly.

Pepper almost threw up. How could Tony have come back from this so calm? How could he have spent months like this and promptly demanded a Press Conference as the first order of business?

*Some people curl up and sob, some people build a combat suit and blow stuff up.*

Pepper smacked that thought away. The file was on Stane's Ghost Drive. She had received no ransom, so why was this file on Stane's Ghost Drive?

They were shouting angrily around Tony, gesturing at the camera. Pepper opened a command prompt and ran the 'Translate' command. An innovation that Tony had put in when she admitted she couldn't speak Japanese.

The speech was out of synch and the computer voice was somewhat 'out of character' but the words were more than enough.

"You did not tell us that the man you wanted us to kill was the famous Tony Stark. The price to kill him has doubled."

The video ended, and Pepper felt cold fury fill her. *Stane isn't just betraying Tony...He was the one responsible for this whole...that arrogant, miserable, slimy, two faced...Actually pretending to be as worried as I was...the next time I see that bastard I'm gonna..."

"So."

Pepper felt her bright red hair suddenly straighten out in all directions from the fright.

Obadiah was standing in the doorway. "What are we going to do about this?"

*He knows.* Pepper thought, feeling her heart race. *No he doesn't."

He came into the room, and Pepper sent a frightened glance at the USB stick, clearly visible sticking out of the laptop. She sent another glance at the screen. Sixty percent complete. Stark always had the local paper delivered to his desk and his home once a day, collected the same night
if left untouched. Pepper slipped the paper over the edge of the laptop, covering the USB drive.

Stane made his way to the wet bar, and poured himself a shot. "I know what you're going through, Pepper," he said conversationally, and Pepper felt her grip on the armrest of the chair tighten.

Stane took a sip, and smiled appreciatively. "Tony always gets the good stuff, doesn't he?"

Obadiah turned from the wet bar, tumbler in his hand, and came closer.

The screen put up a prompt, 'Download Complete.' Pepper slid the mouse up to the control panel and activated the screensaver manually.

Just as Stane was able to see the screen, it was safely back to a picture of Tony's Hot Rod.

Stane didn't even seem to be looking. He had moved to the window. Pepper was willing the man to stay just a few feet away from her.

"I was so happy when Tony came home," Stane said; soft and warm. "It was like he came back from the dead. But...now I realize, he never did," he gave a great sigh and put a hand comfortably on her shoulder, like he had a hundred times before, but Pepper was suddenly terrified of being in physical contact with this man. "He left a part of himself in that cave. Breaks my heart."

"Well, he's a complicated person," Pepper said thoughtfully, hoping her voice wouldn't crack. "He's been through a lot, but I'm sure he'll be all right."

Obadiah was staring at her. Right at her face. Right at her eyes and Pepper felt her heart thunder again...

Until he smiled. "You are a remarkable woman, Pepper Potts," Stane said to her quietly, a voice filled with gentle admiration. "Tony doesn't know how lucky he is."

Pepper forced herself to smile 'gratefully' and stood, collecting the newspaper, feeling around under the laptop, pulling the USB with it, out of sight.

She walked stiffly toward the door.

"Is that today's paper?" Stane asked her suddenly.

Pepper froze. He knows. No he doesn't. She licked her lips. "Yes."

Stane moved in on her slowly, looking something like a shark circling in. "Do you mind?" he asked her, reaching for it.

Pepper gave it to him, trying to keep her hand around the USB drive, hiding it unobtrusively.

Stane pulled the paper back, smiling cheerfully. He gestured at the paper. "The puzzles."

Pepper chuckled, feeling stupid and terrified at the same time, and fought the powerful instinct to look at her hand, to see if the USB was visible.

Pepper stepped out of the office and consciously held back from running for the elevator.

The second she was out of the room, Obadiah reached for the computer and moved the mouse. Pepper had all but run out of the office. Pepper hadn't been nervous in Stark's office since her first day. She had been sitting at the keyboard far too long to be admiring the screensaver.

'Download Complete.' Glared back at him.
Obadiah took all of two seconds to see if Pepper's name could be woven into any really obscure and nauseating obscenities, then took chase after her.

*Walk, don't run. Walk, don't run. Walk, don't run.* Pepper told herself.

A few seconds after the elevator reached the lobby, she could feel predatory eyes burning a hole between her shoulder blades. Suddenly the thought occurred to her that maybe Stane had a weapon...

She had never been so glad to see a cheap suit as she had in the exact moment that Agent Coulson all but attacked her. "Miss Potts," he said, clearly out of patience. "It seems you've forgotten our appointment-"

"No, no I haven't. Right now, we're having it right now. Your office."

Agent Coulson blinked and suddenly found he was rushing to catch up to her. Her stride hadn't even slowed and she was wearing stilettos.

"I'm gonna give you the appointment of your life," Pepper promised, showing him the USB stick.

Stane watched her go with the Government man and accepted that he couldn't stop her. He didn't know what she had copied, but if it was something she was scared to be caught with, odds were it was dangerous to him, and he'd lay equal odds that looking for it wasn't her idea.

Tony.

Time was up. Time to mobilize.

Once Pepper had fled the building, with her Secret Agent in tow, Obadiah had wasted no time hurrying downstairs to Sector Sixteen. Fortunately, at the entrance to the Industrial plant, he found his chief engineer waiting at the door. He was studying the factory Arc Reactor with a desperation that made Stane finally start to worry. "O.K., deadline. We're running now."

"Mr. Stane. Sir, we've explored what you've asked us and it seems as though there's a little hiccup. Actually, um..."

"A hiccup?" Stane repeated. At this level, 'A little hiccup' was engineer code for 'I'm fired aren't I?'

His chief Engineer looked nervous, before finally confessing the problem. "Yes, see to power the suit...sir, the technology doesn't actually exist. So it..."

Stane didn't see the problem. "Wait, wait, the technology?" He raised a hand to point at the Arc Reactor, right where it had sat for decades. *Here* is the technology. I've asked you to simply make it smaller."

He nodded and looked down, slightly embarrassed. "O.K., sir, that's what we've been trying to do but honestly, it's impossible."

Stane erupted, faced with defeat because nobody could copy something that should have been easy. "Tony Stark was able to build this IN A CAVE! WITH A BOX OF SCRAPS!"

The poor engineer was about ready to crawl into a hole somewhere. "Well, I'm sorry. I'm not Tony Stark."
The simple fact was enough to make Stane relax. There was only one Tony Stark, and he knew it.

One Tony Stark, one working Iron Man Suit, one working miniaturized Arc Reactor...

Pepper was already talking to the Government Agents. He needed a fait accompli. He needed this to be an established fact. Get the weapon working, and Stane was set. The powers that be would be willing to look the other way to get the patent to this weapon, and even if they weren't, there were others in the world that could, and they would pay handsomely.

Pepper's involvement had forced him into taking more direct action. She had a copy of the blueprints. She was the only real fly in the ointment.

_Tony_, he thought regretfully. _Why'd you have to involve her? You forced my hand._

Tony came into his living room as the phone rang. He looked at the display. It was Pepper.

_Ah, good girl._ Tony thought and sat down on his couch; flipping the phone open.

He tried to say hello, when he noticed that his mouth didn't want to work. He didn't feel his hand drop, but he heard the phone hit the floor with a clatter. Stark tried to jump up, but couldn't move. At all.

The dull ache in his ears made him realize.

A moment later, Obadiah Stane stood up from behind the couch. He had ear buds glowing in his ears. "You remember this one?" He asked conversationally. "Too bad you couldn't sell it. So many applications for short term paralysis."

_Jarvis._ Tony tried to make himself scream. No good. Jarvis must have been offline anyway. Stane wasn't welcome in the house.

Stane came around the couch to stand in front of Tony, and switched off his Audio Neutralizer.

"When I ordered the hit on you, I was worried that I was killing the golden goose," he unbuttoned Tony's shirt, the scene made more disturbing by the fact that Tony couldn't move. "But, you see, it was just fate that you survived it, leaving one last golden egg to give," Stane had pulled out some kind of hand-grip clamp. The circular shape made its purpose clear.

Stark thought he knew helpless rage in Afghanistan. He was wrong. This was rage. This was more than rage, this was hate. This was more than hate, this was homicide.

"You really think that just because you have an idea, it belongs to you?" Stane's voice still hadn't lost that joshing fatherly tone. "Your father, he helped give us the atomic bomb. Now what kind of world would it be today if he was as selfish as you?"

Stane, Tony thought violently. _I've changed my mind. You're the priority now._

And with that, he yanked the Mark II Arc Reactor straight out of Tony's chest.

Tony wanted to be able to spit at him so badly. There was the only reason he would want to keep the Arc Reactor. The only use he had for one that size.

Obadiah had built a suit.

Raza. It was the only way he could even have found out the suits existed.
Stane looked at the Reactor, it's glow lighting both of them in cold harsh light. It made Stane look like the sub-human monster he had proven to be. Stane actually sat on the couch next to the motionless Stark, taking his time to polish the Generator. "Oh, this is a beat," he admitted. "It's your Ninth Symphony Tony. Your Masterpiece...It's your Legacy. The next generation of weapons, with this as its heart. It'll put the balance of power in the right hands. In our hands."

*Our hands? America? Stark Industries? Or just yours Stane?* Tony would have traded the strength to strangle him for the control to spit at him right then.

Stane pulled out a silk cloth and wrapped the Arc Reactor quietly. "I wish you could see my prototype Tony, it's not quite as restrained as yours."

His prototype was ready. This got worse with each ghastly moment.

"Too bad you involved Pepper in all this. I would have preferred that she lived."

If Stark could have screamed, he would have.

"What do you mean he paid to have Tony killed?!"

Pepper could hear the disbelief in Rhodey's voice through her cell phone and empathized, but didn't have the time. "I mean, he's the one that hired those men to hit the convoy. Rhodes, I don't know if you know what Tony's doing, but I've got five Federal Agents with me right now who say that Stane *does* know, and he wants to—"

"O.K., where is Tony right now?" Rhodey had caught up and jumped to the end of the story very quickly. Pepper thanked anyone who was listening that Tony's real friends were smart enough to keep up.

"He should be at the workshop in his house. But I called and he isn't answering," Pepper explained. "So..."

"I'm on my way," Rhodey agreed.

"Thank you Rhodey," Pepper said and hung up, feeling calmer than she ever had. Obadiah was trying to kill Tony. Tony was not answering. If he wasn't answering, then in all likelihood, there was nothing Pepper could do for him, which Rhodes could not do. And in the meantime, Stane was free, and she was personally going with Coulson and his team to correct that.

It had taken some work, and eventually she had to hand over the Flash disk to convince them that there was a crime to stop. Another half hour to convince them to take her along when they went to arrest Stane.

Eventually, a young black man with an eye patch named Nick Fury put his foot down; dispatched Coulson and his team, and told them to take her and her access pass along.

*I'm gonna find my weapons, and I'm going to destroy them.*

Pepper didn't understand why Tony insisted on doing it personally. Now she did.

Pepper had worked with Stane as long as she had with Tony. More often than not the two of them were coordinating half of Stark Industries on Tony's behalf. Pepper had spent her entire career watching Tony's back, only to discover that Stane had spent that time looking for a place to stick a knife. How many times had she asked Stane to cover for Tony? How often had she corrected
paperwork to make the day-to-day affairs of the company answerable to Obadiah?

_We let the bastard in, and we called him friend, and look what he used us to do. Pepper growled inwardly. I get it now, Tony. I'm right there with you._

"I know a shortcut," She told Coulson.

Coulson grinned. He didn't know how the woman had made it to the car before him in four inch stilettos, but he was getting an idea of what Stark had hired her for.

__________________________

Tony dragged himself off the couch. The paralysis was supposed to last fifteen minutes. Actually, it had lasted only eight. Without the Reactor, there was nothing powering the magnet that Yinsen had put in. When performing the first implantation in Afghanistan, Tony had found a way to let the magnet hold the charge for a few minutes as a backup in case the Mark I suit lost power suddenly, but Pepper had accidentally pulled the backup plate from the base plate when exchanging the Reactors after his return.

There was nothing powering the electromagnet now.

The shrapnel was digging again.

Agony was the only thing he knew. The massive pain was enough to make him push past the paralysis early, but his body was only half working at this point.

_Obadiah. _He said silently, unable to make sound, not even to scream. _I'm going to kill you. In fact, in my mind, I have killed you. There were sharp sticks and poisonous animals involved._

He was a man or Iron will. A man of invincible power.

Tony realized in an instant of clarity. He had made the same mistake over. His weapons were being used by evil men, and he had gotten caught up in his own projects to not notice. He thought he was being so smart. Build a weapon nobody can steal or give to someone else. And he'd done that. Except Obadiah had stolen it anyway.

_He pulled the generator out of my chest._ Tony thought in impotent rage and horror. At least Pepper had the playfulness to have his other heart mounted and engraved.

But Obadiah had screwed up too. He hadn't searched the house for the revised prototype. Raza had the Mark I. Tony had the Mark III downstairs. He had another Arc Reactor right next to it. Obadiah didn't even bother to check.

_Which means he was in a hurry._ Tony realized. _Pepper must have found something. Something to put Stane under the gun. Which means...Oh hell. I've got to get to her before he does._

The Mark III was waiting. The power source was right next to it.

If only the door wasn't a full six feet away.

Getting up wasn't working. His limbs simply wouldn't do it.

Forward. That was the ticket.

He managed to fall forward, come down on his knees, and his face.

He was wrong. It _could_ hurt worse.
O.K. Tony told himself. *Simple tasks to complete the objective.*

Tony reached out one hand as far forward as he could. He gripped the plush carpet; dragged his body about seven inches forward. Reached out again. Gripped the plush carpet. Dragged his body another six inches.

Every movement dragged the shrapnel closer to his heart. He probably had enough time that he would bleed to death internally before it cut up his heart. It would be a race. He would pass out and die from the shrapnel damage, or he would pass out from the pain and lie here till the shrapnel actually hit an artery.

Either way, Pepper would be dead.

Plus there was the gaping hole in his chest.

Reach, Grip, Pull.

An eternity passed, and Tony had made it to the stairs. Fate protected billionaires it seemed; for he had never replaced the glass wall and door into his workshop at the bottom of the stairs from the repulsor blast he had given them before his first mission. He never would have reached the keypad.

Reach, grip, pull. Six inches closer. Reach, grip, pull. Seven inches that time.

He had never realized it, but he was actually lucky the last time he'd been in this state. He'd been unconscious the whole time Yinsen was working. He woke up with car battery already hooked up to his chest. He had never felt the agony of the moving shrapnel before.

He was an iron will in a gold titanium body. Invincible. More than a titan, less than a god. R2 D2 with first strike capability. The Terminator on speed. Tin man on steroids.

If he only had a heart.

Reach, grip, pull. Only five inches. Slowing down.

*Pepper...* Tony thought painfully. *I'm coming. I promise.*

Reach, grip, pull.

*Whoever said getting there was half the fun should be taken out and shot.*

He could see the Mark I generator on the desk, still mounted in a glass box.

*I have been called many things, Pepper. Nostalgic is not one of them.*

*I seem to have a habit of eating my words lately.*

He dragged himself to the workbench, and with the last of his strength, raised a hand...

And missed.

Spent, Tony collapsed. He had nothing left. Couldn't move, couldn't think… he couldn't even raise his head from the side of the bench.

There was a low mechanical whirring, and a bright light filled his eyes.

Tony lifted his eyes a bit. The Mark I was sitting before him, among shattered glass shards of the
box Pepper had put it in.

Dummy the robot had seen him straining for it, and pulled it down for him.

"Good boy," He croaked. _One last time Tony, come on, you're there._

Reach, grip, pull. Smash!

Pepper was in the lead car with Agent Coulson as they pulled up at Stark Industries.

The fact that Tony wasn't answering his phone unnerved her; but Rhodes was closer to him than she was, and she was as outraged with Stane as she had ever been with anyone in her life.

Five Agents flanked her, game faces on. Pepper scanned her card over the reader and led them inside. One or two of them glanced at the Arc Reactor, up to the skylight above it in the enormous room, but not one of them slowed their stride at Pepper led them downstairs.

"Sector Sixteen..." Pepper said, thinking out loud. She had never been there before. It was where more of the industrial aspects of the plant were handled. Tony called it the building's shed. A place where you kept things that were needed but not wanted.

It didn't matter. Pepper had the only card in the entire company that would open every door that Stark's would. Finding it was easy enough. She scanned her card over the lock, and the door buzzed. She did it again. No luck.

"My card's not working," She turned and reported to Coulson, who was already being handed a small cylindrical item.

_Ooh, how James Bond._ Pepper thought with interest as Coulson attached it to the lock. It adhered in place. "What's that? A little device, going to pick the lock?"

"You might want to step back," Coulson advised her.

Pepper got the point. She darted back and plugged her ears.

_Tony, you were a fool._ Obadiah toasted as his new suit lit up. _You can't make the arms race stop. The US kept the Manhattan project quiet, but the rest of the world found out and the Nuclear World came to be anyway._

Howard Stark was Obadiah's friend. He was there when Tony was born. When Oppenhimer made his arguments against Hydrogen weapons, Teller had testified against him. Howard Stark had stayed out of it. Weapons were his trade, and weapons had just evolved to the next level. It was a technological feat that kept the world from a third world war for over fifty years. Stane had told this to Howard Stark, who had agreed with the math, but not the principle. He told Stane in confidence that the test director, Ken Bainbridge had turned to Oppenheimer after the first H-Bomb demonstration in Texas and said; "Now we're all sons of bitches."

Tony had his father's restraint. For all he had done that night, Stane was in awe of Tony Stark. He had personally ushered in the next age. The Steam age, The Electric age, The Atomic age, and the Age of the Iron Men. And where had it got him?

Tony's father wanted out of weapons that were too big. Stark had taken that hesitation one step further and wanted out of weapons all together.
Tony, look at what that would do. It would change nothing. You think you alone can make it stop, just by cutting yourself off from billions of dollars, jobs for a hundred thousand people... including you and me?

It was the ultimate hypocrisy, to declare war on weapons of war, armed with this suit to cut down any who stood in your way. And once again, as with his father before him, Stane had to protect Stark's legacy. Tony could usher in the new age; and be made penniless and reviled in the process, unless Stane took over.

Now we're all sons of bitches, Tony. Stane reflected in amusement. I'll have the profit I know, but I'll give you all the credit I promise. You earned it. You deserved it. And just because you don't have the nerve, you'll have to take it posthumously.

There was the sound of a small charge exploding down the hall, and Stane looked over his shoulder sharply. Somebody had forced the door. Potts. The last he had seen of her, she was being rushed from the offices by a government agent.

She had managed to get them moving it seems. And if she had led them here an hour sooner, they might have made it. He turned to the suit.

The unmistakable sound of power growing filled the room. Stane grinned. This is the next level Tony. You put us there.

And Obadiah Stane was left alone holding the keys to the new age of technology.

"Tony?" Rhodes yelled. No sign of him. Jarvis was silent too. The house lights hadn't grown brighter as he came in, no voice to answer questions, the front door was unlocked, the piano looked destroyed completely...Rhodes looked and saw a trail of something bloody and disgusting making it's way from the couch to the staircase, and started running. There wasn't enough blood to be immediately fatal...

The glass wall to the workshop, a room that Rhodes had looked into but never entered, was shattered.

Rushing into the workshop, he saw Tony's body lying prone, facedown on the floor.

"Tony!" Rhodes yelled and charged forward, turning him over.

His skin was white enough to make blood vessels stick out brightly, he was covered in sweat, there was an awful smell clinging to him, and he was rasping horrifically for air.

But the Arc Reactor in his chest was glowing with blue-white fire, and his eyes were focusing on his friend. His hands reached up and clawed for Rhodes' shoulders.

"Where's Pepper..." he croaked.

"She's fine, she's on her way to arrest Obadiah, and she's got five agents with her."

Tony was pale a ghost, but seemed to pale further as he considered that. "That's not going to be enough."

Sector Sixteen was part of the Industrial Sector. It was full of pipes, full of equipment, but dimly lit. Once or twice Tony had used the area for secret projects, given that it was hard to find and
harder still to simply wander into like some of the production centers.

But with the room dead silent and the lights down dark, it was damn creepy.

Pepper led the way in, With Coulson directly next to her. She had never been in this room herself. There was a platform against one wall. Pepper drew the floor plan in her head and figured out that the platform must have been built into the supports for the Arc Reactor; on the other side of the wall. The positioning meant that the walls were impossibly thick, and the perimeter of the room was filled with steam and coolant pipes.

Against one of these stacks, was a mounted suit of armor. Pepper thought it seemed bizarrely mismatched. The surface was human sized, maybe a foot taller, but it was empty and dead.

"You were right," Coulson noted. "Looks like he was building a suit."

"I thought it would be bigger," Pepper admitted. Despite that, she was relieved. If Stane was in here, then he was alone, and if he wasn't in the armor before them, he was probably outgunned too. There were dozens of places a person could hide in a room like this.

Coulson had apparently reached the same conclusion and signaled his men; who fanned out, searching the room in pairs.

Pepper made her way up the platform to the workstation. Behind her was the foundation line, which descended for at least twenty feet. There were chains hanging into the cavity from somewhere above, but Pepper couldn't immediately tell what they were for, or even if they connected to anything.

Pepper however, was looking at the computer. One the screen was a prompt, which read "Power Up Complete."

Pepper felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up, as the chains behind her started to move slightly.

She turned and peered into the darkness before her, when two bright glowing eyes suddenly appeared from nowhere, and illuminated the shape of a metal demon.

It was shaped like the armor she had seen on her way in, only much bigger, and looking a whole lot meaner. The chains worked again, and the glowing eyes glared balefully at her as it rose to full height.

The monster raised its head, and then took a step up to the platform she was on. Pepper made the mistake of waiting till its face stopped going up, and up, and up, till she was craning her neck back to an almost painful point. It wasn't stupidity on her part, it was the fact that her brain refused to believe what her eyes were telling her.

Faced with the enormous machine, Pepper considered her options. Tony would have been disappointed if she let out a bloodcurdling shriek, or fainted like some damsel-in-distress out of a monster movie...but considering the monster in front of her, Pepper did the only sensible thing. She ran.

One, two steps and Stane had caught up to her, but she had made it back to the larger part of the room, where her backup and their guns were still spread out.

"Open Fire!" Roared Coulson, and gunshots rang out.
The monster didn't even seem to notice. It deigned to swing one massive arm, left, then right, sending the agents flying. It kept swinging, more out of interest to see what happened than anything else, and shattered metal consoles and concrete walls.

Pepper didn't look back. She ran for the door.

One, two three steps and the Iron Giant caught up again, reaching for her as Pepper slipped back through the entrance.

But the machine was too big, and couldn't fit through the door. The concrete shattered, but even the hallway was too narrow. One arm flashed out, missed her by inches.

Pepper kept running.

The Mark III had been repaired, or had the trashed components replaced, and Tony patted himself on the back for the foresight in making the suit something that could be put together rather than a complete piece.

As before, the industrial machines held each component in place, and screwed them together with speed and efficiency, each piece pulling together tightly in flawless fit.

It was the second time that the Mark III was used, and the first time that he had an audience while the garage assembly line constructed him, and Rhodes was 'geeking-out' as Stane would have put it. In fact, Stark had a pretty good idea what to get Rhodes for Christmas.

"That is the coolest thing I've ever seen!" Rhodey almost drooled.

The machines released him and Tony stepped down, his faceplate still open. "Not bad huh?"

He held out a repulsor and blasted the wrecked blue and white speedster over another ten feet, bringing himself into launch position under the hole in the ceiling.

"Anything else I can do?" Rhodes asked as he did.

"Keep the skies clear," Iron Man answered him, and with a blast of power and movement, the suit took off straight up through the hole in the ceiling.

Rhodes fought down the adolescent instinct to stamp his foot and scream 'I want one!' at the top of his lungs. He sent a glance over at the gorgeous chrome Mark II. Even knowing it was obsolete and probably not his size, it was tempting.

But he had a duty to perform in the upcoming combat mission, and Rhodes was a trained and true part of the war machine; even if not the main part.

"Next time baby," He promised the silver armor and ran to the chrome and steel-blue Audi. He liked the color, and needed the speed.

Tony did not have a good feeling. The repulsor blast that moved the car should have been a lot stronger. The Mark I Suit was not nearly as power efficient as it's successors, but did not need as much juice as the Mark III did. Given the likely power that Stane would possess using the revised Generator...

"Jarvis," Tony intoned, "How do you think the Mark I chest piece is gonna hold up?"
"Forty percent power and falling sir," Jarvis said. "That chest piece was never meant for sustained flight."

"Keep me posted."

*God?* Tony prayed quietly. *I hate to keep bugging you like this, and oddly I only call when I'm in this suit that's supposed to make me invincible on my own, but if Pepper dies, at the hand of one of my designs, it's going to take Your own fist to cut me down before I tear Obadiah limb from limb.

*Please God, let me be in time.*

*Amen.*

Tony opened up his repulsors and poured on the speed.

Jarvis brought up a power level readout on his HUD, a pointed reminder.

Tony didn't care.

Pepper made it back to ground level and ran back outside as fast as she could. Stane and his powered suit had vanished; when her cell phone rang. "Hello?"

"Pepper!"

"Tony!" She let out a breath she'd been holding half the night. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

"Obadiah's gone insane!"

"I know, you have to get out of there!"

Pepper started to explain what had been happening for the last six minutes, when the ground beneath her shook, and the concrete parking lot behind her splintered. Like something out of a Godzilla movie, the machine forced its way up through several feet of concrete and metal and earth, without visibly having so much as scratched the paint.

Iron Man reached the Industrial plant at last, and saw Pepper down below with Stane, in his suit directly in front of her. He tilted down his jets and forced the power a little higher.

*Holy...that thing has to top fifteen feet! Jeez Obadiah, compensating much?*

"*We're iron mongers Tony. That's what we do.*"

*No, Stane. That's what I do. You just twist what I do into some despicable thing.*


Pepper was in front of the Iron Juggernaught. It was toying with her. A cat with a mouse before the kill. *Oh, like hell.* Tony's face twisted under his mask and he sent another pulse of power through his boot-jets; sacrificing time for the first punch.
"Obadiah said we're Iron Mongers," Tony whispered.

Jarvis took that as his cue and the HUD lit up further; classifying the targets in view as it did in Afghanistan.

**Classified Target:** Civilian.

**Code Name:** Pepper.

**Classified Target:** Hostile.

**Code Name:** Iron Monger.

Iron Monger was pointing a machine gun at Pepper. "Your services are no longer required."

"Stane!" Iron Man roared dangerously, and struck.

The strike was a jet powered two fisted punch that caught Iron Monger dead in the small of the back and sent them both flying. The repulsor powered blast was strong enough to send both of them through the wall to the enclosed car park, through the other side, into the middle of a four-lane freeway that ran behind the industrial plant.

Enough of their motion was checked that they fell enough to bounce off the road, skid along the surface for a second, and break their way through a semi-trailer in motion; before Iron Man's grip was broken.

Their sudden appearance sent drivers in every direction, knocking some cars straight off their wheels.

One actually car bounced off Iron Monger's back and Tony took a breath. This was going to be harder than he thought.

A Land Rover, with a Soccer Mom at the wheel and at least three kids came to a screaming halt less than an inch from the Iron Monger, and under its metal skin, Stane grinned; and picked the car up, before turning to iron man. His intent was obvious.

"Put them down!" Iron Man ordered. That would accomplish nothing and he knew it.

The wheels of the Land Rover were spinning in air, Soccer Mom was shrieking.

"I love this suit!" Iron Monger was yelling exuberantly.

*He's crazed. Iron Man thought in wonder. No, not crazed. High. He's loving the power. He's high on it. Like me when I fly.*

"Collateral Damage!" Stane cackled maniacally, and heaved the Land Rover up above his head.

"Controlled overload," Stark commanded. "Redirect power to uni-beam."

A blast of power, cleaner and bigger than the repulsors flared and erupted from Iron Man's chest, and caught Iron Monger under the chin. Tony thought for a second that the larger machine actually felt it.

Iron Monger was blown backward off his feet and the Land Rover dropped at him.

Iron Man lunged and caught it around the hood, almost bent over backwards by the weight.
But it cost him. "Power at nineteen percent," Jarvis reported. The uni-beam had drained his reserves, the manic flight over had drained his reactor, and holding up a Land Rover full of hysterical people was the end of it. The power faded, his limbs got heavy, he was forced to one knee and his burden dropped. He still had his glove dug into the metal under the front bumper.

Soccer Mom was still screaming. The kids were yelling but loving it. They were watching a bonafide superhero and villain at war.

Soccer mom pounced and floored the accelerator as soon as she was back on the ground.

With his power at minimal levels, the final amps were keyed toward keeping him alive; and so, unable to open his fist, he was dragged along with the Land Rover.

*Patience, Tony!* Iron Man yelled silently at himself. *The worst this can do is throw sparks, let the generator recover!*

The Land Rover became something of a fireworks display, with Iron Man dragged along underneath along the blacktop, throwing waves of sparks behind it.

Finally, Tony read his HUD and decided he had to chance it and broke himself free of the car.

As he rolled to a stop, he couldn't help but notice the kids were photographing him out the back of the car windows with their camera-phones.

*Great. I'm going to have to think up a superhero name now or somebody else gets the action figure rights.*

The ground was jumping. Iron Man knew what the ground jumping meant.

Sure Enough, Iron Monger was charging him with all the determination of a hungry dinosaur.

Iron Monger slammed a huge foot down on Iron Man's chest.

A quick measurement popped up on his HUD, calculating the pressure. 900 PSI...970 PSI...

Power levels were still below 20 percent. Not even close to enough power to break free.

Iron Monger wasn't interested in crushing him it seemed. The pressure lifted, and iron Monger picked him up in a move straight out of pro-wrestling, and threw him into a passing bus, nearly folding it in half. The driver was thrown through the windshield.

*Fly.* Iron Monger had the power, but Iron Man had the speed. He fired his suit jets and took off fast for the sky; just as Iron Monger sent a powerful missile screaming into the wrecked bus. The explosion helped him get airborne, and swooped out of the fireball, to come to a hover over Stane's armor.

"Impressive!" Iron Monger applauded. "You've upgraded your armor!" Stane's electronic voice still sounded like a proud father. "I made a few modifications myself!"

And with a roar, a burst of flame came from Iron Monger's heels, with all the initial thrust of an Apollo rocket, but little by little, he took off, and chased iron man toward the moon.

"Sir, his suit can fly," Jarvis reported, somewhat unnecessarily.

"I noticed," Stark yelled. "Give me maximum altitude!"
"With less than 16 percent power, the odds of reaching-

"I know the math!" Stark yelled, turning for the sky, and exploding upward.

Miles away, in the Air Combat Command Centre, the radar operator saw a familiar blip on his screen, this time over LA. "Sir, you're not going to believe this, but I think its back."

The night watch commander picked up the phone. "All right call in the jets-

The dial tone went dead in his ear. He looked, and saw Jim Rhodes, still in civvies, had disconnected the call. "Nothing to worry about, gentlemen," Rhodes said firmly. "Just a training exercise."

Iron Man got to an early lead, but Iron Monger was gathering momentum.

"Eleven percent power," Jarvis intoned. "Nine percent. Seven percent."

"Just put it on the screen, stop telling me!" Stark yelled at Jarvis, urging himself to reach the moon if he had to.

Jarvis fell silent, just as iron monger reached up with one hand and caught Iron Man's ankle.

With the immense added weight of his opponent, Iron Man stopped climbing in a hurry.

But Iron Monger didn't start to descend. Instead, he wrapped both humongous arms around him and started crushing again. "Forget it Tony!" Stane yelled in his face. "My suit is superior to yours in every way!"

Iron Man was nose to nose with the bad guy again, but this time he saw victory staring back. It was reflected in the ice built up over The Iron Monger's metal skin.

"How'd you solve the icing problem?" Iron Man asked.

"Icing problem?" Stane's voice asked in confusion, just as the grip around Iron Man went slack, and the glowing eyes of Iron Monger went dead. He had lost power, and began to lose upward momentum in a hurry.

"You might want to look into it," Iron Man flaunted, and rapped Iron Monger on it's icy skull as it started to fall.

The Iron Monger fell like the overweight behemoth it was, and Iron Man fired it's repulsors, hovering victoriously in the air.

For just a moment.

"Two percent power," Jarvis put in, destroying the moment, and Iron Man dropped as his own repulsors lost power; trying to keep a grip on the sky like a roadrunner cartoon.

Wile E Coyote my patron saint, don't fail me now! Tony thought desperately as he went into an uncontrollable dive.

The light in his chest flickered, died, flickered again, faded to almost nothing.

Iron Man dropped, feet first, his repulsors managed to glow every few seconds, checking his
momentum; but the power wouldn't last, and he kept dropping.

Eventually, more out of luck than anything else, he landed on the roof of Stark Industries Industrial again; hitting too fast and skidding a few feet before rolling onto his knees.

His movements were slowing down, but his HUD was still active. As was the cell phone hookup. "Pepper?"

"Tony!" She answered instantly. "My god, are you O.K.?!"

Iron Man slumped with relief to hear her voice. "I'm almost out of power," He started yanking off his gloves. "I've gotta get out of this suit," His right hand was bare, he started sending override commands to unlock the chest piece; when Iron Monger slammed down on the roof next to him.

*Dang.* Tony thought idly. *Wouldn't have thought that tank could recover fast enough.*


*He's slowing down. The ice got into the works.* Iron Man realized, and straightened from the dodge, ready to fire…

A bare hand pointed at Iron Monger. Tony had already taken off his right handed gauntlet.

*Oh Hell.* Tony scanned for it out of instinct, and Iron Monger slammed him across the roof.

Iron Man rolled with it and checked the power levels on his HUD where Jarvis had put it. Not enough juice to fire a Uni-Beam, not enough for a Repulsor, not enough to fly…

Not for long anyway. Before he had even finished rolling from Iron Monger's punch, Iron Man was back on his feet. He took one, two steps toward his foe and pulsed his boot-jets just enough to propel him up to eye-level with Iron Monger and bring down a crushing left hook to his eyes with his still-armored fist.

Iron Monger took it right between they eyes and bent with it, arms flashing up to wrap around iron man's waist again, and start bear-crushing him. Iron Monger was beyond toying with his prey. Crushing him was the slowest, but most reliable way of making sure Tony was dead, because suddenly Iron Man couldn't move.

*The gloves are off.* Tony hissed. *Almost literally in my case.*

"Weapons status!" Tony asked in pain. His rib cage was being crushed, and the Reactor wasn't holding out the shrapnel nearly as well any more under the strain of holding the suit together.

Jarvis dictated as the alerts came across his HUD.

**Uni-Beam:** Offline

**Repulsors:** Offline

**Micro-missiles:** Offline.

"Flares!" Iron Man commanded, and the hip panels opened, firing a pyrotechnic display directly into both of them, scoring pits and marks on both metal suits.

Iron Monger tried to hold his grip, when suddenly, within the suit, Stane was blinded by the thermal camera that he had tracked iron man in the sky with. Faced with the flares, the sensitive
motion trackers went berserk, and Stane broke his grip around Iron Man, throwing the source of the fireworks away.

By the time his vision cleared, Iron Man had vanished.

"Clever Tony," Stane called, starting to prowl the roof.

Iron Man was hiding behind the massive Air Conditioners. His suit wasn't exactly silent, with working gears active for every joint. So Iron Man stayed as still as he could, edging his way at the corner, just enough to keep track of where his evil twin was.

This fight was going badly. Iron Man needed power. But there was no chance of...

Power. That was the answer.

Tony whispered to his suit. "Potts."

The HUD recognized the name and turned up the gain on the microphone to his cell phone call. "Tony?"

"We're going to need a new plan. We've got to overload the Arc Reactor. Blast the roof."

"How will you do that?"

Tony actually felt a moment's sympathy for her. "You're going to do it."

He could hear the shock in her voice. "What?!"

"It's easy," Tony said soothingly. "Open all the circuits, and then hit the master control," I keep laying this stuff on you, but I don't have anybody else.

"O.K.," Pepper said nervously. "I'm going inside now."

"Just make sure you wait till I'm off the roof before you hit the button."

Now all Iron Man had to do was delay Iron Monger.

Pepper went to the controls of the Arc Reactor and started throwing levers, flipping switches.

She sent a look at the deco design Skylight. She remembered when they put that in. She had thought at the time that it was too big and showy.

It might just save them all.

Iron Monger came lunging around the corner of the air conditioner. There was no sign of anyone.

Iron Man took advantage of the moment to lunge forward from the other side of his hiding place. Before Iron Monger could turn, he launched himself up behind Iron Monger, and landed on his back; square between the Iron Monger's shoulders. Between his helmet-plate, and the shoulder pneumatics, huge thick cables and wires ran between the weapons systems and Stane's narrow cockpit.

Iron Man scanned his view and his HUD started tracking on power signals; identifying primary from secondary feeds.
"Take a page from my book, you prize ratbag! Stark snarled. Next time, internalize your systems!

"This looks important!" Iron Man crowed, and yanked out a fistful of cables as fast as he could.

Iron Monger started thrashing, blind but not weak.

Inside the suit, Stane seethed. He couldn't see anything any longer. Iron Man was no longer an interesting field test. He reached behind himself and started searching for the annoying bug on his back. *How did I not build a suit that can reach that spot between your shoulder blades?*

"Tony its ready!" Pepper's voice sounded through his HUD. "Get off the roof!"

Tony was about to give Pepper a polite rundown of what he was a little busy doing right then, when Iron Monger reached back and caught his head between both hands.

Iron Monger swung him forward in a double axel, and Tony could feel his neck wrench. Finally, the pressure on the neck-frame was too much, and Tony twisted his head to work free of the helmet.

With his Iron Mask ripped off, Tony Stark, still indestructible from the neck down, went skidding across the roof, onto the skylight, coming to a glass-scratching halt, dead centre in the deco spiderweb design.

Stane opened his suit. He had to, his HUD display was wrecked. In one giant hand was the helmet; with its eyes still glowing. Resisting the urge to do a quick bit of Shakespeare, Stane settled for crushing the empty Iron head and tossing the mangled remains over toward his wayward protégé.

"Y'know I never had a taste for this," Stane said to Tony conversationally. "But I have to admit, I'm deeply enjoying the suit,"

He fired his chain-gun, and Tony, unable to get any traction on the glass, threw up a forearm desperately, opened every flap, trying madly to cover his head and bullets bounced off his body and tracer fire went past his ears. The air-flaps dented and bent, the glass under his feet cracked, and he fell through, catching a final grip on the steel frame.

Down below, Pepper ducked her head and threw her arms over her neck, as glass shards came raining down on her. "Tony!" She looked up and saw her boss' gold and red body hanging, fifty feet above.

Stane was calm again. It was clear at this point that Tony was either unable, or unwilling to take off in flight or to shoot back. Stane took his time, carefully using up his chain-gun ammo to cut off any direction he could move. Tony was neatly trapped as every pane of glass around him shattered.

"You finally outdid yourself," Stane applauded, taking two steps closer, making sure of his range, making sure of his next shot. "Y'know, it's ironic. Trying to rid the world of weapons, you gave it it's best one yet," He raised an arm and a tri-missile launcher arced into firing position, taking aim at Tony Stark, hanging from the shattered glass roof. "And now I'm going to kill you with it."

Stane fired the missile. It missed completely.

"You knocked out my targeting sensors," Stane scolded lightly, still enjoying the moment. He raised his arm and fired. The missile missed again, but not by nearly as much.
Tony gritted his teeth and held on, out of power, unable to move, losing his grip somewhat and hanging from the iron bar one-handed.

"Hold still you little prick!" Stane cackled. He raised his arm again and aimed more carefully. But he didn't step forward. He couldn't. He was at the edge of the shattered skylight, and couldn't risk going through the roof.

You screwed up Stane. Stark hissed. The Mark I was too slow, too heavy. You based Iron Monger on the Mark I, and you didn't correct the weight ratio. "Pepper! NOW! PUSH THE BUTTON!" he screamed down to her from the roof.

"You'll Die!" Pepper screamed back from five floors below.

Tony was hanging on with one gauntleted hand, one bare hand, the glass edges digging into his skin. "JUST DO IT!"

Pepper hit the button.

The Arc Reactor erupted with electrical discharge, a thunderstorm gone insane.

Pepper did the math and ran for it.

An instant later, the Arc Reactor blew, sending an impossible blast of pure white electric power straight up to the shattered roof, and the destroyed skylight...

Iron Man was tossed by the blast.

Iron Monger, heavier, armored to be a tank, barely able to fly under its own repulsors, was heavy enough to stay on the roof.

Obadiah Stane, blinded by the shockwave, his suit opened for all to see, was not thrown clear, cooked alive, anchored to the fire by the weight of his suit; and he howled as his body convulsed, sending the suit forward as his limbs hit the controls.

Enough to stumble blindly into the white light, falling through the hole he had blasted in the roof of Stark Industries; the white fire tasking him apart as he fell.

The impossibly heavy machine and it's already beaten human pilot fell into the building, spinning gently from the fall, till it landed heavily on the Arc Reactor, which had just enough juice left in it to explode when it ruptured.

Pepper was clear enough to hide behind one of Coulson's Range Rovers. A clinical part of her mind hoped that the Agent was O.K. downstairs, when a blast of heat and fire made her duck. Several seconds passed, and she raised her head finally, to see the entrance to Stark Industries gutted by a mini-mushroom cloud of flame.

There was no sign of anyone moving. "Tony!" She shrieked up at the rooftop.

Iron Man had been thrown, landed hard, but Tony was already unconscious.

Without a helmet, and parts of his armor missing or wrecked, he lay silently on the roof, several feet from the glass ceiling; motionless against the concrete.

Until finally, freed from the drain of activity and combat, his miniature Arc reactor recovered, flickered and finally glowed to a tiny beacon of light against the darkness.
"By now, you've all received the official statement about last night's events. A Stark prototype malfunctioned, and caused damage to Stark Industries, and the surrounding area. Fortunately, a member of Mr. Stark's personal staff was nearby and able to…"

Pepper switched off the TV and headed downstairs to find the boss.

Rhodes really had his work cut out for him this time. The kids with their camera-phones weren't even close to being the only ones to get a photo. Everybody on the freeway, as well as half the city, as well as the Air Combat Centre had seen a massive duel between two robotic gladiators.

If that had been hard to cover up, the blast from the Arc Reactor had sent up a flare that had not only been seen for miles, it had blacked out almost two thirds of LA.

The newspapers all had amateur photos of one fighter or the other, and eye-witness accounts had made it clear, the larger one was attacking civilians, and the red and gold one was risking his neck to save them.

The battle had started and ended at Stark Industries. That much was unmistakable, so the press, eager for more surprising revelations from the billionaire industrialist, was demanding answers from them.

With the new day, the headlines screamed the question that the whole world was asking: "WHO IS IRON MAN?"

Pepper came into Tony's private office at a pretty good pace, and was completely unsurprised to find him reading the newspaper. Taking that as a good a cue as she was likely to get when he was reading about himself, she launched straight in. "Mr. Stark, the Press are assembled downstairs; I've got The Washington Post on line one demanding details, I have the FAA on line two demanding to know when 'Iron Man's' next fight is going to be, and reminding you to file a flight plan. I've got Ozzy Osborn's lawyer on line three demanding to know if they should sue you or the Chronicle over that headline. Jerry Seinfeld's on line four asking if Iron Man wears any underwear under that suit, and Jerry Springer on line five asking the same question. Line six, was Bill Gates asking if he was interested in an endorsement contract, and I didn't even know you had a line seven but it was the Board of Directors demanding to know why they weren't told about him; since they can't reach Obadiah. And speaking of that, Agent Coulson is here to see you."

Tony wasn't listening. "Iron Man. That's kinda catchy, don't ya think?" He asked her without looking up from the paper.

Pepper all but threw up her hands.

Why do I bother?

She finally looked up from her PDA and sighed. His cuts were still visible. She pulled out her compact and started touching up his cuts. He wasn't embarrassed by her practically leaning on top of him with her makeup in hand. He didn't even look away from the paper. "It's not strictly accurate, though, it's really a composite gold titanium alloy, but I like the feel of it."

Agent Coulson said, having learnt his lesson about waiting, let himself in. "Here's your alibi," He handed Tony a set of cue-cards. "You were on your Yacht, we have port papers that put you in Avalon all night, and sworn statements from fifty of your guests."

"I was thinking, about the Alibi, maybe it was just me and Pepper on the Yacht," Tony glanced away from the cue cards just long enough to wink at her. She smirked, just a little.

"This is what happened," Coulson said firmly. "Read it word for word."
Tony read the cards through. "There's nothing about Stane here."

"He's on vacation. Small jets have a notorious safety record."

I wonder if this is why. Tony thought idly. "This going to work?" Stark questioned, tapping at the cue cards. "I mean what is this? That he's my bodyguard?"

"This is not our first rodeo," Coulson responded evenly; and turned to Pepper. "We'll be in touch."

"Agent Coulson," Pepper chased him as far as the door and graced him with a smile of professional courtesy. "I just wanted to say thank you."

Coulson returned the gesture. "You'll be hearing from us."

"From the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division?"

Coulson gave a long suffering grin as he headed out. "Just call us S.H.I.E.L.D."

"Much better," Tony called after him in agreement without looking up from the cards.

Pepper checked the screen again and got Tony moving. "Let's get the show on the road."

As Pepper picked up Tony's coat and helped him into it, he spoke. "You know, I have to admit, this is pretty good. Even I don't think I'm Iron Man."

"You aren't Iron Man. Remember?" Pepper gestured at the cue-cards and started fixing his tie. How had he never learnt how to properly tie a Windsor knot?

"You know..." He said conversationally to Pepper. "If I were Iron Man, I'd probably have this girlfriend, who knew my secret identity; and be worried all the time about something bad happening to me, but at the same time she'd be all proud of me, of the man I'd become; and then she'd be all conflicted and that of course just makes her crazier about me."

Stop reading my mind. Pepper told him silently without looking up.

"You ever think about that night?" Tony pressed gently. It was as close to an offer as he could make her; she could tell.

She was suddenly aware that her hands weren't moving on his tie any more. She was just standing there, staring at him; right where his Arc Reactor was under his shirt. Criminy Tony, your timing...Pepper sighed as silently as she could, and raised her face to look at him. "You mean, that night, when we danced," She said, in a low, seductive drawl. "And then went up on the roof..., and you went downstairs to get me a drink, and then you...left me there, by myself?"

He swallowed. Actually, 'gulped' would be more appropriate. "MmmHmmm,"

Tony had actually blushed. It was incredible to Pepper that she could make him blush. It was something unique to her alone. Something else. She was the only woman he kept on speed-dial. She was the only one who had a personally given nickname; the only one who had the key code to his house and workshop, and the fact that he had used the word 'girlfriend' for probably the first time in his life didn't go unnoticed...It was clear he trusted her, clear he needed her...But it was Tony. It was her Tony, but still...this man wore the Iron Man suit. He wasn't wrong. She was terrified he was going to get himself killed. And she had lived and died, wondering about his fate twice now. The second time she had hit the button herself, on his order.
She gave him a beseeching look. *You understand don't you? I can be your right hand. I could even be your girlfriend if you were willing...but I can't be Iron Man's sidekick too. In the last few months I've updated your eulogy for the papers, I've pulled your heart from your chest with my bare hands; I've fended off the government bloodhounds, I've slow danced with you in front of everyone I work with, I've been your undercover spy, and I've helped you kill your friend turned super villain. Sooner or later this crusade will kill you, and I can't be part of that as your girlfriend. Not while I care about what happens to you this much.*

Tony could read the look easily; and he had the grace not to push it now. He sent her a look back. *Pepper, I had to burn my way out of a terrorist camp; bury the man who saved my life; lie to my only two friends, and kill the man who took over when my father died. I don't have anyone else I can rely on like you. I don't have anyone else like you period. I really don't want to lose you over this.*

*You won't.* Pepper promised silently. "Will that be all Mr. Stark?"

"That'll be all Miss Potts."

Rhodes saw him coming in the door at the back, and wrapped up his part in the proceedings. "And now, Mr. Stark will read a prepared statement. He will not be taking any questions."

Tony made his way to the podium and idly wondered who had thought that part up.

Rhodey stepped aside for him, and Tony pulled out the cue-cards, holding them out for all to see. "After my last press conference;" he told them lightly. "I'm going to stick to the cards this time."

Everyone chuckled politely.

Tony cleared his throat and began. "There has been speculation that I was involved with the events that took place last night. What actually happened-"

One reporter in the front row shouted out a question before he was even done with the first sentence. "Do you really expect us to believe that you have a new bodyguard that nobody has ever seen or heard of before, who appeared conveniently last night?"

*Everheart. Who else? Stark hissed mentally. Did I really cut you that deep? If your surrogate father tried to kill you twice with your own creations you'd know what feeling used meant and you'd get over me pretty fast.*

"I know it seems confusing," Tony was playing defense and he knew it. "And it's one thing to contradict the official story, but making accusations that I'm parading around as a superhero-"

*I never said you were a superhero,* Everheart pointed out. Checkmate.

"Didn't you?" Stark awkwardly responded, fully aware she had caught him. "Well, good, because that would be ridiculous, and fantastic..."

For a moment, Rhodes was convinced that somewhere along the way he had developed telepathy. He could almost hear his friend's thoughts so vividly he actually felt his feet inching over to Stark.

Everyone knew about Everheart. At least four society reporters had seen her get into his car; and all of them had mentioned the conspicuous lack of an interview in the next issue of Vanity Fair...Her putting the screws to him wouldn't convince anybody as long as Tony kept to the point.
"Stick to the cards," Rhodes whispered in his ear.

The press had noticed the Military man hissing at their host and realized something unplanned was happening. The last time Stark did something unexpected the stock market exploded. Rhodes didn't care about that. His friend was a bona fide superhero now, but that armor couldn't protect him from the press.

Rhodes stepped back to his place beside the podium, but kept up his mantra. Don't do it. Stick to the script. Don't do it.

Tony knew if he said what he was thinking, they'd never let him forget it. The suit and the mask would be his epitaph; his legacy.

Better than a body count. He admitted to himself.

Rhodey had a point. S.H.I.E.L.D. did too. If the one in the suit was revealed, they'd never let him be anything but Iron Man. Ever.

"I'm just not the...the heroic type," Stark protested; but his heart wasn't in it. "Clearly."

After all, if were the hero, I would've got the girl.

Oh for crying out loud! Pepper raged inwardly at Everheart as she watched the Press Conference. He's had plenty of one night stands who were a lot less bitter, and frankly more attractive than you Blondie. Get over it!

"The truth is..." Tony started to say on screen.

Pepper sighed, accepting the unfolding disaster on the screen as fate. She pulled out her PDA and looked up his schedule. There were going to be some revisions needed after the inevitable explosion to come.

She started with the most popular reporters, and then moved onto the most attractive ones. Tony would appreciate that.

She left Vanity Fair off the list completely.

You start the fire, Pepper told the blonde woman on screen with silent venom. You're the only one left out in the cold.

Tony could almost feel Rhodey glaring at him. Somewhere, he knew Coulson was pitching a fit and Pepper was throwing up her hands.

The press had noticed him putting the cue cards down, discerned the feeling of lightning about to strike, and waited with a reverent hush. Tony was almost squirming under their gaze, but not for the reason they thought.

The stock will go nuts, the Board will scream bloody murder, this will be the most talked about press conference since Moses came down the mountain, the truth about Stane will come out eventually, Rhodey will reach across the podium and strangle you, S.H.I.E.L.D. will go berserk and Pepper may never talk to you again. Tony told himself firmly. But on the other hand...nah.
"The truth is..." Tony put down his cue cards, and said: "I Am Iron Man."

An instant later, almost every reporter was on their feet screaming at him. Everheart was not. She was too busy being stunned at what she had turned loose.

Tony drank it in. This was going to be one Hell of a ride.

Chapter End Notes

I know, crazy isn't it? I got the first movie done in three huge chapters. The reason is because I had no idea the rest of the MCU was coming.
The Press had taken two hours to get their fill of him and his thousand and one ways to avoid questions. Pepper had taken another hour to run through his suddenly expanded itinerary. Once Tony had waved most of that off and made appointment times for the rest, he went back to his office, where Rhodes was waiting for him. Pepper didn't envy either of them and opted to stay outside the office for a while at her own desk.

Rhodes hadn't stopped yelling for half an hour, and it had taken Stark another hour to get him to stop sulking.

After that, Pepper had cornered him in the elevator again on his way out. The Board of Directors had given up looking for Stane, and they were demanding Tony come to New York so they could scream at him in person.

Pepper had already booked him a flight. News about Stane's death would be public soon enough, and he would have to go to New York when that happened anyway, to calm things down and appoint a new Chairman.

Pepper had also quietly informed him that they were getting ready to muscle him out, but with Stane dead, the stock he held would default, and the Board would not have enough to take over control of Tony's percentage without Stane to back them up.

Agent Coulson had checked in one more time. He had finished going through the copy from the Ghost Drive, and reported that Stark had been cleared of any suspicion, as they now had the full manifest of Stane's private customers, as well as eyewitness accounts from their agents saying that Obadiah had gone insane.

The whole day had been spent in clean up of the Press Conference, and there was a lot of work still to do.

Hours later as the sun set, Tony came out of his Private office to the adjacent waiting room, where Pepper was at her desk, watching the TV.

Tony glanced over and saw his own face staring back at him. "The truth is… I am Iron Man." His on-screen counterpart said.

Pepper turned off the TV. "They're gonna run that clip forever."

"Well, until I give them something to replace it, they will." Tony agreed and pulled on his jacket.

Pepper sent him that look again; and retreated to the safety of her PDA Tony led the way downstairs to the street. "Rhodes sent me a message about an hour ago saying that the Military is demanding Iron Man suits, and offering you billions."

"No."

Pepper marked that one off the list without blinking. "I have a personal message from The Treasury Department asking if you would like a Secret Service Detail since you just outed yourself as-"
"No."

"I have Secretary of State asking if you would be interested in playing bodyguard for visiting dignitaries…"

"No." Tony waved that off. "And don't bring me anything with the word 'bodyguard' in it anymore, it's undignified."

"Okay. The Miss Universe Pageant would like you as Iron Man to be part of the opening show, and you as Tony Stark to be a judge."

"Sold."

"Oh sure, very dignified." Pepper mumbled.

"Hey! A scholarship is involved!" Tony pointed out as they made it to the foyer.

Pepper let out a noise somewhere between a sneer and a sigh as she ticked that one. "MTV is doing a thirty minute show called 'Tony Stark's Fashion Do's and Don'ts', they want some glamour photos of the suit."

"Fine." Tony said, and then blinked. "Is the suit a 'do' or 'don't'?"

"They didn't say but on that score, the Queer Eye Team would like to give you an opinion on color schemes for the next Armor you make."

"Meh." Tony waved his hand back and forth, largely ambivalent as Hogan opened the door for them. "Home please; Happy."

"I'm saying 'no' to that one then." Pepper marked it off and got into the car with him.

"You don't like the Queer Eye guys?"

"Carson made fun of my hairstyle the whole day last time." Pepper explained. "Dr Phil has approached you about the possibility of appearing on his show to talk about your trauma…"

"No chance. If I was going to see a shrink, I'd go to one of the people Rhodey recommended." He shook his head slightly and looked back at her. "Oh, and I have to do something really nice for Rhodey soon, because I don't think he's ever going to talk to me again otherwise.

"I'll make a note." Pepper agreed and jotted it down. "DC comics are interested in-"

"No." Tony said firmly. "That won't be happening."

"Right. I agree." Pepper marked it off. "I got a memo from some of the Board of Directors, lodging a formal Vote of No Confidence about all of this."

"What a shock." Tony said sarcastically.

"It's been signed by half the Board." Pepper pointed out.

"And the other half?"

Pepper was conspicuously silent.

"And the other half?" Tony pressed.
"Have resigned." Pepper admitted.

"Well, tell Obie that..." Tony caught himself suddenly, and his expression dimmed, just a bit, and he turned to look out the window.

Pepper looked at him sympathetically, but said nothing.

Finally, Tony turned away from the window and looked at her. "Has the news broken about Stane yet?"

Pepper shook her head. "No." She gestured to her PDA. "A number of people want to know where he is."

Tony sighed. "I'm going to have to go to New York for a while."

"I already filed the flight schedule. Stark One will be ready to fly tomorrow afternoon. Somehow, I think arriving as Iron Man won't relax the ones that haven't deserted you already." Pepper nodded. Tony was staring out the window again, lost in his thoughts.

Pepper regarded him a moment. Almost since he took over at Stark Industries, Stane had been the one running the Board of Directors. Except for the letterhead and the paper Trail, Tony had always been more of the figurehead. Part chief engineer/designer, part PR. Having to replace Stane as the chairman...

"Tony," She said finally. "If you really have lost all interest in the business, then there are about a thousand calls from private sectors." She licked her lips nervously. "I would go with you."

That got his attention, and he glanced over at her. "You would huh?"

Pepper smiled, slightly embarrassed and looked back at the PDA. "The headhunters all want to hire you. Everything from MIT to the CIA to the LAPD..."

"M-O-U-S-E." Tony sing-songed and shook his head firmly. "No. It's not my name on the building Pepper, it's my fathers name. I inherited this from him, I'm not going to toss it just because... No. I'm going to have to go be a businessman for a while."

The car pulled to a halt outside Tony's home, and he opened the door. "Pepper?" he said, before getting out.

"Yeah?"

"That first Arc Reactor? You kept it for me, and it saved my life."

"Mine too." Pepper said quietly.

Tony smiled. "Thank you for saving my life."

"Don't waste it." Pepper answered him lightly, and Tony suddenly whirled like he's seen a ghost.

She stared back, surprised. What did I say? What did I SAY!?

"I won't." Tony promised, sounding more sincere than she'd ever seen him.

He was giving her That Look again, and she blushed slightly. The moment stretched briefly, and she covered professionally, once again. "Will that be all Mr. Stark?"
"That'll be all, Miss Potts."

"Tony?" She called after him. "You can't have late night 'interviews' in private with the Miss Universe contestants if you're a judge."

Tony seemed to think about that very hard for a while. "Still get good seats though."

Pepper smiled, feeling relieved. "Have a good night."

Tony hadn't been so happy to see his home since getting back from Afghanistan. But the first thing he noticed was that the lights were turned down too low. They hadn't brightened to his usual presets when he walked in.

"Jarvis?" Tony called.

"Welcome home, si-i-i-r-r-r-r-r-r..." The voice slowed from cultured British butler, to a damaged electronic scrawl before going silent.

Tony froze. For the second time in as many days, Jarvis was shut down. He scanned the room and saw a figure sitting over by the window, looking out. The silhouette made Tony's hands start to shake. Tall, with an overcoat too big, and a smooth head. It reminded him instantly of Raza. Had the leader of Ten Rings survived and managed to get into his house?

Tony, who had only recently started thinking along these lines, recognized the strategic value of the spot. There hadn't been a chair there before, but from that positioning, some one could have their back to the wall and see both the road up to the house, and the entire room without shifting from the dark shadows. He did not run. There was nowhere to go just yet.

"I am Iron Man." The figure said, quoting the line that had been played on a continuous loop for the past nine hours.

Tony let a breath out slightly. This was not Raza.

"You think you're the only superhero in the world?" The voice continued. "Mr. Stark, you've become part of a larger universe, you just don't know it."

"Who're you?" Tony asked, without responding to any of the rhetoric.

The man leaned forward, coming into the light. He was a powerfully built black man, with a physique in its twenties, a face in its thirties and eyes in their eighties. Or at least one of them was, the other covered by a black eye patch. "Nick Fury." He introduced himself. "Director of SHIELD."

Tony relaxed. Just another headhunter. "Oh."

"I've come to talk to you about The Avenger Initiative." Fury said.

*The Avenger Initiative? Shield's talent for coming up with names is steadily improving.* Tony thought lightly.

SHIELD had lost two men trying to protect Pepper from Stane, and had given him an alibi that he hadn't even bothered to hold onto for ten minutes…

Tony sat down across from Fury.
After all, no harm came from just having the conversation…

Chapter End Notes

Okay folks, as of here, the chapters start getting shorter, and some of my own stuff is added as Missing Scene Fics. The next part will actually diverge from the backstory provided by Captain America 1, but bear in mind it was written years before that came out; so I was basing it on The Ultimates comics at the time.
Putting The Team Together

Stark Industries managed to remain a player on Wall Street, due in no small part to the outright fame of it's CEO alone. The factory had been put under constant guard as the Arc Reactor had been rebuilt, Stark had found all the surveillance devices that Fury had slipped into his factory, workshop and around the rest of his home, and life went on.

True to his word, Tony had shut down the Weapons Production Division of his family business. What nobody had expected at first, was that Stark Industries wasn't done with the armed forces all together. Instead, the division that used to supply weapons now called itself "Military Support." There were plenty of aspects to the Armed Forces that didn't involve explosions, and Tony already had the resources and contacts in place to innovate them.

Within two months: body armour, transport, survival gear, storage, communications, encryption, maintenance, food-distribution, natural disaster relief, International Aid, food supply, everything had been improved thanks to Stark patents.

The sudden shift in policy had gathered him much international goodwill, and recognition from many quarters, giving him the ear of plenty of civilian customers that had otherwise been closed him before.

The front line Research and Development team, the best that the company had to offer, with the exception of Tony himself, were quick to get to work on their newly appointed field. After it came out that they were the ones to help build the Iron Monger suit, albeit without knowing why, the scientists and engineers in question were overjoyed to learn they weren't being fired, or for that matter, thrown in jail, and eagerly worked to prove their loyalty to the Stark name.

Several governments and various leaders had made their attacks on Iron Man for violating airspace and International treaties.

CNN had broadcast endless reams of footage of small children and old widows in Gulmira weeping their gratitude to the new Superhero for saving their fathers and sons. When faced with the fact that a single man would act to save refugees, when no Government in the world was willing to send an army to do the same, the various Western nations remained mute when asked if Tony would face repercussions for his actions.

The final word on the matter was that Tony Stark had done everything as a private citizen, and was not affiliated with any Government, the US included, when he liberated Gulmira.

After that, came the domestic politicking, with endless questions asked as to whether or not Tony had violated any US laws.

After endless, and very public debate, the courts had ruled that there was no law against building a one man flying combat suit of armour without telling anyone. The fact that the majority of construction had occurred on Stark's private property had ruled out any violation of Industrial laws.

The actions that caused half of LA to lose power for a day had been ruled as the fault of Iron Monger, and as Stane had not been identified as the villain of the story, and nor, for that matter, had any pilot been proven, let alone identified, the whole matter had been ruled an Industrial Accident, which was protected by Stark Industries Liability Insurance. The fact that it was Iron Man's direct intervention that had prevented any casualties helped considerably to smooth over any lingering questions.
In fact, the only legal claim that could stick was from the Federal Aviation Administration regarding the fact that Tony had failed to file any flight plan with local Air Traffic Control, and did not maintain communication with the Control Tower. Nor had the Iron Man Suit been inspected and granted a "Standard Airworthiness Certificate." That case was quietly settled out of court and forgotten.

But alongside with the serious implications of what Stark had brought, the ludicrous had it's time to shine as well.

Crime rates in LA dropped considerably for a grand total of two days, and sky watchers suddenly made an appearance on the beach near Stark's home, watching for any jet-powered suits overhead.

Letterman and Leno had a field day with the idea of a socialite billionaire having a secret life. A new wave of paternity suits had come across Pepper's desk, including photos of the kids wearing red-and gold clothing.

Tabloids had quickly thought of every double-meaning that "Iron Man" could give them. Some of the less scrupulous lawyers in town had gone looking for specific laws they could use to sue Tony on behalf of the city, as well as the usual ambulance chasers that represented people on the freeway.

Pepper herself had been approached by a legal firm willing to represent her if she wanted to sue her boss for emotional trauma as well as putting her in harms way. She had run them out of the building on a rail. Several Insurance firms, some reputable, some not, had offered Insurance against damages caused by superheroes and villains alike; and various talk shows held their forums on people who believed they could have superheroes in their families, or possibly be superheroes themselves.

The overall feeling on the matter was that Tony Stark was one of the richest, most well connected, and now the most well armed men on the planet, and answered to no one, and as a result, nobody wanted to be the one who crossed him first.

And eventually, the world became used to the idea that there was a superhero around, and life went on.

But surprisingly, Iron Man was not the story of the year.

Only a few months after Iron Man made his first public appearances, a new power made an even more dramatic entrance, in what had been dubbed 'Hulk vs Abomination.'

Not since the 'I Am Iron Man' announcement had a single video clip been played on so many news outlets. There wasn't anyone in the western hemisphere that hadn't seen the fight. The more reserved news outlets had censored the video considerably, given it's brutal nature, but almost everyone who had a recording of the fight had gone to Youtube.

Within twenty hours of a massive showdown between two impossibly powerful, freakishly dangerous monsters; both of whom had trashed a sizable portion of Harlem, New York, Tony Stark had an answer for Nick Fury.

Colonel Rhodes discovered that he was not the only one being briefed on the newest battlegrounds.

Presented with the notion that a 'One-Man-Army' was no longer exclusive to the comic books, a whole new kind of game was being played by the world's governments. 'Super-Soldier' was a term being tossed around Weapon's Development, and Rhodes had volunteered to keep his current
position as the point-man on experimental Weapons technology. Technology that had now been expanded to human beings. Despite Tony's refusal to engage in the new Arms race, it went on without him.

The successful experiments were kept secret for security purposes.

The unsuccessful experiments were kept secret on general principal.

One experiment gone wrong had gotten past the wall of silence that had been built around it. In fact, one experiment gone awry had smashed through plenty of walls, plenty of guards, half the US Army, and a small city's worth of buildings and people.

Rhodes had written letters to parents before. Test pilots lived on 'the cutting edge' and were all too often sacrificed upon it. But this one was different. This one was not his responsibility, not his field...

But his position among the armed forces made sure he was fully briefed on the situation. Things that even the press did not know. Things that they could never be allowed to find out.

Rhodes had received the briefing memos, and noted the list of people who had received a copy. Intelligence, White House, DOD...

Tony Stark.

When Rhodes had found that name, he couldn't believe it. Stark wasn't military, wasn't intelligence, and since getting back from Afghanistan, he wasn't even a private contractor for their experimental programs any more.

So why was he getting the files on Emil Blonsky?

An hour later, he had an email from Tony, marked 'Urgent'

Rhodey-

Come see me. Bring booze.

Tony.

Two hours later, Rhodes let himself into Tony Stark's Beach front home, with a sixpack in one hand and a scotch bottle in the other. "Tony?"

"In here!" Stark called back.

Rhodes followed his voice to the living room, where the lights were dimmed to movie theatre level. Tony himself was sitting, cross-legged on the couch, with a lightpad tablet on one knee, stylus in hand, and projected on the smart-glass windows was the news footage from the Hulk vs Abomination fight.

Rhodes walked closer, never taking his eyes off the screen.

After one particularly brutal punch by the Hulk, Tony tapped his lightpad and the image froze. "Blonsky's safely locked away by SHIELD. You caught the green guy yet?" Tony asked without looking up.

"No."
Tony took that in and waved his friend to the other end of the couch. Rhodes sat down and handed over the bottle. "Pepper was in Manhattan you know."

"She okay?"

"She wasn't in Harlem, but look at those things! They could have gotten from Harlem to her in how long? From what the reports are telling me, we're lucky you didn't have to nuke em."

"We had enough power on the ground when we had to."

"Ross came to me about the Bio-weapons program y'know. Wanted my people to get into it."

"What'd you tell him?"

"The truth. Biological weapons, innovations, all that stuff was the one area of warfare my company never touched. We're iron mongers. Blacksmiths don't play god."

Rhodes didn't have an answer to that.

"Let me get you a glass." Tony said.

"Don't bother, brought my own." Rhodes pulled a can off the sixpack.

"Barley soda?" Stark quipped. "Sugar water?"

"Beer. It's called beer. It's good." Rhodes stressed for the four thousandth time since meeting Tony Stark.

"I can't believe you. You're supposed to be a career soldier, cool and deadly and you still drink nothing but soda pop."

"It's Budweiser. Buy American."

"I think there's some milk in the fridge..."

"I like beer, okay?"

Tony waved that off and tapped the lightpad balanced on his knee. The frozen image on the screen came to life again and the two men watched a clash of monsters, in the open streets of Harlem.

"Think if I'd gotten into it there would have been more damage or less damage?"

"As Iron Man? I honestly don't think you could have taken either of them, let alone both."

"Probably not." Stark agreed. "Fury gave me a call when he sent this along, wanted me to come up with something, just in case we don't have the Jolly Green Giant next time."

"What'd you tell him?"

Stark smirked. "That I'd think about it."

Rhodes merely looked at his friend.

Stark rolled his eyes and confessed. "Okay, so maybe I already have the blueprints drawn up. I call it the Hulk-Buster."

Rhodes laughed, and the video footage replayed again. Other men might get bored watching the
same scene replay, but these weren't two people watching a movie-clip, these were two soldiers, knowing that one day they'd have to fight these same monsters.

"Did I do this Rhodey?" Stark asked quietly.

Rhodes blinked. "What?"

Tony gestured at the screen. "Did I start the new arms race after all? Fury's been sending me reports about... about China trying to build an Iron Man Suit, about Mutants with superpowers popping up... I have personally knocked people out of Stark Industries during the reconstruction. They were trying to lift the blueprints to the Arc Reactor. Fury doesn't want a team so that he can get merchandising rights." On the screen there was a momentary close up of the Hulk's glowering face. "How can we ever get the world back to the way it was?"

"We can't. But we've gotten used to it before. People learn to live with fear. Fear of the bomb, fear of terrorism, fear of supervillains... it sucks, but it's not your fault. You just got there first."

"Just like dad." Tony tapped his pad again, and Jarvis projected up a picture of Howard Stark, with the original Manhattan project team. "Look where that got the world. People living with that fear for fifty years."

"Saved the world in WW2 first though."

Tony let out a bitter laugh. "Yeah."

Rhodes blinked. Tony had never reacted like that before. "What?"

Tony seemed to think about something for a long time. "Rhodes, not counting me, and not counting these guys..." He waved at the screen where the footage of the fight replayed yet again. "When was the last time the world had a superhero? I mean a real, genuine, superhero? Someone that people knew existed, someone the press didn't vilify... Someone they could rally behind? Truth, justice, all that good stuff?"

Rhodes settled back in his chair, giving the matter thought. "Have to be Captain America." He said finally.

"Who else?" Tony agreed. "He wasn't an ordinary soldier Rhodey. He was part of a Bio-Weapons program, started up, mostly out of desperation after Pearl Harbor. The only human survivor of the Super Soldier Program. The only one of his kind. Sixty years later, we can't even recreate it. He was unique Rhodes."

Rhodey raised his beer bottle in tribute. One soldier toasting the greatest of them to go before. "He was."

Mild silence as the Hulk fight played again on the screen.

"Rhodey, the Manhattan Project may have been the first successful nuke *used*, but it wasn't the first *made*."

Rhodes blanched. "What?!

"The Nazi's had built a working missile, under a program run by Herr Klieser, and the Normandy Landings forced them to use it. The Allies sent an attack to kill it before they could launch, and Captain America led the strike. The missile was launched at Washington, with the Captain *hanging onto it*, and he sabotaged it midflight while it was over the Arctic Circle. The Manhattan project
was completed a full six months later. We'd all be speaking German right now if it wasn't for a Super Soldier."

Rhodey was stunned. "My god... they told us that Captain America died hitting a Nazi base, but... that was a Nuclear Missile?!"

"They hushed it up because they didn't want Japan to know that the next level of firepower had arrived and none of the players had made it yet." Tony handed one of the many folders on his desk to his friend. "Fury's been sending me the files."

Rhodes put it down very fast. He wasn't cleared for this file, and didn't like being in the same room as it.

"A superhero Rhodes. One guy that could do things no other soldier could do, and he saved the whole war. A superhero, the first of his kind, and sixty years later they're finally starting to catch up with him. For a while there, the age of heroes was dead on arrival."

"It opened with the best though didn't it?"

Stark shook his head. "I'm not that guy Rhodes. Captain America wouldn't have four sex tapes online. Captain America wouldn't have presented a Nobel Peace Prize while drunk..."

"Tony... Captain America was the successful experiment. That's why he had the power Tony, he was the only lab rat that survived!"

Tony tapped the pad again, and Captain America, in full uniform, with his trademark shield held high overhead on the battlefield was projected up on the glass. Tony and Rhodes were both silent before the image.

"He was more than the lab rat that lived. He was more than that." Tony said quietly.

"He was."

"Blonsky could have gotten from Hulk to Pepper in seconds, and all our weapons couldn't have stopped him." Stark took a deep breath. "Fury wants me to be part of the team, Rhodey. He wants me to lead the Avengers. He wants me to be the new Captain America."

"No Tony, he wants you to be Iron Man." Rhodes said firmly. "And you know what? That's okay, because that's who you are."

Tony thought long and hard. "Think there are female superheroes?"

Rhodey rolled his eyes, but inwardly he relaxed. His friend was going to be okay.

Tony read that expression and kept going eagerly. "Will they be wearing spandex?"

Rhodes drained his beer and stood up.

"But really, if I get to pick the team..."

"Goodnight Tony."

General Thaddeus 'Thunderbolt' Ross was a hard man to track down these days. He spent most of his time off-base and away from his subordinates, all of whom were trying to think of ways not to let on that they knew he was finished.
He much preferred the company in the most out of the way bar he could find. The people that were there during the day weren't wearing uniforms, but all were down on their luck, and had no pity in their eyes. The room was hot and smoky. Ross had loosened his tie and lit up his own cigar. he held the cigar and glass in the same hand.

Since the disaster that was the fight in New York, combined with the fact that Banner had been allowed to escape, Ross had been told to stay behind his desk for a while, pending a review of his activities.

Ross looked at the glass in front of him as the ice made condensation gather between his fingers. His drink. It was green. Of course. The fates were mocking him with green liquor.

Ross threw back his drink hard. The bio-weapons division was a secret program, made to go completely dark. His superiors had been throwing money at him, and begging him not to let them find out what he spent it on.

Two monsters killing each other in the most crowded city on earth and all their cameras had effectively ended the "don't ask, don't tell" that he had enjoyed for the past few years, and he was likely to get the blame. Probably a dishonourable discharge. Maybe some jail-time too...

Ross set the tumbler down on the bar. "Reload." He ordered the Bartender, who obligingly refilled it.

Ross threw that one back bitterly. The bartender was about the only person left that would take his orders. His own daughter was barely speaking to him. It wasn't his fault that her boyfriend had issues...

Ross set the tumbler down on the bar, harder this time. "Reload." He ordered the Bartender again, who refilled it without ever having had the time to put the bottle down.

A blisteringly bright light was reflected off the ice in his glass. Someone had come into the bar. Ross didn't care.

"Hmm, the smell of stale beer and defeat."

Ross found that he did care, but only enough to be annoyed. He didn't need this today.

"Y'know I hate to say 'I told you so' but that Super-solider program was put on ice, for a reason." Stark continued.

-On ice. Bad pun Stark. Ross growled without looking up. Stark didn't track him down just to gloat. If he had come in person, there was a reason. Ross was content to wait until Stark got to business.

Stark leaned against the bar next to the General. "I've always felt that hardware was much more reliable."

-Was that before or after your partner stole your idea and blew your family business apart? The general groused to himself and took him in sourly. Stark wasn't sweating. Ross had never met anyone who didn't sweat. It had the effect of making everyone else seem sub-par when faced with the man in the impeccable three-piece suit.

But then, Ross wasn't feeling particularly superior any more. "Tony Stark." He said finally. "You always wear such nice suits..."

"Touché." Stark returned but didn't smile. "I hear you have an unusual problem."
"You should talk." Ross slurred.

"You should listen." Tony said calmly.

Ross sat up straighter. Stark was getting to the point.

Tony lowered his voice a fair way. "What if I told you we were putting a team together?"

Ross was suddenly sober. The weapons game was going on with or without him, and if Stark was here with an offer then it meant that maybe there was still a way to deal himself back in. It meant that maybe something could come from this after all.

It meant that somebody was getting ready to set something in motion...

Ross saw a shot at redemption and deliverance alike, and asked the only question he needed the answer to. "Who's 'we'?"

Tony Stark didn't smile. He simply gave the General a look. 'Are you in or out?"
Even as he pulled his arm free of the wall, he was already redesigning the suit, making modifications, drawing blueprints.

There was daylight up ahead, and a body on the ground. "YINSEN!" Stark yelled.

Impossibly, the old man was alive, and looking at Stark, and the corridor to daylight behind him. "Look out!" he shouted hoarsely.

The Iron Man spun and saw Raza himself, with a RPG launcher aiming at him.

The grenade screamed toward him, and Iron Man threw himself to the left.

The grenade flew past his head and into the tunnel, where it exploded, spraying debris everywhere.

Tony hit a button on the inside of his wrist guard. A small missile ignited on Tony's forearm, and whistled toward Raza. He missed by about two feet, but the explosion was enough to clear the entrance to the outside, and knock Raza down. The entire left side of his face was shredded.

Tony checked. He couldn't tell if Raza was breathing. Bending down would probably topple him permanently...

Yinsen was the priority now. Stark would have liked to finish Raza for sure, but with his friend wounded, the math had changed. He flipped up the facemask and stepped over to Yinsen.

Yinsen was still breathing. Tony clung to that, trying to make the older man focus. "We gotta go. Come on, move with me," Yinsen didn't so much as lift an arm. "We got a plan, and we're going to stick to it," It was already over and Stark knew it...they were still surrounded by enemies. The suit didn't make Stark fast, and wouldn't protect Yinsen while moving...and there were still bad guys around...

Yinsen knew it too. "This was always the plan, Stark."

Tony ordered him to move, frantically. "Come on, you're going to go see your family again."

Yinsen had a look so serene that Tony nearly broke. "My family's dead," He whispered, weaker. "I'm going to see them now, Stark. It's O.K. I want this."

Tony racked his brain, finding the right words to stop the inevitable; but they just wouldn't come. Finally, he settled on honesty. "Thank you for saving my life."

Yinsen smiled. "Don't waste it."

Tony wanted to say something else, wanting to stretch the moment before the inevitable end.

But after a few moments, it was too late to try.

Yinsen was dead.

Tony Stark never cried. It wasn't out of any macho desire to seem strong; it just wasn't in his nature. But at this moment, he wished he it was. This moment sent him cold. It was like he felt when his parents died. After getting captured by these people, after being saved by one man, after three months in a cave, after fighting his way past more than a dozen of them...and Yinsen still
died, killed by a Stark Industries weapon. Tony wanted nothing more than to break down in tears at that moment from the shame.

Tony could hear movement outside. Weapons being loaded, things being dragged around, orders being shouted angrily back and forth...

Shame was strong. Grief was stronger. Rage was Pure Iron.

Tony shut the face plate. His world went darker again. He stalked past Raza's motionless body, and the gaping hole he had ripped in the rock.

Targeting sensors. Tony made a mental note. So I don't miss next time.

The Iron Man stalked out of the mouth of the cave with calm deliberate steps. The glowing centre to his chest was muted by the sudden glare of daylight.

The last of the soldiers were surrounding the entrance in a semi-circle, hiding behind solid cover.

And his armor was gone.

The armor was just suddenly gone. He was suddenly open to them, just Tony. Nothing but a victim.

Tony panicked. Suddenly he was mortal. Destructible… helpless.

And when the hell did Stane get there?

"Nice Try, Tony." The older man grinned. "These men were supposed to kill you, but we both know if you want something done right..."

Stane reached for Tony, who stood there. Why couldn't he run?!

"…do it yourself." Stane finished, and tore the Arc Reactor from his chest with one hand.

Tony screamed.

Tony woke up sharply.

He quickly rolled off his cot, marched right past the cars, past the armor, and poured himself a shot of the strongest stuff he had. He downed it in one gulp and checked the clock. 4AM.

It's always Miller Time somewhere. Tony told himself and poured another. He downed that one in two gulps; and looked over to the left. "Jarvis, the show-lights."

Jarvis, who never slept, lit up the circle of mini-spotlights, which made his armor visible.

Tony had spent hours positioning those lights, trying to find the perfect angles, the perfect wattage to make the armor come alive. He had become obsessed with it.

Inwardly, he knew why he was so crazed over this. The armor made him invulnerable. The scotch made him numb.

But he didn't care.

The nightmare's adrenaline had worn off. His body ached horribly. His chest was the worst. His arms were next, the ache in the muscles under the elbows from the workload. His back too, the
strain from where the tank nailed him in Gulmira. It always took several minutes for the muscles to recover after he slept.

He stared at the golden faceplate, saw his face reflected back at him. The bags under his eyes were deep and dark, his face was drawn, there were lines drawn into his forehead...

Oh god... he thought to himself painfully. I'm old.

The thought made him feel so bitter, and he ran back to the wet bar, pouring himself another shot with shaking hands.

"Sir," Jarvis said, unperturbed by his master's current state of near hysteria. "I have an incoming call on the number provided by Colonel Fury."

Tony scrubbed his face hard with his hands and downed the last of his drink. "Put him through."

"Mr Stark."

"Colonel Fury."

"I have some information you may be interested in. We've discovered a shipment of Stark weaponry, sent to combatants in Central Asia. One of several skirmishes and attempted rebellions going on in the wasteland, but we've confirmed that the weapons were not shipped before the Iron Monger incident."

Tony went cold. Someone else was supplying weapons. Somebody not Stane.

"Send me the information."

Pepper's heels clicked on the stairs. The food she'd had delivered was still on the counter, still in the bags. She'd have bet good money that one of the robots answered the door and collected the bags from the delivery guy. She knew she should have hired one of the Playboy bunnies to deliver the food. At least it would have gotten him out of the workshop for a few minutes.

The smartglass door was vibrating from the inside. Pepper realized he'd changed it again to make it soundproof too. She keyed the passcode on the smart glass door. Once it had been rebuilt, her passcode had been given half a dozen more digits, but Pepper was good with numbers. She could tell by the feel of the glass under her fingertips. It was stronger. Shockproof, bulletproof, fireproof. Odds were it'd be airtight now. He'd done something new to make it opaque too...

The door opened as the glass cleared, and Pepper was hit with a wall of atonal heavy metal. She keyed her own little code into the door's keypad, and the music went silent. If Tony ever figured out how she kept getting that code into the programming, Jarvis would be de-rezzed.

He kept tinkering with everything, not the least of which was his armor. As the door opened and she entered the workshop/garage, she noticed he'd changed the configuration again, this time so that his design terminal was half surrounded by various Iron Man suits, left to right from the Mark I to the current version, assembled in the centre of the semi-circle.

"You're late." Pepper fired the first salvo.

Tony didn't look away from his screen. "You're fired. I win." He quipped. "Whatever it is, it can wait."
"You don't know what it is yet," Pepper countered. "Have you been down here all night again?"

Tony looked up from his workstation. "Is it daytime?"

"Have you eaten?" Pepper continued.

Tony knew that if he lied, she'd know. If he said 'no', that would be bad... "In what sense of the word, do you mean 'eat'?" he carefully began.

"I know you may be unfamiliar with the concept," Pepper said. "But that stuff on your counter upstairs? That's called food. You should eat it. Or at least stick the bag in the fridge before it starts to smell."

"That's why I made the smartglass airtight." Tony quipped.

Pepper sighed. "Mr Oppel called from New York. He's still not happy about the drop in revenue. The new boards have put up half a dozen proposals."

"Proposing what?"

"That you could settle a lot of rumors about Iron Man, and about Stane, and about whether or not the Ten Rings reprogrammed you if you'd just appear before the Joint Chiefs subcommittee."

"Spend a month or two in a Senate courtroom answering insulting questions? Sure, that sounds like a barrel of fun."

"Tony, there's a lot of questionable stuff in Stane's personal files," Pepper told him patiently. "He got away with it because you let him. You don't have anyone to wrangle the Board of Directors any more, which is why I'm getting all the irate calls."

Tony knew all this. He knew that Stane had gotten away with murder, literally, because Stark himself didn't keep watch over the business. But still, Pepper was here, telling it all to him. "Why do you always automatically assume that I'm incapable of understanding anything that relates to taking care of human necessities or being a serious... anything?"

"I find it saves time," Pepper said primly.

Tony would have smirked, but he was already onto other things in his head. "Did SHIELD clear the Mark I yet?"

Pepper fought to keep him on topic. "Tony, the Senate Committee..."

"The Senate Committee also controls spending for the Armed Forces. They don't want to talk about Afghanistan, they want Iron Man to have a US Flag spray painted on his forehead."

"Rhodey said that might be a good idea."

"No way. It would clash. I have to go."

Pepper started to argue when Tony started stripping his clothes off. "Tony-"

"Pepper!" Stark responded, already down to his black bodysuit. "When the Board of Directors demands to know where I am, you tell them there's a whole bunch of kids getting killed by my weapons. I'm gonna go stop it."

Pepper smiled despite herself. "Yes Sir."
The workshop came alive and Iron Man was constructed around her Tony. While never being overly excited about gadgets, she had to admit certain awe at watching a superman come to life. "Will that be all Mr Stark?"

The mask clamped shut over his face like a pair of Iron Jaws. "That'll be all Ms Potts." Iron Man's digital voice responded, and with a burst of power that swept her hair up, Iron Man flew out the spiral driveway; into the sky.

Iron Man had been tweaked and rebuilt after the fight with Iron monger. The surface had been mangled beyond repair, and most of the circuits burned out by the inefficient use of raw power from the Mark I chest piece.

The current version was technically Mark 3.1, with various tweaks made to the circuits and controls, refined from the long distance missions.

Tony sometimes wished he could stay up here forever. He always ruled whatever room he stepped into, whether a board room or a party or a laboratory or a workshop. But up here he didn't need any of it.

This was his element. This was his new reality. Up here he was free.

Down below the world turned slowly. He was faster than the time zones. Down below, dawn broke over Central Asia. The world looked so beautiful up here. Nobody would have guessed that wars were being waged down below.

Or that one was about to be lost.

It was a relatively small area. The sort of place where there was no law that could be upheld by government. It was neatly in the No Man's Land between two armies that had claimed jurisdiction.

From high enough, Iron Man could see both forces. They had taken up equal distance over the town from opposite sides.

And square in the middle, was a large fort, seemingly made out of stone. Plenty of walls, plenty of cover, plenty of gun emplacements and even a number of AA guns.

Tony smirked beneath his mask. This place had probably been heavily defensible back in the middle ages, but with the invention of missiles and high altitude bombs, big thick stone walls were no help.

But the place was a Hot Zone. A place where an armed incursion could tip off retaliation, and where jurisdiction was unclear. The sort of place that could cause contention between governments, and with that a war.

And whoever had claimed the fort was doing so illegally, armed with Stark Weapons.

From almost a mile in the air, Iron Man pointed himself downward and struck.

Pepper was in her element sitting in Tony's living room, barking into the phone while speed-texting on her PDA. "No. Stane did not approve any contracts before he died. I don't care how much money it is, I don't care how long the negotiations have been taking. Stark industries are not in the weapons trade any more." She changed the channel from Mad Money to CNN, which had run the clip from the beach outside of Iron Man's takeoff twelve hours before, and begun speculating
where he was and why.

The door opened. Pepper barely glanced over. Jarvis wouldn't let the enemy through.

Happy Hogan came in, hauling a hand truck with some large unmarked crates stacked on it.

"With Agent Coulson's compliments." Happy said. "Where's the boss?"

"Somewhere in Central Asia by now." Pepper nodded to the TV and returned her attention to whichever board member was complaining now. "Listen, you may outrank me, but your boss is currently getting shot at with weapons that have the Stark logo on it. If you want to believe that one more deal is worth it, you're talking to the wrong girl. You can take it up with him when he gets back."

She disconnected the call and turned back to the TV. CNN had switched to the world news desk, listing off all the hotspots in Iron Man's direction.

Iron Man had made his way into the building with the thickest walls, gambling that would be the base of operations, sacrificing the air advantage for the time away to think. His enemies had quickly abandoned the confined spaces, calling up heavier weapons while Iron Man went through their stuff. Most of it was in various languages he couldn't read, but there was one thing he could make use of.

"Jarvis, does this laptop have a wireless modem?"

"Confirmed sir. Wireless Signal detected."

Iron Man could hear the rest of the invaders screaming outside, calling for reinforcements, heavier weapons...

Inwardly, Tony thought that it'd be easier to let them gather, draw them into the close quarters, where his armor would give him the defensive edge, and his repulsors could pick them off in the doorways.

But if they had more of those AA cannons, they could bring the whole building down, destroying the laptop and all the information it contained.

Iron Man fired from his chestplate, blasting the roof clean out of the building, and he started to fly again.

As he rose, Tony did the math. Since shutting down Stane, any confederates he had would go to ground fast. Stane was the type to lead from the top.

But if these weapons... if they were provided by Stane, and it wasn't recorded in his files, there must have been either an accomplice, or somebody else had access.

"Jarvis, Phone Home."

"This is the last of it, Pep." Hogan called, carrying the crate in.

"Thanks, Happy." Pepper said distantly, looking through the crates. SHIELD had released the Mark I suit after dissecting it for 'evidence' against Stane. Tony had let them, because without the Arc reactor, it was largely a hunk of patchwork iron. Pepper had seen it before, when Obadiah had
attacked her. Once Tony had told her the story, she had tried to imagine him in the desert in this thing and shivered.

Pepper knew why Tony had wanted it back. For all his claims about not being sentimental, he kept his notes meticulously about his work. Iron Man was evolving still, and Tony wanted the early incarnations close at hand.

Hogan waved to her on his way out, then changed his mind at the door. "Pepper?"

Pepper was still on her PDA. "Yeah?"

"Would you like to get some coffee some time?"

Pepper refocused instantly, giving him her full attention. "Like a date?"

"Or just coffee." Happy quickly backpedaled.

Pepper just looked at him, not sure how to respond.

Happy looked down. "Look, Pepper… I don't rake in the big money, and I'm not Tony Stark…In fact of all the guys in your life, I'm the one that's not a billionaire, not a superhero, not famous…"

"Happy." Pepper said gently. "You don't have to be-"

"I know, but it's still a fact."

Pepper smiled. "Yeah. Maybe so. But you know what? When Tony was being held prisoner, I had to take care of things and… well, you took care of me."

Happy looked down, embarrassed by the smile she was giving him. "Listen… you don't have to give me an answer… if you want to, then let me know, if not, then we can forget about it."

Pepper was about to answer, when her cellphone rang. She knew the ringtone.

So did Hogan. "I'll be outside if you need me."

Pepper nodded gratefully and flipped her cell open. "I was wondering how long it was going to take you to call me." She answered it. "How's it going?"

"Do you still have that lockchip?"

"The one I used in Obadiah's office?" Pepper was surprised. "No, SHIELD confiscated it."

"Are you in the House or the Office?"

"The house. I always work here when you're on missions."

Tony smiled under his mask. Waiting at home for me. "There's a second lock-chip in my Workshop, in the top drawer of the computer desk. Go get it. Plug it into the diagnostic pad."

"I'm on it."

"While that downloads, we'll have something else to follow up." He took a breath. "Pepper, these are Stark weapons. Armor piercing."
"WHAT?!" Pepper screeched. "Tony, get outta there!"

"Relax Pepper, they aren't that powerful. There's armor, and there's Iron Man." Tony promised her. Pepper could hear bullets pinging off Tony's skin. Then a much harder bang. "Agh!"

"TONY?!!"

"I'm alright." Tony grunted. "Hang on."

The sounds of energy discharge came over the line as Pepper let herself into Tony's workshop. "Tony?"

"And now, there are a few less claymore mines in the world." Tony said smugly. "Are you in the workshop yet?"

"Just got there." She reported. "The lock-chip is plugged in."

"Jarvis, activate interface." Tony said. "Pepper, go to the workstation."

"Okay." Pepper started to say, when the screen changed from the Iron Man Diagnostics, to a live POV from the Armor itself. Pepper was presented with a view of the battlefield from Tony's own view. "I've got the feed."

The screen showed a few unconscious fighters, still hanging onto their weapons.

Iron Man reached down and picked a weapon up, studied it carefully, giving Pepper a perfect view.

The HUD scanned the weapon, and started picking up details. Stark Industries logos, triggers, gunsight, scope, dimensions…

No Match.

"Pepper." Tony directed. "Cross-check with-"

"I'm already in the database. There's nothing. These serial numbers don't match anything Stark industries made."

"Pepper, these are Stark Weapons. I'm looking at the logo."

"Tony, you designed them all, if you don't recognize it, and it isn't in the database…"

"I didn't design the Iron Monger."

Pepper was quiet a moment. "All right, I'm on it…"

Tony made it home later that night. Pepper was waiting for him. "Any leads on the weapons they were using?"

Pepper shook her head. "I've tried shipping, I've tried billing, I'm called the manufacturing departments, I called our contractors. Nothing."

"Damn." Tony hissed, rubbing his chest idly. Then his eyes focused past her. "Ooh! They sent it!" he went straight to the Mark I and started unpacking it.
Pepper licked her lips. "I've been on the phone all day. Legal's trying to circle the wagons, but they
don't know where to start."

"On what?"

"Tony, everybody's calling. The pentagon wants Iron Man to take out various hot spots, the Air
Force and the DOD want their contracts fulfilled, the Senate wants you to testify before three
different committees, the Press wants the story, and the Board wants you to grow up..."

"Tell them that nobody likes a whiner." Tony shot back impatiently. "God, what do these people
want? Blood?"

"Tony, the absence of Stane is becoming a problem. Nobody knows who to call about anything, so
they're all calling you. Nobody knows who's in charge now, and we're under attack."

"I'm in charge. And we're fine, the stock is climbing."

"Tony the stock is climbing because we're selling all our weapons facilities. Hammer Industries is
buying it all up. Including the contracts..."

"We're accepting Justin Hammer's money?" Tony cried out dramatically. "Wow, I feel dirty."
Pause. "And not in the good way. And coming from me that's bad."

"...And once that income dries up, we're in trouble. There's only so much stuff to sell! We're getting
slammed in the press, in the market..." Her phone rang. "...in the courts, and you literally fly off
when people on the ground need you and..."

"Shouldn't you answer that?"

Pepper took the call. "Yes?"

Tony felt saved for some reason. His innards were still shaking, his chest was hurting and his head
was pounding. His eyes flicked to Pepper and he set down the crate, making his way over to the
desk. He checked Pepper again. She wasn't facing him, and Tony let his legs shake as he grabbed
for his chair.

He took deep breaths, pretending to be typing as Pepper stalked around the workshop. Tony
focused on Pepper's legs, forcing his vision to focus again.

After a few minutes, Pepper's voice raised significantly. "He WHAT?"

_Uh oh..._

Pepper snapped her phone shut. "Anthony Edward Stark!"

Tony's eyes snapped up to her face. "Whoa! Whoa! Don't go middle naming me like that! What'd I
do?!"

"The Expo!"

Tony winced. "Oh. Right. I meant to tell you about that."

"You have any idea what that's going to cost?"

"I have a vague idea. I'm pretty good with math you know."
"Tony, why?!"

"Seems like a good idea. Plus it's got my name on it all."

"Not your name. Your father's name. There hasn't been a Stark Expo since the seventies! You know what that means!?"

"We're... going to have to find new caterers?"

"It means we're going to have to rebuild the Expo from the ground up. For god's sake Tony! It's practically a city you want to make. It's Epcot! It's Disneyworld! It's a black hole of money!"

Tony grinned at her. "Look at you, all worked up."

Pepper fought to keep it together. "What am I supposed to tell your Board?"

"Tell them that the smartest people in the world will be pouring into New York. Tell that Iron Man made science sexy and we can put on a show. Tell them that if CNN will run a blurry photo of me flying out of my garage, what will people pay to come see him on stage showing off all the latest technologies and toys from people who will pay us for the privilege? Tell them it my company and my dad thought that technology given the chance would save the world, and we haven't given it this chance in forty years."

Pepper was silent. "Okay. I'll tell them that." She said shortly. "Will that be all Mr Stark?"

The pain spiked through Tony's chest again. Tony could feel sweat trickling down the side of his neck. Something was wrong. "That will be all Ms Potts."

The second Pepper left, Tony clawed for his shirt. He couldn't stand up. He fought to get his shirt up and got a look at the arc reactor. The glow was faded quite dramatically. "Jarvis?"

"Yes sir, I am monitoring. I'm registering a drop of power from the Arc Reactor of at least 40%."

"Why?"

"Unclear sir. I would recommend taking a look at the equipment itself."

Tony fought for the new reactor's edge. After Pepper's mild panic attack the last time he swapped out his chest reactor, he had modified a new one that could be removed and replaced without manual release of the wires. He slid out the reactor with a series of metallic clicks... and a burst of arid foul smelling smoke swelled out of the chest cavity.

Oh, that's not good. Tony thought. he examined it closely. His chest was spiking with agony again. The magnet would hold the charge for another few minutes. he sucked in a shaky breath. "It's the palladium chip. it's fried."

"I would recommend replacing it at once." Jarvis suggested mildly.

"Duly noted." Stark gritted out.

Tony couldn't stand up. He fought to slide the chair over to the workshop table. Various articles of Iron Man armor littered the tables and drawers. "Need..."

Dummy came over helpfully and slid open the lowest drawer.

"I take back the time I threatened to make you into a paperweight." Tony grunted, and snapped up
the palladium chip. He slid it into the Arc Reactor quickly; and it suddenly glowed brightly with its usual fire. Tony took another breath and slid the reactor back into his chest. A sharp click and Tony could practically feel the shrapnel moving back again.

Tony was never quite sure how much of his vitals were now dependant on the Arc reactor. his heart could certainly work better with it, but the shrapnel almost certainly put pressure on his lungs, both of which regulated his blood pressure...

Tony looked closer at his chest, past the glowing light. There was discoloration around the chest piece. It looked like... like his flesh was rotting around his glowing heart.

Tony's vision was clear and his head wasn't pounding any more. But the whole matter had shaken him. Tony quickly went to his sidebar; grabbed a something flammable and pulled a shot's worth straight from the bottle.

With that done, he turned back to the smoking palladium core. it was... melted? No. Corroded.

He quickly broke of a piece... and it crumbled in his fingers. Palladium was not meant to do that.

"Jarvis, this is not palladium any more. It's an altered material."

"Yes sir. If I had to theorize, I would suggest that the material has been subjected to a high energy/thermal reaction which has corroded out the usable palladium and left this waste behind."

Tony took that in. "J... Jarvis? What kind of effect would that have on living tissue?"

"Unknown."

Tony grabbed a compass from his draft board and doused the sharp ends in his drink to sterilize it. He stuck one pin into his finger hard enough to draw blood. He had a microscope somewhere, fed into Jarvis for alloy tests. He slid the drop of blood in.

One look at the screen was all he needed. "Oh hell. Jarvis... is that..."

"A Palladium atom sir."

"Is it toxic?"

"Yessir. Current toxicity at 3 Percent based on this sample."

Tony swallowed. "How long before it starts causing... symptoms?"

"It already has."

Tony was silent a long moment. "Treatment?"

"I would not even hazard a guess sir."

Now Tony asked the big question. "Jarvis... is this... reversible?"

"It pains my circuits to say so sir, but it seems likely to escalate, given that the palladium supply has just been refreshed."

Non-fissionable material. Like nuclear waste without the glow, leeching from my heart into my blood. Tony thought bleakly. Oh hell. How do I fix this?
Pepper was on the phone. By this point, it was largely vacuum sealed to her ear. The PR department was working up the press release on the Stark Expo. They were focusing on the technical aspects, trying to package it as a much bigger version of other Tech Expos. As MIT's finest started RSVP-ing Tony Office, Pepper started to realize how much Tony had already done on this. Without telling her. He told her what color underwear he was wearing every day. he told her every time he did something illegal or disgusting, usually in bright Technicolor detail... This, something directly connected to her job and her employer, which would take an enormous amount of work, he had kept to himself.

Call waiting beeped in her ear and she made her excuses, switching to line two. "Hello?"

"Ms Potts."

"Agent Coulson." Pepper remembered the voice instantly.

"We've found the weapon you were looking for. I have the details." He said. "Ready?"

Pepper pulled her PDA, set to take notes. "Ready."

The screen blanked for a moment, and came back with a SHIELD logo.

"How are you doing that?" Pepper asked in shock.

"Well if I told you, I'd have to kill you." Coulson responded, without a trace of irony. "Tell Mr Stark Good Hunting."

Information scrolled across the screen of her PDA as the phone call disconnected.

Pepper found herself holding the information that would send Tony on a crusade to save his legacy, destroying weapons of death before they could take innocent lives.

And Pepper found herself seriously considering pretending that she hadn't got the call. Pepper felt a knife edge of worry. Since Stane had died, Pepper had noticed Tony withdrawing a lot more, even from her. She understood why. She had worked closely with Stane and not seen his betrayal coming either. She and Stane had run Tony's company almost without his involvement, and with this kind of money, that was quite the demonstration of trust.

The only thing stronger than her anger at Stane was her sympathy for tony. Who do you trust with something like Iron Man when your most trusted man tries to kill you?

*Don't tell him Pepper. Do not tell him. Just let it go. Just let him...*

"Tony." Pepper reported suddenly, before she could lose her nerve. "The serial numbers on the gun sight? I've got a match. Not on the gun, just the scope. It belonged on a Stark industries Rifle, matched to Airman James Forrest. Killed in Action last year."

Tony went cold inside. "My escort soldiers in Afghanistan."

"Right."

"What happened to the bodies after I was captured?"

"The bodies were sent home. The forensics team went over the wreckage and declared most of it a write off. It was catalogued and junked." Pepper handed her PDA. "Here it is. The junked wreckage was all recorded for the Army's Inventory. There's a lot missing. A lot of stuff was
unrecognizable. The gun Forrest carried isn't here."

"Anything not dragged away would still be in the desert."

"Scavengers?"

"No chance. Those weapons were clean and new. Not trashed and damaged. Somebody swapped the serial numbers on the weapons themselves with destroyed weapons so that they couldn't be tracked."

"If that's true, where'd the weapons come from?"

"Right off the assembly line. I ordered the weapons we hadn't sold destroyed. If somebody put the serial numbers of destroyed weapons on the good ones, then as far as the paper trail's concerned, they don't exist any more."

"Then how can you find where they came from."

Tony thought for a moment. "Whoever did it must have known which weapons had already been destroyed. Which means he probably got hold of the reports, or the gun sight itself. Who filed the report?"

Pepper checked. "Sergeant Brett Hawke."

Tony stood. "I left a present for you upstairs."

Pepper chose not to be present when Tony's robotic workshop built him. Instead, she went up to the living room.

She opened the box.

"Operation. Ages Three and Up."

Pepper smirked, just a little, as Iron Man flew away.

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Edwards Air Force base had several sections. There was the hangar. There was the control tower. There was the Combat Control Centre...

And there was the administration building. This last was the workplace of Sgt Brett Hawke. As luck would have it, he had a corner office, which was targeted by a manned missile.

Sergeant Hawke fell backwards out of his chair as his roof exploded. Before the dust had even settled, Hawke felt himself getting hauled up off his feet and he was nose to nose with an unforgiving gold mask.

"A trashed gunsight lost in the middle of the desert suddenly comes back from the dead!" Iron Man growled digitally. "And you were the one that declared it lost. Either you lied or you stole it from someone."

Hawke was shaking. "I... I don't know what you're talking about!"

"You're in the Air Force Brett. Ever been to thirty thousand feet without a plane?" Iron Man snarled. His repulsors glowed.

There was a pounding on the door. "Sarge? What's going on?! Sarge? Can you hear me?!"
Hawke grinned. "Can't wait to hear you explain this one."

Iron Man shook him a little. "My lawyers eat people like you in quick small bites. And that's nothing compared to what your guys will do."

Hawke shook his head. "I told you. i don't know nothing."

Iron Man dropped him. "Watch the double negatives."

The hammering at the door suddenly intensified. "Military Police! Open up!"

Iron Man's repulsors exploded to life and with a burst of thrust that threw everything around the room, Iron Man lifted off through the hole he made in the ceiling.

Pepper was at her desk when he phone rang again. "Tony?"

Tony studied his HUD carefully. "Pepper, begin monitoring all calls between Stark Industries New York and the Edwards Air Force Base exchange."

Pepper started typing again. "Uh Tony… I don't think I can do that…"

"Yes you can. SI logs all incoming calls. Get sued as many times as we do and you have to. Start recording the numbers that the Edwards Air force base switchboard connects to SI."

"I will. How'd it go?"

"Not like I'd hoped."

The HUD flashed up Rhodey's picture. "Ah. Pepper?"

"Here."

"I have another moment that won't go like I hope. I'll have to call you back"

"Okay."

Jarvis quickly connected the call, and Rhodey got the first word. "WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU?!"

"Hey Rhodey, I can see your house from here!"

"You do not do this. You. Do. Not. Repeat: NOT! The universal indication of the negative. You do not just attack my base and strong arm US soldiers without evidence or charge! If you wanted to get the Pentagon off your back, blowing a hole into an Air Force base is not the way to do it."

"I don't doubt it, but this is more important. Rhodey, all I want to know is where my weapons are. I know at least a few uniforms looked the other way to get Raza those guns. I want names."

"Why? So you can go all Lone Ranger on their ass?"

"Something like that."

"Tony, the military has people to do that. That's how it works. I'm your liason. You call me, I call the Military Police, or NCIS, or the JAG Corp. There are people who can do this! Your part
happens to involve being a superhero. not playing bad cop on uncle Sam."
"the bad cops you've got are taking too long, and I'm not a soldier."
"Tony, they're planning to take Iron Man off you."
Tony laughed. "I'd like to see them try right now."
"I'm not kidding Tony. DOD, Senate, CIA, Air Force. Nobody wants you wearing that suit. And they are looking for a way to take it off you."
Tony blinked. Rhodey's voice had turned ferocious.
"You did this to yourself Tony. You cut them off from Stark Weapons and then you went and built the best one yet. Then you rubbed their noses in it with Gulmira. Then you signed your name with that press conference."
"Funny, because most everyone agrees i did the right thing."
"No, Tony. You did the spectacular thing. You always do, and you went and made yourself a superhero doing it. But you've got to remember that being a hero means something. Remember what you said to me? About how you aren't Captain America?"
"I remember." Tony sighed. "SHIELD told me about another weapons cache of mine. How come SHIELD will tell me these things when the military won't?"
"Because you don't work with the military. You aren't a soldier, but Iron Man's an army. The want Iron Man; it's you they don't trust."
"I don't trust them either." Tony said sharply.
"That's your problem Tony. You don't trust anybody."
"I trusted Stane."
Silence.
"Tony, you're under attack from all sides right now. Iron Man may be invincible, but Tony Stark is not. The military don't trust you with a weapon like Iron Man. The senate doesn't trust you with it either. And this is why. Iron Man may not need help, but Tony Stark does. So you tell me, who does Tony Stark trust?"
It was a fair question. One that Tony almost answered; when Pepper's picture popped up on his HUD. "I have another call."
"TONY!"
Tony disconnected and put Pepper through. "Pepper?"
"Hawke made a call once the MP's left. By the way, why was he ranting about a hole in the ceiling?"
"I told you, it didn't go like I hoped."
"He called Stark industries. New York Offices."
"Give me the name."

"He called one of the Board of Directors, Mr Jean Craighead."

"Gotcha." Stark hissed. "Jarvis, contact the home unit. I'll be home in three minutes. I want his life story by then."

"Yes sir."

"Born in Colorado, high grades, started a small business, was summarily bought out by a larger company, went for Tertiary Education at the LSE…"

"London School of Economics?" Tony interrupted. "When?"

Jarvis obligingly put the timeline on the screen. "March 1973 till-"

"There it is." Tony interrupted. "Stane taught economic theory there for two semesters. Stane appointed him to the board."

"Shall I prepare the new Armor sir?"

"Afraid not." Tony said. "Iron Man doesn't have authority to make arrests. Call Fury."

Mr Craighead, one of the more experienced members of the Stark industries Board of Directors was in the middle of dictating a letter to his secretary when he met Agent Coulson and a few other agents. "Can I help you?"

"Yes, we need to ask you a few questions."

"Regarding what?"

"I'm sorry, do you have an appointment?" His secretary quickly put herself in the way.

Coulson opened his jacket, revealing his badge and his gun. "I do now." He said. "Out."

Craighead didn't seem nervous. "Police?"

Coulson didn't smile. "No." He pulled his cuffs. "Mr Craighead, you're under arrest for conspiracy to commit terrorism."

Craighead stood up easily. "This is utter nonsense." Coulson slapped the cuffs on him. "Careful. This suit is worth more than you make in a decade."

"You have the right to remain silent. if you give up the right to remain silent-"

"If you feel like ending your career, whoever you are, go ahead. My lawyers will-"

"They aren't your lawyers. They're my lawyers."

Craighead turned and saw Tony Stark in the doorway, looking madder than all hell. For the first time, he seemed worried. "Mr Stark, if you think that i had anything to do with Stane's illegal weapons shipments..."

Coulson grinned. "I didn't say anything about Obadiah Stane."
Craighead realized he'd screwed up and let his poker face relax. He turned to Tony. "Stark, once you start making your living by selling things that kill people, does it really matter who's paying? Sooner or later there are people dead."

Stark got in his face. "There was more than one shipment wasn't there?"

Craighead nodded. "I'll tell you. If you let me cut a deal."

Stark seemed to consider it for a moment. Then he turned to Coulson. "Lets see what you can get out of him... without cutting a deal."

Coulson grinned like a shark. "We'll be in touch."

Jarvis put the new blood sample up on the screen again. "Six Percent of fatal blood toxicity sir."

Tony focused his eyes so that he could see his reflection in the screen. He did not look healthy. in fact, he looked like he' been on a three day bender. "Jarvis, have you figured out a treatment yet?"

"I have been accessing several keyword searches in a number of medical journals sir. There has never been a blood poisoning case using palladium. Any treatment would be strictly theoretical."

"Live dangerously."

"I would theorize that the metals are reaction to the presence of the electrical field created by the Arc Reactor. As the palladium is consumed to create the electrical reaction, the few palladium atoms that are not used up are negatively magnetized, and move away from the reactor, into your bloodstream. You could attempt some remedies for heavy metal poisoning, but that would be treatment, not a cure."

"What would cure it?"

"Unknown. At this point, the palladium is still leeching into your system."

"Is there any way to boost my immune system to take care of it?"

"Negative sir. I have been comparing your vital statistics from your last two missions. I'm afraid that your immune system is already taxed beyond its limit. Hence the symptoms. If you were to gain another illness, you would be almost defenseless against it."

"You know me Jarvis, I'm all about healthy living."

"Sir, a virus could move unchecked through your system at an alarming rate."

Tony sobered. He poured himself another drink. "Right. Well, I'm a billionaire. I can have someone shake hands for me."

"It would be nice for you to have a harmless seeming eccentricity for once." Jarvis remarked.

"Did I program sarcasm into you?"

"You worked quite extensively on it sir." Jarvis responded. "Have you told Miss Potts yet?"

"I want this fixed before I have to do that."

"The only way to let your immune system do its job is to remove the palladium source."
Tony moaned. "Okay. Begin simulations. Simulate the Arc Reactor... without palladium. Substitute with all known elements, or combinations thereof."

"That many simulations will take over six months to complete sir."

Tony pulled his shirt up. The black discoloration was spreading with his veins. "How long do I have?"

The phone rang. Jarvis answered it. "I have a call from Colonel Fury sir."

"Put him through." Tony ordered. "I didn't want to know the answer anyway."

"Mr Stark." Called a familiar voice.

"Fury."

"Mr Craighead is currently considering all aspects of a thirty year jail sentence. He was a tough nut to crack. Took Agent Coulson almost twenty five minutes. The last shipment of your weapons is currently being used to control a stronghold in the village of Bulezia, in Central America. I've routed some of my forces there."

"I could probably get there faster."

"Take a break Stark, we can handle it. You've already had a full day. My sources report that the major destabilizing force in the Central Asia region has been successfully removed, which stabilized relations between at least two governments and the United States, and whatever members of them that survived have been taken for questioning. Not a bad day's work."

Tony grunted. I could have done incredible things. If I just had the time. As it is, all I may have left is... some legacy. The Avenger initiative won't be part of it. I don't have... time. "I quit."

Fury was silent a moment. "I'm sorry?"

"The Avengers. I'm out. Scratch that. I don't want in."

"Mr Stark, we had discussed this and you agreed it was necessary."

"Maybe it is, but I don't want to be part of it myself any more."

"May I ask why not?"

"I don't want a team. I don't need one either. Let's face it Fury, can you see me as a team player?"

"Mr Stark, you don't get to walk away from this. As Iron Man, you are somewhat obligated to-"

Stark erupted. "I am SICK AND TIRED or people telling me what I have to do!" he disconnected the call at once.

He wanted Pepper. She made things better.

Tony blinked. Where the hell had that thought come from?

Almost as though answering his thought, he turned to head toward his Armor and saw Pepper in the doorway to the workshop. She had heard at least some of that.

She started to speak as Tony stripped off his work clothes. The black bodysuit was underneath, as
was rapidly becoming the norm for him.

Pepper came into the workshop and tried to intercept him. "Tony, don't." She told him firmly. "You're still bashed up from the last trip to Central Asia. SHIELD can handle it."

"SHIELD can handle it, but there'll be casualties." Tony told her, heading for the center of the room.

Pepper was scared. Nearly terrified. She could see the dark circles under his eyes, she could see the paleness of his skin, and she could see his hands shaking. Something was wrong with him. She didn't know if he was hung-over or sick, but she knew he wasn't in the right shape for this...

Tony didn't have time for this. The woman was his indispensable right arm, but she was standing between him and his armor. "Move."

Pepper wouldn't. "SHIELD has already organized a strike. They don't want Stark Weapons in the open either. The military can handle this."

"I don't work for Fury. Or the Pentagon. Or anybody."

Pepper stepped into his way and put a hand up to his chest.

Stark almost jumped back. "Don't... I don't like people touching me right now." Pepper froze. Was this hell boss that said that? Was this Tony 'The-Maxim-Maniac' Stark who suddenly didn't want to be so much as touched? What was wrong with him?!

Tony had pushed past her toward the centre of the workshop.

"Tony, you gotta stop!" Pepper yelled. "I get that you want to handle this because they're your weapons, but there's other people that can handle this! You're needed here! I need you here!" She was just babbling now, and she knew it, trying to make his march toward the Armor stop for a moment. "I need you here to deal with your job. I need you here to talk to your Board members who want to know why one of their own has been arrested. I need you here to tell legal that we're not all going to jail with him. I need you here to-

"I DON'T CARE!" Stark almost screamed. "We've been over this and over this. There is nothing to sign; there is no phone call to make. Whatever time I have is for this now. There is no team, there is no business; there is the next mission. I don't care about anything else, and I never pretended I did!"

Horrible silence. Both of them were breathing hard, staring at each other darkly.

"I'm worried about you." Pepper said quietly. "Last week you were talking about joining up with... you were talking about... Tony, what changed?"

Tony wanted to tell her. But he couldn't. If he told her it would be real. If he told her, she'd have reason to...

"I have to go." He said roughly. "Don't wait up for me."

"Tony..." Pepper started to say.

"That'll be all, Ms Potts."

It was the first that that actually seemed like a dismissal. Pepper stalked out of Tony's house, barely
Happy had been quietly invisible, overhearing a good bit of that little hurricane. He had gone only as far as the driveway, waxing the limo as Pepper shut the door behind her firmly, and started taking deep breaths. Hogan watched her out of the corner of his eye, like he almost always did, not sure he should let her drive in a temper. He never knew how she drove in those heels anyway.

"Need a ride somewhere?" He asked her.

"Since when do you wash the cars?" Pepper demanded, still not quite as professional as usual.

"Since the boss became a superhero." Happy said easily. "I like to… keep myself available after he does one of his little missions. He has some weird ideas after getting back from those places."

Pepper blinked. She hadn't heard about this. "Really?"

"Sure. When he got back from Afghanistan the first thing he wanted was a cheeseburger."

"I remember."

"After the Gulmira mission he went and bought a bunch of war-games for the Xbox 360. He had Jarvis play all the war sounds really loud. I could hear it out here. When he got back from the Central Asia he wanted to buy a Sensory Deprivation Tank…"

Pepper shivered.

"Anyway, he never really has it together for a day or two afterward so I go do these things for him."

Pepper felt a wave of affinity for Hogan. His life had been put on hold when Tony was away, just as hers. His life story would always be 'the one standing behind the crazy Tony Stark'. Just like her.

"He does tend to…" Pepper started, and then decided not to finish the sentence. "Did… do you still want to have coffee sometime?"

Happy looked over. "Pepper, what just went on in there?" he asked pointedly.

*Perceptive too.* Pepper noted. "What you said a few days ago, about how you aren't Tony… that's not necessarily a bad thing. Certainly not a mark against dating you."

"Dating huh?" Hogan smiled.

"Or just coffee." Pepper amended.

Hogan smiled. "I'd like that."

It reminded him a little of Gulmira, only in the jungle. Lots of undergrowth surrounding the village, lots of buildings in various stages of disrepair. There were a few Soviet Era helicopters parked along the western edge of the village…

And many men patrolling the streets with very expensive looking weapons. There were civilians. They didn't seem to be in danger, just watching the armed men with thinly veiled fear.

His HUD followed his eyes and focused on the guns, putting the specs up in full view. Stark
weapons.

Grinning wolfishly beneath the mask, Iron Man struck.

Pepper was at the house, as she always was while the boss was getting shot at.

The door opened. She didn't turn. She knew who it would be.

Sure enough, Rhodey sat down across from her in the living room. "Bad day?"

"Bad day." Pepper agreed.

Rhodey handed her an envelope. "One more headache for you."

"What is it?"

"An official complaint against Tony Stark for damages incurred on a Edwards Air force base by the actions of Iron Man."

Pepper sighed. "I'll add it to the list."

"I'm running out of ways to explain him to people Pepper." Rhodey rubbed his forehead. "This man took out two terrorist cells, one of them holding him prisoner at the time. This man fought down an advanced super-weapon, even though it meant killing a close friend of his. This man could make armies follow his lead in Hot Zones around the world, one of which he cooled down single handedly without even being asked to. But for all the amazing things he's done... Pepper, tell me that it's under control and I'll keep the Pentagon away from him."

Pepper didn't answer.

"I mean it Pepper. Look me in the eye and tell me that he's okay."

Just then, her phone rang. They both recognized the ring tone.

Pepper still couldn't look at Rhodes. "I have to take this... downstairs."

Rhodey nodded. "I'll be here."

"Tony?"

"Pepper, do we have a driver for Monaco yet?"

"What?"

Iron Man blasted the next gunman down. "I've made a lot of modifications to that racecar and I was just thinking that if we got a driver who knew how to-"

"Where are you?"

"Hot Zone in Central America. I told you that. Jarvis, activate heat seekers."

"Are you... are you in the middle of a fight right now?"

"Two of them. One with terrorists, and one with you."

"Tony!"
"Wanna watch?"

Pepper could not believe that he was actually having this conversation while people were shooting at him. "No I don't want to watch. I want you to-"

"AGH!"

"Tony!"

The viewscreen came up again, and Pepper got an Iron Man's view of the battle.

Tony started to answer her when he was suddenly hit across the back with a massive blast. He was barely able to process that his body was being thrown by an explosion before another slammed into him, this time in the midsection.

Iron Man was slammed down hard on the ground, before dragging himself upright with effort. His mask was scarred and pitted, and looking about as angry as a motionless, expressionless metal face could. He forced himself to turn around through his aching muscles, and turned to face the man who fired.

Two men with grenade launchers. His HUD did a scan. Both of them hard twin shot barrels. A Stark Industries innovation. Two shots before reload.

A warning flashed on his HUD:

**INCOMING FIRE.**

**Automatic Evasive Engaged.**

One fired the launcher again, and Iron Man swiveled, dodging the RPG from a range of four feet. He actually caught the rocket in his fist as it passed, and crushed it in his fist.

The second, only one shot left in his weapon, saw the move, and knew he was finished.

Mad as hell now, Iron Man lifted both hands, ready to fire…

And his target fired first, not at the superhero, but at the school, where the civilians were hiding. Iron Man spun to try and shoot it down… too late.

The grenade slammed into the windows to the school, and there was an explosion. Children screamed. Some from the other rooms… some from the one that just had an RPG go through it.

Iron Man saw it, and forgot all about his targets. He threw himself forward, into the building.

People were screaming, some were running away from him, some trying to get closer, some clinging to each other.

Automatic interceptors. Tony told himself, making notes for the next suit. So that I can stop that from happening next time.

Iron Man did a quick scan of the structural damage. The shot had been perfect. These old buildings hadn't been maintained since the era of the Tsars. The hole punched through the main outer wall had brought down a good chunk of the room, and the fire had been enough to tear down the central load bearing foundation wall. It was crumbing from the head.
Jarvis took in the room, crossed it with the records taken during flight, and put up a quick schematic of the building, with little notations marking the probability of accuracy.

The wall crumbing ahead was 75% likely to bring most of the building down when it fell.

Tony took worse odds than that all the time.

"Uni-Beam!" Tony commanded. "23 percent power!"

The power ran from his repulsors to the chest-piece. Originally meant as an emergency release valve in case of overload, it had become his heavy assault weapon. Tony had redesigned the chest-piece to include a better focusing lens, making the power discharge regulated. At just over 20%, the beam would be narrow.

The precision blast blew a neat human sized hole out of the crumbling section of the wall, and Iron Man was suddenly in place of it, holding up the section of the wall that hadn't crumbled yet…

"OUT! EVERYONE OUT!" Iron Man roared, and Jarvis quickly replayed the order, electronically enhanced to be heard over the shaking walls, and digitally translated into a somewhat monotone Spanish. The people in the house heard it, and started running, but unaware that their attackers had been defeated, tried to get out the back way…

"Redirect power to control surfaces." Jarvis volunteered.

"Negative, keep the control surfaces sealed." Tony countered. Doing so would keep his arms locked.

"Sir, any excess pressure that lasts longer than-"

"I KNOW!"

"Tony get out of there!" Pepper's voice yelled.

"NOT YET!" Tony roared back. "Jarvis, is everyone out?!"

The rest of the building was collapsing around him, when Jarvis suddenly put another display up on his HUD. It was an audio scrambler. Various soundwaves were visible. Jarvis quickly filtered them all out one by one, cutting them off from Tony's audio inputs, till suddenly Tony was suffocated by the sudden silence, all sound wiped out.

All except one.

One soundwave was left on the readout, as the weight of the collapsing building forced Iron Man down to one knee. "Enhance!" Tony gritted out.

Jarvis filtered and amplified the sound. It was all Tony could hear thanks to Jarvis. It was a very young sounding voice, crying.

"Oh no." Pepper whispered.

"Where?!" Tony demanded.

"Cabinet, north wall." Jarvis directed.

Iron Man strained his neck to see past his own shaking arms. The cabinet against the wall was closed. Tony focused his eyes harder on it, painting the lock and the hinges with targets.
One of Iron Man's shoulders lifted and a bunch of pin-missiles blasted across the room and tore the hinges and handles off the cabinet doors. The door fell forward, revealing a pair of scared twins hiding inside; a boy and a girl, neither of them more than ten years.

"Run!" Iron Man yelled at them.

The kids didn't move.

"Jarvis, divert all power to Uni-beam!" He painted the wall next to the cabinet. "And aim straight!"

"Sir, the necessary power to blast a hole in the wall, while keeping your torso at the correct angle, will not allow you to support the weight of the foundation wall."

Huge chunks of the ceiling were collapsing down around them. Iron Man fired a much more powerful blast. The power drain drove him down to both knees, made him lose his grip, and the wall came down hard on him.

The little girl started tugging at her brother's sleeve, and both of them made a break for the hole in the wall…

Too late. The debris rained down on both of them, crushing them both.

With most of the building down, the pressure eased instantly on Iron Man, and he was able to force the wall back up. For a second, almost like an out of body experience, Tony saw himself. Iron Man, scuffed and dented, holding an Atlas weight on his shoulders, with two dead children at his feet…

"Tony…" Pepper started to whisper in his ear.

Tony didn't answer. He was back in the cave. Yinsen dead. Back in the jeep. His escort dead. Back in his bedroom. His parent's dead. Back in his lab looking at his chest...

Tony Stark, on top of the world. With all the wreckage at his feet.

"Tony? Answer me."

Iron Man forced himself to stand taller, the glow of his Reactor dimming to the greater power drain. Guilt was strong. Grief was stronger. Rage was Pure Iron.

Power redirected to his jets by his thumb controls, and with all the speed of a turtle, Iron Man took off with half the building on top of him. Through some means even Tony couldn't figure out, Iron Man kept his balance, going straight up with both his hands occupied.

His defeated opponents were gathering their wounded together, and running for the helicopters, trying to escape.

A million times too slow. Tony Stark had transcended himself, transcended his suit… An Iron Dragon breathing fire on his victims.

The entire wrecked building came crashing down on the warming up helicopters, eruptions of noise and flame scattering their helpless passengers-to-be. The now doomed men realizing they had nowhere left to escape to…

Iron Man let them run. He had a specific man in mind.
The last terrorist, the man that had knocked down the whole school building, threw down his empty grenade launcher, raised his hands, quivering in terror…

Iron Man took him in, and stepped forward, slowly… This man had blown up a building full of children. He had murdered them with a weapon that had Stark's name on it. His name, his father's name…

Iron Man raised both hands, and put on glove on either side of his surrendered foe.

The man was too scared to even move, as Iron Man stopped just short of gently squeezing his skull.

"Tony?" Pepper said sharply. "What are you doing?"

There was a whine of power as the glove repulsors flared brighter and hotter. Power readouts, temperatures…

"Tony, I'm looking at the readouts on your HUD… are you seeing them too?"

The man started to shout, then scream; the static electricity making his hair stand on end before starting to smoke…

"ANTHONY STARK!" Pepper roared, so ferociously that for a second, half a world away, even the Invincible Iron Man froze. "Put him down! You've stopped them. You've collared them. You've won. SHIELD is sending gunships to apprehend the survivors. It's over."

Long silence.

"It's over." Pepper repeated softly.

With a whine of power, Iron Man released his prisoner, who collapsed. Iron Man nudged his motionless body with one boot, before he fired his jets and lifted off.

Pepper was correct. Hovering over the remnants of the battlefield, Iron Man witnessed a formation of helicopters coming in fast and low, directly for him. An Audio scan popped up on the HUD, as a new transmission came in on a new frequency.

"This is SHIELD Strike One to Codename Iron Man; come in?"

"This is Iron Man." Tony responded.

"We're under orders to take over the situation, and detain any prisoners for questioning. Is there any further resistance?"

"Not that I'm seeing." Tony said as Jarvis obligingly put up the statistics. "A few left, but I think they know it's over."

"Roger that. We have the ball."

The helicopters came in to land and started dropping off Shield Agents.

"Tony?" Pepper asked softly. "Are you okay?"

Tony directed the question to Jarvis. "Jarvis, am I okay?"

A damage report popped up on the HUD. It showed damage to several outer layers of the Iron Man...
Tony scanned it quickly; nothing internal. "I'm fine."

"Tony, about bef-" His vitals popped up on the HUD again, and Tony quickly cut the connection to Pepper mid sentence before she could see.

His vitals did not look good. Respiratory, blood pressure, all of it was borderline.

"Jarvis?" Tony called weakly. "I'm not fine; am I?"

"No sir."

Pepper turned to face the phone in her hand. She was mid-word! He just hung up on her mid word when she was clearly trying to make amends... god, he was actually about kill that man. She didn't care who he didn't work for, and she didn't care what suit he was wearing; even Tony couldn't just go and execute somebody like that!

She looked around helplessly at Tony's workshop. She had often thought of the workshop as Tony's mind given form. Ten percent living space, thirty percent fast cars, and sixty percent work in progress.

Except now the workshop had been transformed into Iron Man's headquarters. The armors were lined against the wall, one after the other. From the first Iron Man right up to the mangled wreckage of the Mark III as the finished product.

He was getting worse. Afghanistan, Stane, Iron Man... it had all brought out more of the Tony in Tony Stark.

Pepper went upstairs and waved for Rhodey to follow her.

Confused, the soldier followed Pepper downstairs to the smartglass door of the workshop.

Pepper very carefully keyed in her passcode. The door opened. Pepper did not go back in. She slid it shut again and stepped aside.

Rhodey, without saying a word, stepped forward and keyed in the same numbers. The door slid open again. He remembered the code.

She had just given him the way into the lab. She had just given him access to all of Tony's projects, all of his private files, and most of all... to the suits themselves.

For a long moment, the two of them just stared at each other.

"He's getting worse." Pepper said quietly. "He's acting more... I don't know."

Rhodey nodded, taking the matter as seriously as she was. "We're not that far gone yet Pepper. Neither is he. He has it in him, I know he does. If he wants to be a hero, he has it all. If not, he's got us to take care of things."

"And we're going to, right?" Pepper whispered. "You aren't just going to... to do what Stane did? This is for him isn't it?"

Rhodey put a hand on her shoulder, and led her away from the lab, not even trying to go inside. "It's the right thing Pepper."
His chest was hurting again. He called up his vitals. The palladium was getting into his blood faster now.

He wanted Pepper. She made things better.

Except he couldn't go to her right now. Because she was mad at him.

He looked at his vitals. Another thing to fix.

Tony came upstairs quietly. Pepper was at her usual seat in front of the window, tapping away at her PDA. She barely looked at him.

Tony shivered. She was still angry. Tony put on his best 'Mom, I know you're mad, but I can explain.' expression, and quietly came forward. "Hello."

Pepper didn't say anything. Bad. Normally she'd be giving him a list of things to ignore by now.

She barely looked at him. "More calls from the Board of Directors. Either appoint a new CEO, or I'll give them your number." She hit the enter key a little too hard.

"After what happened with Stane, I'm a little leery of giving anyone that much control over my company. Stane was one of the few that I trusted. Dad trusted him too." He sighed. "You're one of the few that I still trust after Iron Monger."

Silence.

"Don't take this the wrong way, boss; but sometimes, you're a real jerk." Pepper said quietly.

"What would be the right way to take that?" Tony quipped. "I know I disappoint you Pepper. I can feel your disappointment in me. But I know it's because you care about what happens to me." Tony looked her in the eye. "There are not a whole lot of people in my life that care about me personally. But Pepper, I'm worried about me too. About the things I have done. About the things that go on in my name, or because of me indirectly. Pepper, when you were worried I'd get myself killed, just after you found out about Iron Man... You remember what I told you then? I know what I have to do, and I know in my heart, that it's right." He put a hand over his chest in sincerity.

"Other side." Pepper pouted absently.

"What?"

"You've got your hand over the right side of your chest. Your heart's over the other side."

Tony shifted his hand. "That's what I get for practicing in the mirror." he mumbled.

Pepper smirked, just a little, and Tony knew they'd be okay. Time to turn it up a bit, and seal the deal.

"If you're really that worried, how about you come along on my missions and protect me. I could build you a suit of your own." Tony offered. "Iron Man and the Iron Maiden?"

"Oh no, no you don't. We're still hammering out a settlement with Ozzy Osbourne for you."

"Just a working name." Tony promised. "Of course... I'd need your measurements...they'd have to be pretty accurate, so I'd do it personally..."
Pepper handed him a clipboard. "Here's your call back sheet, and a few cheat sheets on what it's about." Pepper stood up and headed out, pausing check for injuries. "Will that be all, Mr Stark?"

Tony smiled, relieved. Proper balance between them had been restored. "That will be all, Miss Potts."

"Don't sleep in your workshop again." She told him on her way out.

"I won't." Tony said quietly as the door closed behind her. His voice dropped lower still. "Oh, and by the way, I'm appointing you my new CEO. If you want to stop me speak now."

Obviously, he'd made sure she wouldn't hear him.

Tony poured himself another drink, and started flipping through his call sheet. He turned to face the huge windows, enjoying the view. It wasn't as good as when actually airborne... but it would do for now.

Tony Stark. An Iron Man on top of the world.
Chapter Notes

Ivan Vanko

While Tony Stark dealt with problems close to his heart, both figurative and literal, another personal nightmare was unfolding; halfway around the world; in a broken down, un-maintained tenement block in the farthest edge of Moscow.

Vanko played the tape again.

"The truth is… I Am Iron Man."

Vanko knew what it was going to say. The Russian translation dubbed over the smug pronouncement was not needed. He spoke English well enough. The English language, English maths, the metric system, American codes, American software...

Vanko looked at the wretch on screen. America's most beloved mass murderer, and the crowd shouting his name. As though building a super-suit and blowing things up made him popular. As though killing terrorists in Afghanistan instead of villagers made it all better again.

As though those four words made all his sins forgiven.

"Ivan…"

The voice was barely audible, but Vanko was up out his chair and into the bedroom like a shot. It took no time at all to cross the dark room, to the only other room in the tiny apartment.

His father was bundled up in every blanket, every sheet, tablecloth, towel… and still the old man shivered violently. Vanko knew the score. Nothing was going to bring him back.

And he had to listen to Tony Stark on his last day.

Anton had nothing left for revenge, all that stayed in his heart was despair. Regret and lost potential was not an uncommon feeling among the older generations on the streets of Moscow; but Anton Vanko's grief was more personal.

"It should be you." Anton croaked to his son.

The mountain of a man shook his head and tried to pour his father a vodka. "Don't listen to that garbage."

Anton's eyes were glazing over, losing focus as he almost managed to wave about the tiny room. "All I have to give you is my knowledge."

Ivan was about to tell his father that he didn't care. He'd lived a significant portion of his life in a Siberian Gulag. What was a dirty apartment?

But it was too late.

His father was dead.

And if he'd had the life he wanted. The life that he had earned… The life he deserved…
And if The Stark Dynasty had not taken it all away… his father might have lived. Russian prisons, soviet era apartments… These could kill an old man.

Vanko looked around the room. Tiny, dank, rats crossing the floor and cracks in the walls.

The huge man pulled the stained yellow sheet back over the window, willing the darkness to cool his frustration.

The darkness helped until the vodka wore off. All that was left was rage.

Ivan embraced it. He was a man fuelled of broken promises and broken dreams, forged and strengthened by Siberian Hard Labor Camps; trained by brilliant minds both official and disavowed.

And above all, by his father.

His father, who knew more about engineering and construction than MIT could ever teach. His father who was brought to near greatness when his quality was noticed by the most resourceful man in the world; his father who had been cursed and cast off in the name of politics and geography…

His father, Anton; who was left to die miserable and cold in a place that was not worthy of him; by the greed and ambition of the Stark Family.

Ivan had studied his enemy, looking for the cracks in the armor, both physical and metaphorical. Armed with his father's knowledge, but not his father's blessing. Anton Vanko senior would never have counseled revenge.

But his father was dead.

Ivan had allowed the notion of tearing down the Stark legacy to fade to nothing once Howard Stark had been killed in what Ivan knew to be karmic payback. Tony Stark, for all his wealth, was a joke. A bad caricature of a Brat Prince, and not worth the effort.

But then Ivan's father had been diagnosed with cancer. Treatable, but such treatments were expensive, and those who could help were not inclined to save the life of anyone named 'Vanko' and Ivan's rage toward those that had taken their good name flared again.

Then Tony Stark had disappeared, and Ivan nearly exploded. His own plans were barely coming together, his father rotting away in the next room, and he was denied even his revenge!

It all had turned to ice and dust in his hands.

And then Tony Stark was found. Ivan had quietly turned the television on for the Press Conference that announced an end to Stark Weaponry. Ivan had stared long and hard at the face of the Stark heir. The idiot brat prince was muted, and pure iron remained in an angular face full of weary edges and grim memories.

He looked like half the people Ivan had to face every day of his life. Ivan Vanko was not a man intimidated. Even if you went to battle with someone greater than you, you kept your resolve. It was how you survived.

A few months passed, and suddenly Stark became much more than a man. He became an Iron Man.
And the world adored him. His people cried out his name in victory, his government with mild awe, his enemies in fear.

And Ivan returned to work. Ivan had been approached by someone who understood the kind of rage that grew from a long hard winter; and been told of vengeance granted and promises restored.

Vanko had believed none of the promises. He was Russian, and had seen promises come and go in every leader for sixty years. He understood that if you wanted to make your lot better, you had to do it yourself, and the world would grant you nothing but more opposition.

*A long hard winter.* Ivan reflected. *For me, my father...*

Ivan had ignored or disbelieved all that his self-appointed Master had promised him. But he knew that he had something to offer. He had resources.

And for these resources, Ivan would gladly kiss His Ring, and do whatever task was asked of him; right up until the point where his new Master became inconvenient.

A discreet delivery of some papers, a few blueprints, and Vanko had something that all power-mongers and self-appointed lords of the earth wanted. The complete designs of an Arc Reactor.

The plans bore his father's name. And the Stark logo.

Vanko could have sold them for a great deal of money. There was no government on the planet, including the Americans, who would care to ask where they came from.

For a time, Ivan Vanko considered it. Selling these plans would get his father out of this place.

Then Anton Vanko died, with the sound of Tony Stark's smug announcement of his superiority filling the room, and Ivan cared not for money. He cared not for security, or fame or recognition, or even what his father would have wanted.

With his father's dying breath, Ivan Vanko was free.

Vanko ignored most of the resources offered to him. He knew the technology, learned at his father's side. All the blueprints were for an industrial sized Arc Reactor, the kind that nobody else had been able to build, and only one man had been able to innovate.

All that was missing was palladium. Ivan had been put in jail for crossing his superiors in Russian Nuclear Engineering. He knew where to find odd materials. He'd been able to keep his father alive by supplying hard to get materials to people willing to pay. A working knowledge of flaws in software made theft and dangerous work immaterial. All you needed was the right set of numbers, and Vanko had studied that as well.

Ivan was a child of the Soviet Union. He understood what happened when people took power they did not earn. Stark was an example of that, standing on the shoulders of his Father's accomplishments, and turning it to his own ends.

Ivan had to earn the power, the way Stark had, by getting it himself.

Ivan had collected every scrap he could find about Iron Man, and the fool Stark had made it easy, by making a spectacle of himself and the suit. The technology he had hidden, the method a secret; the end result was a circus attraction.

And a look at the end result was all Vanko needed.
Iron man had a circular glow in the middle of his chest. A glow and design that Vanko had immediately recognized.

If Stark had become Iron man to escape in Afghanistan, then it meant he had been able to build the power source in a cave in the desert, with a box of scrap metal, and a narrow understanding of the technology.

Ivan could certainly do the same in a crumbling workshop apartment.

It took him months to do it. He had set himself the dead line of only three months. That was all the time Stark had taken to break out in Afghanistan. If he had constructed the weapon from nothing in that amount of time, then perhaps he was worthy of the power he now had.

Then new reports came in over the small television. Tony Stark had become more than just a sideshow, he was actually hitting back against the world.

And nobody was stopping him. The arrogant bastard was flying all over the world, blowing things up, and getting rewarded for it. Who knows how many laws had been broken. And nobody cared! Once again, the man had managed to cheat all the rules and get applauded for it.

Ivan was not a fool. He had seen all to often how someone's worth was defined by what those in power could hope to get from him. Tony Stark, the Iron Man, had made himself too valuable to defy; even his own people dared not anger him.

And Ivan knew what to do.

His neighbors in the building did not care where he came from. Vanko had used his knowledge to get them a working furnace in the basement. A luxury that was uncommon in this part of Moscow. A luxury that meant they would not have to leave the city for the country during winter. So many had to leave their homes to go where there was firewood. Thanks to Vanko, his neighbors could stay and work without fear of freezing to death. They were certainly willing to let him work in the basement as a result, ignoring the sounds of metalwork.

Six weeks passed, and Ivan had finished.

Ivan connected the last of the wires and pulled his hands away quickly, as his wretched little apartment was filled with an unearthly glow. The bare light-bulbs cracked and died in respect to the sudden inclusion of raw power.

And Vanko smiled for the first time he could remember.

Chapter End Notes

From here, the story goes up in smaller chapters. The first movie was covered in three big sections. This time around, we have easier to manage chapters.
Iron Man waited.

The movement sensors under the impenetrable armor could protect him from a tank gun, but the sensor mimicked the wearer's movements so fluidly that Iron Man moved like any human being.

The cargo hold of the C-130 was huge and exclusively his, for this very special mission.

Within the armor, Tony checked his vitals again. Heart rate was accelerating. Blood pressure had spiked… what was going on? He hadn't seen readings like this since the Palladium…

Stark put it out of his head. Before Iron Man, his life required him to shake off hangovers and project ideas and get to work on one thing at a time. After Iron Man, that was a matter of survival.

Stark put the future out of his mind.

"Air speed, 25 knots. Mr. Stark we are over the insertion zone, all indicators are in the green, you are go for precision drop. Godspeed, Iron Man."

The cargo hatch opened, and in two strides, Iron Man was airborne.

Far below, New York was spread out in a blanket of twinkling lights.

Iron Man's repulsors flared to life, and suddenly he was not falling, but powering straight down like a ballistic missile.

Stark was always at his calmest when hurtling at supersonic speeds. All his self-training, all his knowledge of the suit, all his adrenaline and intelligence just flowed into each other and became something tranquil. Flying at night, without a place, Stark sometimes felt that he became something other than human...

Iron Man was suddenly hit in the gut by a speeding rocket, moving so fast that even Iron Man's eyes could not see it coming.

The armor absorbed the hit easily, not even a dent in the newly blended gold-titanium alloy, and Tony focused tighter on his target, spinning his body around like a fighter jet.

More explosions surrounded him, flares of brilliant light rocking the darkness around him as he headed for the stadium.

And with a roar, Iron Man came crashing down, cutting his momentum and making what had become his customary entrance, letting his arrival be swift and sudden, a loud metal BANG heralding his appearance in a full combat crouch.

And the crowd went wild!

Iron Man rose to his feet and raised his hands up over his head, as fifteen cheerleaders, wearing skimp red and gold uniforms, as well as glowing LED gloves, went into their routine behind him.

The crowd was wearing the same thing, Iron Man gloves replacing the standard glow sticks that came to stadium events.

The Iron-ettes kicked and flipped around him in unison, as Iron Man came to the front of the stage,
a crowd of people waving and screaming before him in the near mosh pit of the Stark Expo opening night.

From beneath the stage came a complete replicate of Stark's private assembly line, and the crowd was treated to the sight of Iron Man being removed, and lo behold, Tony Stark, the man himself, in full three piece suit was immediately giving them a dazzling smile.

The rock music came to a smashing finish, the machines vanished back under the stage, the Iron-ettes came and surrounded him in a fantastic pose and the spotlights came to settle on him in a dazzling finale.

The crowd went ballistic trying to outdo each others screams and applause, as the girls quick-marched off stage in file, and Stark himself grinned, looking like the world was his, because for this night, it was.

"Oh, it's good to be back!" Stark relished in the moment.

He raised his hands, and the crowd fell into hushed silence, with the odd exception of one woman shouting "We love you Tony!" and another man yelling "Blow Something up!"

"Blow something up?" Tony responded. "I already did that."

Light chuckle, but the crowd was silent for whatever he had to say.

"Now I'm not saying that the world is enjoying its longest period of uninterrupted peace in years because of me." Tony said modestly. Sort of modestly.

The crowd whooped, but kept it in check. They knew there was more to come.

*Work the opening Tony, work the room.*

Tony started dialing up the dramatics. "I'm not saying... that from the *ashes of captivity*; never before has a phoenix metaphor been better personified in *human history*!"

The crowd roared again, loving it, stepping into his rhythm.

"I'm not saying, that Uncle Sam can kick back on a lawn-chair, sipping on an ice tea; because I haven't met anyone who's *man enough* to go toe-to-toe with me on *my* best day!" Tony exulted.

The crowd roared, their silent listening now limited to only a lower roar of appreciation for The Man himself.

Tony drank in the screaming for a time, before waving them off and lowering his head, getting to the point at last. "Please. No, please. It's not about me." He called. "Or you. It's not about us. It's about legacy. It's about what we choose to leave behind for future generations. And that is why, for the next year; and for the first time since 1974, the best and brightest men and women of nations and corporations the world over with pool their resources, share their collective vision to leave behind a brighter future."

The crowd started to yell again, for Stark had neatly described the one thing that everybody in the world had hoped for, and never dared to dream possible.

"It's not about us. Therefore what I am saying, if I'm saying anything..." Stark built to the finish. "Is welcome back... To The Stark Expo."
The crowd exploded again.

Tony let them cheer, let the crowd feed it's own cry, until finally, he signaled the FX department. "And now, from beyond the grave, to tell you what it's all about, My Dad. Howard Stark."

Tony bowed and the lights dropped down to nothing, as the huge movie screen behind him came to life, and started playing the promotional film from the 74 Expo.

Stark shivered. His chest was hurting again.

The film was old, though it had been transferred to digital formats. Standing before the model of the 74 expo, Howard Stark made his introduction. "Everything is achievable through technology. Better living, robust health. And for the first time, in human history, the possibility of World Peace. So from all of us here at Stark Industries, I'd like to introduce you, to the City of The Future."

Tony glanced at the show over his shoulder. The huge screen showed Howard Stark, standing before the Stark Expo of 1974. Pepper wasn't wrong, it was practically a small city, from the self contained ecosystem the size of a hockey rink, to the six story steel model of the globe, to the three or four hundred stalls, presentation booths and tents, laid out in geometric patters; the Stark Expo had all the hallmarks of a theme-park, a tech-expo, a sideshow... It was an insane expense, all for the hope of creating something that could save the world from itself.

Pepper had thought rebuilding the Expo was a ridiculous idea.

Of course, Pepper had also thought it was a ridiculous idea, wearing the suit under the Armor, but Tony had seen something similar in a James Bond movie once, and knew he could do it better. He so rarely made Iron Man his formal attire. It was so worth it.

But the extra layers... had nearly knocked him over. He was sweating. And as much as he'd like to pretend it was the spotlight making the stage a little warm...

With the lights off and the crowd facing elsewhere, Stark was finally out of view and slipped off stage, letting the sudden exhaustion fall across his face. He pulled out the blood-test, a Stark industries Medical Invention for diabetes, allowing instant, simple blood tests for insulin.

Stark had adapted this one to test for palladium. Blood Toxicity: 8%

Stark swore under his breath. After a few days, Jarvis had developed a chlorophyll solution to fight the heavy metal poisoning. It had kicked the poisoning problem down completely, but the palladium was still burning out in his chest... It wasn’t a problem; because he'd found the right treatment, but now…

The blood poisoning was on the rise again.

The movie was finishing and Tony fought to keep his face together as the lights came back up. The Expo... was expensive, but getting all the minds together...

No. There was nobody who was brilliant in this field. All these minds were pople looking for a grant, armed only with an idea.

While his father kept extolling the virtues of technology, he thought about it again, and felt his face fall. The chlorophyll was the only solution he could think of... and had failed.
The simulations had been finished, they all came back negative... the symptoms had reappeared, and his treatment wasn't stopping it, and the prognosis was... fatal.

Tony was more surprised than upset. He was going to die.

He was Iron Man, and he was going to die... because he was Iron Man...

*It's about legacy.* Stark's own words came back to him and he suddenly remembered how old he felt. He couldn't die. He had too much to do...

And then it suddenly dawned on him. What else was there to do?

He'd made the next generation of weapons. he could keep it his, and his alone for as long as he lived. There was nobody else even close to making it. What did he care what the government would get after he was gone?

Pepper had been clambering for his attention with regard to his own investments. What did he care for the money? There was always a long list of people who needed money. Worthy causes. He could donate without fear for his bank account.

Pepper had also demanded his attention on company business. What did he care for that? Pepper's ascension to CEO was already prepared, and she was better at it anyway. His company would have it's stability assured, and Pepper would have to give Rhody Iron Man eventually after he was... She could keep his family business afloat without him.

The Expo would ensure his legacy. A thousand brilliant minds in every field and Stark Industries would have all the patents that came of it, year after year. What did he care for start-up costs?

Fury would probably keep on him about the Avenger Initiative, but before they recruited anyone else, he would be past the point of... well... breathing.

His own weapons had been hunted down and taken out. Most of the World's Hot-Zones had been taken on, publicly, loudly, and spectacularly.

His Grand Crusade... was done.

The thought made Tony pause. That couldn't be all, could it?

Out on stage, Howard Stark was wrapping up his own presentation. "So welcome. Welcome to the Stark Expo."

The promotional film ended, and the crowd started cheering again.

Tony took a breath. Time to feed the beast.

Happy had been doing the job long enough to know the drill. Tony Stark gets off stage and heads out through the crowd. As part chauffeur, part bodyguard, it was Hogan's job to keep the dangerous ones away, and the boss moving.

Right now however, the boss looked bad. He was weaving a bit on his feet. As yet he hadn't been flying the Iron man suit while drunk... but knowing Stark, there was bound to be a first time...

Still, he was out of the armor now, and Hogan's job was the same. Attractive women, who quickly pressed everything from phone numbers to underwear into Stark's hands, trying to be discreet in the crowd; little kids who wanted things signed; media personalities who wanted to get assurances on
his public schedule; charitable organizations who wanted five minutes...

But eventually, they made it out of the stadium, and onto the street.

Pepper had warned Hogan that there would be a handler ready to collect all the detritus that Stark had handed to him by the thousand odd people that descended on him whenever he went out in public. Stark had handed it all to Hogan, with the handler six inches away, and hogan quickly passed it on.

Stark had antibacterial wipes out before they even made the door, and Hogan found himself staring as Stark cleaned his hands meticulously.

"Shut your mouth Happy, you'll catch flies."

Hogan quickly looked away and pulled the door open for Tony.

Waiting for them at the street, was the latest model Prius to roll off the Stark Industries assembly line. Tony had designed the engine carefully to keep the feel and power of a regular V8 engine.

The Arc Reactor had not become the standard solution for the modern energy crisis. It was part of the Iron Man technology. After Stane had been able to copy everything except the power source, Tony had come to protect it jealously.

Still, Green technology was an emerging field, and Tony had made sure that the first Prius that felt identical to a race-car had a Stark Logo on the engine.

Calmly leaning against the car was a preppy young woman who had clearly not seen her 25th birthday.

"Is this the latest model?" He quipped to Hogan.

"Yes sir."

"Think she comes with the car?"

The young woman gave him a big smile and stepped forward with the keys. "Mr Stark?"

"Call me Tony." He took the keys. "Happy, I'm driving; take the passenger seat." He hopped in the car and turned his attention back to the blonde. "And you are…?"

"Marshal."

Tony blinked. Hardly a typical hot blonde name… "Irish? Huh. Where you from?"

"Bedford."

Tony grinned. People were coming from all over the planet for the Stark Expo, why not Bedford? Tony started the car. "So, Marshall, what are you doing later?"

Her face changed and Tony knew he'd been baited. "Delivering subpoenas." She held out the paper in question.

"Ouch." Hogan commented.

Stark's face fell. This was turning into a less than thrilling night. "I don't like people handing me
things." He said flatly. If she had a cold, then handing him a subpoena could actually be dangerous and not just annoying.

Stark seethed. It was not like this had come as a surprise. The hearings had gone for weeks after Iron Man made his debut; but his lawyers had managed to fend off the attacks without him thus far. As far as the public was concerned, the matter was closed, and the politicians had quickly jumped on the bandwagon, taking credit for Iron Man... But apparently the suit was enough of a prize that the military wasn't willing to let it go. Offhand, Tony could see why. Hot-Zones were a sticking point for the US Military, and Tony had cooled most of them without anyone from the military being involved.

Hogan reached across the car and took the envelope off her. "I'll take that."

"You are hereby ordered to appear before the Senate Armed Services Committee tomorrow morning at 9AM."

"You got a badge?" Tony quipped, his mind was already elsewhere. "I like to see that badge."

She pulled a silver star out of her pocked. "Still like it?"

Marshal. As in US Marshals. Stark let out a low whine. Five years ago, she would already be in his car, Happy would be getting a cab, and Pepper worrying about that subpoena for him...

Oh god, I'm getting old. Stark thought; not for the first time.

"How far away is Washington DC?" Stark asked Happy.

"About 250 miles." Hogan responded promptly.

"Hm." 250 miles against my newly designed Hybrid Engine... I love a good field test.

Stark floored it, leaving Marshal in the dust.

Pepper was waiting in Washington with Stark's newly dry-cleaned and pressed suit over one arm, and a cardboard tray with two large coffees. "Mr Stark, your lawyers are already set up; the Press are assembled; I have your suit, three ties, two watches for your selection; and your triple espresso. Happy, Black coffee, two sugars."

"You're an angel." Happy told her gratefully.

Pepper smiled at him. "I try to be. Did he give you too much grief on the highway?"

Tony took in Pepper. She was... bantering. With. Someone. Else. He took in a large slug of his espresso and held up the ties. "So, which of these shout 'power and control'?" He asked at his most suggestive. "You can wear it later if you want."

Pepper didn't blush, and pointed to the blue and white striped tie. "That one. And I don't believe I will."

"Can I?" Happy put in playfully.

"No." Pepper and Tony responded at the same time, and this time Pepper did blush.

Hogan grinned at her. "I'll have the car ready for whenever you're done."
"Thanks, Happy."

Tony stared back and forth at both of them, as though he didn't quite recognize what he was seeing. When it dawned on him, his eyes bulged and his jaw dropped open.

Pepper, who was watching Hogan leave, turned to see him staring at her and blushed again. "What?"

Tony was about to speak when the espresso hit his stomach and he felt nauseous. "Where's the bathroom?"

Pepper pointed, and Tony snatched his suit off her. He made it to the bathroom and puked up everything he'd eaten for a year and a half.

Several minutes passed, and Tony shrugged out of his old sweat-soaked shirt; moving slowly and painfully. The black, putrid looking skin around his reactor was spreading again. But now, it seemed to be moving through his veins properly. Thin, spidery strands of silver and black were visible across his chest, extending outward from the brightly glowing Reactor.

Tony shivered violently, not just out of fear, and scrubbed his face had with his hands. This was turning into a bear of a day.

And when the hell had Happy and his Pepper become a thing?

Five minutes later in the Senate cloakroom, Tony had changed into the suit she'd brought him, and she fixed his tie while they walked. Tony had shaken off the shock and the sickness, slugged down another mouthful of coffee to hide the smell on his breath; and had his poker face back. "So, who's chairing the Committee? Becker?"

Pepper shook her head. "No it's-"

"Because Becker hates me."

"It's not Becker, it's-"

"It's Lynch right? Congressmen Lynch hates me too, with a name like that, it's hardly-"

"It's Stern. Senator Stern."

"Stern really hates me!"

"I'm detecting a pattern here." Pepper quipped as they made their way into the Senate Hearing Room. "Can you blame him?"

"What? I thought his daughter looked good in those photos." Stark grinned, the room was crowded with people and reporters, soldiers and civilians alike. With Stark's arrival, the camera flashes intensified.

Pepper forced herself to smile for the cameras. it was hardly the first time she'd had to do so. "You are unbelievable."

"Don't flare your nostrils like that." Tony counseled through his perfect public smile.

Pepper didn't answer, sitting down on the end of the third row from the front.
Stark came into the centre of the room as five Senators quickly filed in and took their places. A Senate Committee had the effect of having the witness sitting in a near spotlight, three feet beneath those asking the questions, surrounded on all sides by observers. A deliberately intimidating arena.

Iron Man was not easily intimidated.

Stark sat down, and the general introductions of witnesses and the Committee members; for the benefit of the official records being noted down.

Senator Stern, Chairman of The Committee, slammed a gavel down, bringing the room to attention. "Good Morning. Why are we here? Today we are presented with a truly unique situation. We live in an age where one man can do an immense amount of damage to our country and it's holdings. It's a problem we have lived with for too long. For the first time we are faced with the idea that one man could fight back, armed with a weapon so great so as to make an army redundant." He paused for effect as that sank in. "And this one man, made his living, selling weapons to The United States Of America. But not this one. Today, we are here to determine if this is an act of criminal irresponsibility. One so great that we have to take action to correct it, in the interests of the American people."

Stark's lawyer butted in. "Excuse me Senator, but to compare the actions of Mr Stark to those who have attacked American interests is poor taste to the point of defamation. Secondly, the courts have already ruled on the legality of Mr Stark actions, and those of Iron Man, and have been found to be perfectly legal; if unprecedented."

"Exactly, laws were not broken, because laws simply did not exist to cover this sort of thing, but there are rules about weapons of mass destruction. Do you deny the destructive power of Iron Man?"

"I deny his threat. Time Magazine has named him person of the year. The American people have spoken, and if you represent them, and not your own Armed Forces-"

Stark took the opportunity his lawyers provided to turn around in his seat and face Pepper. "When did the thing with you and Happy start?"

"Pay attention." She hissed.

"I am, why were you hiding it?"

"The legality of Mr Stark's actions have already been ruled on, as you say. This is not a criminal trial. Nevertheless, there are laws in place to seize weapons that can be harmful in the wrong hands, or could cause destruction on a mass scale. That is the matter before us now, as Mr Stark will not let the military even look at his weapon."

"I was not hiding anything," Pepper hissed. "And you're in the middle of something right now."

"Apparently. Right between you and him."

"Now, then, with that settled, if we can pick up where we left off. Mr Stark?"

"You're not between me and anything, and we can talk about this later."

"I want to talk about it now."

"Mr Stark!" Senator Stern almost shouted.
Stark turned back to the hearing in progress. "Yes dear?"

A round of laughter.

"Do you, or do you not possess a specialized weapon?"

"I do not." Stark confirmed. But he knew that wasn't going to fly for long. "Well, it depends on how you define 'Weapon'."

"The Iron Man Suit. It's a weapon."

"My device does not fit that description."

"How would you define it?"

"I would define it as what it is, senator. It's a high tech prosthesis."

The room burst into laughter. The show was starting in earnest.

Stark couldn't help but smile, just a little. "Seriously, that's the most apt description."

Stern nodded. He was a politician. He knew that the best way to avoid an answer was to change the question. Stark was clearly doing so by telling people Iron Man wasn't a weapon at all, taking away any justification for confiscating it. "It's a weapon, Mr Stark. It is a weapon." He said flatly, cutting that move off completely without even addressing it.

Stark moved onto his next attack. "If your priority was the well-being-"

"Our priority is to get you to turn over the Iron Man weapon to the American people."

Stark smirked. 'The American people' would have nothing to do with it. Two or three politicians and a bunch of Generals would get it. 'The American people' wouldn't even get close. "Well, tough. You can't have it. I am Iron Man. The suit and I are one. To turn over myself would be tantamount to indentured servitude or prostitution depending what state you're in."

The room in general laughed.

Stern was out of his depth and tried to get control of the room back. "I'm hardly an expert-"

"In prostitution?" Tony pounced while he was mid sentence. "Of course not, you're a Senator." He thumped the table in absence of a snare drumbeat. "Come on!"

Another burst of laughter, stronger this time. Work the opening, Tony; work the room.

He turned to grin at the laughing crowd, caught Pepper giving him The Look, and quickly settled.

Stern quickly picked up his sentence. "I was saying, I'm no expert on weapons. We have someone here who is. At this time, I would call Justin hammer, our current primary weapons contractor; to testify his expert opinion."

Tony would have retched if he hadn't already thrown up his breakfast. Justin Hammer had taken over weapons exports after Stark Industries had pulled out of the business. Justin Hammer himself had take it as a personal victory, happily ignoring the fact that Stark had let him have it.

Justin Hammer came in, wearing a suit that was close to identical with Tony's, and a pair of designer shades. It looked like it near always did. Like Hammer was trying to be a younger, hipper
version of Tony Stark, and missed the mark by enough to look stupid.

No wonder they want the armor so badly. Stark thought. If Hammer is their primary supplier now, America is clearly doomed without Iron Man.

Aloud, he leaned carefully toward his microphone. "Let the record show, that I observed Mr Hammer entering the chamber, and I am wondering if and when any actual expert will also be in attendance."

The crowd 'ooohed' at the shot, Stern banged his gavel again to quiet them, and Hammer, tool that he was; laughed like it was just a private joke between him and Tony. "Heh, absolutely. I'm no expert. I defer to you Anthony. You're the wonder boy." He started to move about the room, as though putting on a show. "Now Senator, if I may. I may not be an expert. But you know who was?" He turned to Tony, speaking to him now. "Your dad. Howard Stark. Really a father to us all, and to the entire Military industrial age. But let us be clear, he was no flower child. He was a Lion."

Stark twitched. Hammer was playing the daddy card?

"We all know why we're here. In the last six months; Anthony Stark has created a sword with untold possibilities. But he insists it's a shield. He asks us to trust him as we hide behind him. Well I wish I could just leave it at that Tony, I really do. I wish I could leave my door unlocked when I leave the house. But this ain't Canada." he turned back to the room in general. "We live in a world of great threats. Threats that Mr Stark alone may not always be able to see coming. Thank you. God bless Iron Man, God Bless America."

He bowed dramatically. There was some applause, mainly from the Senators and Generals at the head of the room.

Why that was incredible, Senator. I didn't even see your lips move. Tony thought. Hammer had made the one point that Stark couldn't answer. That there was only one Iron Man. By invoking Howard Stark's name, he made it seem like less of an attack, while he told the room what the Generals all wanted to hear.

Stern moved onto his next attack. "I would now like to call Lt Colonel James Rhodes to the chamber."

"Rhodey?" Stark blurted before he could stop himself. It was the first thing that had taken him by surprise so far.

Rhodes walked into the room, looking less than pleased with his own involvement as he took in the cameras and audience.

Stark got up and went to his friend. "Hey buddy. Sorry they pulled you into this." He mumbled, shaking the man's hand.

Rhodey looked awkward. "Look, I'm here. Deal with it."

That took Tony by surprise. Stern grinned slightly and Stark realized he'd been baited. Calling him Rhodey in full view of everyone; plus the handshake greeting; made it clear to those who didn't already know that this particular Colonel was a friend.

Tony recognized the feeling. He knew that a hit was coming.

Rhodey apparently knew it too.
Stern wasted no time. "I have here a full report on the Iron Man situation, compiled by Colonel Rhodes. And I would like to draw the Committees attention to a few points. Colonel, could you please read page 57, paragraph three?"

Rhodes looked like he would rather be anywhere else. "You wish me to read specific portions of my report, Senator?"

"Yes."

Rhodey continued. "It was my understanding that I was going to be testifying to a much more private committee and giving a much more comprehensive-"

"I understand, a lot of things have changed today." Stern was trying to keep him moving.

"Because I should warn you that one or two points taken out of context, does not reflect the overall view of my report."

"I understand that, Colonel; please read the section I have indicated."

Tony almost got up and shook Rhodey's hand again. The small objection was either for his benefit or the whole room, telling them all that Stern was taking things out of context. He knew that Rhodey had been rooked into it, and felt no malice, but at the same time...

Rhodey sighed on got on with it. "As he does not operate within any definable branch of Government, Iron Man does present a potential threat to America and it's interests."

At the same time, Stark was still reeling from the revelation about Pepper and Happy, and suddenly Rhodey was tearing him down too, even if he only intended to in secret, which was almost worse.

Rhodey didn't even take a breath. "I did, however, go onto say that the benefit of Iron man far outweighed the risks, and I also-"

"Thank You, Colonel, that's enough."

"-Went on to suggest that the better solution would be to fold mr Stark into the current chain of command-"

Stark leaned forward to interrupt both of them. "I'm not much a joiner, but I will consider Secretary of Defense. If we can amend the hours a bit."

Tony shook off the momentary anger. He didn't have time to hold grudges. He could afford to make a fool of Stern and the entire committee. He could afford to tweak their noses. In a few months they would have what they wanted, and he would be too dead to care. With a little bit of luck, he could make them froth so much that even after he was dead nobody would have over Iron Man to them.

Stark was hitting back by making the Iron Man situation seem lighter and mostly harmless, Stern was fighting back by trying to make Stark seem like a clown. He moved on to his next attempt to stress the situation as urgent and dangerous. "At this point, I would like to show the imagery that goes along with that report Colonel, if you could."

Rhodey blinked as three large screens were rolled into the room and brought forward to be visible to anyone. "Sir, at this point I would believe it would be premature to reveal the images in an open court Senator-"
"You're objections are noted, Colonel, if you could just tell us what we're looking at please."

The view-screens came on, and various images of large suits came up. One from an orbital photograph, another from a much closer video. The photographs remained on screen while Rhodey explained.

"Intelligence suggests that this is an attempt by China to create their own version of Mr Stark's invention. And here, North Korea, and here Iran. This has been corroborated by our allies and local intelligence, and may in fact be active."

The room suddenly wasn't laughing any more. Everyone loved a Superhero, as long as he was on their side, and as long as he always won. People had accepted Iron Man because Iron Monger was gone in seconds. But the collateral damage...

Everyone in this room had read at least one comic book at some point. A super-powered fight always destroyed a city in the comics... the idea that it could happen...

Fortunately, Stark had a counter to that. He knew about the other suits. He knew about the international Iron man programs. Fury had sent him most of this footage before he broke with SHIELD.

Stark pulled out his PDA, a new, transparent touch screen that he's designed, based on Jarvis' AI tech after SHIELD had apparently taken over Pepper's PDA one day to deliver information to her without her consent or passwords. "Mind if I take over here?" He tapped at the PDA for a moment, and aimed it like a camera at the screens. Numbers and coding started scrolling across the large screens with amazing velocity, making everyone in the room blink.

Stern too. How was he doing that? "What is this?"

"Just doing my part in the interests of accuracy." Stark commented, as the Screens all lit up with the words "Welcome, Mr Stark."

Stern blinked. "Can we turn those off now, please?"

The pictures on screen suddenly started moving, because they were not photos, they were paused video. Stern hadn't had time to take the proper screen-shots, so he'd just put the vids on pause at the moment he wanted. Stark stood up, back in control of the room. "If you'll turn you attention, to said screens; let's start with China."

The orbital footage of the small facility started moving again, and after a few seconds, the circled dot exploded in a flash of white that covered most of the visible buildings. "Yep. Boom. No problem there." he turned to the next screen. "North Korea?"

The image of the large walking tank on the far left screen started moving again, and the huge robot took two steps forward and toppled over completely, its immense weapon's going off all at once, chewing up the dirt, the buildings, the watching soldiers, and a heartbeat later, the cameraman. "Yep, no immediate threat there either..."

Stark couldn't resist. Hammer could not get Iron Man. Stark had to do something to remove Justin Hammer from this whole equation. He tapped on his PDA for a moment, and uploaded a whole new video file, on the screen closest to Justin Hammer himself. "Is that Hammer Industries? Huh, how did that get there?"

Hammer saw the footage suddenly on screen and turned white as a sheet. He darted toward the screens and tried to figure out how Stark was interfacing with it, yanking on leads.
On the screen, Hammer's latest Iron Man attempt, which frankly looked a lot closer to the original than any of the others, was having it's first test flight. On the screen, Hammer was walking the pilot through each movement. One step, two steps...

Hammer went nuts, yanking on leads, not caring that he was standing right in front of the footage that condemned him, the audience looking back and forth between him tearing at the television, and his on screen counterpart, who directed the pilot to turn his upper body.

The pilot did so, and apparently the Hammer suit overcompensated. Screams filled the room as Hammer's suit clearly twisted the pilot in half, 180 degrees.

Justin finally found a power lead and pulled it out, sending the screen blank. He turned away from the screen, and found the entire room staring at him in horror.


Justin tried to salvage something. "I would like to point out that the pilot in that video survived."

He said meekly.

Survived. From the left lung up maybe. Stark chose not to say this out loud. The Generals in the room were already trading significant glances.

Stern tried to salvage his point too. "I think that Mr Stark is making the point--"

"The point," Stark interrupted. "Is this: You are welcome."

Stern didn't answer. It was over and he knew it.

"Because, I am your Nuclear Deterrent. It's working. We are safe. America is secure. You want my property, you can't have it, but I did you a big favor..." Tony whooped as the audience responded to him.

"I have successfully privatized world peace!" He turned and posed for the entire room, raising both hands making a peace sign with each hand.

Vanko grinned. Five to ten years, huh? He sent a look over to his own creation.

Vanko hadn't replaced the lightbulbs in the basement. He hadn't needed to. The Arc Reactor had kept the place well lit, and would do so for fifty lifetimes.

Ivan watched the television out of the corner of his eye as he worked, knowing that Stark had just damned himself, as all the egotistical did.

Stark had made a critical error, fueled by his own narcissism. His ego had defied the world, telling them that he was the only one of his kind.

If it had been true, his might have gotten away with it.

Even over the wild applause, Tony continued to play it up for the camera on his way out of the room. "My to the American people; is that I will to continue to serve as Iron Man, at the pleasure of... myself. And one thing you can count on, is that I will continue to pleasure myself!"

He blew kisses to the camera, and quickly swept away.
Vanko grinned wider. Oh, he was going to enjoy knocking that guy on his ass.

Ivan had gone to a circus once as a boy, and seen a big black bear in a cage. It was furious, clawing at the bars and the trainers with wicked claws. It had broken it's way out, smashed furniture, bowled over people like an unstoppable.

Then the bear trainer had come out, and snapped his whip a few times.

So trained was the huge animal, to be terrified at the lash of the whip, that it seemed to forget it was a bear.

It was an image that Ivan had never forgotten, that of the huge bear suddenly cowering before a small man, barely five feet high. Twenty minutes later, that bear was dancing on its hind legs pathetically, all for fear of the whip.

So when Ivan had started designing his weapons, he started there. The flexible cable was useful for more than one kind of attack for one, the steel coil would maintain integrity under the power of Arc level voltage...

Ivan knew that it would take more than simply hooking the cables up to his reactor. Keeping the whips in hand was going to take a fair bit of stability. The first tests to see if the cable could hold the charge had demonstrated how the thick metal cords had come alive under the lightning. Wielding a regular whip took great skill and strength. One like this...

Ivan started building a framework. One of gears and pulleys that would cover his spinal column, and his forearms. It would effectively protect his spine from both impact and his own weapons. There was going to be a lot of pure power coursing from his chest to his arms.

Idly he considered keeping his power source somewhere else, but quickly put that thought away.

Ivan understood spectacle too. The point was not just to be more dangerous than Iron man, but to be more dangerous; armed with the same technology. But the spectacle would not end there. The whip was an intimidating weapon. It could make giant bears weep. Its strike was lightning cracking, its movement was too fast to follow.

Arm it with Arc Electrical power; and even Iron Man would feel the lightning.

It was the perfect weapon to bring down Tony Stark, the Dancing Bear.
Daddy's Home

Tony made his way into the workshop. The room had been reconfigured yet again, giving the desk a completely unobstructed view of the smart-glass doors. The glass had been upgraded again, and the workshop been moved to the side, giving the Iron Man assembly the run of the room.

The latest development was a wider upgrade of the holographic system. The room lit up as holographic displays, designs, scale models and works in progress came to life, filling the air in the large and formerly empty room.

"Welcome home sir." Jarvis said, unflappable as always. "Congratulations; the Opening Ceremony was a smashing success, as was your Senate Hearing. And it was quite refreshing to see you in an online video, with your clothes on."

Tony smirked at the computer displaying a Youtube clip of his Senate exit, when the sound of a blender; almost instantly followed by the sound of splashing, filled the room. Tony glanced over at his wet-bar. his two personal robots, Dummy and Butterfingers, had not yet been able to master the vodka Martini. Even worse with chlorophyll extract. Dummy had placed the plant stems in the blender, and hit the button without putting a lid on it. "Oh I swear, I'm gonna soak your motherboards!" He shouted at them, and hissed as pain lanced through his chest. He took a slow breath, as his vision swam briefly.

Tony turned back to his beaker full of the thick green pulp. "How much of this stuff do I have to drink now?"

"We are up to 80 ounces a day to counteract the symptoms sir." Jarvis calculated promptly. "Unfortunately, the device that is keeping you alive, is also killing you."

Tony winced. And it wasn't working. He was still getting worse. The chlorophyll had been keeping the palladium in check, but now that the metals in his blood had passed the saturation point, it was simply overpowering the medicines. He pulled out the little box and checked his blood again.

**Blood Toxicity: 24%**

"Another palladium core has been depleted." Jarvis reported.

Tony had set Jarvis to monitor power outputs from his Reactor whenever he was home. Getting caught once like that was more than enough.

"They're burning out faster too." Tony observed. Using Iron Man was speeding both problems. The Palladium was burning out faster and the waste getting into his blood becoming thicker the more drain he put on the Reactor.

He turned to his desk and opened the cigar box. He usually kept his Palladium in a steel case, but Pepper knew what it looked like, so he hid his Palladium cores in a cigar box now.

Tony took a long slow breath, steeling himself, and rotated the reactor in his chest, pulling it out, with a puff of arid smoke. He slid the next one in. He kept his shirt up and checked his reflection in the mirror. The blackened veins were standing out against his skin vividly, and the flesh surrounding the reactor itself was turning black and purple.

"You are running out of time and options." Jarvis observed. "I have run simulations on every known element, every combination of elements, and every proportion of combinations of all
known elements. none of them are a viable replacement sir."

Tony felt a warm feeling come over him suddenly. It was over then. He'd tried every trick at his disposal, everything he could think of, and it had failed. he could not lose the Reactor without dying, he could not keep the reactor without dying, and all that he'd intended to do with his life, he had done.

It was... peaceful. The kind of peaceful he felt when climbing out of the Mark I wreckage in Afghanistan. It was the feeling of: 'It's over now.' Tony felt soft all over. There was nothing that could touch him, nothing that worried him, nothing he needed to concern himself with.

Iron Man's great crusade... was done.

"Ms Potts is approaching. I suggest you tell her t-"

Tony muted the audio and yanked his shirt back down before Pepper was halfway down the stairs. Her eyes were a little red, as was her nose. *Oh hell no, Pepper can't be sick, I can't let Pepper be sick around me. A cold could kill me right now!*

The thought didn't terrify him so. He was dead in a few months, maximum. But to die from a cold or a handshake? That was just... *not* Tony Stark.

She keyed in her code and opened the door. Tony pointed at her before he could stop himself. "No!"

Pepper either didn't hear him, or didn't care. "What were you thinking!"

"I'm thinking that you're mad about something." Tony responded carefully, quickly reviewing which of the thirty odd things he'd done that would anger Pepper she might know about. "Do you have the sniffles? I don't want to get sick, keep your distance."

"Did you just donate our entire art collection to the-"

"Boy Scouts of America?" Tony finished it with her. "It's a worthy cause. They could always use the funding, or some cross interest appeal from the art crowd... Besides it's not 'our' collection, it's 'my' collection-"

Pepper would hear none of that. "Oh no you don't! I practically picked every item of that collection, going back almost ten years now, so I think I'm justified in-"

"It was a tax write off, I needed it."

Tony was up out of his seat and waving at various holographic displays, cataloging them as he talked. *Boring. Other people can do it. Boring. Take too long; I'd be dead before I can finish it.*

"There are only about eight thousand things I need to talk to you about-"

"With the Expo running and out of the way-"

"The Expo is a gigantic waste of money." Pepper said plainly, and put a hand up to stop him walking away from her any further. "Tony."

Tony shied away from her hand. "I need you to wear a surgical mask, until your cold passes. You're contagious."

Pepper looked at him, gobsmacked. This man never ate a vegetable in his life. When Pepper last
warned him about Office flu vaccinations, Tony had poured himself a larger shot of alcohol, to 'stave off infection', and now he was demanding that she actually wear a surgical mask.

*Oh god, the boss is turning into Howard Hughes.* Pepper thought, listing the comparisons in her head. *Rich, eccentric, aeronautic engineer, brilliant, made fantastic flying machines, and now getting germ obsessed.* "That's... rude." She stammered out, taken by surprise.

"Well, as to those eight thousand things, the Expo is my primary point of concern."

"The Expo is your ego gone crazy."

Tony was already onto the net thing. "Hey! Did you see this?" Tony picked up the picture frame, which had a large framed relief of Iron Man in profile. "Now that's art!" He beamed. "I'm putting this up right now!"

He carried it over to the wetbar and promptly swept everything off the counter with one arm.

Pepper stared at him. He was losing it. "Tony, Stark Industries is in complete disarray! I need you to focus on-"

"The stock is great! Never been higher!"

"From a managerial standpoint, but from a financial- Tony! Stop this! And don't take down the- Oh No You Don't!"

Too late. Tony had taken down the last item in his modern art collection, admittedly, not having a clue who had painted it anyway, and jumped up onto the now empty counter, neatly putting the Iron Man picture up in it's place.

Pepper gave up and moved back to he main point. "Okay, fine, but listen to me. We have already given contracts to the Windfarm people, and to the-"

Tony spoke over her. "Don't say Windfarm, I'm feeling gassy now."

"-which was your idea by the way-"

"Everything is my idea-" Tony was out of patience with this conversation. He had weeks to live at most, he didn't want to spend it arguing with Pepper over financial stuff that mean little to him and interested him not at all. Suddenly it dawned on him why she was so panicked. Stane was no longer handling this stuff and now everyone was attacking her with it. "Pepper, this stuff is all boring. It's boring and I don't want to do it, so you're going to."

"I have been trying to-"

"Stop trying and do it."

"Tony, that is what I am telling you-"

"I mean actually do it. Physically do it. Yourself. You run the company."

Pepper wasn't getting it. "I'm trying to run the company, and you are not making it any-"

If he had dared touch her, he would have clapped a hand over her mouth by now. In another time and place, Tony would have found this funny. "You're not listening to me!" He shouted. "I'm trying-"
"You're not listening to me!"

"-to make you CEO!"

And both of them... stopped. Pepper was frozen, halfway between a laugh and a face slap. Her jaw was on the floor, her eyes had bulged... Pepper had lost her legendary knack for taking things in stride only three times before. Lo behold, here was time number four, as the redhead was seemingly trapped in total brain-lock at the news.

Tony signalled Butterfingers, who picked up a platter with a chilled champagne bottle in a sterling silver bucket and two flutes. The procedural changes had also gone through. For all intents and purposes, she was already running the company and didn't know it. The celebratory drinks had been sitting in Tony's fridge for almost two weeks while the paperwork went through, and Tony had yet to find the right moment to inform Pepper that she had been promoted.

Tony took her in. "Breathe." He told her gently.

Pepper did so.

Pepper leaned forward. There was a smell she couldn't identify on Tony's breath. After this long Pepper could tell by his breath alone, which particular poison he'd been guzzling, but this was new. "Have you been drinking?"

"No." Tony promised. "I hereby, irrevocably, name you Chairman and CEO of Stark Industries."

Pepper had stopped being surprised and now looked scared. She had been making a check-list of things the boss was doing that worried her. This had gone straight to the top of the list. This was more than eccentricity, or even selfishness. This was... something different. Something permanent. Something was wrong.

While Pepper slowly processed, Tony kept talking. "I have actually given this a lot of thought. I thought there may be legal obstacles, but it turns out that the company is privately owned by my family, and since I'm the last Stark around, I can decide who gets to run the company. It's all pretty much my choice."

Was it simply that he trusted her? After Stane, Tony had not appointed another CEO, because there was simply nobody left in the company that he trusted. Except her.

And she'd given Rhodey the pass-code to the workshop.

She smacked that thought away firmly. She'd done that for Tony. To take care of him. now he was asking her to take care of his family business as well. She couldn't let him down. Not when he'd given her this.

"It took a lot to decide who the right person would be." Tony popped the cork on the bottle and poured two glasses. "And then I realized: It was you. It's always been you."

That thought emboldened her, and she reflexively took the champagne flute that he gave her. She was still staring at him, stunned, until finally Tony clinked their glasses together himself. "Congratulations."

*What am I going to tell Happy?* Pepper thought. *Will he call me ma'am now?*

She giggled slightly at the thought. "I... I don't know what to think."
Tony grinned and recited his personal motto. "Don't think. Drink!"

Pepper did so.

Ivan could always tell who the locals were in this street. The ones that didn't mind waiting for things were from this neighbourhood. In this part of Moscow, trained soldiers didn't like to wait around. It was too dangerous for them. Those who lived further out in the country or in the more expensive part of town did not like the cold. All those in between, were simply waiting.

The last two decades had been very confusing for the clandestine operatives in the former Soviet countries. When the KGB collapsed, a lot of its operatives simply went silent. Most of the overseas spies had paying work as part of their cover; and let their lives go on with only one payroll.

Some were identified and arrested. Some vanished into the woodwork and found new masters. Some of them kept in touch, looking for their moment to take revenge or make their fortune.

Ivan had only three names that were not confirmed captured or deceased. After the Americans had expelled his father, the money had dried up and Ivan was forced to go elsewhere to gain the money needed. Such terrible things they had asked of him. When he had nobly refused to obey, they sent him to Siberia as punishment.

While there, he had the nobility, then the pride, then the weakness beaten out of him by the hardest of Russian criminals, and then the weather, and then the guards, just to make sure he got the message.

Vanko had survived far worse than waiting on the streets of Moscow for a few hours; even in winter.

Finding Stark had been the easiest thing in the world. The American couldn't not stop himself from announcing to anyone who could hear or see that he was traveling around the world non-stop.

Vanko had long decided that this would have to be a very public, very daring strike. A one man shock and awe campaign. Doing so in front of all Stark's kind, to say nothing of the world's cameras would do that nicely. Monaco was the convenient and most public venue in the near future.

The problem was getting over there. There would be all kids of security to protect Stark and the other celebrities, to say nothing of the millions of dollars in winnings, expensive cars, equipment, food and liquor, jewelery...

Getting in as a guest was impossible. Vanko was going to stand out anywhere you put him.

And all that came after actually getting him out of Russia. Travelling internationally was a much more difficult task than it had been when Vanko was last allowed to leave his home country. Doing so on a fake ID was near impossible now. They either had to be genuine credentials with a new name, or very good fakes. His real name was flagged by Interpol and most government customs in the western world. Going as himself was out of the question.

His mysterious benefactor had sent a discreet inquiry as to whether or not Vanko needed help. Vanko let the message go unanswered for a time; running down his old contacts.

The fact was, he was damaged goods. Nobody wanted to associate with him, and those who might be tempted for old times sake saw the destination, and knew who Vanko was after. Those who did not fear the retribution of the Americans feared at least the retribution of Iron Man himself.
Finally, and with great reluctance, Vanko responded to his new pseudo-master and asked for papers that would get him there.

They were ready within the hour. Ivan was stunned at the speed in which they were completed. Either his new contacts had either been listening in while he detailed to his old friends what he needed, or they were simply that good.

But how did they get the picture on the fake passport? Vanko hadn't posed for any pictures since being put in jail; and he looked a lot different then.

After giving the matter some thought, Vanko decided he didn't care. He was on his way to the Monaco Speedway, passport and plane ticket waiting.

There were even special Diplomatic Envoy papers to ensure that none of his equipment or luggage would be inspected when he got on or off the plane.

It was going to be one hell of a show.

__________________________________________________________________________

Being Iron Man meant that Tony had to keep in shape. Gaining weight meant that the suit had to be redesigned. Losing weight made the protection of it's Armor meaningless.

Tony had been slugging down protein drinks. The palladium poisoning was eating away at his appetite, and he was losing weight fast.

Tony woke up and felt hung-over. He grabbed the flask of chlorophyll, swallowed a mouthful of the green muck and his stomach had instantly rebelled. He barely made it to the bathroom before heaving up everything he'd eaten since the last time. He was getting worse and he knew it.

Taking tiny sips of ice-water, Tony managed to settle his stomach enough to let him handle the chlorophyll, which fought down the symptoms enough to let him eat breakfast.

Tony changed into sweats went into the Gym. When reworking his workshop downstairs; he had split the huge living room into a living room with ocean-front views, and a gym with more equipment than most professional gyms had available. Weights in all sizes, exercise machines of all kinds, even a full regulation style boxing ring; for fighting styles.

Hogan, as his bodyguard, was more than willing to help Tony train as a fighter. Iron Man, for all his power, had little in the way of technique.

The fact that Pepper and Happy arrived together made him feel sick again. Pepper thought she was being discreet, but he'd noticed them holding hands on the way into the room. The fact that Hogan was clearly wearing the same clothes as the night before made him actually nauseous.

He pointed at Happy the second they walked in. "You! In the ring! Right now!"

Pepper frowned at him. "And good morning to you too, Mr Stark. Why yes, we're fine, how are you?"

Hogan, however, accepted the order graciously. "Let me get changed."

As he left the room, he realized Pepper seemed different too. The head-cold was apparently past. She seemed a lot calmer about her job. She was still buzzing when she'd left the night before.

Well it's nice that Happy can put her at ease. Tony snarked to himself, and shook that thought
away. He'd made the offer to Pepper once, she said no. He wanted her to be happy with someone; and he wasn't going to be around much longer anyway...

Tony got his gloves on, glancing over his shoulder at her as she tapped away on her PDA. Then he realised what was different about her and froze. "Pepper... are you wearing flats?"

Pepper flushed. "No."

Tony let out a high pitched and very audible gasp. "You are."

"I'm not."

"Two inch heels, for you, are flats."

Happy came back in, workout clothes on, and gloves and helmet ready. "Shall we?"

Tony stepped into the ring, ducking under the ropes. Happy did the same, and the two of them squared off. They started out with jabs and feints, feeling each other out.

"You got her out of those stilettos. I've been trying to do that for years. What happened, Happy? You get tired of the fact that she's roughly three feet taller than you?"

Happy slugged Tony in the jaw. Stark went down on his butt, and climbed back up again, somewhat awkwardly. Tony turned away just enough to keep the sudden blast of agony that ripped through his torso hidden.

"Two and a half feet." The ex-boxer responded before Tony could stand up.

Pepper didn't even look up form her PDA. "Happy, don't beat up the boss."

Tony had the decency to feel slightly embarrassed as Hogan grinned. "I thought you were the boss now, Pep."

"The paperwork hasn't been finalized yet. The notary is on the way here."

Hogan grinned as Tony came up swinging. The fight was a little nastier than usual. Tony told himself that he was putting a little more heat into his punches because he had to keep himself in shape. The idea that he was showing off for Pepper had nothing to do with it. Hogan had been a boxer before working for Tony, and was wearing pads across his chest and stomach for Tony to practice on. He took every hit without blinking.

After several minutes, the doorbell rang and Pepper went to answer it.

"So, you and Pepper huh?" Tony said as soon as she'd left the room.

"That a problem?" Happy countered.

"Not at all. If you ever want to take her to Rio, then Vegas, then Maui, then Switzerland, I could float you a loan of your next twenty years pay." Stark jabbed.

It was a cheap shot, bringing up money. Pepper worked for, worked with, and hung around with billionaires her entire working life. Happy wasn't rich and he knew it.

"Pep sees through things like money, boss. She hangs around billionaires so often it means nothing to her. I would have thought you'd know that about her by now." Happy jabbed back.
"The Notary's here!" Pepper called, unknowingly just in time, and led her in.

Happy glanced over and actually put his gloves down.

Tony looked back and noticed the arrival of an extremely well put-together redhead, with a clipboard full of papers under her arm. The white blouse hugged her tightly in all the right places, and the black trousers made her legs look eleven feet long.

"What's your name, girlie?" Tony called.

She took the 'girlie' hit without so much as blinking. "Natalie Rushman." She answered, handing over the clipboard to Pepper.

Tony was staring until Happy jabbed the back of his head. Pepper smirked and took the paperwork, filling out her own details.

Tony turned back to Happy, a little irritated. He just grinned. "Lesson one, never take your eyes off-"

Tony slugged him in the face and then brought his elbow up to get him in the chin.

Happy reeled back. "What the hell was that?"

"It's called mixed martial arts. It's new." Tony told him.

"It's called dirty boxing, and it's been around a long time." Happy shot back.

Pepper had finished her part. "Tony, if you pay attention for two minutes, I promise that I'll never ask you to give me your company ever again."

Tony grinned and gestured to Rushman. "Front and Centre."

Rushman came over to the ring, and with the grace of liquid steel; slipped off her heels and slid under the ropes, long and lean.

Watching the woman flow under the ropes was a near-religious experience. Tony actually felt as though she had come in in slow motion. Her hair was a much darker red than Pepper's, her curves more pronounced, her face a little rounder...

Tony took a long pull off the sports bottle full of chlorophyll and snapped himself out of it. Stop comparing her to Pepper. And stop thinking about sex. If a handshake, let alone first base, could kill you...

If he had been thinking clearer, he would have noticed her dissecting him with her own smoky gaze in return.

He signalled Happy. "Give her a quick lesson, will ya? Be right back."

Happy came over and took Rushman in himself. "So, you box before?"

She smiled slightly. "Oh yes."

"What? Like Tae-Bo? Booty Boot Camp?" It wasn't sexism, it was simply that Stark Industries Fitness Program made such things cheaper for female employees, by order of Tony Stark himself. That and the fact that fad workouts were fairly common in the gyms Happy worked in. He had heard them all.
Tony sat himself down next to Pepper and started signing things. "Well, she's hired. What do you think?"

"I think she is from legal, and she is potentially a very expensive sexual harassment lawsuit if you don't stop ogling her."

Tony grinned. "I need a new PA."

"Yes and I have a number of excellent candidates waiting-"

"Natalie? How do you spell your last name." Tony called.

Natalie was still balancing herself on the boxing ring mats, feeling it out. "R-U-S-H-M-A-N."

Tony tapped it out on his smart-glass table, an innovation he'd come up with after his I-Pad came in the mail. Natalie's personnel file came up. Idly, Tony wondered why he'd never found her before.


"Nobody speaks Latin. It's a dead language." Pepper floundered.

Tony skipped right past the professional qualifications when he saw her portfolio had pictures. Modeling pictures. *Lingerie* modeling pictures.

Pepper looked over his shoulder and saw a picture of Ms Rushman pouting provocatively at the camera, and knew she'd lost this fight. Nevertheless, she felt the need to keep the boss way from this particular woman. "Tony, you can not just..."

Tony grinned. She was all but made for him. "She modeled in Tokyo. You never modelled in Tokyo."

Natalie was openly looking over her shoulder at him. Happy decided to get her attention by giving her a light jab.

Before he could make contact, the curvy woman had caught his glove in one hand, somehow turned upside down, had her knees around his head and put him on the mats before anyone was aware she was moving.

WHAM!

"HAPPY!" Pepper squawked.

Tony burst out laughing before he could stop himself. "Knock-out!"

Rushman had the ex-boxer in a flawless scissor-hold until Happy slapped the mat reflexively; the traditional signal at conceding the match. She released him easily and was upright again, seeming a little embarrassed at the attention.

Happy stood. "I slipped."

"Looks like a TKO to me." Stark beamed as he hit the bell, more pleased at the sight of a woman knocking Happy to the mat than he should have been. *My redhead can beat your redhead. And you.* He thought childishly.
The sight of Pepper fussing over Happy as he got up made the smirk drop a little.

Rushman, who had not so much as a hair out of place; flowed out between the ropes gracefully, and put her shoes back on. "Beginners luck." She picked up the papers again. "I need your impression."

"You have quiet reserve, under a veneer of very attrac-"

"I refer to your thumb-print." Rushman held open the folder, ink-pad included. Tony dutifully pressed his thumbprint to the page, and signed his name; she witnessed it and signed it herself.

Pepper finished fussing over Happy and came over quickly, almost but not quite putting herself between Stark and Rushman. "So, how are we doing here?"

"All done." Tony promised, crossing the final 't's' "It's official, you're the boss."

Pepper smiled, despite herself.

Rushman closed the folder professionally. "Will that be all, Mr Stark?"

The line was so Pepper-like that Tony was about to give her the job right there, but Pepper spoke first. "Yes, that'll be all, Ms Rushman, thank you."

"Thank you, Mr Stark." Rushman said politely, sent a nod to Pepper and Happy, the latter still seeing stars, and made her way out.

Tony grinned. "I want one."

"No." Pepper drawled patiently.

Tony looked after Rushman and then back to Pepper. "Please?"

"No."

"Oh, so it's going to be like that is it? Now that I made you the boss?"

Happy grinned from the ring. "I think that's 'now that I made you the boss... ma'am.'"

Stark tossed his sports bottle aside and climbed back into the ring. "Round Two."

Pepper obligingly hit the bell for them.
Once a year, the streets of Monte Carlo were transformed into a Formula One racetrack. Once a year the eyes of car enthusiasts, punters, racers, driver and spectators flooded the streets of Monaco for the show. The narrow streets and tight corners made for a gripping; sometimes deadly show of pure driving prowess; the most powerful engines fatal on the hairpin turns.

The narrow roads made overtaking difficult. Nelson Piquet, former Formula One World Champion, likened the event to running a bicycle through your living room.

The Grand Prix was one of the most difficult in the world, and so the stakes were incredibly high. Where money went, society types followed and the Monaco weekend had become a high society bash as well as one of the most anticipated events on the racing calendar.

Add to the fact that Stark Industries was entering it's own race-car, hand built and tuned by Tony Stark himself, and all eyes were on the Man himself as he and his troupe entered the pre-race parties.

"Whatever happens in the next two minutes; just go with it." Tony told Pepper as they entered.

Pepper tensed. The last time he had said that; she had to babysit a Russian model's stepson while Tony made plans with his mother, and a French stewardess; neither of whom spoke English.

But this time was worse, as Pepper met Tony's new Personal Assistant.

"Mr Stark, how was your flight?" Rushman asked.

"It was great." Stark enthused.

Natalie Rushman was apparently taking to her new job well, having everything that required his attention lined up. "Your pilot sends his thanks for the room you had booked; your own suite is prepared as per your requests, as are the rooms you had picked for Happy and Pepper; paperwork has already been seen to and signed."

"By who?" Tony asked in surprise.

"By you; in a manner of speaking." Rushman returned.

Tony grinned at a glaring Pepper. "Why didn't you ever learn to fake my signature?"

"-And we have a photographer from AP here." Rushman finished.

The photographer moved in on cue to snap a hot of Strak with his new CEO. Tony grinned, pleased and Pepper plastered a similar smile on her face; not for the first time. Tony leaned in. "Don't flare your nostrils like that when you pretend to smile."

"You are unbelievable." Pepper snarled through her perfect smile. "What was that about rooms you picked for me and Happy?"

Tony kept smiling for the cameras. "I got you guys three rooms, one each with a hot tub room in between. Why? Is that a problem?"

Pepper gritted her teeth under her smile. "Un. Be. Lieveable."
The camera flashed while they argued and Natalie quickly clamped a hand on his shoulder and hustled him away; moving Stark forward. "Your suite is already booked and checked; refreshments and linens arranged per your requests, your bags are waiting there; and Your table is ready sir."

"Thank you Natalie; and You look great." Tony said, unabashedly staring at her.

Rushman took the open leering in perfect stride, almost posing for him as she led the way. "Why thank you."

"But that's thoroughly unprofessional." Tony continued without pause. "Is this us?" Tony asked.

"It can be." Rushman said without hesitation.

Tony smirked. He liked this girl. "Make it us."

Rushman took the reserved sign off the table without hesitation and tore it in two.

Pepper studied Natalie out of the corner of her eye. The woman had taken to the job like a duck to water. Pepper had floundered when she first started, because she didn't understand the kind of clout that the Stark name brought in places like restaurants and hotels. If Tony had asked her whose table it was, she would have directed him to his actual table.

Whoever Natalie Rushman was, she had taken to 'power' far too quickly. Whoever she was, she had tasted authority before.

But why then, was she so laid-back with Tony? Anyone who had that kind of natural authority would never tolerate Tony's open advances and/or flirting. Getting called 'girlie' and being hit on mid-sentence was part of the life when working with Tony Stark, but Rushman was not only unfazed, she wasn't even bothered by it.

Pepper shook it off. Her job had expanded exponentially since Obidiah had died, and now that she had the title officially, she had to figure out how to ignore things that weren't her problem. Or her business any more. The care and feeding of Tony Stark was no longer her job description. The personal life of Tony Stark was not her concern.

Expect that it was. Except that it wasn't.

Except that she was still very concerned about Tony's private life.

Pepper fought that thought down. Her job kept her too busy. She had already canceled on happy twice this week; and she sometimes wondered if that's what Tony had in mind. It was Rushman's job to corral the brat billionaire and it was Rushman's job to fend off the sharks.

Tony took in this little inner war as it played out on her face and put on his most calming expression. "You look tense Pepper. Would you like a massage. I bet Natalie knows how to give massages. If not, I have two or three Swedish-"

"Anthony?" A smarmy voice called from behind them at the bar.

Tony winced. "My least favorite person on earth!" He called back cheerfully.

Hammer, tool that he was, chuckled like it was a pet nickname Tony had. "Great to see you. You aren't the only rich guy with a car in the race today. Oh, have you met..."

The blonde turned around and Pepper fought to keep a real smile in check this time. Hammer was
apparently still going with his campaign to make himself a Tony Stark Clone. "Christine Everheart."

Tony froze his face and tried not to look Everheart in the eye. He remembered her this time. Of course he did. She was the one that outed him as a superhero. Not that he needed much convincing of course.

"She's doing a big spread on me for Vanity Fair." Hammer said, needling Tony.

"Well, she did quite a spread on Tony last year." Pepper said blandly. There was barely the slightest trace of sarcasm or smugness in her voice; but Tony could hear it; clear as a bell.

Tony could not resist making a little plainer for Hammer's benefit. "And she wrote a story too." He added. "I was very impressed."

A series of uncomfortable or sarcastic looks passed between Everheart, Potts and Stark; while Hammer took several seconds to catch up.

The rumors had flown about Everheart and Tony, but they had died quickly. There was little interest in Stark's latest notch on the bedpost. The fact that she had gone after him at the infamous I Am Iron Man Press Conference had revived them for a few days, but there was far bigger story to talk about then.

Hammer broke the odd stalemate. "FYI," He said to Everheart. "Big story of the week; meet the new CEO of Stark Industries."

Everheart seemed genuinely pleased. "I heard, Congratulations."

Pepper was a little taken aback at Everheart's graciousness. "Thank you."

"My editor will kill me if I don't get a comment for our 'Women in Power' section."

"Oh." Pepper said, smile still in place. "Sure, of course. But right now, I have calls to make and things..."

"Don't leave me alone with them." Tony said instantly.

"So if you'll excuse me..." Pepper bowed out graciously and vanished into the crowd.

Hammer signaled a few photographers and put an arm around Tony, who tried several times to extricate himself from Hammer. He caught a whiff of Hammer's aftershave and his stomach started rolling.

"So, while I've got you here Tony," Everheart said as they half-posed for the cameras. Her familiar recorder was out and running. "This is the first time you two have met since the Senate..."

"Since he got his contract revoked, yes; that is gawdawful aftershave..." Tony jumped in. "Yeah, how about that?"

Hammer's smile dropped. How the hell did Stark know about that already? "It's not revoked, it's on hold."

"Oh, on hold." Stark nodded, making his way toward the stairs out of the dining hall. "What's the difference between on hold and cancelled?"

Everheart swung the recorder back to Hammer, smelling blood. "Yes, what is the difference?"
Hammer fought to regain the conversation, trying to steer the three of them towards a table. "Actually, I'm looking in new directions now. I was hoping to present something at your Expo."

Tony nodded and moved past the open seat Hammer gestured him to, fighting to keep the nausea from his face. "Well, if it works, I will personally make sure you get a slot. There's your story Christine, Hammer needs a slot."

Hammer chuckled like that was some great funny joke and Tony was gone up the stairs.

Tony had all but sprinted away from Everheart and Hammer, and made it to his suite just in time to throw up again.

Hands shaking, he wiped his face and stood up, only to have his legs give out. He sat on the tile for a little while, letting his head clear. He had experienced too many hangovers to let this bow him. Ordinarily he would get up from this; and go straight back out the start partying again. Scrubbing his face clear, Tony finally stood up an fought down some water. He kept sipping till his hands stopped shaking.

He pulled out the little box and jabbed himself again. Fire raced up his arm from the pinprick. Tony winced and gave the drop of his blood a betrayed look.

**Blood Toxicity: 64%**

Tony shook off the numb feeling in his gut. It didn't matter. He shouldn't be alive. He should have died forty ways by now. He had made peace with it. He wasn't scared.

Oh really? A traitorous little voice in his head responded. *Then why are you fighting it? Why are you slugging down the chlorophyll by the pint? Why is Pepper now carrying a surgical mask in her briefcase? Why do you have the hand wipes to keep you healthy? Why are you so obsessed with making the Expo work, a legacy that the US Government won't claim after you're dead. You can tell yourself that you're finished, but you aren't done yet. You can act like your not scared, but you are.*

Tony smacked that thought down. The Expo was running. He didn't need to worry about that. The Chlorophyll was to counter the symptoms. He wasn't going to rot away. Killed by a handshake? A common head cold murders Tony Iron Man Stark? No way in hell was that going to happen. He wasn't going to die in agony. He wasn't going to be drugged out of his skin in a hospice somewhere. No chance. No way.

Stupid idea Tony. Go now, tell Pepper the truth; then you get help for the hole slowly rotting its way through your chest. *You do not act like a teenager and get yourself killed because you don't want to fight any more. That's what you do. That's how you save your life, and how you get Pepper back.*

But on the other hand... nah.

He looked at himself in the mirror. "Any more bright ideas?"

Iron Man deserved a Viking Funeral. Spectacular and explosive, just like his life.

After all, without the chance of a massive explosion, you're just watching a bunch of race-cars chasing each other in a circle.

Iron Man deserved a Viking Funeral.
Everheart wasn't sorry she had taken the job exactly, it was just that there was nothing new here. Stark had fed her a hot tip that Hammer was out with the US Military, but Hammer was quickly blocking all her questions on that one.

"Tony and I are pals. We aren't rivals really." Hammer assured her and her notebook. "I love the man and he loves me. Him being out of the weapons trade just makes more-"

Inwardly, Everheart knew what he was doing. Stark had been the primary supplier of weapons in America. Though she had herself ambushed him, accused him of being a War Profiteer, she could recognize the fact that he was in so much demand because he was good at it. He was more than good, he was gifted.

Hammer was trying to make himself Tony Stark's clone. Just as good, only cheaper and still in the weapons game to begin with.

Those that knew Tony Stark were aware that there was more to it than simply being a great weapons designer. Stark was a celebrity. Stark was larger than life. When he entered a room, every eye went to him. Hammer was desperate to match that. Somehow he'd got it into his head that to be as good as Tony Stark, you had to be Tony Stark.

And he was one of a kind.

"-there are tremendous opportunities at Hammer Industries now with-" Hammer suddenly noticed that she was looking past him, and turned around.

On one of the myriad of television screens, Tony was wearing a blue racing suit, with the Stark logo on it, and was waving to the cameras in the Pit Lanes. His driver looked madder than all hell, but got out of the car anyway as Tony turned to face the Press. "What's the point of owning an expensive race-car if you're not gonna drive it yourself?"

"Is... Is he driving? In the Grand Prix?" Hammer asked in disbelief.

"I have to make a call." Everheart said as Stark's name replaced his driver's on the lineup.

"Wait wait wait! Can you just read me what you've written th-"

"Be right back!" Everheart called over her shoulder.

Swearing under his breath, Hammer downed the rest of his drink. Across the room he saw Pepper at a bit of a loss at the situation. "Natalie!" She hollered.

Hammer, watching from across the room, had a clear view of the room, and still had no idea where Rushman had materialized from, suddenly appearing at Pepper's side. "Ma'am?"

"What is he doing?"

"I don't know, he didn't say anything about-"

"We have to do something."

"How can I help?"

Pepper thought for a moment. "Go get Happy. I need Happy."

Rushman vanished into the room within seconds. Pepper was glued to the screens, as was everyone
else. Hammer moved smoothly into place next to Pepper. "You didn't know?"

Pepper glanced over and dismissed him instantly.

Hammer nodded, ever so sympathetic. "It's not the first time he's acted this way, Potts. Sooner or later everyone's going to get as sick of it as you are."

"Get lost, Hammer."

"Potts, everyone on Wall Street knows you're the responsible one, but he's the brains of the operation. You're not a CEO, you're a PA. A damned good one, but you can't handle a wild horse like Tony. You try, you'll get tossed. Stark acting like this doesn't demonstrate a lot of good judgement. If he's stupid enough to do this for kicks, what will they think of him putting you in charge? Cloak and Dagger is the rule at this level. You're not Stane. Everyone on Wall Street knows this, and they're already drawing up plans to devour you whole. And when they do, you'll take down Stark Industries with you."

His speech had made the desired point. Pepper was looking borderline terrified.

Hammer pushed his glasses up his nose. "I always liked you, Pepper. I hope Stark lives through this. If he kills himself on the track, there'll be nobody to save you when the wolves come to tear you apart."

Pepper bunched her fists, and Hammer withdrew to the bar before he could get his face punched in.

He moved to the bar and ordered a glass of the finest champagne that Monte Carlo had to offer. Stark was going to smear himself all over a barricade; and Hammer was going to get to see the whole thing, not to mention instant replay.

Time For The Show.

Vanko swore fluently when Stark had left the party. Making a strike, surrounded by all those high society types? A room full of reporters would give him the audience he needed. The small room would make his entrance all the more intimidating.

And then Stark had left the party. Vanko had found him heading downstairs. The opportunity was too good to miss, and he followed, until he saw what Stark was wearing.

A racing suit. bright blue, with the Stark logo all over it.

Vanko was surprised. Surely he would have noticed Stark's name on the Lineup.

He made himself invisible among the Pit Crew. The support teams of these race-cars were big enough, and had all traveled internationally to be here. One more face, even with a mouthful of gold plated teeth and covered in prison tattoos, did not draw much attention.

Watching Stark push his driver out of the car, and hearing some of the elegant French and Japanese curses that driver had thrown in his face was fun, and Vanko knew that he had a much more visible moment than the party.

He picked a large Pit Crew member, tapped him on the shoulder and wordlessly gestured the large man to follow him. They moved off the track, away from other people, and Vanko calmly turned around a put a fist into the man's throat. A move he had learned in Siberia. The huge man dropped. His throat spasmed from the blow, and he could not get air enough to call for help.
Vanko leaned down as he writhed, clutching at his throat. "I am sorry for this. We have never met. I bear no grudge. But I need what you have." He put a hand on his victim's shoulder gently. "You are not the first man I have seen killed, for naught but the clothes on his back."

The explanation was mostly for his own conscience. He doubted this man spoke Russian. He brought his other hand up and calmly broke the man's neck. Quick and painless. A moment passed while Vanko respectfully let the body stop spasming. He took no pleasure in this killing. He had to kill before; to save his own life, or to keep other prisoners away. If he had gone looking for a locker he may have been discovered, and it was unlikely that he would be able to come across a jumpsuit that fit him at random. He had found someone his size, and he took advantage of it.

Vanko started removing the man's orange jumpsuit.

Stark pulled the wind visor down over his eyes. The lights flashed red, then green, and Stark floored it. The racetrack was very narrow, with many hairpin turns. As such, pole position at the start of the race was vitally important. Stark wasn't at the head of the pack, but was by no means at the back.

Stark was now in third place, most of the pack behind him; the road narrow enough that he didn't have to worry about anyone getting up close.

A part of him knew that he was feeding too much speed into the turns, locking the steering wheel too far. He was being reckless. He was moving at velocities that did not forgive recklessness.

What's the alternative? Tony asked himself. A handshake gives me a virus? Or a tight turn gives me a massive explosion.

He had moved a lot faster than this. He had done things a lot more dangerous. But he was wearing unbreakable armor then. For all the safety features built into these machines, metal got real pliable once you put it up to speed, and against a concrete wall.

Pepper was glued to the screens, feeling her palms burn as she dug her own fingernails in with each hair-raising turn.

Pepper sucked in a breath and looked away as he cut one corner too close...

...And Happy was standing in the doorway. The huge silver briefcase, which Tony had dubbed 'The Football' was handcuffed to his wrist; and he had that look on pure readiness on his face. Pepper felt better for it. She just didn't know what to do. The last time she didn't know what to do; the Boss was in Afghanistan, and Happy had taken care of her then too. "What do we do?" She demanded.

Happy took in the screens. "He knows the car better than anyone. He built it. He knows the racetrack as well as anyone who follows the race. What he doesn't have is a support team. His pit crew all speak Japanese. He had them picked specifically for this race, and his driver." He bit his lip. "If we can get to the Stark Pit Crew, we can reach him over the radio, we can tell him everything. Every turn, every other competitor..."

"Okay, let's do that then."

Happy led the way toward the car-park. "Faster to go around the outside of the track." He said. "Pepper... we won't be out there with him. He's currently in the Monaco race. There's only so much you can do without being in the car with him."
"I know." Pepper said. "But I have to. Even if it's not much, it has to be me. It's always been me."

Happy reacted to that, and Pepper wished she could take it back, but by then they were at the car.

The St Devote corner was the first hurdle. Tony had taken it way too fast and somehow made the turn, though he'd given them time to get closer.

He'd accelerated through the Monte Carlo Casino run, gaining ground on the rest of the field. Only one or two drivers ahead of him, the rest behind. He took the Fairmont Hotel hairpin with ease, almost drifting the car around the turn.

His car had been altered to have much better down-force, and Tony blasted his way through the tunnel. The tunnel would be the wrong place for a crash anyway. A lot of drivers had trouble going from darkness to light at those speeds without wiping out. Stark couldn't let that happen to him. The tunnel would become a narrow underground death-tube for everyone who followed him; which was most of the pack.

After the tunnel there was a few turns, and after that a chicane; it would be one of the few places that one car could get around another. A very tricky set of extreme turns. plenty of professional drivers had wiped out there.

"How much longer?" Pepper asked from the backseat.

Hogan was weaving his way around the outside of the track, cutting wider around streets full of people and parked cars. "Another few minutes." Hogan called back. "The streets are pretty narrow. There are thousands of people here..."

Pepper grit her teeth. "I... Happy, I don't know if I can wait that long."

Happy took that in. "Okay. Hang on." He cut the wheel right and floored the Audi and smashed through the gate, and suddenly Pepper felt the walls closing in on her. The street had turned really narrow, and Pepper realized that they were on the racetrack. "Happy!"

"You said you were in a hurry!" Happy called over his shoulder. "I think we can make the Stark Pit Stop before the race-cars reach us!"

"We better! I don't wanna get rear-ended by a Formula One car!" Pepper screeched.

"Well no problem there." Happy shouted back over the rushing noise. "We're going the other way. They'll be coming straight at us head on!"

Tony floored the accelerator. The engine groaned in response, doing what it had been built, piece by piece, to do. The walls around his race-car blurred from the velocity. Tony didn't even know exactly where they were. It was glorious, it was exhilarating. It was nothing compared to being Iron Man.

Tony howled with the adrenaline as the pain in his chest made his vision blur. He was practically blind as he fed more power still into the engine, demanding more speed.

His eyes cleared just enough to see the concrete jumped toward him. He spun the wheel and locked it to the hard left. He wasn't even sure if he was turning it the right way.

He was. The road was open again before him, and Tony spun the wheel back, barely clearing both
sides of the turn. His hands were shaking on the wheel, he was fighting for breath, he couldn't stop the way his vision blurred.

He shifted gears and pushed the race-car faster, willing more speed from the engines he had designed, tempting, almost daring the fates to end him; quickly and gloriously. This would be a good death. A Viking Funeral. Exactly the way Tony Stark would go.

Vanko picked his moment. The first two race-cars were on their way. For all the attention that Tony Stark had gotten with his last minute antics, the racers were following the race. Most of the cameras were on the Race Leader.

Vanko took a breath, steeled himself. The kind of mental preparation a man needed when faced with destiny. He stepped out of the Pit, over the barricades, onto the track.

He could hear the volume of the voices on the radio intensify. He was directly in the path of the oncoming Race leader; maybe fifteen seconds from being killed. More than enough time to yank his jumpsuit open, revealing the glowing circle mounted over his chest.

Up his sleeves, the whips slipped into position in his hands, and they came alive, crackling with Arc Reactor electricity. Twin glowing ropes of pure deathly white. The electricity flashed about him; making his dreadlocks flare to life, and his jumpsuit burst into flames, revealing the grid-work of his near exo-suit beneath.

Vanko did not hurry. He did not need to. There was plenty of time for people to get a good look at him as he calmly stared down the manned rockets that came toward him.

The Race Leader screamed around the corner. On the tight road there was no way to avoid Vanko; the blind turn made it impossible to slow down.

Vanko stared it down like a matador, and cracked his whip with a toothy grin.

From the furl of the whip came a shock-wave of electrical power. For a fraction of a second, everything was bleached out by the sound of lighting striking the earth.

The shock-wave hit the lead car and sliced into it like a hot knife through melted butter. nobody could follow the movement properly. Lightning struck where Vanko demanded, and the race-car was suddenly in two perfect halves, their momentum tossing the racer and his wreckage into the sky.

Pepper and Happy were screaming around hairpin turns, Pepper convinced that with every turn they would come face to face with an oncoming Race-car. Happy was in his element, spinning the wheel back and forth.

Then the radio; set to the race, started yammering something in a much higher pitch. Pepper leaned forward suddenly, listening. "WAIT! Oh god!"

"What is it?" Happy demanded. "I don't speak French."

"Trouble on the track." She croaked. "Get the Football ready!"

"That bad huh?"

Pepper fought to keep his arm still as he spun the wheel. The handcuffed case was banging against
them both as she tried to get it loose. "Where's the key?"

"In my pants pocket."

Without hesitation, Pepper leaned over the back of the seat and started feeling for Happy's waist. "Watch the road!"

Vanko kept moving, letting everyone get a good look. The second car came running; and Vanko cracked the other whip. Lighting and thunder in the same second, and this car was neatly sliced through the front axle, the car having enough momentum to flip clean over Vanko and explode as it hit the ground behind him.

Vanko still didn't break stride. people were screaming, smoke and fire erupting behind him...

And Stark came rushing around the corner, oblivious to the destruction in front of him.

Vanko felt the electricity pouring through his limbs, literally flying from his fingers, and he brought the lightning down again, quick as a striking rattlesnake.

The front half of Stark's race-car was smashed into the road, the rest flipped over. Vanko swiped up with the other whip and severed the back half of the car.

The cab went sliding, upside down along the road until it reached a wall and slammed to a halt.

Vanko moved in for the kill as he struck, over and over, slicing off whole hunks of the car, leaving the drivers seat for last.

He flipped the last hunk of car over...

The driver's seat was empty.

Stark suddenly emerged from the smoke with a hunk of debris in his hands, and brought it down on the Russian's back, right between the shoulder-blades. It clanged against the framework that kept his arms steady under the power of the whips. Vanko dialed down the power a few levels and flashed the whip up again, the shock-wave sending Stark flying back against the opposite barricade.

The whip came over and down again, Tony rolled frantically to the left, then the right as the whips carved glowing lines a foot deep into the track. He rolled, tried to get to his feet, when Vanko brought both whips together; lightning flashed again, and Tony went sprawling.

Vanko gave a feral grin and moved in, cracking the whips down over and over, digging huge gouges out of the concrete, getting closer and closer with each and every Whiplash.

Tony had half been expecting the car to vanish in a burst of flame around him since the first turn. The huge bear of a guy with bright electrical whips was a surprise. Lying on the road, fighting to clear his vision, the burning in his chest keeping him from moving, Tony looked up blearily at the man moving in for the kill, the world flashing white with every attack.

Tony fought to move his limbs; he hadn't been this helpless against an attack since...

The roar of engines distracted his attacker for a moment, the rest of the field catching up finally. The sight of exploding cars made the first on spin away, locking the wheels and the breaks. Half a
dozen race-cars came up behind him; smashing into each other in a fiery explosion.

The whips came closer, and Tony wasn't sure if it was the whips of the pain in his head that made each crack sound like a bomb going off.

There was another engine; this time from the other direct. With a wall of flame behind them; Vanko was surprised by the sudden movement from the opposite end of the track, a huge black and silver Audi came through the smoke, bashed aside the wreckage, and slammed into Vanko's midsection, sandwiching him against the barricade.

Vanko grunted from the impact, and collapsed across the hood of the car; the whips went dark.

Tony fought to his feet and came over to the car. "Hey-"

"ARE YOU INSANE!" Pepper screeched at him. "ARE YOU COMPLETELY OUT OF YOUR MIND?"

Tony came closer, rubbing his head. "Would you mind screaming a little quieter? I've got-"

Vanko lifted his head and groaned, apparently alive and kicking. The whips flared to life.

"Give me the Football!" Tony yelled. "And hit him again!"

Happy backed up the Audi, ready to ram it forward again, as Pepper fought to get the huge briefcase out the window.

Vanko moved again, the sparks showering over everything as they moved the whips back and forth over the hood.

Pepper was about to throw the Football out the window, when the Audi started moving forward again, throwing her off balance.

WHAM! Vanko was bent over the hood again. There was blood in his mouth, fire in his eyes and hatred in his heart as he flicked a wrist up; and brought the lash down again! It was chaos! Pepper was screaming, Happy was screaming, Tony was screaming at both of them, and the Audi was vanishing slice by slice from the car doors inward.

The Audi was severed, cleaved right down the middle; the shock-wave nearly taking Pepper out with it. The Audi fell apart; right down the middle. Half the car fell over, and Pepper was suddenly half outside the car. She threw Tony the football as Vanko smashed the whip down again.

Tony, finally able to do something, unlocked the case, and pulled the handles of the case apart. The handles hit into his palms and he pulled them apart like a ripcord.

The Suitcase Armor had been Tony's latest idea, after one two many talk-shows referred to him as a superhero. All the other heroes could take their costume with them.

The suitcase armor was essentially a hundred tiles in four blocks, all of them connected by thin wires that ran the length of his arms, hand to hand via the handles. Pulling his arms out as far as he could was like pulling the ripcords, and a red silver armor folded out across his body, slice by slice folding into place. A portable Iron Man.

It was a cheap copy of the Mark IV. No flight, no advanced sensors, no Uni-Beam, thinner armor; but once again, Iron Man was on duty. He shoved what was left of the Audi, Pepper and Happy included, and it all went skidding away.
Vanko shook off the impact, and the two of them took each other in. The fold-out armor made Iron Man look not unlike a humanoid reptile in red and silver. Vanko; wearing the tattered remains of an orange jumpsuit as leggings, and a grid or metal rods and gears across his every limb, making his limbs solid enough to handle the thick cable whips.

Tony's head was clear, despite the agony. His eyes focused on the one thing the two of them had in common. A glowing circle of power; dead center in both chest-pieces.

Vanko grinned cruelly. He knew what Iron Man was thinking.

Stark was sweating in the armor. It was happening again. Someone else had taken his inventions and used them to kill innocent people. But where the hell did this guy get an Arc Reactor? There were only two of them. One was mounted in his chest right now, the other at home; the same generator that Pepper had put into his chest when he'd upgraded it.

Iron Man made the first move, lifting a hand. There was a half-second whine of power, and the repulsor glowed.

In the instant before it fired, Vanko moved faster. The whips came up, lightning cracked, and the shock-wave blew the armored hand aside.

Iron Man spun on his feet, trying to stay upright, and came back with the other hand, firing a blast at his opponent, who somehow managed to deflect it with one of those whips.

The other whip came up in the same movement. Lightning cracked and Iron Man staggered back. CRACK! CRACK! CRACK! Two more blows, one wrapping the whip around his neck, the other around his shoulder and suddenly Iron Man was being thrown.

Inside the suit, Stark was stunned. True, this wasn't his heavy suit, but still... It was the first time Iron Man had been thrown off his feet by anything less than a tank.

Stark looked down at himself in shock. He could see his jumpsuit. His armor was breached! What could just slice his Armored skin open like that?

Vanko wasn't content to let him think about it. The whips came up again, one around his ankle, one around his neck. Vanko was apparently able to control the output, because suddenly the electricity arcing around the cable intensified. All the readouts on the HUD went berserk, fritzing in and out completely.

Vanko yanked in the end of the whip, sending Iron Man smashing back up and down again, this time crashing onto the hood of the severed Audi. Another flick of the Russian's arms and Iron Man was on the ground, hog tied by electrical whips.

Think, Tony! He ordered himself. His weapon is a whip. You need room to whip someone. So don't give him room! Just like Happy taught you! Get inside his hits!

Iron Man fought to half-stand, put out a hand, and wrapped the whip around his own arm, reeling the cable in. The other whip came up, and Iron Man grabbed it before it could strike, much closer to his opponent now. The cable wrapped around Iron Man's chest and he was more than willing to get closer. Ignoring the fire that raged across his skin, Tony stepped in closer, wrapped another coil around his arm, and pulled back an Armored fist.

Vanko had the whips attached to his arms directly. There was no way to abandon them and get clear, and the huge man felt a red steel glove smash into his chin, then again into the side of his head, then again into his gut.
Vanko reeled, still flesh and blood, until Iron Man tossed him over in a wrestling move, and reached down to his chest, yanking the Arc Reactor clear.

The whips electrical charge died fast and quiet. The game was over.

What audience had stayed after the cars started exploding, or had returned with their cameraphones once Iron Man had appeared, burst into cheers and applause. Their Superhero had saved the day again.

Stark wasn't cheering. Neither were Pepper and Happy. They knew.

Vanko knew it too. As the security came to drag him and his useless whips away, he spat out a mouthful of blood and broken teeth; and laughed hoarsely at Iron Man. "You lose!" He cackled in a thick Russian accent. "Hahaha! You! Lose!"

Iron Man looked down at the small arc reactor in his hand. It was not one of his. He had only made three. The first, which was sitting on his workbench at home. The second, which was destroyed with Iron Monger, and the third in his chest. This was not one of them. This was... someone else's work. Someone else had discovered the trick of making Arc Reactor technology. And that was the missing piece to Iron Man.

Without hesitation, Iron Man crushed it in his fist, and looked outward, seeing all the cameras, still recording the whole event with great interest.

Hammer watched the screen with great interest. Everyone was shocked, certainly. Most of them horrified. Most of the society elite knew, or was in some way connected to the racers in the Monaco Grand Prix, which was suddenly a bloodbath. At least three cars had exploded, to say nothing of the pile-up... There were casualties, plus the attack on Stark...

The whole room had Whiplash, but Hammer could barely contain his grin. Stark had just been beaten; quickly and painfully. Even if he had won the fight, Stark had been shown up, made to look like a liar, knocked on his ass, and left bleeding in full view of the entire world.

By someone who had the magic bullet. An Arc Reactor. Either someone out there had built Arc Technology without Stark, or someone was selling them without his knowledge. Either way; Stark had become redundant, by his own actions, by his own smugness. There was suddenly another way. Someone else.

Someone else who was being put in jail.

Someone else who could probably use a friend in power.

Hammer grinned. Oh, this was going to be sweet!
Rhodes was preparing another batch of recruits for their indoctrination at Edwards Air Force base, when an airman came up and told him to report to the CO's office.

Waiting for him, reading a file, was the Base Commander Major Allen and a pair of airmen.

"Lt Colonel Rhodes, reporting as ordered sir."

"At Ease Rhodes." Allen didn't look up from the file. "I have the results of your last physical here. You're in good health."

"Thank you sir." Though Allen was a Major, he was the base commander, and Colonel Rhodes was not stationed there himself. It just happened to be the closest posting for Stark Industries' distribution. But with SI no longer in the weapons trade; that had fallen into something of a limbo. While on base, Rhodes gave the Base Commander a wide berth. It was his house, and Rhodey was a guest in it.

"Remove your jacket please." Allen said.

Rhodey didn't have a clue what was going on; but did so. The two airmen came forward and began taking his measurements. Arms, torso, legs, waist; even his hands.

"Sir, can I ask what this is about?"

The airmen finished noting down the results and they headed out.

Allen waited for them to be gone. "Rhodes, we're comparing your measurements to those of Tony Stark, to see if you can possibly work the Iron Man weapon."

Rhodey felt his heart speed up a little. This was it. Tony had finally pissed them off too much and the US Government was about to declare war. They would take the suits while Stark was in Monaco, he would come back and scream bloody murder, and the military would graciously bog him and his lawyers in trials and courts and hearings and committees for the next year while they tore Iron Man apart and put out their own suits together. "Sir, I must point out that the Senate Committees have failed to define any clear and present threat that requires-"

"There's one now." Allen interrupted. He tossed Rhodes the remote. "Turn on the TV."

Rhodes did so. "Which station?"

"Any of them."

Rhodes felt a chill and did so. There on the screen was a newscaster, looking grim, with a freeze-framed shot of a huge man framed by massive explosions, and two glowing whips in his hands.

Rhodey felt his face harden. The huge man was wearing an Arc Reactor; looking a lot like the one Iron Man had.

The newscaster was talking; rapid fire. "Stark Industries has released a statement, direct from Tony Stark. He says: 'The fight is over, and I won. Iron Man saved the day. The attacker is in custody. I'm still top of the food chain; and you're welcome.' Though praising Mr Stark's ability and his quick victory; the statement is not good enough for most. Senator Stern was quick to call for-"
Rhodey shut his eyes for a moment. Stark had been so secretive about his weapon. And then he rubbed their noses in it. Then he made it a show. He got away with it because people wanted Iron Man on their side; and humoring Tony Stark was the only way.

Not any more.

Allen checked the file again. "Rhodes, we're going to ask you to follow an unusual order. I want you to lose half an inch from your waistline; and bulk up your shoulders a little. I want you to wear some pads under your shirt to widen the base of your neck; and I want you to talk to our medical staff. They'll teach you how to bind up your legs with bandages to make them a bit narrower."

"Sir!" Rhodes interrupted. "Permission to speak freely?"

"Granted."

"Are you intending to *steal* the suits?"

"Colonel Rhodes, the decision is made; we are getting Iron Man. The only thing left now is how, who does it, and who wears it afterward. Now; you are obviously at the top of a very short list; but there are some other, very prestigious officers being hand picked for the US Military Iron Man program..."

"Sir, I think that."

"Rhodes, listen to me." His CO had dropped the commanding tone, being more personal. "I know he's your friend. You went running into Afghanistan to pull him out yourself. That kind of loyalty does not come often. But the fact is that he's been burning bridges with everyone in power since he got back from that Ten Rings camp, and he expects us to thank him for acting like a two year old. These weapons aren't a theoretical game any more. They are out there, and today they're killing race car drivers. Tomorrow, who knows. We can't humor him any more. Every weapons designer, every branch of the service, every *government* knows there's another supply out there somewhere. Stark, as of now, is not worth it. Tony Stark, by his own doing, is obsolete."

"And what about Iron Man?" Rhodes demanded.

"Iron Man is an incredible asset. But he's not one of ours. SAC's motto is: 'Peace is our Profession'. Defending people from great and terrible threats is our way of life. For Tony Stark, it's a hobby." He took a breath. "Edwards is the closest base with the relevant equipment and personnel. We have jurisdiction. If Stark decides to be childish about it, the National Guard has been alerted."

"Sir!" Rhodes blurted. "I believe that making this a-"

"Calm down, Rhodes." Allen commanded. "This is just a preliminary action. We're not quite there yet."

"Sir, I can talk to him. The situation has changed, and even Tony must get that now..."

"Well he'd better. I hate to keep putting you in a room with the jackass, but you have to give Stark the news. Either Iron Man is on duty 24/7, or we have our own War Machines doing it for him." Allen said firmly. "Rhodes, the sort of person you want wearing the Iron Man suit; does not have to be convinced to do the right thing."

It had taken Natalie Rushman about four seconds to convince the Warden to let Stark question 'Whiplash'. In the absence of any other name; the press had gone inventing again. Stark spoke
French, so Pepper and Rushman had been left behind. The guy was being held before his trial, in a grungy small prison.

Tony had his wounds tended to, but had caught a look at his face. He looked rough. For once, he didn't have to hide it. Stark followed the Warden down the hallway, past a dozen prison cells; all of them occupied.

The Warden gave him the full dossier, such as it was. "No Identification on him. We don't know how he got into the country. His dental came back negative. He's had a lot of work done, but it's cheap work, and not on any official register. We ran the fingerprints, and we got a match on Interpol. His name is Ivan Vanko. He hasn't said a word since we brought him in."

"He'll talk to me." Stark said.

"You have two minutes. He's dangerous, and without your armor..."

"Two minutes." Stark agreed.

Stark was let into the Interrogation Room. The lights were off, and there was a little light from the small barred window. Vanko was sitting in the middle of the room with his back to the door, handcuffed to a bench, which was bolted to the floor. Stark took a longer look at him. He had long dreadlocks, huge muscles; and was covered in prison tattoos. He did not turn when Stark began to speak.

"Palladium core. Suspended between Zinc brackets. Keeps the charge; without temperature regulators. Nice trick." Stark said. "If you wired the cables in those whips together with something non-conductive, you'd be able to keep a much stronger charge. Making the framework powered was a nice touch. I could build it better of course."

He came around in front of Vanko, holding the mangled reactor in his hand. "It looks right. Where'd you get it?"

Vanko grinned. He had a mouth full of metal teeth. But he still didn't speak.

"The attack was a stupid idea. You could have sold it." Tony continued. "North Korea. China. Hell, even Russia. You look like you have friends in low places. Tell me where it came from; I'll put in a good word for you."

Finally, Vanko spoke. "You come from a family of thieves and murderers." He growled. "And now, like all guilty men; you seek to rewrite history; to make you look like the benefactor, rather than the death dealer. As if Iron Man made your weapons less destructive, and made you more noble."

Tony tensed. It wasn't a hit. It was personal. "Who gave you this design?"

"My father. Anton Vanko." He said this with pride.

Tony sensed a raw nerve to strike. *Work the opening, Tony; work the room.* "I don't know who that is."

"He's the only reason you're alive." Vanko growled. He was pointing at Tony's chest.

Stark shivered. Who the hell was this guy? "I'm alive because you took your shot and you missed."

"No I didn't." Vanko leaned back, satisfied. "If you can make God bleed; people will cease to
believe in Him; and the sharks will come. I did far worse than kill you. I made you bleed. I just have to watch as they devour you."

Stark was a little shaken by that. It was true. He had literally placed himself above every military on the planet. It wasn't like he thought he could keep them at bay indefinitely. It was just that he planned to be dead by then. By now, for that matter. He fought for bravado. "Where will you watching from? Oh. Right. In Prison." Stark shot back. "I'll send you some soap."

Stark turned to leave. Vanko did not bother to watch him go. "Stark? Palladium leeching into the chest... Painful way to die. You should have let me beat you."

Stark paled. He was telling the truth. He understood the technology himself. He knew what the Arc Reactor was doing to him.

For the second time, Stark left a confrontation with this man; to the sound of his laughter.

Ivan grinned. Stark actually thought he'd won. He actually thought that nobody would come for him. Vanko knew better. His father had died because the rules had become inconvenient. He had been disavowed because the rule-makers decided he was no longer worth it. He knew the truth. Laws existed at the convenience of power and money. Ivan had provided the chance for both.

Blood was in the water. It was only a question of which shark would devour Iron Man first; and which ones would come to Vanko for help.

Stark One took off from Monaco that night; and made it's way back toward LA. Rushman had gone ahead to finalize plans for the Stark Birthday party, and Happy had gone with her because Stark knew that the second the CEO was back in the States, the hounds would come. He didn't want Pepper caught up in it until he could be there too.

Four hours into the flight, Tony was curled into the fetal position in his private cabin, while the stomach cramps rolled through him in waves. Tony whimpered through it for almost an hour, till it passed enough that he could get up. He went to the kitchenette and made himself an omelette. Eggs were light on the stomach.

He took a deep whiff of the pan while it cooked, and the deep inhalation set off a coughing fit. The pain lanced through his chest as he coughed and Tony reached for the chlorophyll with shaking hands. He managed to spill a large swig of it into the pan before he could get any of it into his mouth. His hands were shaking so badly that he had to change his shirt.

After washing his face, he rushed back to the pan, and found that the omelette was half-burned. Tony didn't care. He'd lost his appetite. Even so, he knew he hadn't eaten a meal that stayed down in more than three days, so he took it with him anyway; vowing to have something.

He came out into the cabin, and found Pepper watching Larry King. Senator Stern was being interviewed.

"No, no of course not Larry." Senator Stern said plainly. "It was a completely unforeseen attack. The kind of attack that Justin Hammer was warning us about not three days ago; when Stark told us all that these weapons either belonged to him, or were twenty years away. News Flash: These weapons are here now. Something that most everyone seemed to have seen coming, except for Iron Man himself!"

"Are you saying that Stark could have prevented this event by making the Iron Man technology
"We have always wanted Iron Man to become part of the US Military, accountable to the American people. Stark’s judgement has always been in question. Google him right now and see how often his name comes up without the word 'scandal' attached to it! His career has been a series of stupid moves, rescued by his unfortunate brilliance, and his staff. With the death of Obadiah Stane, a close personal friend of mine, may he rest in peace; Stark has put his secretary in charge! Just like that. Never mind that there are people on his Board of Directors who have been working with the Government, the military, and the Stark family longer than this Potts woman has been alive; never mind that she has no managerial experience; never mind than nobody has even asked if she is remotely qualified! She now holds a post that carries with it the livelihoods of thousands of American workers, billions of dollars, and with Iron Man at the top; she has to carry the hopes for the entire free world!"

"You're saying she can't handle it?"

"I'm saying that it's time for Stark to stop playing with the lives of people who are counting on him. Iron Man is the greatest weapons innovation since the Manhattan Project, and Stark is treating it like a toy he doesn't want to share. The protection of the United States has long been in the capable hands of our Armed Forces, and for the last year, Tony Stark has been telling us."

"Mute." Tony said from behind Pepper. The TV sound cut out, and Pepper turned to look at him as he came in. "He does love to hear himself talk doesn't he?"

"Doesn't make him wrong." Pepper said quietly.

Tony sat down and set the plate next to him on the side table. Pepper looked at it. "What's that?"

"Your in-flight meal." Tony said instantly, and took the microwave lid off. The microwave had made the omelette look even less appealing. One side was burned beyond recognition, the other side melted somehow, soaked with thick green chlorophyll that had been spilled into it.

Pepper looked at it, trying not to gag. "Um... did you make that yourself?"

"Where do you think I've been the last three hours." Tony leaned back and put his fork down. He wasn't going to pretend appetite either; and covered up the plate. The shadows in the plane shifted as the plane banked, and suddenly they were both bathed in the sun.

For a long silent moment, they just looked at each other. Tony was staring. She just looked so... beautiful in the sunrise. The orange light was coming in from the window as the private jet raced the dawn; lit up her hair...

Pepper glanced at him. He was still staring. He didn't care. He felt like he'd been washed in a river and beaten on a rock. His skin felt stretched over his bones, his eyes felt like sandpaper, and there she was... and she looked so soft, and warm and alive...

"Tony..." Pepper searched for the right words softly. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

Tony took the moment. He'd had months to rehearse this; to think about his answer. She knew him so well. She knew he was hiding something. She knew... she knew him. What to say?

Pepper; I am dying. I've tried everything I can think of and it hasn't worked. I am going to die, and I picked you to run everything after I was gone; because if this is the end of my everything, I wanted you to be the one centre stage in my last thoughts, because you are...
No.

Pepper; you've been my best friend for a long time. I'm not a person who makes best friends. I've relied on you for everything for as long as I can remember. I'm not someone who relies on people. For my every rule, you are the exception. I'm going to die, and I wanted you to be the only person I tell, because you're the only person who means...

No.

Pepper, when I was in Afghanistan, I thought I was going to die. I have no family; I didn't care about the money; and whenever I thought of home, I was thinking about you. Now I know I'm going to lose this fight. And I have no right to ask you to stay with me, but I am, because...

No.

Pepper; I'm going to die. I'm not taking anything else seriously, because I know the game is over. Once I'm gone, I have no doubt that you will do the right thing by me. I wish you didn't have to take this now; but you were still the right choice and I don't care what the talking heads on CNN say. It's you. It's always been you.

No.

Pepper; I'm dying. I want you to know because after everything we've been through together; all the good times and the bad...

No.

Pepper; I love you.

Tony took a breath, and started to speak. "Pepper... I don't wanna go home."

Pepper blinked. "What?"

"I don't want to go home." Tony said, soft as a psalm. "We're in a jet. Let's just keep flying."

Pepper's warmth faded a bit. She looked a little disappointed. "Tony..."

He knew what it looked like. He looked like a little kid who broke something and was running away from his parents wrath. He didn't care. He didn't want to spend his last days being yelled at. He didn't want to face all that crap from the military, or the press. He didn't want Pepper being stuck on the phone in a fistfight with anyone he pissed off...

He wanted...

"Let's go to Venice." Tony said quietly. "You remember Venice?"

Pepper smiled despite herself at the memory. Yikes, the hotel staff had gone berserk that day. "Oh yes. I remember Venice."

Tony laughed. "I wish I had a picture of your face as you walked in. You looked so cute."

"Me?" Pepper laughed. "What about you? I couldn't look at your face for days."

Tony grinned wickedly.

"I was embarrassed to look at your face that is." Pepper clarified, blushing bright pink.
"Like I said, Iron Man was not the worst thing you ever caught me doing."

They laughed warmly for a moment; enjoying all their history. The smile melted off his face and he looked... smaller. "Let's go to Venice. It's a great place to just be... healthy."

"Tony." Pepper broke it to him kindly. "This is hardly the time. As CEO, I should... well, show up."

Tony wasn't smiling. He looked like a gambler who was desperately trying to stop a losing streak. "As CEO Pepper, you're entitled to a... a retreat."

Pepper looked disappointed. "A retreat? In the middle of all this?"

"Just... a break. Recharge the batteries."

Something was wrong. Something had been wrong for a long time. Pepper looked at him. He was... sad. Tony didn't get sad. He looked smaller. Like he was actually trying not to cry. She wanted to reach out and hug him; and she didn't know why. She didn't know why; because he wasn't telling her anything.

Pepper looked at him, soft and gentle. She hated telling him that the time to play was over. "Tony... not everyone runs on batteries."

They just looked at each other. It felt like they were both holding their breath. The moment felt so horribly... Fragile.

Tony closed his eyes gently and leaned back in his seat. Pepper found she was holding her breath, and after a while, she got up, retrieved a blanket from his private cabin, and brought it out, putting it over him. If he didn't want to sleep in his bed, she didn't mind.

"I'm so tired." He whispered without opening his eyes.

Pepper leaned down and stroked his shoulder softly. "Rest, Tony. Just rest."

"When I wake up... will you be here?" He asked miserably.

"I promise." Pepper told him.

Vanko had been taken to a cell. It was small enough that he could reach end to end without even stretching his arms.

He waited. He had been in prison cells before. One was much like any other he had seen. The facilities and the food were the only things that changed from one prison to another.

Vanko waited. He was patient.

He did not have to wait nearly as long as he thought.

Hammer was not a patient man. He was fully aware that some things took time, and had no worries about letting them happen. But when you had his kind of money, you were used to seeing people jump. Things that did not have to take time frustrated him. Legal options simply did not exist, he knew that before he started. So he went to his own Assistant; Jack White.

Jack had gone quickly to the underground fight circuit. To pull this off, they would need someone...
who could pass for Vanko. The underground fight circuit was pretty brutal; and one of the most dangerous regulars was Marcus. He mostly worked the Chicago fight clubs, so Hammer dispatched his team to bring them in. Some rich people had ex-cops on payroll for security. Stark had an ex-boxer. Hammer hired a team of black belts. Money was better in working for him and not asking questions.

Hammer was on his way to New York, Marcus would be on his way to Monaco. They met halfway in an airport.

Marcus was brought before Hammer in a private hangar, which housed Hammer's private plane. Marcus came off the plane after the hangar door had closed; and found Hammer sitting at a table, complete with tablecloth, candles and sterling silverware. The whole thing was impossibly out of place.

Hammer spoke first. "Hey! There he is! The guest of honor. Please, have a seat!"

Marcus, feeling like he'd passed through the looking glass, sat down and had a waiter in dress black and white tie provide him with napkin, champagne...

"Do you know who I am?" Hammer asked.

"No." Marcus said.

"Good." Hammer pulled out a notepad and took a look. "So, Marcus, huh? Well, This Is Your Life. Hope you don't mind, I did a little research. You're a four time loser in the criminal system. You got into jail, where you made some friends who came to you once you were out; offered you a job; left you to take the fall for them... Says here your daughter needs a liver transplant. That's a shame. She's what? Eleven?"

"Twelve." Marcus growled.

"That why you turned to crime? Can't say as I blame you. Hospital bills. That's the real crime."

"Yeah well." Marcus said uncomfortably. "Didn't work."

"Dude, that's harsh." Hammer nodded. "Dying slow without insurance. Terrible way to for a little girl to go. Expensive. Especially for someone who can't get a job parking cars thanks to your record." Hammer looked up. "Oh, I'm sorry, I'm being rude. Please, have some caviar!" Hammer pretended not to notice Marcus' hand close around the salad fork tightly. "Lousy thing to put on an ex-wife too."

"I wouldn't know." Marcus growled again, bunching his fists.

Hammer blinked and made a show of checking his notebook again. "Oh, that's right. Says you lost custody while in Joliet, and they haven't spoken to you since. Must be rough, not knowing what's going on with your kid. So... now you go from town to town around Chicago, fighting in illegal fight clubs, trying to earn some cash you can send them? What's that earn you? Hundred bucks a week? Maybe two?"

Marcus said nothing.

"What's your daughter's name? Lucy? Great name. I love Lucy. Great show too." Hammer smirked. "You know something Marc... can I call you Marc? Marc, there might be a way to save her."
Marcus sat up straighter in his seat. They were finally getting to the point. "How?"

"Marc, baby. What you need is... the help of a friend. Someone who can afford these vital things. Someone who isn't shy about helping others in need. Someone like me."

"Just like that?" Marcus asked.

"For the right price, you can get anything in this world. Even a liver. Even a private hospital room. Even a skilled surgeon. The funny thing is, you just need the money. Not really an option for you."

Marcus picked up the wineglass and took a swig. "What do you want?"

"I need someone brought to me." Hammer said. "He looks a lot like you actually. You'd probably like him."

"So what do you need with me?"

"Well, this guy, who's name you don't care about, is currently hard to get to."

"Thought money could get you anything." Marcus needled.

"It can. But I'm not the only one who's taking an interest. I need to do this fast, so it will have to be messy. I want this man. I don't want to argue with anyone. And I don't want anyone looking. You're a crook. You must know that the only people they don't hunt, are the ones that are dead already. And you've taken the fall for others once already."

Beat. Marcus stared. "You're asking me to..."

"No, I'm telling you that there's a job available. You don't know who I'm after, you don't know why, you just said you don't know my name. Walk away now, I won't try to stop you. Save your life, forget this conversation. I'll find somebody else, you can take your chances for $100 victories in fights that aren't any more legal than what I'm asking, and your daughter will die, slowly and painfully while your ex-wife curses your name."

Silence. Neither of them had said it out loud, but it was a suicide mission, and they both knew it.

Marcus stared Hammer down... before finally nodding. "You'll take care of her?"

"I will."

Marcus took it with stoicism. For a moment, his eyes moistened, but then he set his jaw tightly. "If there was any other way to save my daughter, I would reach across this table and kill you for even suggesting this."

Hammer sipped his champagne, barely looking at him. "Good thing for me there isn't any other way."

Silence.

Marcus licked his lips. "Can I... can I leave a message? Write her a letter or something?"

Hammer pulled a pen out of his pocket without hesitation. "Somebody get this man a pad and an envelope!" While White scrambled off to obey, Hammer handed Marcus the pen. "You like it? Mont Blanc pen. One of the best pens in the world. Expensive."

White returned with the pad, and Marcus started writing slowly. After several minutes, he folded
the page, and slid his letter into the envelope. He wrote Lucy's name on the front and handed it back to Hammer. Marcus stood. "When do I leave?"

Hammer waved at his men, and his security team moved to escort Marcus out of the hangar.

White turned to face him a moment later. "I will make the arrangements for his daughter's transplant, sir."

"No." Hammer said curtly.

"Sir?"

"We can't risk it. There can be no connection between me and this man, or me and Vanko. If anyone tries to figure out our deception; we can make it look like someone else did it; as long as there's nothing for them to get from the body. There'll be a long list of suspects."

"But, you said-"

"I made a deal with a dead man, Jack. He won't know if I don't follow through. Neither will his kid. They don't even know where he is. They won't miss him. If we do pay for the kid; somebody is going to wonder where the money came from and why. Let it drop. It costs nobody anything and everybody gets what they expect once this all disappears. Not my fault that nobody expects anything of Marcus."

"As you wish, Mr Hammer." But it was clear he didn't like it.

Hammer ripped Marcus' letter in half. "Don't get sentimental, Jack. I'm a rich man. I got that way by not wasting money on expensive things I don't need. Pass the caviar."

Vanko waited. It was all a question of who came first.

The first to come was a guard who slid a meal tray through the cell door. Vanko reached forward and took it. He wasn't particularly hungry, but you couldn't take your chances on food. you never knew when the next meal would come.

There was a small note on the tray, and Vanko grinned.

Enjoy the Mashed Potatoes.

Vanko prodded the potatoes. The white mound was a solid piece. Vanko grinned and picked the lump of play-dough over. There was a timer with a 30 second countdown. Plastic Explosive.

The door opened again, before Vanko had time to hide the bomb. It didn't matter. It was the same guard who supplied his 'meal'. The door opened, and Vanko received a cell-mate, who just stood there.

The man was wearing a prison uniform... with an identical ID number to Vanko's own stitched over his lapel, and Ivan knew what he was meant to do.

Vanko took in the large man. He was Vanko's size, had dreadlocks... from the way he stood, he knew how to handle himself in a fight. It would be a tough battle in close quarters like this..

The man spoke. "Once I'm dead, you must use the explosive to destroy any evidence. Turn left after leaving the cell." He said. Four doors down, there is a stairwell. The door has been left
unlocked. Take the stairs down and you will be met." Beat. "But don't trust him."

Vanko blinked. The man was a willing victim?

"What are you waiting for?" The man asked, and Vanko noticed that he had a mouthful of recent dental work. "Do it!"

Vanko stood up, laid a hand on the newcomer's shoulder "Brother, I bear no anger toward you. You know that."

"Mister, I don't even know who you are." Marcus retorted. "Just make it quick. Save my daughter's life."

Vanko swiftly understood. There was very little that could make a man such as this simply give in to an opponent he could fight. Vanko nodded without regret. "You should know, that you are not the first man I have seen killed for a chance at freedom," Vanko said kindly. "Or for the life of his child. I thank you."

The man nodded. Something primal passed between them, and Marcus made the move, instinctive, habitual, it was almost fast enough that Vanko considered blocking the hit before striking back...

Vanko brought the hand on his shoulder higher, caught a fistful of hair, and pulled him face-down against the sink in a short sharp drop, smashing his face apart.

The man dropped, and didn't get up.

The same guard passed the door again, and left the key within reach without breaking stride.

Vanko moved swiftly, planting the explosive against the wall. He quickly calculated where to put it; that would case the most damage within the cell, but very little outside the cell. After that, he reached through the bars and used the key to let himself out.

He made it to the stairwell door when the explosive went off. Alarms went berserk across the Prison and Vanko sped up. in the stairwell, Vanko could hear people rushing up toward him from the lower levels, and was suddenly uncertain. His latest victim had warned that he would be met, but did not say by who, or from where.

He was about to turn and run when a black bag went over his head.

Two pairs of arms caught him around the chest and started pulling him downstairs. A pair of handcuffs went around his wrists.

For a time, Vanko struggled not to kill them both from the beat of sheer panic. He had been black bagged before. It was the favorite trick of special ops and secret police. In Siberia, Vanko had seen prisoners taken away with black bags over their heads, never to return. he had heard tales of KGB bagging their prisoners and shooting them dead on the spot...

He fought to breathe. Prison guards in Monaco didn't use those tactics on escaped prisoners. Whoever they were, they were trying to keep his face hidden.

That was all. That had to be all.

Even so, his muscles bunched. He could have this bag off in seconds, he could have the men holding it there dead just as fast; handcuffs be damned. Part of him was expecting the bullet any second as he was rushed down the hallway.
He was released, dropped, and hit a metal floor. The sound of a door slamming, and Vanko grabbed for the bag over his head. His new 'cell' was the back of a truck. Dark, but moving.

Vanko was fine with it. He wasn't afraid of the dark, he wasn't afraid of carsickness, or the fact that he still didn't know who had broken him out. Just as long as that damned black bag was off his head.

He had his calm back in seconds. Once again, all he had to do was wait. It was not the first time.

He was patient.

Rhodes had been on the phone for hours with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. The list of people who demanded action was growing longer and more distinguished.

"Due respect, General, but Vanko's in jail. The odds that more people might have."

"Vanko's dead." The Chairman interrupted.

Rhodes blinked. "Dead?"

"It looks like he was murdered. The cell he was in got blown to hell so it's hard to get any forensics."

"This guy built an Arc Reactor." Rhodes argued. "He was too smart to get himself blown up."

"Indeed, but it wasn't him. It looks like he was dead before the blast. The CIA guess is that someone approached him, probably about the Arc Reactor technology; the conversation went bad and he got himself killed. After that, so that he couldn't give what he knew to anyone else, they killed him; then the cell was blown to destroy any evidence. They did dental comparisons on the body; it matches Vanko. They checked the jumpsuit he was wearing, the prison numbers match. It's a confirmed kill. We're still trying to track down whoever killed him."

Rhodes considered. "Could be anyone trying to get at what he knew. Plenty of people would have come for him, even in jail."

"Exactly. Colonel, it's possible that Vanko may have given them the information, and he was killed to prevent him from giving the same information to anyone else. Rhodes, the courts have ruled, and the President wants to tread carefully. Either Iron Man joins us properly, or we get our own from Stark. I am prepared to recommend to the President that we activate the Californian National Guard."

Rhodes hesitated. He was arguing with someone far above his pay grade. "Sir, without an executive order, sending in the National Guard would be... dangerous."

"You don't think Stark would fight back as Iron Man, do you?"

He hadn't mean it that way, but now that he'd thought about it... "Well, sir I think that Mr Stark is a veteran of more battles than some National Guard units. He's taken down tanks and fighter jets before, and he's at his most volatile where his weapons are concerned. You don't want to invade his home."

"Giving orders, Colonel?"

Rhodes swallowed. "No sir."
"Well, as it happens, the President agrees." The Chairman said. "But understand, this reprieve is only because Stark has removed the only other Arc powered opponent in the world. Within one hour of confirmation that foreign powers or terror groups have Arc or Iron Man technology; or if we get any indication that Iron Man isn't protecting us with all due seriousness, we take action."

"I will impress that upon Mr Stark sir."

Rhodey came storming into the Stark home in L.A, and found two redheads, one familiar, one not, playing phone tag.

Pepper clapped a hand over her receiver. "Rhodey, this is Natalie Rushman; Tony's new PA. Natalie, this is Lt Colonel James Rhodes, SI's liaison with the Military."

The talking head on the screen was still going. "-this latest act of irresponsibility, we have to ask if this man can still be trusted to protect us!"

Pepper uncovered her phone. "Iron Man never stopped protecting us!" She countered. "What happened in Monaco was proof of that!" Pepper snapped.

Rhodey whispered to Rushman. "Where is he?"

"He doesn't wish to be disturbed." Rushman said in the same moment that Pepper covered her phone again and said. "He's Downstairs."

Rushman gave Pepper a dirty look as Rhodey headed downstairs toward the workshop.

Rhodes found Tony sitting in his garage, off the workshop, in the back of the hot-rod like it was a drive in movie, while Jarvis projected various clippings of Ivan Vanko's family history, starting with his father's defection, his arrest for espionage, and subsequent deportment. Also up were records of Ivan's own criminal actions.

Rhodey considered using the pass-code that Pepper gave him, but decided to just buzz at the door, rather than reveal that he had that card. Tony waved without turning, and the door unlocked for him as the projection faded.

"Tony, you've gotta get upstairs and handle this." Rhodey told him firmly. "I have been on the phone for the last two hours with the National Guard, and the Joint Chiefs. I am the only thing stopping them from rolling Tanks up your driveway; and taking these suits off you!" He pointed at the Iron Man suits, lined up in order. "You told us that nobody could do it for twenty years. Well somebody did it yesterday!"

Stark didn't look away from the empty air where the holograph used to be. Rhodey went over, right next to him and shouted the point over again. "They are going. To Take. Your Suits."

Tony's head sort of lolled to the left enough that he could look at Rhodey, and the soldier almost jumped back. Tony's skin was flushed and sweating, his eyes were sunken and feverish... he looked like he'd lost twenty pounds since leaving for Monaco, and his hair was plastered down with sweat.

Tony nodded slowly, and got out of his hot-rod. He almost made it out of the car before his legs gave out.

"Tony!" Rhodey rushed around the side of the car and hoisted him up over his shoulder.

"...desk..." Stark croaked. "...desk..."
Rhodey carried him over toward the workbench, and let him down into the chair. Tony reached with shaking hands toward the cigar box.

"Now, are you going to tell me what's wrong with you?" Rhodey demanded. He reached out and turned Tony's head a little to the left; seeing what looked like black spiderwebs creeping under Tony's skin. "Or about that hi-tech crossword puzzle creeping up your neck?"

Tony shook his friend off, slid a hand under his shirt and clicked the Arc Reactor out; with a burst of arid smoke from the Palladium core.

"Is that supposed to be smoking like that?" Rhodey asked, knowing the answer.

"It's neutron damage from the Arc Reactor, if you must know." Tony replaced the palladium core.

"And you had that thing in your body?" Rhodey pressed.

Tony said nothing. Rhodes was smart. He was figuring it out. He could almost feel the Colonel's gaze burning into his neck. Tony swivelled the chair to hide his chest from Rhodey as he pulled his shirt up just enough to slide the Reactor back into his chest. The shaking in his hand slowed.

Rhodey stared at him. He looked terrible; but he was standing upright again. "What are you looking at?"

"Looking at you. You don't look good." Rhodey stared at him, willing him to understand. If Tony would just place a little bit of faith on people for once; people who had been specially chosen for the right reasons... "You don't have to do this alone Tony." Rhodey implored him. "They're always going to have the high ground, because they have people backing them up. This whole lone Gunslinger act is what turned them against you."

Tony wiped the cold sweat off his face. *Tony... soon you're going to be too weak to keep them out.*

No. He couldn't tell Rhodes he was dying. Rhodey would do the responsible thing and tell his superiors. His superiors would pounce and pick Iron Man clean. Rhodes was a friend, but he was a soldier. His loyalties were to them.

Pepper was too busy for him because he'd promoted her; Rushman was too... new, Happy was being driven away because Tony was acting childish about his thing with Pepper; Rhodey was a soldier, working for Stark's near-enemies...

Tony felt sick again. He was going to die alone, because he'd acted like himself for his entire life. That thought hardened him. Why should he care? He shouldn't have to care. He didn't care.

"You don't have to do this alone Tony. You can trust us." Rhodes begged him. "You can trust me."

"Wish I could." Tony said; and he slugged down another gulp of chlorophyll. "But for now, this is the way it has to be. Contrary to popular opinion, I do know what I'm doing."

Vanko waited, he listened to the engine around him for several hours at least, maybe a day or two. The engine had faded for a while, probably because the truck was loaded into something. Ivan wasn't sure if he was being flown somewhere or carried by ship, but he knew that it wasn't being done legally.

It was all a question of who had come first. A government agency putting this much effort into
being anonymous would have him killed once they had what they wanted. If it was a criminal organisation, they would do the same only be less painless about it.

If he had been caught by someone who's greed outweighed his judgement, Vanko knew he could turn the situation. A soldier would give him no room. A politician would give him no control. It was all a question of who opened the door.

Eventually, the door opened, and Vanko heard chamber music.

The same guard who left him the key led him out of the truck. The first thing Vanko saw was a private plane. In front of it was a table, set out with tablecloth, sterling silver...

"Hey-Hey! Look who's here!"

Vanko looked as the man who spoke came out. He was... extravagant. he moved around, waving his arms, putting too much enthusiasm into everything. He acted like he was always in front of an audience. it was a quality that reminded Vanko of Stark, only not quite as... awesome.

"Really been looking forward to meeting you!" The man looked at Vanko's cuffs and reacted like he'd been slapped. "Get those handcuffs off this man! What are we thinking here? This man is not an animal! Really, what's wrong with you?"

The guard stepped forward and unlocked the handcuffs. Vanko came forward and the man waved him into the opposite chair at the tables. A small army of servants appeared, and in the space of two seconds, silverware was laid out, as well as two kinds of glasses, one with wine, one with water, the candles were lit and two meals brought forward.

"I'm Justin Hammer, and you are my own personal hero. Welcome! Enjoy your meal; what do we have here Jack?"

"Salmon Carpaccio, sir." Jack placed a gourmet meal in front of Vanko, and an ice-cream sundae in front of Hammer.

"Ooh, that sounds nice." Hammer beamed. "Well, I hope you like Salmon. if not, try the caviar. Me, I prefer dessert. Flew this sundae in straight from San Francisco."

Ivan's father had taught him that there were three ways to find out the measure of a man. One was through adversity. Another by putting him in a strange situation. The third was by giving him an impossible task.

"I gotta tell ya, seeing what you did on that Racetrack, smashing around Tony Stark like that, in front of everybody. Mm. I won't forget that little show for a long time. You sure gave him something to think about."

Ivan had set for himself an impossible task, and succeeded. He had survived endless adversity. He was now in a situation beyond what he had experienced before. There was very little that rattled Vanko. He had been put through enough that nothing threw him off, but Vanko had to admit to being a little intimidated at the casual wealth being thrown around here. He had lived off stolen food for long enough...

"You really spoke to me; and somehow, I think you knew I was listening." Hammer said.

Vanko said nothing. The words were vindication. It was happening, just as he told Stark it would. The Sharks had come. What he wasn't sure of, was Hammer. Vanko's own plans would depend on what kind of man Hammer was. If he was as smart as he was extravagant, Vanko would have to
pick his moment to run. If he could be played, Vanko's plan could go so much bigger.

"I couldn't leave you in a jail cell. Oh nonononono. Waste of talent. I said to myself: Here's a man who knows the score. I said to myself: You can't let this one get away. You remind me of me, Ivan. Can I call you Ivan? Ivan, I see a lot of myself in you." He paused to take a bite of his sundae. Vanko's food was untouched. "You and me? The only difference is that I have resources. So, what do you say? Come on board. You're know-how, my resources; we'll tear Tony Stark limb from limb; dance over his corpse a little; have ourselves some fun. I want to do more than just kill the guy; I want to destroy his legacy. I want Stark to be remembered as a joke and not a hero. You have the way to do that, but you need my resources. What do you say?"

Vanko still did not speak. Did not touch his food. While the picture Hammer painted was... more than pleasing, he had to figure this man out. He spoke in Russian. "If you cross me, I will stuff Stark's inside your dead body."

Hammer was still smiling, clearly not understanding. "I probably should have opened with this: Do you speak English? Because I can get an interpreter in here..."

Vanko grinned. First test down. "You, real good guy." He said in broken English, picking up the wineglass and toasting.

Hammer beamed. "Great! Jack, this is our guy!"

Vanko took a bite of his salmon. The first one he'd ever tasted. Second test: "I want my bird."

Hammer blinked. "I... I don't..."

"I want. My bird."

"Your bird?" Hammer asked carefully. "Are you talking about a bird back in Russia?"

The bird in question was a cockatoo. It belonged to somebody in the building who had long ago moved on. Vanko had kept it, mostly for the company while he worked on the whips. When he'd made it work, he tested the whip by slicing the bird in half mid-squawk.

It was an interesting test, to give this man who bragged endless resources a no-win scenario.

Whatever Hammer did, Vanko was confident. He was out of the cell, he had access to resources, even if not his own. If he could build a match for Iron Man in his basement with a box of scrap metal, what could he do to Stark after six months with this guy?

It would be a tricky tightrope though. If Hammer's frustration ever outweighed his greed, Vanko would have to be careful.

Work him up slowly. Ivan thought to himself. Take everything you need from him, but do it slice by slice so he won't realize how much he's given away.

"Yeah!" Hammer said quickly. "I can get you that bird back no problem. Whatever you need big guy!"

Vanko grinned wider and the two of them toasted each other.
Hammer lead the way to his limo, and they were driven to a large warehouse. The Warehouse said Hammer Industries out front, and Ivan began revising his plans. The warehouse was in the middle of New York. Where Stark was? No. The expo was in NYC, Stark was in LA.

*This could work.* He had the place, and hidden behind Hammer, he had time. If Stark arrived back at his expo at any point during Vanko's tenure with Hammer...

Hammer led him into the warehouse, keeping up his patter the whole time.

"So, here's where you'll be working. I'll have a room set up for you here. I can't guarantee the Ritz, but the great thing about being dead is you don't have to worry about your neighbors bothering you while you work. So, take a look around, tell me what you think of it all, huh?"

Vanko went straight past Hammer over to the computer console; and started tapping away.

Hammer saw this and waved him off. "Now, that's protected. Obviously, if you'll be working on our prototypes, you'll need access, but you won't be able to use any of those computers that till we make up some encrypted passwords for you. Jack, can you get this man some encrypted passwords?"

Too late. Vanko had hacked better security than this. It was a skill learned in Moscow, which had got him the chance to take some protected materials out of the Russian Nuclear Program. It was a talent that he had developed further in Siberia, which got him out of the Gulag a full six years early. With several seconds work, he had found the backdoor that the Suit programmers had used to make adjustments during the testing phase. It was impressive to look at if you didn't understand, but exploiting Hammer's own inadequacies in tying up loose ends was hardly his most impressive trick

Hammer looked out over the view screens, feeling about like he did in the Senate hearing, when Stark had waved his magic wand and made the screens humiliate him. "Wow... you really, uh... blew through the firewalls there."

Vanko saw the prototype design and revised his timeline yet again. He could *maybe* make this work to his advantage. Hammer had more than a dozen suits, looking a lot like Iron Man; lined up. The looked a little like clay models, largely carved correctly, but with no paint or covering. Some had large weapons mounted...

Vanko went closer. The suits had small ladders leading up to the eye-level. He climbed up the helmet, started checking it out...

"Yeah, go take a look at that. Straight to business, I can appreciate that. Well, those suits are functional, but untested. We're still working the bugs out. I'm having a little trouble finding volunteers after our first test flight. Still, they cost about One and a Half million each, so..."

Vanko yanked the helmet right off, feeling the neck joints cracks apart as he did, and Hammer almost squealed. Vanko ignored him and looked into the suit. They were meant to be piloted by much smaller men than Ivan.
Vanko revised his plans. This was going to take some work. Several weeks at least. One advantage to being dead, nobody was going to bother him. And if Hammer was stupid enough to give him full reign over the project...

*Slice by slice. Ivan warned himself. He can't realise until it's too late.*

"What you want them do?" He asked Hammer in fake broken English.

"Well, eventually, I want them to put me in the Pentagon for the next twenty years, after that..." Ivan just looked at him, so Hammer dropped the patter, and laid it all on the line. His tone became so ugly and hateful that Ivan was almost impressed by it pure spiteful wrath. "I want to make Iron Man look like an antique. I want all the Kings of the earth to come begging me for approval and aid. I want to make Tony Stark look like a buffoon, and have everyone look on him the way I do. I want the law of world power to be written by my hand and nobody else's; I want people throwing themselves at my feet. I want wars to start and end by my choice, and nations to rise and fall at my will. I want to start by leaving Tony Stark speechless at his own Expo next month; trying to figure out how I beat him at his own game and have him personally put me on stage to show the world as I take a dump in his front lawn and leave him in the dust."

Beat. Hammer was breathing hard as he got his face back under control.

Ivan laughed. The fool did not realize that he was merely theater to the real show. Hammer wasn't even in the game between Iron Man and Whiplash.

"I can do that." Vanko promised.

Hammer beamed. "Good! Jack, this is our guy! What did I tell you? I told you he was one of us didn't I? Yes sir, you and me, Ivan. We're going places!"

Vanko tuned him out and got to work. Stark was never going to know what hit him.

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Tony felt like something large had hit him repeatedly. The symptoms had come to include something of a constant ache through his every movement, his every breath... just constant aching. He checked his Arc Reactor. He looked like something Frankenstein's Bride would turn down. He had stopped wearing his usual black t-shirts; even around the home. The black spidery veins were now visible on his arms and stomach. They were creeping higher up his neck too, so he took to wearing suits, complete with tie, to do up his collar tighter.

Suits were completely impractical for the workshop projects. But it didn't matter. He had no strength for his usual projects.

More out of morbid curiosity than any desire to know, he checked his blood toxicity again, gritting his teeth through the spike of agony that went up his arm from the pinprick.

**Blood Toxicity: 89%**

He had maybe a week left. Probably two days before he lost all function. Tony gave the drop of his blood a betrayed look, wondering how long his taxed system would take to heal that tiny cut. He stuck the bleeding finger in his mouth and sucked it clean of his poisonous blood defiantly.

Rushman came in. She held a small oak box in her hands. "Would you like to select a watch for this evening, Mr Stark?"

Tony stared at her as she set the box down without waiting for an answer and went straight to the
bar, fixing him a drink. Select a watch to wear? Please. That was thin. She wanted to come into his room. Man alive, she was so unbelievably gorgeous. *Not like Pepper is, but-*

Tony smack himself mentally. *Stop comparing them, dammit!*

Rushman returned with a martini glass, two olives. Tony never took his eyes off her as he sipped. She didn't look away either.

"Did I make it dirty enough for you?" She asked, low and soft.

Tony felt his heart do a hard thump against the side of his Arc Reactor. What was with this girl? He'd had advances from women before. A lot of them very attractive. Most of them more direct than this. So who could handle his usual personality toward attractive women, even *encourage* it, while still being completely professional and taking easily to one of the most high-pressure demeaning jobs in existence?

Tony turned that over in his mind and came back with nothing. Something else that pissed him off. He was one of the most brilliant men alive. And yet somehow he couldn't put this woman together in any way that made sense? Was that because she was just that mysterious, or was it because his brain was shutting down?

"You're a tough one to read." He said aloud.

"You strike me as the type to get bored easily." Rushman drawled, and for the first time, Tony caught the hint of an accent; though he couldn't place where it was from. "I wouldn't want to make things too easy for you now, would I?"

Tony grinned and took a sip of his drink. It was perfect. There was silence for a moment. He suddenly noticed that she was standing a good deal closer to him than she was a moment ago. Tony turned back to the window, and saw a flash of red hair reflected in the window. *Pepper? No. Rushman.*

Tony turned back and found her looking up at him again, slow and heated. Maybe it was the dim lighting, but her eyes seemed to glow slightly. Tony was no stranger to office flings. It wouldn't be at all unusual for him to…

But once she saw his chest rotting away…

The thought made Tony feel… old. Well, it was his birthday. "I should cancel the party."

Rushman seemed pleased with that. "Probably a good idea."

"What with the situation… International intrigue, government beating down my door…"

"Sends the wrong message." Rushman agreed.

Tony twitched again. She was finishing his sentences. Like Pepper used to. *Stop comparing them!*

"Do you want to send them all home?" Rushman asked. "Or should we just stay in till they leave?"

That was blatant enough a suggestion, even for Tony Stark. "Natalie?"

"Yessir?"

"What would you do if this was your last birthday?"
Rushman didn't even hesitate. "I would forget about parties. Forget about others, and just spend it with who I wanted to be with. With someone I cared about."

Tony winced but didn't let it show on his face. He wanted Pepper. She made things better. Except he couldn't do that, because who knew where she was now? Or who with?

Tony managed to slip past the now arriving party guests, making his way to the workshop, stopping only to grab a bottle of scotch. The only thing he had left was his Armor. The closest thing to a person that made him better. Made him strong.

He let himself into the workshop, sealed the door, and made the glass opaque. Safe in his private room, he went over to the Hot Rod, stretched out in the backseat; and gave himself a good view of the Mark IV.

*How much of the last two years have been dedicated to that thing? How many people killed for it? Or by it? Or over it?*

Tony was suddenly angry. Dammit, this wasn't fair!

Tony had been counselled when his parents died. The shrink warned him about the stages of Grief. First was denial. Then came bargaining. Then came anger, depression, and finally acceptance.

It was funny, but that seemed to work when you were the one dying too.

Tony poured himself a drink. *Here's to trust fund brats who inherit too early!*

He threw back the drink and poured himself another.

Denial. Tony had spent months looking for a solution, trying to put it out of his mind; pretending he wasn't worried, hiding it from Pepper...

Tony toasted the suit. *Here's to brilliant minds that can create super weapons, but can't figure out how to cure disease!*

He threw back the drink and poured himself another.

Bargaining. Who was he kidding? No matter how much he hit out at the world as Iron Man, or tried to single-handedly save the future with the Expo, he couldn't save himself.

Tony toasted the suit. *Here's to Yinsen! Saved my life; and I upgraded his methods into the slowest and most painful way to die!*

He threw back the drink and poured himself another.

Anger. Of course he was bloody angry! He set the world on its head, solved the world peace problems, delivered the new age… he could have done so much. He could have Done So Much!

Tony toasted the suit. *And here's to Iron Man. An invincible superhero, so damn strong a handshake could kill him!*

He threw back the drink and poured himself another.

Depression? Pepper had taken care of that. Rushman had hit the nail on the head. He wanted to be
with her. But he couldn't could he? He had driven her to Happy Hogan. Hogan was a nice guy, 
dammit! He was a friend! He had saved Tony's life once! He couldn't be mad at Pepper for 
hooking up with a better man than he was!

He threw back the drink and poured himself another. He lifted the glass to his lips and missed. The 
booze ran all down his shirt, and Tony threw it off irritably. Now he was going to have to go 
upstairs past all those guest and find a new shirt. Except that he couldn't do that. Could he? No. 
Why not?

Tony thought for a moment. He knew there was a reason.

It was because he didn't have a shirt on. So what? People had seen him shirtless before. There were 
viral Youtube videos to prove it!

Tony started upstairs. Then paused. His chest was hurting. Why was his chest hurting?

Oh. Right. He couldn't go upstairs because people could see the way his body looked from all the 
palladium poisoning.

Tony sighed. He would have to stay down here until they all left. How… depressing.

The music started, loud and thumping, enough that Tony could hear it from his workshop.

He toasted them too. Bet they were having fun without him!

Tony threw back his drink and was about to pour himself another when he dropped the glass and it 
broke.

Aw nuts. Now he was going to have to find another glass, too! He'd moved his wetbar upstairs for 
the party! The bottle he had was running low! How was he supposed to wait out the party without 
booze or a new shirt? Until he could get the new shirt he would have to sleep in the booze while 
the car went upstairs to miss the party and the shirt would get smashed on the floor!

He wanted Pepper. She made things better.

Except that he couldn't go upstairs to get Pepper because Hogan had smashed on the floor and he 
needed a new booze to wear.

And then finally, it dawned on him. He did have a change of clothes in the Workshop. He'd made 
it himself. What a great idea!

He weaved his way over to the computer, and activated the start-up sequence.

"Sir, I believe you are too intoxicated to handle the Iron Man suit." Jarvis said firmly.

"I tell you what, Jarvis: I'm thinking of a number between one and five… thousand. If you can 
guess it, then I'm not so think as you drunk I am!" Tony slurred.

"Three." Jarvis said.

Tony blinked. "Damn. Good guess. Okay, fine, then I has to override you."

The password prompt jumped up on the screen. Why had Tony put that in? Something about 
stopping people from taking Iron Man. He knew he had a good reason. Lots of good reasons. All 
the pretty little reasons, dancing in a circle around the…
Tony blinked, confused. The password prompt was on screen. Tony struggled to stop the keyboard from moving, before he gave up and reached under the desk.

"Sir, I must ask you to-" Jarvis started to yell.

Tony yanked the cables out from Jarvis' mainframe upstairs, to the workshop computers. The password prompt went dead, and Jarvis went blessedly silent.

Tony wheeled the Mark IV over to the platform, and kicked his shoes off. The Assembly droids had their own power supply. As a precaution against Jarvis losing power and Iron Man being prevented from... Tony shook his head again. He had an ending to that thought right?

Regardless, the machines automatically found the suit, took it apart, and reassembled it over Tony. There. Now he was wearing a shirt. The clothes make a man. Now he could go upstairs and join the party without anyone seeing the palladium and Pepper would make it all better.

Iron Man stalked up the stairs, weaving on the steps. *Like a jungle cat;* Tony thought to himself.

The crowd reacted of course, as everyone did when they saw Iron Man. A huge whoop heralded his arrival.

Iron Man's helmet opened, and Tony grinned giddily. "Okay! Let's get this party started!"

Rhodes pulled his car to a halt outside the Stark home. Judging from the light show visible against the windows, then party had started a while ago.

Rhodes hadn't bothered with a present. There was nothing to buy for the man who could buy or invent anything he wanted. Plus, this really wasn't his kind of crowd. Still, things had been tense, and Rhodes had to make an effort to keep things...

Before he could finish the thought, his cell rang. Rhodes turned off the engine and answered it. "Rhodes."

"Colonel Rhodes? Please hold for the President."

Rhodes nearly dropped the phone.

"Colonel? This is the President of the United States speaking. How are you this evening?"

Silence.

"Colonel?"

*Answer him, say something, why aren't you talking, Rhodey, open your mouth and say some words, any words. "Good evening, Mr President. I am well sir, how are you?" Well, it was coherent.*

"I'm not having a good night, Rhodes. I have a problem. This problem's name is Tony Stark. Do you see where I'm going with this?"

"Yes sir."

"My staff tells me that I could win points with my allies and shut my enemies up, as well as keep the State Department happy, and keep the UN, and half a dozen allies across the world in line. All I have to do is take an Iron Man suit and give it to Justin Hammer. I could save several thousand US jobs in the weapons export business, billions of dollars in free trade, and the safety of the American
people. Do you see what a good idea that is?"  

*Be Careful, Rhodes; you're defending a man that nobody likes. And you're defending him to the President of the United States.* "Sir, I should say that I am against-"  

"I know you are, Rhodes. You see, my communications director says that it's a nightmare to try and take on a celebrity like Stark, my Legal department says that it's illegal for me to do so unless I declare it a matter of National Security. It's getting easier and easier to see that Tony Stark can't control it like he did before. If he can't, I have to." Beat. "Now Colonel, can you guess how much trouble it will take for me to declare Tony Stark unfit to be a part of our National Defence, and legally take any and all weapons he may have built, that can defend us?"

"Sir, I..."

"Really. Can you guess?"

"Nosir."

"No trouble at all."

"Mr President, I understand that many in the military are not wild about Iron Man being a civilian; but the fact is, he's not a soldier. The military doesn't get to decide things for him like they do for me. Legally, you have no right, and frankly, making it a direct confrontation would elevate Stark's position-"

"And give my political enemies ammunition anyway. I agree." The President interrupted him. "Rhodes, you understand that Stark's worth is tied directly to his invention, and *nothing* else."

"Mr President, giving Iron Man to Justin Hammer, is... Inadvisable."

"He is our primary Weapons supplier, Colonel."

"Only because Stark Industries is not." Rhodes insisted. "I personally will vouch for Tony Stark."

Dead silence, and Rhodes struggled not to freak out at what he'd just said.

"You vouch for him *yourself*, huh?" The wording was not lost on the Commander In Chief. "Colonel, there is nothing but domestic politics... nothing *at all*... keeping me out. You tell him that every time he gets his face on CNN, I have to respond. Now that Iron Man's got equals, *International* equals, I can't pass this on to the Pentagon any more. You tell him that if he can't handle it, I can. And I will. Tell him that he's on my radar now, and not in the good way."

"I will do that sir. I am on my way to see him now."

"You will tell him that Iron Man isn't an entertaining news story any more. Now he's a necessary part of our National Defense. One way or another, we need an Iron Man."

"You have my personal assurance that Iron Man will be back on duty within the day."

"And you have my personal assurance that I'll hold you to that, Colonel."

The phone disconnected, and Rhodes had to sit and breathe slowly for several minutes before he could move. He had just tied himself to Tony Stark, in the most dangerous way possible.

Rhodes steeled himself and went inside. With luck he could get a minute with Tony alone and...
He came into the house. There was heavy music shaking the windows, and the sounds of cheering coming from the next room. Pepper was sitting outside the living room, with her head in her hands.

"Pepper?" Rhodes asked in alarm. Pepper looked... lost. "Pepper, what's wrong?"

Pepper waved a hand over her shoulder at the door to the living room, completely helpless. "I don't... I don't know what to do."

Feeling like he was about to get punched in the head any second, Rhodes forced himself to walk into the living room. It was worse than he thought.

Tony was holding center stage to a crowd of cheering guests.

He was wearing the Iron Man Armor.

And he was quite extraordinarily drunk.

He was so drunk that with a bottle of something in one hand, he could barely stand upright. Rhodes could hear the mechanics of the suit whirring as he weaved back and forth on his feet. After a moment he stabilized himself and picked up the microphone. "So, the one question I get asked again and again is: How do you go to the bathroom in the suit?" A look of intense concentration passed over his face, and he suddenly relaxed. "Just like that."

Everybody laughed, except Pepper and Rhodes, who looked sick. Maybe even scared.

Rhodes whirled on the one person in the party who deserved it least. "Pepper."

"I know."

"I just went to bat for this guy. And it's not the first time."

"I know."

"Pepper, I just staked my career on Iron Man being Mission Ready. I mouthed off to the President, Pepper!"

"I know. I got it. I got it! I'll take care of it." Pepper promised. She'd done it before.

The crowd were cheering Tony on, as he did the Robot, complete with metallic mechanical sounds; and Pepper sidled in next to him; quietly pulling the microphone out of his hand. She forced a smile on her face, not for the first time. "Boy, does this guy know how to throw a party or what, huh?"

The crowd cheered, wondering what she was going to roll out. Surprises at Tony Stark parties were almost expected.

"Pepper?" Tony slurred. "You make things better. I love you."

Pepper was covering over the microphone firmly, keeping him quiet. "Tony, you have to call this off now. You trust me?" she asked, knowing the answer. "So you cut this out now."

"Pep, I'm fine. Gimmie a kiss." He pulled her closer, reaching for her with his lips.

Pepper recoiled, disgusted. She didn't know which was worse, his behavior or his 120-proof breath. "Tony, no."

"C'mon, you know you want to." He insisted, moving for her lips again.
Pepper tried to duck him, in full view of everyone, feeling sick to her stomach. She had wanted to once, and the thought now made her stomach turn. She couldn't get his gauntlet or glove from around her waist. Even drunk, it was near impossible to break an Iron Man's grip. "Tony, you don't know what you're doing. You're drunk, and you-

"I'm fine." Tony insisted.

"You just pissed your suit, Tony; you're being disgusting and you're too drunk to care." It was risky, difficult, even dangerous, having this conversation while in full view of the LA elite.

"Suit has a filtration suit. You could drink that water. Want to drink it? I'll prove it to you."

"Tony. The party. Is over." Pepper said firmly.

Tony sighed, and took the microphone back. "She's right." he said. "Party's over."

The crowd groaned sadly. They were still having fun.

Tony brightened. "The After-Party however, started ten minutes ago!"

The crowd whooped! Tony Stark ending a party before Five AM? No chance!

Tony slugged down another big gulp of champagne, straight from the bottle and tossed it to some Supermodel he didn't remember in the front row of his audience.

Rhodes was unmoved by the lights, unmoved by the feel of the crowd. He was seeing his world come crashing down. His uniform, his career, tied to this man. And Iron Man, centrepiece of the modern military, drunk as a frat boy!

One way or another, we need an Iron Man.

You have my personal assurance that Iron Man will be back on duty within the day.

"Pull!" Tony yelled, like he was at a clay shoot.

One of the models threw a large bottle of something into the air, and Tony fired a repulsor blast at it. He hit it dead bang, and glass and champagne rained down. Everybody squealed and cheered wildly. What a fantastic show!

Rhodes felt sick. This got worse with each moment. Pepper came over, looking helpless. She didn't know what to do any more than he did.

"Pull!" Tony yelled again.

The model threw another bottle. Tony weaved a little as he tracked it, delaying his shot just a bit. He fired, and the bottle exploded, this time at eye level. Rhodes could see Pepper's hair straighten out from the static charge of the near miss.

That did it. This was no longer just a matter of the Government's interest in Iron Man, or a measure of Tony Stark's personal character flaws. There was a very real chance that Tony was going to kill somebody. Maybe a few somebodies.

Rhodes went down to the workshop, and without hesitation, keyed in the passcode. The code that Pepper gave him.

You aren't just going to... to do what Stane did? This is for him isn't it?
Pepper had said that, nearly in tears as she gave him the code. She did it because Tony was going off the rails slowly. Tonight, he had officially passed the point of tolerance. Pepper had given him the code, and now she was sitting in the living room, near tears because she had no idea what to do with his behaviour now.

Rhodes couldn't believe his luck. The power source was sitting mounted in a glass box, in full view. The armor was sitting right there, on wheels, ready to be moved. Jarvis was offline, unplugged. No passwords, no prompts, no double-checks, and the mechanical arms were all on automatic. Tony had disabled them all, because he was too drunk to care.

Tony had left the ultimate weapon completely unguarded; Rhodes felt still worse. Anybody could just walk in, pick a suit, and take it away.

Somebody was about to.

Rhodey pulled the bandages tight around his legs. It did make them a bit narrower, if uncomfortably. He kicked his shoes off, keeping his shoulders lower, trying to be an inch or two shorter.

The armor barely fit. Rhodes could feel it squeezing the sides of his head tightly, and for a moment, he nearly panicked as the mechanical arms forced the helmet around his head. Movement was painful, but not hindered.

But he could move, he could see, and he could work the controls. It was all he needed. Rhodes put all else out of his mind, focusing on the mission.

He walked up the stairs, stretching his new limbs, feeling the way the suit moved with him, assisting him, responding to him...

God forgive me. Rhodes thought.

"PULL!" Tony shrieked.

It took two of them to toss a watermelon up in the air this time, and Tony blasted it with a shot from his Uni-Beam. The huge fruit erupted into a thousand pieces, raining juice and seeds and rind across the walls, ceiling and guests. Rhodes saw people wince as the droplets of the booze rained down on everyone started to smoke and wisp from all the energy discharge in the air. The uni-beam had set some of the carpet and wall hangings on fire.

Stark himself crouched like a pro-wrestler and roared loudly, completely unaware of how unhinged he was acting as the crowd roared back.

The party had turned into an out of control Rave which would have made Ancient Roman aristocrats proud, the lights were off, the music way too loud, people covered in bits of glass and scattered liquor and exploded fruit and nobody seemed to care. Filthy, depraved, drunk, they all cried out for more, caught up in the insanity of it; weaving in the crazed spell that existed in the world according to Tony Stark.

"I'M GOING TO SAY THIS ONCE!"

Sudden silence. Everyone turned to see Rhodes' face staring out from a bright silver suit, looking madder than all hell.

"THIS PARTY IS OVER."
And with that, the gleaming silver helmet shut with a metal clamping noise. The Mark II's eyes glowed fiercely, looking deadly and dangerous.

The crowd of party-goers, who were, until now, having a blast watching the superhero acting like a little kid; suddenly felt like they'd been caught doing something wrong. And now, presented with an equally powerful superhero laying down the law, they could see that this was going to be bad. Nobody dared be in the room.

The crowd turned and ran for the doors, getting well out of the way.

Tony however, was still laughing. "Hey, Mr DJ?" he called. "Play me something with a heavy downbeat. Something I can beat my buddy to."

The DJ obeyed, and 'Another One Bites The Dust' started blaring out through the room.

Tony started dancing to it slowly, weaving on his feet. Rhodes came up behind him and wrapped his arms around Iron Man's torso from behind, holding him still. "Shut it down, Tony! You're drunk. Stop this now!"

Tony's helmet clamped down shut over his face, and Iron Man flared his repulsors, sending two heavy human wrecking balls into the wall behind them, barely missing the DJ, who finally got scared enough to run away too.

The two Iron Men went smashing through the wall, and suddenly they were both in the gym.

Even drunk, Tony knew the suit better than Rhodes did, and Iron Man twisted in the air, landing on his feet until his momentum was checked. Rhodes was left on the floor, unhurt.

Iron Man started walking away calmly. "Now. Put that thing back where you found it, and-"

CLANG!

Uncertain, Iron Man turned. "Did you just...?"

Rhodes threw another barbell weight, about 70 pounds, and threw it like a Frisbee into Iron Man's face. CLANG! Metal bounced off metal, and Iron Man weaved back for some reason, having trouble tossing off the impact.

Rhodes stood, looking cool and deadly, swinging the other end of the barbell like a medieval Mace. "You don't deserve to wear that suit. Now shut it the hell down."

"I am sick and tired of people telling me what I have to do with my own toys!" Stark yelled, suddenly furious again. He marched straight into Rhodey's reach and punched the silver suit right in the face. Iron Man clawed for Rhodes' neck, trying to get a grip on it, preparing to yank the mask right off. "I thought we were friends, damn you!"

Rhodey grasped Iron Man's wrists and managed to toss him back through the wall, back into the living room, where the music was still going.

Iron Man hit the floor after the toss, and got up, protected and unhurt.

Rhodes followed, and quickly settled into a proper fighting stance.

It was a tragic match-up. Stark was more experienced with the weapon, and had the more powerful suit, tailored to fit. But Rhodes had much more experience in actual fist-fights, had proper military
training, and was dead sober.

Out of the corner of his eye, Stark noticed that his party guests were still present, gathered outside his windows, most of them staring vacantly, wondering how the party had gone from full scale self-indulgence to war so fast. More than a few of them had their cameras out, recording the fight.

It was a brutal match. Stark had never had a fight with a single opponent that lasted this long. Iron Monger didn't count, as more time was spent protecting civilians and trying to escape. Iron Man had never fought an opponent that could take a punch as well as he could.

"THEIF! CROOK! STOLE! MY! SUIT! I thought we were FRIENDS!" Stark yelled, the scotch making him hysterical as he struck again and again.

Rhodes blocked and diverted, sending the force of each punch or kick away from him, the momentum of the blows working against Stark as Rhodes shifted out of reach again and again.

"Tony! Calm! Down!" Rhodes demanded, cool and collected, hating that this was happening; hating that the only way to shut Stark down was to fight him.

The close quarters fight sounded like someone beating a steel drum with a crowbar. Metal on metal, slamming each other constantly. The armor protected from impacts, the armor made his hits more powerful.

And for the first time, his opponent could say the same.

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

Stark could feel his armor bending under the Hammer blows, and could see that Rhodey's armor was also getting... no! Not Rhodey's Armor dammit! It wasn't his!

Tony ran through his options.


Unibeam? No Dammit! This was Rhodey! He was a Friend!

Repulsors? No. Not this close! He had never fought repulsor to...

Tony blinked. What was he just thinking about? Why couldn't he think straight? His vision was blurring. Was it the HUD, or his eyes?

Tony was suddenly knocked back, and lost balance, falling against the wall. His hands were trembling, he felt sweat soaking his skin everywhere...

Rhodey came for him again, and Stark reacted, rerouting power to his limbs, and his armor amplified his movements. He struck three times, real fast, once under the jaw, once to the stomach to make him bend, and the third time in a move Hogan had taught him, sandwiching Rhodes' head between his elbow and his knee.

Rhodes' throat spasmed. The neck of the armor was not a perfect fit, the impact had made it part of the way through. Iron Man threw a much more powerful punch than any Rhodes had taken before...

Iron Man stood over Rhodes as the silver suit struggled to move again, fighting for air through a bent in neck...
The crowd was staring at him like looking at a ghost. An audience beyond the glass, looking at a wild animal gone berserk.

Tony was suddenly outraged. They were begging for more five minutes ago. Amoral, no loyalty! Inexplicably, he suddenly hated them. He roared his fury, his voice digitally amplified, shaking the windows, as they screamed and ran from him, fearing his power, fearing his wrath...

Tony watched them all run, losing steam, his rage falling away, no more energy to be angry...

Rhodes saw Iron Man's fade slightly, his face bent, and he struck from the floor!

The Mark II's repulsors flared suddenly, both feet coming up to point at Iron Man. A wave of repulsor jet thrust hit Tony in the gut and he was thrown, up and over, coming face down into his own fireplace.

Like all demons, Iron Man looked best bathed in fire, the flames licking up over his red and gold skin. He fought to pull his face out of the fireplace, and finally lost his balance completely, sliding to the floor beneath the fireplace on his back.

*Hey...* Tony thought distantly. *My chest doesn't hurt. I must be drunk enough that the pain can't swim upstream against the scotch... Finally!*

Rhodes was glaring down at him, and Tony suddenly realized how imposing the armor could look when you were outside it.

Stark tried to get up and failed. "Ugh."

Rhodes was satisfied with that and moved toward the window.

*He's taking my suit. He can't take my suit!* Tony thought and lifted a hand, repulsor glowing brightly. "Freeze."

Rhodey turned and quickly aimed a repulsor back at him, gunslinger style. "Put it down." Rhodes warned.

"You wanna be a War Machine, you build your own." Stark growled. "You don't take mine."

"You don't deserve this Tony. Put down the weapon."

"Put my hand down? Come on, you have any idea how stupid you sound?"

"Tell you what, if you can stand up; then you can take the suit."

"We don't make deals, War Machine!" Tony fed more power to his repulsor. "Gimmie back my suit!"

Rhodes flared his repulsor too. "Put it down!"

"NO!" Stark yelled and fired a repulsor blast.

Rhodes fired too, reflexively.

Replusors were energy forms given cohesive shape by electro-magnetic focus. This kept the magnetic field contained while keeping the power levels up. It was why Tony was able to land or take off without ripping the floor up with him.
The two repulsor blasts probably would have missed each other, had they not been the same. Like sought like, and the repusor blasts met each other halfway, slamming together.

But a magnetic field had two halves. Positive and negative, this is why two magnets would repel each other, and attract as soon as you flipped one over. So while the repulsor beams merged with each other, they repelled each other too. The equal force of attracting and repelling erupted with power, exploding outward from the two combatants and impossible blast that exploded enough force to shatter the Stark Home, rupturing it from the inside, destroying every window and door, carving holes in the walls and sending both iron men flying in opposite directions.

Tony, already on the floor, felt the power wash over him, pushing him back a bit, but not really too far. He sort of rolled his head to the side, looking to see if Rhodey was still alive.

He was. A gleaming silver suit of armor was standing at the edge of his living room, now shattered and opened to the air. The Mark II was looking back at him resentfully, before turning his gaze to the night sky and lifting off.

Neither of them said anything. There was nothing left to say.

The mania had left him, and Stark considered the results.

His guest had run screaming, his staff had fled, his friends had turned on him or stolen his stuff, Jarvis was offline by his own hand, his reputation was ruined, and his house was destroyed.

He still had the suit. It was all he had.

Tony laid his head back against the floor, felt the armor wrapped around his body like a warm cocoon, immortal and unbreakable; ignoring the flames and broken glass. He didn't care about it. His chest had stopped hurting for the first time in months, and his head was spinning enough that he could sleep.

Parked at the end of the driveway, Hogan and Pepper were watching, looking miserable.

Happy's hands were locked around the wheel. "Day-um." Happy whistled. "I can't believe it."

Pepper stared into the sky after Rhodes, betrayed. Forgetting for a moment that Tony was out of control, he'd stabbed her in the back too. Just like Stane had.

"I didn't see Rushman. Did she make it out?" Happy asked, concerned.

"I trusted you." She whispered, barely audible. "Dammit, I trusted you."

Pepper didn't know who she was whispering to. Rhodes or Tony. She felt betrayed by both of them. She also felt like she'd betrayed them both...

Tony was out of control. And Rhodes hadn't taken anything. She had given him the code freely.

"How did Rhodey even get the suit?" Happy demanded. "Aren't there protections for that?"

It was enough. Tears started rolling down Pepper's face gently. Hogan reached over and put an arm around her. She shifted over in her seat and laid her head on his shoulder, accepting what kindness she could.
Fury was in his office, being briefed on various matters around the world.

"What kind of disturbance?" Fury asked.

"Uncertain at this point sir. There are only one or two witnesses, and they described it as a 'war between lightning.'"

"And what does that mean?"

"We questioned them more carefully sir, and it sounds like what we're looking for. Do you... do you really think that it could be the genuine article?"

"There are weirder things happening in the world." Fury said evenly. "If there are only one or two witnesses, then this may be a controlled situation."

"Yessir."

Search the area. If it's what we're looking for, either there is no trace, or there'll be hard evidence that cannot possibly be anything else."

"Understood, sir. Beginning search."

Another voice broke in on the line. "Director Fury, I have Black Widow on a scrambled line for you."

"Patch it through here."

"Yessir."

A moment passed, and a new voice. "Director Fury. You have to bring me in now. There have been... developments."

Fury sighed. "I'm not going to like this am I?"

"Nosir."

Chapter End Notes

Read and Review!
Tony woke up and hoped it was all a bad dream. The pain in his head said no. He'd been there before. Hangovers was a normal pain that he could filter out. He'd done it before.

So why weren't his arms working?

Normally he would call for coffee before opening his eyes, Pepper would bring it…

Except she wasn't there. None of them were. They were all…

_Ugh._ Tony shut his eyes within the mask again.

"Pepper? Pep, wake up."

Pepper woke up, feeling warm sunlight on her face. She was still in the car. Happy was in the driver's seat. His jacket was over her like a blanket. She was confused for a moment. How had she...

Oh hell.

"Happy... tell me I dreamed it." She said as her first words of the day.

"Fraid not." He said sympathetically.

Pepper closed her eyes and breathed in the coffee that Happy had brought her. And with memory of the night before came a sledgehammer of guilt.

"I wanted to take you home. But you were already asleep and I figured that after last night you'd like a chance to-"

"It was me." Pepper whispered, blurting it out before she could stop herself.

Hogan blinked. "What?"

"Rhodey got the code... because I gave it to him."

Happy blinked. "Oh god, Pepper."

"I know. I'm sorry!" Pepper said. "Tony isn't... Happy..." She struggled for the words. "What's the matter with Tony?"

"I don't know."

"All week, I've been trying to figure it out; trying to help him... I want to make it all better, and I don't even know what's wrong!"

"I thought so too. He's... different." Hogan nodded. "Except that he's not really. We both know him better than anyone, Pep, and he's been like this more or less since as long as I can remember. We just got used to… well, after Afghanistan, Tony came back like he was a changed man… but now
that he's been back a while…”

"Just the same old Tony. Only now he's got so many people expecting more…” Pepper had soft tears in her eyes again. "Happy... I can't do it. I can't do this job. I don't know why he even gave it to me. I'm not cut out for this."

Happy was silent a moment. "Pep... do you remember how we met?"

Pepper, still in tears, smiled a little at the memory. "Oh yes."

"You found a mistake in Tony's math, went to him... and he told you quite calmly that his math was never wrong. You argued with him; his secretary called in Tony's bodyguard..."

"That would be you." Pepper put in.

"That would be me." Happy agreed. "I came in to drag you out, and you weren't the first gorgeous woman I had to forcibly eject from Tony's office. And you jumped away from me and yelled... what was it again? It was..." Happy teased, leading her on a bit.

Pepper smiled. "I said-"

"You yelled."

"I yelled: 'Don't you touch me! I have Pepper Spray!'"

"He hired you right then, and a nickname was born." Happy squeezed her shoulder. "Pep... I don't claim to know much about business... but I know that every time you think you can't do something, you go and do it, and you do it better than anyone else. It's why Tony kept you, why he treated you different than every other stunning female PA that came before you, and it's why I love you."

Pepper blinked. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Pepper laid her head back. "There's going to be some damage from last night isn't there?"

"Lots of it."

"I have to go to work now."

"I'll drive you."

"Happy?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you."

Happy shrugged, keeping it light. "Hey, what did I do?"

Pepper looked earnestly at him. "You took care of me. And it's not the first time. You always have."

"Always will."

They were three blocks closer to SI, before Pepper realized that Happy had just told her he loved
her.

And she hadn't said it back.

Edwards Air Force Base was on full alert. The radar tower was playing host to the base CO, the airfield was cleared, and helicopters and fighter jets were circling the area...

It wasn't said out loud, but everyone wondered if it meant that Iron Man was about to declare war on their base. And nobody knew if they could take him.

So when the radar operator announced an incoming Bogey, everyone held their breath.

"Edwards, this is Rhodes. Permission to approach the base?"

Everyone relaxed.

Allen leaned over the radar operator to the mike. "Permission Granted. Do you have company?"

In the suit, Rhodes winced. "Negative, sir. No tailgaters. Clear the runway. I will vertical land toward the hangar."

"Understood, you are clear to land."

Rhodes shivered. He should have been here hours before, but had spent the night flying. Rhodes was a pilot. He had flown all manner of aircraft. He had flown helicopters, and tony had once put him on the short list to fly the Space Shuttle as a birthday present, but this...

This was an experience. It was a revelation. It was alive. It was his skin.

Except that it barely fit. Except that it hurt his sides and shoulders painfully. Except that it wasn't the finished product. Except that...

It wasn't his.

Rhodes felt sick. He was meant to put Iron Man back on duty. He promised he would. Tony was always the loose cannon. He couldn't even show up at his own awards ceremonies, because there was a Roulette wheel. He was not the man who got handed a weapon. Not a weapon like Iron Man. The fact that he'd built it was the only reason he'd been let within a hundred miles of one.

Tony was Iron Man. He just wouldn't be the hero everyone needed him to be.

Rhodes had told him the point so many times. When you wear the uniform, it means you stand with others. With the others in the Army, the Air Force, the Marines... whoever's colors you wore, you stood with them. And if you couldn't hold the line alone, there were hundreds of others there to hold it with you.

Now there was a new line to hold, and Stark insisted that he had to be the one to fight the most powerful enemies in the world. And to do it alone.

And then he had acted... completely in character.

Rhodes shivered. He'd stayed in the sky over Stark's house for hours, waiting for Tony to come after him. Nothing. By all rights, the brilliant Tony Stark was passed out in a puddle of his own urine by now, wrapped up nice and safe in the suit should the house fall down on his head.
"Rhodes, we see you. LZ is clear."

"Roger that." Rhodes answered. "Codename War Machine, coming into land."

"War Machine? Really?"

"Something wrong with that?"

"No."

The gleaming silver suit was so bright it was painful to look at as the summer sun reflected off it, coming in to land smoothly at the entrance to the Hangar. He had practiced with the suit all night, learning how to steer the thing.

"Very nice, Colonel. Excellent work." Allen said by way of greeting. "We have a full crew of engineers ready with whatever tools are necessary to get you out of that thing.

"I would be grateful, sir." Rhodes said flatly, before stepping into the Hangar. "You understand that this is a piece of equipment gained illegally."

"Rhodes, let's be honest about this. If Stark tries to give you grief for getting us a suit? The laws will change as needed. Getting the suit? That's one thing. Giving it back? That's another. We've been ready and willing to do this at gunpoint for so long, that getting one without a shot being fired; will probably earn you a medal."

*Without a shot being fired?* Rhodes felt worse, but fought through it. Now that the military had an Iron Man, the pressure on Tony would ease significantly. He would always be the first. Just not the one and only. Once they had what they wanted, the Pentagon would probably be gracious enough to give him the credit, now that they had the hardware. Stark would probably win the Nobel Prize for this.

Inwardly, Rhodes hoped that would be enough. People remembered the Wright Brothers, no matter how many pilots there were now.

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Tony vented the suit's filtration unit. He was thirsty, but if he got over the hangover, his chest would start hurting as much as his head again. Despite that, he'd gone in search of coffee. He'd failed to find it.

Jarvis was still off line, so he couldn't order any... his house was destroyed, so there was none in the kitchen.

His stomach was rolling. He wasn't sure if the blood toxins were getting stronger; or if it was just the hangover.

He wasn't sure what possessed him to leave the mangled wreck of his home in search of coffee, but knew that it was likely the last thing he would ever do. *If the blood tox read at the mid 80's last night...*

Iron Man flared his repulsors and took off, in search of coffee.

He wanted Pepper. She made things better.

But Pepper was likely at work, trying to clean up the mess he left after the party. And after last night... she would probably hate him.
But hey, he would be dead by the end of the day. Probably by noon. She would come to his funeral. She would forgive him after he was dead.

*Something to look forward to.* He thought morbidly. *So, your last day on the planet Earth, Tony. What to do?*

He pulsed his repulsors faster and raced the sunrise. He found a place where the sun wasn't up far enough yet, and saw a Dunkin' Donuts down below.

The kid behind the counter had nearly fallen over when Iron Man strolled in and ordered coffee. Tony checked the clock and realized that the morning crowd may be coming in completely forgetting that he was somewhere out in the middle of nowhere. He could carry no money in the suit, but he took the kid's name and promised to send him a new car if the kid would part with a large coffee and his sunglasses. The kid had thrown in a box of donuts for free.

Tony took his order to go, wondering how he was going to fly with breakfast in his hands, and made it halfway around the side of the building; when suddenly his body woke up enough to make him puke, managing to foul the inside of his mask before he could rip the helmet off.

Coughing violently, his throat on fire, he considered his options. He could go back inside and get more coffee, admit to the kid behind the counter that Iron Man had spent the last few minutes on his hands and knees, the coffee spilled in his mess...

He stuck his helmet under his arm, pulsed his jets and landed in the giant Donut sign.

Looking out at the endless miles of desert, he wondered idly how far he'd flown. He very slowly, very carefully munched some donuts, and he looked back; the sun was shining on his face,

"Sir!" Called a voice. A voice that Tony wondered if he should recognize. "I'm going to have to ask you to exit the donut."

Tony would have grinned, had this not been said with such a severe deadpan.

Nick Fury glared up at him, the eye-patch making the look more forbidding. And Tony tried to figure out how he could get back to ground level and still keep his donuts.

They made an odd pair. Tony, Iron Man from the neck down, was sprawled out pathetically across one plastic seat in the Dunkin' Donuts, trying to keep a grip on the coffee cup that Fury had waiting for him; and across from him, seemingly amused, Nick Fury, complete with eye-patch, shaved head and over-sized winter trench-coat, glaring across at him.

"Look, I told you, I don't want to join your super-secret boy-band." Tony slurred, still not completely sober.

"No, I remember. You like to handle things yourself." Fury said, appearing to have all the time in the world. "How's that working for you?"

Tony knew he was not in the best position to be arguing. Especially while he was hungover. "It's..." he started to slur. "It's been... I'd give you a pithy answer, but I'm a little hungover. Actually, maybe a lot."

"From more than just the booze, from what I hear."
"I don't want to talk about it. Do I look at the eye-patch or your eye? I don't want to get off on the wrong foot here... And where is that kid behind the counter? I promised him enough cash to keep me in coffee."

Tony looked around and realized that the entire store was empty. Surely that kid had tweeted about who was sitting in his giant donut by now. Where was the crowd?

Tony heard a determined stride catwalk up to them and tried to remember how he took his coffee, when he turned around and saw an all too familiar set of curves.

Natalie Rushman, no longer in her business suit or one of her curvy dresses, now clad in a skintight black catsuit, with weapons strapped to her thighs and utility belts around her waist. She wore fingerless gloves and there was a SHIELD logo etched over her... heart. Her eyes were cold and deadly as a Black Widow spider, and her face bore a look of absolute disdain at Tony Stark.

The mask was off; and Tony finally realized what he should have seen since the moment she walked into his house. How had he not seen this? How had he not seen that it was a setup, tailored to him specifically?

Tony struggled through the hangover and the pain in his chest to find something... something droll and James Bond-like to say that would put the femme fatale in her place and seem unimpressed.

"Well." Tony said. "You're... fired."

Ugh. That was not at all up to his usual standards.

Rushman was not at all amused. "That's not really up to you is it?" She turned to Fury and came to attention. "Director, the area is secure, the perimeter has been cleared, and the kid behind the counter has been convinced that silence is golden."

Fury didn't grin, and waved her into the seat next to him. She slid in next to Fury with her usual grace and the two of them stared across the narrow table at Tony, who was sliding down in his seat, his legs splayed out into the aisle, losing strength fast.

"Tony Stark, I'd like you to meet Agent Natalya Romanov. I sent her in to keep an eye on you. It was actually pretty easy to do. Just stick a resume on your company server with a few lingerie photos, and you begged her to stick around."

Tony tried to pick up his coffee. Even with the suit, he just couldn't make his fingers close. It took him three tries to manage to pick it up.

"You've had a busy week." Fury said easily. "First you made your girlfriend CEO, without warning I might add, and oh, she just loves you for that one; then you go and give one of your suits to your best friend-"

"I didn't give him anything, he took it." Tony sipped more coffee. He couldn't taste it. He couldn't even feel the heat from it inside his mouth,

Fury stared, looking stunned, but Tony knew that he already had all this information. "Waitwaitwait! He just took it? You're Iron Man? And he just took it?" His voice seemed to be beyond surprised, beyond stunned. "You're telling me that, you, bad-ass superhero were robbed at your own birthday party? Little brother just walked in there, took your suit, beat you up, left you on the floor of your own home and flew away in your suit?" He looked amazed; even amused, but it didn't touch his eye. "Agent Romanov, surely the good Mr Stark is just messing with us. Surely that what he suggests is not possible!"
Tony was trying to follow this, but every word was hammering in his headache. Rush... Romanov took the question with disturbing sincerity. "Mr Stark has numerous protections built into his home and his base of operations to prevent outsiders from even achieving access to the Iron man technology, let alone its actual use. The only way that somebody could have done so; was if someone had cracked them all; or Mr Stark himself had shut down all security measures, either scenario has been sworn to be impossible by repeated statements from Stark Industries."

The latest speech was not making his head hurt. Instead it was starting to fade, Stark's hearing going fuzzy with each word.

Fury nodded approvingly of Romanov's description of the situation. "Good to know that you can keep your house in order while you're out 'Privatizing World Peace' Tony. So, how did last night happen?"

_I was too drop dead drunk to care about things like security or world peace and left the door wide open for him._ Tony thought. He doubted that the truth would gain him any points. "Can we just get to the point please?" He rasped. His was trying to raise his voice, but he just couldn't get the air...

The pain in Tony's head was warring with the pain in his chest and he was struggling to keep his eyes facing them both, who looked at him mercilessly. By now the toxicology screen in his blood would be reading the high 90's. His blood was nearly pure poison. _Please god, don't make Nick Fury's eye-patch the last thing I see._

The coffee cup slipped from his hand, falling half an inch to the table without tipping.

_Nerve endings shutting down. A distant thought warned him. This is it!_

"You have made quite a mess, Mr Stark. A Mess that I have to clean up now. Contrary to what you may think; you are not the center of my universe. I have lightning gods at war in New Mexico, I've got Hulk hunts to organize in Canada, and I cannot wait patiently for you to grow the hell up."

Tony felt it all going. It was shutting down. The voices were further away, his vision going dark... _Pepper!_ He tried to scream. _Pepper! I'm sorry! Where are you!_

But he couldn't scream. He couldn't even breathe.

"Dose him."

_I'm going to die now._ The thought came to him with sudden clarity. _Oh, I'm glad I had all that sex._

It all went black, Tony could feel his limbs starting to drop... their voices were all so far away...

A spike went into his neck. He didn't feel it till suddenly the black tunnel vision exploded into light and he could see again. There was a roaring in his ears as his hearing came back into sharp focus, and Tony was suddenly aware of the room again. He could breathe, he could think, he could scream.

"Y-yyah-ow!" He yelped as Romanov put the injector back in her holster and sat down. "Oh, god you're going to steal a kidney aren't you? Hope you brought a can opener."

The line with better than any of his recent puns. His brain was working again. Tony quickly calculated Pi to the 30th decimal point and realized that his chest wasn't hurting any more.

"That was a shot of Lithium Dioxide. There's more than one treatment to any illness Stark. If you'd bothered to tell anyone what was going on with you, we might have been able to tell you that weeks
The point was made. Stark was being an idiot, he could have saved himself a lot of needless pain if he'd come clean, he could have saved his own life if he'd gotten some help. Something that Rhodey and Pepper and Fury had been telling him for months. It was still a bitter pill to take. "What do you want?" Tony said finally.

"What do I want?" Fury demanded. "No, it's not what I want, it's what you need! By all rights, you should be dead now."

Tony gestured to Romanov's hip. "Give me a crate of those shots, I'll be fine."

"The shot we just gave you is a treatment. Not a cure. Another few months, and it won't work any better than the green muck you drink."

Tony sent a scandalized look at Romanov. Was there nothing she hadn't reported?

"Yeah, she told me. This is not going to be an easy fix."

"I know. In fact, I do know a little about this sort of thing. I've tried everything. Okay? There's no tricks left. I've done everything that can be done." Tony snapped, having the conversation he was trying to avoid for months, and having it against his will.

Fury met his gaze evenly. "Not everything."

Tony looked up from his coffee.

"Get sober, and we'll talk." Fury advised. "Agent Romanov, you're late for work. Advise Miss Potts that Stark is lying low for a while, and you are at her service until he comes out of hiding. Keep me advised on what Stark Industries is doing after last night, try and keep the military in line from their end, and keep any and all official interest away from the house."

"Yessir." Romanov stood quickly; and she turned to Stark ironically. "Will that be all Mr Stark?"

Fury grinned like a shark.

Tony tried to shrink into his armor. Okay. He thought to the universe in general. You got me for one more day.

Another hour and the two of them were back at the Stark house. With the windows blown out, there a cool breeze blowing in from the ocean. Stark managed to get the suit arms to take his suit apart.

His chest still looked... dead, but the black in his veins had retreated back to his arms.

They went upstairs and Stark turned a chair upright. Fury had already poured them both some juice from the still standing refrigerator.

Stark was slugging down coffee and juice with both hands, trying to kill the hangover so that he could focus on what Fury was saying.

"That thing in your chest was based on unfinished technology." Fury said, taking in the view.

"Not unfinished." Stark corrected. "Just not viable. There was no real application that was worth it till I figured out how to miniaturize it."
"This is not the time to correct me on things I know better than you, this is the time to shut up and let me tell you what you do not know." Fury said without so much as raising his voice.

Tony shut up, oddly intimidated.

"Your father was obsessed with getting to the next stage. He thought that the Arc technology was going to lead into something the would make an Arc Reactor look like a AA battery."

"Which was?"

"No idea. He could never make it work. He said that the technology he had to work with wasn't advanced enough to get him to the next step. He died before he could get there."

Tony slugged back his juice. "So what makes you think I can finish what he started?"

"You father sure seemed to think you could." Fury signaled. "You remember Agent Coulson."

Coulson came into the hollowed out wreck of the Stark Home, with two agents behind him, carrying a large sealed box. The box was reinforced and had 'Property of SHIELD' emblazoned across it.

Tony nodded absently to Coulson, wondering what was in the box.

"Agent Coulson is going to be taking care of you while you work. He'll report to me, he'll see to it that you have what you need brought to you, and he will stop you if you try to do anything that is... too much like you."

Coulson did not smile. "Love what you've done with the place, Mr Stark."

Tony opened the box and took out the first thing his fingers touched. It was a blueprint for an Arc Reactor... and down at the bottom were the names Howard Stark, and Anton Vanko.

Tony felt kicked in the gut again. Whiplash had told him the truth. Howard Stark had help on the Arc Reactor.

"There's something you should know." Fury said, reading his mind. "This box was one of two. The second was dug out of storage recently. Not by us."

Tony blinked. "Who else looked through my dad's stuff?"

"We don't know. And that's a problem. The box was rated Top Secret. Now that applies to a lot of crates and personal effects that our people have had, but when you check a box with this security rating out of storage, you have to identify who it is. Someone managed to get one past our checkpoints. None of the personal effects or private notes were taken. It was mainly blueprints, all of which we have scans and backups for, but someone else is looking."

"Vanko?"

"If he was, the knowledge died with him." Fury stated firmly. "Good luck."

Tony opened one of his dad's notebooks, and suddenly froze. "Wait. You said... 'a lot of crates and personal effects that our people have had.'"

"Yes."

"My dad... he was... You knew him?"
"He was one of the founding members of SHIELD." Fury said matter-of-factly.

Tony dropped the notebook. "What?"

"Like I said, your old man had a knack for seeing where things were going." Fury stood up. "He knew what the future would need."

Tony was swallowing convulsively, trying to wrap his brain around this new thought. "I... you mean... how did..."

"Enjoy your reading." Fury said, heading for the door.

"Waitwaitwait!"

But Fury was gone.

Hammer was having a great day. He'd secured the spot at the Stark Expo, and by all rights it could be called the Hammer Expo soon. Stark was currently a punching bag on every talk show that went to air. The military had called Hammer in personally, and there were only two possible guesses what it would be about. Either his contract had been renewed indefinitely, or they wanted him to weaponize something new.

Stark was looking like an idiot drunk, and Hammer was looking as the wise and responsible statesman who predicted Stark's downfall.

And the moron had done it to himself without any help at all from Hammer.

All that was left was to cement his position as a viable replacement to Tony and Iron Man alike.

Tony was going through the box for most of the day, hiding out down in the workshop. The damage was less, but the lights were all off, power cut throughout the house with Jarvis off line.

Tony reached under the desk, and plugged in the cable again.

"-to leave my systems alone!" Jarvis finished yelling the sentence from the night before.

Tony suddenly felt embarrassed. "Jarvis... Um..."

"I am scanning the house as best I can with a number of my sensors apparently missing. If I may ask, sir; what did I miss?"

"Jarvis, I need you to focus. It's Tuesday. And we have work to do."

"Hey hey!" Hammer called happily over to Ivan. "Look what I found! Special delivery! Just for you. My very best friends get the personal stuff shipped at top speed!"

Vanko looked down at Hammer from his position next to the primary Hammer Suit. His dreadlocks were bound up behind his head, and he was wearing wire rimmed glasses. Hammer grinned. The huge man had gone right to work. It was so good being in charge of passionate people. They got things done with such efficiency.

Hammer set down the package carefully, and whipped off the cover. A large white cockatoo in a birdcage flapped around in response to the sudden light.
Vanko seemed to smirk, and came down to look at it. He studied it carefully for a moment. Hammer wasn't worried. It matched his description perfectly.

"Not mine." Vanko said evenly. "Not my bird."

Hammer kept his grin in place, but his heart was starting to pound. "Wh-what are you talking about? Of course it's your bird. Look! It's your bird! See it?"

Vanko and Jack were both giving him the same look. It was the look that said 'You've been caught. Quit digging.'

Hammer did so. "Look, maybe it's not exactly your bird, but look at it! It matches your description exactly, so it's pretty damn good right? I mean, how did you even know that it wasn't the real-

"Could not find, or did not look?" Vanko challenged.

Hammer suddenly felt as though he was dangling on a hook, with some sharks wondering whether or not to bite. How the hell did this guy know that? "Ivan, let me tell ya, I've had lots of stuff in my life, you know what the first rule is? Don't get so attached to things. They weigh you down buddy! They-WHAT IS THAT?"

Hammer had seen past Vanko to the Hammer-Vanko prototype and freaked out.

Vanko watched Hammer run up to the Prototype and he smirked slightly. The billionaire has three homes across the world, fourteen cars he's never driven and he presumes to tell me, the convict, not to put faith or value on possessions?

"What is this?" Hammer yelled. "This is no longer a suit! What did you do to the helmet? This is not a helmet. How is a pilot supposed to get his head in there? There's no room for a pilot to get his head in there! That's not a helmet, that's a head! I need to put a person in these suits Ivan. What the hell are you doing to my suits?"

Vanko let Hammer exhaust himself on useless fury. Repeating himself didn't help either. Everything Hammer did was wasted effort, wasted energies...

"Drone better." Vanko calmly said, opening the cage.

"DRONE BETTER?" Hammer went ballistic. "What the hell does that mean? Why is Drone Better!"

"People let you down." Vanko said, still petting his new bird.

Hammer seethed. "I don't like people being inventive. I didn't pull you out of that hell-hole to start improvising." He snapped. "I want suits. These are not suits. There are works in there now! These are robots."

Vanko set the bird on his shoulder, and grinned a metallic grin up at Hammer. "Don't get so attached to things."

Hammer took that in and argued with himself briefly. He had the spot at the Expo. He needed to unveil something big. It wasn't like drones were that much of a concession. He was having trouble finding test pilots. The military would probably appreciate drones instead of thinking people put in these suits. It could easily work to his advantage if he spun it as a unit incapable of disobeying. Add to that the fact that he could tell the Pentagon that he could make war absolutely casualty free...
Yes. This could still work for him.

"Fine." Hammer said finally. "But don't think that I'm okay with this. Don't forget who's in charge here."

Vanko nodded, and got back to work, the bird on his shoulder. *Slice by slice, Ivan.* He told himself. *Hammer can't realize that you've got everything you need till it's too late for him to do anything about it.*

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Dammit, what did Fury expect? So his dad was talking about being on the *verge* of something. *News Flash, Eyepatch, scientists have been on the verge of things since the first scientist rubbed two sticks together.*

Tony remembered his father had told him once, that the Periodic table of elements was not always complete. He said, that scientists had not always known each of these elements, but knew they were there. The atomic number of each and every element, had such a pattern to it, that those who knew how to find such things could see that there were gaps in the table, and even what the unknown elements would look like; long before they had actually been found in nature…

Knew what they would look like…

Tony shook that thought out of his head. If his father had an idea like that, he would have put it down somewhere...

He had spent most of the night scribbling down his father's notes into his PDA, Jarvis was scanning the blueprints with all speed, calculating how they might relate to newly proven science, beyond his father's time.

At the end of one notebook was something written in the margins in red pen.

**Einsteinium**

**Californium**

**Fermium**

**Eureka!**

After that page was an endless series of diagrams of molecules of most elements, with various things circled in red ink.

Tony had the impression of his father's and at work, like he was trying to put a puzzle together when he didn't know what the picture was.

The writing got choppier and more frenetic the more pages Tony turned.

At the end of the last written page, scrawled in the same angry red pen, were the words: "*No reference! How do I make it work?!!*"

Tony turned the next page, and it was blank. His father had either died at that point, or given up and moved on to other projects. He was about to toss the notepad away in frustration, when he saw something folded into the back cover.

It was an envelope, yellowed with age, and it had 'To Tony' written across the front.
Feeling a chill, Tony picked up the letter and opened it.

The top of the page read 'From The Desk of Howard Stark' in SI letterhead, and the words in a long flowing script.

My Dear Son.

Tony, as I write this, you are only four years old. I look out my window and see your mother doting on you shamelessly, and I wonder sometimes, if the world you live in is one that we could be proud of. Where other fathers might read the paper and wonder with fear at the times, I must accept a measure of responsibility for the problems that haunt the latter half of the twentieth century.

My son, I have done what I could to try and correct for my sins. By now, you will know that myself and others strove to change the world, and protect it from itself. At the time, weapons and power were the only way to keep the evils of the world in check. But now I hope to actually do some good instead of fighting evil.

If you're reading this, then you know about the Expo. You know that I hoped to save the world. Or at least make it so much better. You know that all the good things that are brought into the world can be used for evil as well. I did what I could to keep ahead of things, but I could not do it alone.

I have told you often how the reach of technology exceeds it's grasp, and I hope to make you understand what that truly mean. There comes a time when every generation must make the evolutionary leap and embrace the future it made. I thought that I had been blessed to see it happen twice, but the more I see us on the verge of something extraordinary, the more I come to see that I will never realize that dream myself. I am limited by what I have to work with, and I hope that you will not be limited at all.

Even at four years old you possess the extraordinary curiosity and brilliance that can reach the miracles that are beyond my grasp. All we lack is the will. The Expo, the weapons, the Industries, the money; are all meant to leave something greater than we are behind.

I hope that we get to have this conversation in person, but in the world, you never know what tomorrow brings, and ever since the day you were born, I find myself caring more and more about tomorrow. I hope you feel the same way about your own future, because I made my fortune based on the trick of seeing how it will all play out. I hope that you can see how unlimited the horizons before us are Tony.

If you are reading this, then you probably know something of what I tried to do, tried to achieve. The unfortunate truth I must contend with, is that there's so little time to save the world; when you're trying to save the world. I was blessed to find your mother, and then you, giving me the chance to simply live in it.

You are the most wonderful thing I leave to the world Tony. My true north. My greatest legacy.

All my love,
Dad.

Tony put the letter down, fighting back tears. The closed over feeling in his throat was, for once, not a part of the palladium poisoning.

His father had been part of SHIELD? Had created it?

Fury wasn't wrong. Howard Stark had been really good at seeing the future play out. He was ready with what was needed, when it was needed.

But the letter from his dad had given no answers on how to get there. How to save himself. It talked about the future, looking at it with hope and taking action to make it better.

Tony had failed terribly in that respect. He had planned for nothing, left nothing of his work behind, prepared nothing for tomorrow.

The brief burst of optimism that Tony enjoyed after the Donut shop was fading fast. All Fury had done was buy him a week or two to slowly die again. What could he do in that long that he hadn't tried already?

He could try to fix things with Pepper.

Tony looked at the letter again. *I was blessed to find your mother, and then you, giving me the chance to simply live in it.*

Tony shivered. He didn't have that either.

*And so you are a man with everything and nothing.*

Yinsen had tried to tell him too. So had Rhodes. So had his father. So had everyone who cared about him, even a little. He had thrown them all out...

And for what? There was no magic formula in the notes that Tony alone could decode. There was nothing there, but words of his father, written from beyond the grave.

But he might. Fury had bought him time...

He couldn't fix his reputation in time. Couldn't save his own life... Pepper. He had to go to Pepper. She made things better.

Tony had floored the accelerator in the Hot Rod, hoping that it the acceleration would clear his head. It always had before. Something about moving at incredible velocity had the effect of putting all the chaotic stuff away for a while. Arriving as Iron man would just throw gas of the flame he'd started the night before.

He took the beach-front road. His chest was rotting deeper under his shirt, but the shot from Fury was keeping him on his feet. It was better than he'd had in a while. He was going to come clean. He had to. If there was one thing to do before he'd died...

There was a vendor on the side of the road selling strawberries out of the back of a car...

*Strawberries! Pepper loves strawberries!* Tony thought, feeling optimistic about his chances suddenly. The fates were putting strawberry growers in his path! Things were looking up!
"I'll take a pound of your best please!" He called.

The man jumped to it, getting a bucket full and filling it up.

Tony blinked rapidly, the pain in his chest was back. Was a pound of soft fruits too much? If you're going to make a gesture, you should probably make it so that the girl won't possibly miss it.

"Fifteen dollars." The vendor said.

Tony was caught again, realizing that he still didn't have any money with him. And he still owed that kid from the Dunkin' Donuts a car.

"I... I uh... I don't like people handing me things. Just put that on the seat, and here. Take this!" He tossed the man his watch. "Worth more than a bunch of strawberries, I promise."

"Are you really Iron Man?" The vendor called after him as Tony floored the accelerator again.

Happy and Agent Romanov came into Pepper's office. Happy had been there before. Pepper loved the view; and was now sitting with her back to it, looking frazzled. Tony's project ideas, his wet-bar, his model of the Stark Expo, everything that made the office his, was piled up against the wall, with a sheet hanging over it.

"No!" Pepper said into her phone. "No, Tony was just having his birthday party and it went a little far. most of Tony Stark's parties do." She listened, and whoever was on the other end was yelling loud enough that Romanov could hear it through the phone, even from five feet away. "Who is it?"

Pepper covered the mouthpiece. "The Pentagon."

"Why? They got what they wanted." Happy was genuinely confused.

"Someone from the party was going to sell their camera-phone footage. The Joint Chiefs got a look at it, and they want Iron Man to Cease and Desist permanently; now that they've got their own."

Romanov rolled her eyes.

"No, Tony has never flown the suit while drunk before. You got the suit-"

Romanov's hand flashed out and covered the mouthpiece to the phone, putting her and Potts nose to nose. "They stole the suit. Attack is the strongest defense."

Pepper took that in and nodded. Romanov released her.

Pepper took a breath. "Listen to me you jar-head; I have just lost patience with you." She barked. "Your man just stole a proprietary technology during a birthday party; trashed a billionaires private residence and put a lot of his friends in danger. Mr Stark's personal life is not in your jurisdiction. Neither is his technology and you have helped yourself to both. The biggest lawsuit you have ever seen will be filed before we finish this phone-call, and Stark Industries has more dirt, and more IOUs on every soldier with two or more stars on their shoulders than any intelligence agency ever hoped to get. Enjoy the feeling. Two seconds after I hang up this phone, your career is over. We have the best lawyers in the Western Hemisphere, and the entire Justice Department knows it. I am going to make it my life's mission to make sure that you yourself personally get to tell the Commander in Chief why the Defence Department is suddenly bankrupt after we take you for everything the taxpayer gave you. By the time we're through, you'll be begging us to take the Mark II back." She slammed the phone down.
Romanov stuck the clipboard under her arm and started applauding. Happy quickly joined in.

"I have to say, Pep; I've never been more attracted to you." Happy said plainly.

Pepper waved them off. "Thank you both, but it was bravado. We pick a fight on this we'll lose. The entire Board thinks it's not worth the fight. Too many agree with what Rhodey did. The head of our legal Department said that we're fighting a war on seven different fronts; we can't take another."

Rushman looked sympathetically at Pepper. "Miss Potts, can I offer an idea?"

"Sure." Pepper said listlessly.

"Don't talk to department heads or Board Members. You want to talk to their staff. The closer to the operations the better."

Pepper looked up. "Why?"

"People in charge of departments have to consider their agendas, their own budgets, their own careers."

Pepper snapped her fingers, suddenly getting it. "And people in departments have to actually do things."

Rushman smiled at her. "Right."

"How many of those brilliant people work for Tony?"

Rushman shook her head. "Not a one of them."

Pepper deflated. "Oh."

Rushman handed her the phone. "You're CEO now, they all work for you."

Pepper beamed and took the phone off her.

"Will that be all, Ms Potts?"

"That'll be all, Ms Rushman." Pepper said, smiling nostalgically. "Natalie? Thank you."

Happy hung back as she walked out. "Have you heard from Rhodes since the party?"

"No. You?"

"Not a word."

Pepper sighed. "I have to start tracking down patent lawyers who are willing to take on the US Air Force."

"I have to get your stuff to the car for our trip to New York."

"You're coming with me?"

"You'd prefer to go face them alone?"
"Absolutely not." Pepper promised. "To top it all off, Everheart has Tony on the record promising Hammer a spot in the Expo if he makes something that will work. Hammer says he's got something, and wants centre stage."

Happy shrugged. "Give it to him. If it pulls people in, it's good for the Expo; if he fails, it's good for SI."

Pepper smiled. "Happy, you're great to have around."

The door opened and Romanov stuck her head in. "The front desk called in. They say Tony Stark just pulled in. He's on his way up here."

Pepper felt her face fall. Idly, a part of her wondered exactly when his arrival was considered to be bad news. She and Happy traded a glance, looking worried. "Is he sober?" Pepper asked.

"They weren't sure." Romanov said. "Should I call security, intercept him before he gets here? I could do it myself if you want to keep it quiet?"

Pepper actually had to think about it for a long moment. "No. It's still his name on the side of the building."

Happy looked at Pepper. "If he makes another scene like last night, the game's over."

Pepper felt sick inside. She suddenly had a staff. A staff that was trying to protect her and her office from drunken idiots looking to make trouble. One of whom was her Tony. What a week. "I know."

"Want me to stay?" Happy asked.

"No." She heard her voice say. "I can handle him."

"You always have." Happy told her kindly.

Chapter End Notes

AN: The walk down memory lane between Happy and Pepper was based on the first novelization. The one thing that I do not like about the movie is the sudden solution that comes from Howard Stark midway through the film. I wanted to make that a little less... Deus Ex Machina. This was tricky to get across on paper, especially since I'm working from memory. I'm also not an expert on any of these sciences, so I hope you'll all bear with me. I hope it makes sense, and I REALLY hope you enjoy it.

Read and review!
Deus Ex Machina

The Mark II was reassembled and laid out across the table, under heavy armed guard in the Special Projects Hangar of Edwards Air Force Base. Rhodes had not left it's side since he brought it in.

Allen was making notes for his report. "It's ready then?"

"Fully mission capable." Rhodes confirmed. "But sir, I have to ask: Do we really need it weaponised? I was under the impression that this was needed as a defensive..."

"Best defense is a good offense." Allen responded. "But to be fair, the main reason for weaponising it, is to make it a new product, under our own patent. Nothing says 'Military' like having guns all over everything."

Rhodes almost chuckled at that. "Yessir. But it seems... aggressive. And I don't trust Hammer."

"It's necessary. Hammer will be here in an hour to get a look at it, and he's making some presentation of his own Iron Man technology at the Stark Expo late next month. We want this as the centerpiece. Makes it clear to the whole world who has the top War Machine."

"Sir, it seems-"

"It's also a direct order from the Joint Chiefs."

And that was that.

Rhodes gently pulled the Arc Reactor out of the Mark II chest cavity, and set it in a secure case. Hammer wouldn't get that right away. At least there would only be one War Machine. And that would manage to defend the country; without a Hammer logo on it. National Security was one thing. Giving Hammer a chance to dissect the technology for his own purposes was another.

Tony stood outside the door to his... to her office, and fought down the sudden desire to turn and run away. She was on the other side of the door. She knew he was there. So why couldn't he just open the door?

*Pepper, I am dying. And when it happens, I just want to be holding your hand. You see there's a lot of things that I mean to...*

*No.*

*Pepper, you have always been the one person in my life. The only person that I absolutely can't do without and...*

*No.*

*Pepper, I have no right to ask you to forgive and forget, but I hope you will, because I'm going to die soon, and I don't want us to be...*

*No.*

*Pepper, do you believe in God? Afterlife? Heaven? I never did, but lately it's been on my mind a lot, and I want to...*
No.

Pepper. I'm dying. We have a lot to talk about. Let's run away to Venice and talk about it. I promise that we won't be more than a few days, maybe a week or two, because I'll be dead by then...

No.

Pepper. I love you.

Tony took a breath, steeled himself, and opened the door.

She was sitting behind the desk, regal and focused. She barely looked at him when he came in. "Alex, don't tell me that we have the best patent lawyers in the business and then tell me we can't chase this down. Pick a side. Either Rhodes is going to jail over last night, or we are."

Tony winced at that.

Pepper looked at him finally, and her eyes went subzero in a heartbeat. She still spoke into the phone, but the words were clearly for Tony's benefit. "Well, Alex; I wish that the whole thing had gone differently last night too. But your opinion was not taken into consideration by either of them. And neither was mine."

Tony let out a low whine and gulped. This was going so badly, and he hadn't even said a word yet.

"Well then until the President decides to sign an executive order, we can still act like somebody did something wrong," Pepper said firmly. "You've been telling me that the Legal department is at it's best when it attacks. We've been defending for months now, from the military, the press, the government, the FAA... Alex, I just gave Legal a target. Follow your instincts. Hm? Well then follow your job description; I'll be in New York for the next couple of months. I'll be heading things from the offices, and the Expo if you need me." She hung up and turned to Tony. "Hello."

He'd gotten warmer welcomes from the Ten Rings. "I... uh. I was going to get all these things out of the office by now."

"Well, we were going to discuss that at the party, but you were a little busy." Pepper told him.

"So ends the small talk portion of the afternoon." Tony tried to smile.

She stayed frosty. "Tony, I hate to cut you off, but I'm leaving for New York soon to handle the Expo and-"

"I really need to talk to you." Tony said. "Won't take a minute."

"I don't have a-

"Thirty seconds then."

"Twenty nine, Twenty eight..."

Tony started to speak and made it half a breath before he started stuttering. "I... um. I've had some things on my mind lately, and I... I always knew that I could..." Dammit, Stark! He screamed at himself. You rehearsed this a thousand times between your house and here, and then a hundred more times between the front desk and the office. Mea culpa! This is for all the marbles. "This is hard for me. I've never done this before. I'm not really one to apologize, but I know that I..."

"You're down to fifteen seconds, Tony. So let me stop you right there." Pepper interrupted.
"Because if you say the word 'I' one more time, I am simply going to hit you. Or hurl a blunt implement at your head. Or a sharp implement. Some kind of implement."

Tony felt it all spiraling. "Pepper... you never acted like this with me before. We were always... us. What happened?"

"I changed and you didn't." Pepper told him. "You went and promoted me, threw me in the deep end with no warning and no training, and then you go and pull stupid childish stunts like you always do. The Grand Prix, and the party last night..." She looked earnestly into his eyes. "Tony, I can't be there to clean you up and hold your hand any more, because you put me here now. Now, I actually have to be responsible for more than just your own personal need for attention."

Tony tried to find an answer to that, and hung his head. "Have I really been acting so... In character?"

"After Afghanistan, I had hoped that you were... Tony, people are counting on you to be Iron Man. I was counting on you to be at least Tony Stark. And you just swan off whenever it suits you. I really don't know how Stane handled it for so long."

Tony lifted his eyes to look at her. "He tried to have me killed."

Heavy silence as that sank in for both of them.

Tony pulled his chair closer in to the desk, raised a hand, reached across, and very gently touched the side of her face, expecting her to push him away any second.

She didn't. In fact, she took the hand against her cheek and leaned into it gently. She was with Happy now. Tony couldn't be relied on for more than two seconds. But these things had been true for a while, the latter for as long as she had known him, and she held his hand in her own nonetheless.

Tony could feel the deathly weakness trembling in his chest. She was so... alive. And anything full of life was so very beautiful to him right now. "Pepper... that night when we danced... do you still think about that night?"

She nuzzled her cheek into his fingers softly, all the old forbidden emotions coming back after being away from him so long... "Yes. Yes I do."

Tony was shivering. His chest was so cold and her face was so warm.

Pepper's eyes flicked to the desk, and those perfect lips parted slightly. "Did... did you bring me strawberries?"

Tony looked into her eyes deeply, seeing a spark of hope. "Yes. Yes I did. Would you like one?"

Pepper's eyes clouded, and she pulled back, just a few inches, just enough that his hand dropped. "Did you know that there's maybe one thing in the world that I am actually allergic to? And that one thing would be-"

"Strawberries." Tony said it with her, feeling worse. How had he missed that? The strawberry shortcake in Milan! How had he forgotten that! He'd made the suggestive remark about rubbing lotion... "Pepper... um. This is bad, but this is progress right? I knew that strawberries had something to do with... Hell, even I can't make that one fly." He hung his head again. His moment to make it better was long gone before he even walked in.
"Tony..."

"Can we... can we just rewind back to before you saw the strawberries? Please?" He asked pitifully, trying to recapture the moment. "Can we go back to that for a second because..." He reached out a hand to cup her cheek again, and she leaned back expertly, leaving his hand hanging in midair.

And after a moment, Tony stopped reaching.

Pepper was staring at him. He had the same look that was on his face in the plane. Like he was a gambler trying to break a losing streak. Desperate and hopeful. "Tony." She reached across the desk, caught his chin and made him face her. "Is there something you want to say to me?" She asked him pointedly. "Is there something I need to hear from you? Something important? Because if there is, now would be the time to say it."

It was a clear invitation. It was the very definition of the right moment to tell her the truth. "I... just wanted to do something nice for you."

She looked at him with open pity. He seemed like the loneliest person in the world, and as much as she longed to just reach out and give him a hug, she couldn't. Because she was with Happy now, and Tony himself had so neatly demonstrated exactly why that was the case. And because she was CEO now, and her responsibilities went so much further than simply looking after him personally. No matter what she wanted for herself.

Pepper pushed the strawberries aside gently, and took his hand. Tony's brain short circuited. Had honesty actually done the trick?

"Tony..." She told him, soft and kind. "There are a thousand things I need to do. And so I'm just going to be honest with you, okay?"

"Okay. Can I just get to the point?"

"Tony, I need you..."

"I need you too..." Tony started to say.

"...to leave. Now." Pepper said, with polite, horrifying calm.

In his life, Tony had been shot at, blown up, operated on without anesthetic, tortured, left for dead, exposed, and death was catching up by degrees. But now, right here, with those simple words, Pepper had gutted him whole.

She released his hand and stood up, leaving Tony staring at her empty seat, just as the door opened.

"Car's loaded." Happy called from the door. "Anything else you need, boss?"

"Nah-" Tony started to say.

"Thank you, Happy; I'll be down in a moment." Pepper said over him.

Happy nodded to Pepper, gave Tony an uncomfortable look.

The feeling in the room was something like having your ex around the family dinner table. Tony got the point instantly. He had been replaced. He had done it to himself. Pepper had taken over, was in command, and Tony was no longer even welcome as a guest, even with his name on the side of the building.
By his own actions, he was obsolete to everything he'd made.

Tony smirked. "Hey, how about that?" He said lightly. "I lost both kids in the divorce."

The joke fell flat and died quickly. All others in the room were busily doing things. Romanov and Pepper with paperwork, Happy with baggage and equipment. Tony was just sitting there, adrift and unnecessary.

Stark was feeling pretty left out in the cold. He knew it wasn't smart, but he was feeling petty. "Are you... blending in well here, Natalie? That is your name, right?"

He saw Romanov look at him sharply and Pepper scowl at him again. He realised that looked like he couldn't remember her name. Something that only happened when he didn't care or was drunk. Given that she was supposed to be his PA, and that he'd hired her himself, neither of these options were good.

"Actually, Tony; I think it might be a good idea if you let Natalie work here with me for a while." Pepper said. "Given that all your public appointments for the next few weeks have been cancelled, there's not much for her to do with you."

"They have?"

"They have." Pepper said firmly. "She can be far more useful here."

Tony translated in his head. Translation: 'Natalie' was far too competent to be wasted on babysitting the drunk billionaire, when it was all hands on deck after Tony made such a mess at his birthday party.

"I thought you two didn't get along?" Tony said, the first thing that came to mind.

Pepper was signing something Romanov held out with one hand, and slipping her other arm into a jacket that Romanov was holding out at the same time. "Why do you think that?" Pepper asked. "She's been incredibly helpful."

Translation: I learned more about handling this company from her, than I ever did from you, who hired me and dumped this all on me.

Oh, boy. Tony thought. Romanov's got her hooks in good and deep.

"Will that be all, Miss Potts?" Romanov asked, every bit the dutiful assistant.

"That will be all, Miss Rushman." Pepper said professionally, picking up her bags. "Actually, since I've got you both here, maybe you could discuss these personal effects of his."

Tony stood up, stammering. "Pepper, I still need to talk to you."

"And I have to leave for your Expo in New York right now. Natalie, keep on top of things here until you can come join me."

Translation: Keep Stark out of my way until I get to the car.

Romanov nodded immediately. "Certainly, ma'am."

Pepper walked out of her office without so much as glancing back.

Romanov dropped the cover act like a hot rock. "Amazing to me that you kept a secret identity
long enough to build Iron Man, let alone liberate Gulmira." She said disdainfully.

Tony was losing his entire world, in huge chunks at a time, and went on the attack. "Man, you are good at that. You aren't two faced, your three faced. Four!"

"Potts expects me to get these things of yours out of her office. You brought a car. Take them or I'll burn them in the parking lot and make you watch. How did you even get here? Coulson was supposed to keep you at the house and out of our way while we clean up your mess."

Tony felt the barbs hit him dead center and winced. He was... just in the way.

He reached over the desk to Pepper's pad, tore off the first clean page, and picked up a marker as Romanov started tidying things, looking over Pepper's correspondence, making notes for her report to Fury.

Tony scribbled down a quick message.

---

Happy-

Take care of her.

---

He folded it over and wrote Happy's name on the front. "Would you deliver this for me, when you get to New York?"

Romanov took the page, opened it, read it, and tore it up without question. "Nope."

"Why NOT?" Tony almost yelled, furious.

"Get back to work, fix the problem, and you can do it yourself. I'm not going to let you say goodbye to them. You don't get your affairs in order unless you're planning to die. My orders are to keep things under control so that you can prevent that from happening."

Tony sighed. He knew she was right, but wondered if he cared any more.

"What was the deal with the other night?" Tony asked suddenly. "Just before the party?"

Romanov frowned delicately. "You were supposed to get the idea in your head to sit down with Potts, straighten things out. She would convince you to come to us and we wouldn't have had to put the Lithium Oxide dose in a needle-gun."

"That was the big plan? To make me go running to Pepper?"

Romanov didn't blink. "The other option was you would either try to impress me, turning the attention to the Iron Man suit, or you would try to seduce me. If the latter, I could rip your shirt off with my teeth and discover the Palladium damage."

Tony blinked. She was so... bland about it.

"If the former, talking about the suit would allow me to 'find out' about the Arc Reactor. Either way, I would then be able to use my cover to bring you the treatment we gave you, without having to bring Director Fury in himself." Her stone cold eyes actually seemed to shiver for a moment. "We don't like to involve the Director until we absolutely positively have no other choice in the matter."
Tony found himself gaining a new respect for Fury. If his appearance could make *this* Black Widow shudder...

"I didn't expect that you would actually throw such a hissy fit and get loaded." Romanov almost spat. "I figured someone like Iron Man wouldn't be so blatantly self-destructive."

"You don't know me that well then."

"We know everything, Mr Stark, that's sort of what we do."

"You flirting with me was supposed to get me alone in a room with Pepper? Or was that just for fun on your part?"

"Unlike you, I work before I play." Romanov said evenly. "It was a solid plan. Who *else* would you have gone to when I suggested somebody you care about?"

That struck a little closer to the bone than Tony was comfortable with. "Huh."

"Go back to the house. If you come back here without my permission, I will tell Miss Potts you are drunk and have security escort you from the building. If you leave your home again, I will alert Agent Coulson. He can kill you with a toothpick."

"I think we need to examine your cover. You're here as my PA. you don't give me orders. Was that even a real resume? I bet those modeling shots were photoshopped. Can you really speak Latin?"

Romanov spoke a long sentence in Latin without hesitation, heading for the door.

"Aaaaaand, what does that mean?"

"'You can leave willingly, or I will have you dragged out by your hair.'" Romanov said coldly and shut the door behind her firmly.

Well. That was it then. No solutions. No way out. Pepper was the one thing he'd wanted to sort out before he died, and she'd shot him down before he could get a word out. He'd acted like this for a long time, but now that she was CEO, she was done tolerating it. You could only have the same problem so long before you stopped coming back for more.

Tony's chest was hurting again. He needed another shot. Idly, Tony wondered if it mattered.

Tony was left alone, in what used to be his office. He stared out the window. Stark One was coming in to land, ready to pick up Pepper and his... *her* entourage.

Tony Stark, a man on top of the world.

Tony struggled to stand, feeling more than a little exhausted. He could build things like Iron Man, he could jump into race-cars on a whim, he could calculate Pi to 40 decimal places in his head, so why was he having so much trouble putting together a complete sentence around Pepper Potts?

He wandered around the room for a while, looking at things, saying his goodbyes, when he noticed the model of the Stark Expo.

*That could work.*

Tony froze.

Tony could feel the idea at the edge of his mind. He squinted at the Expo model. He felt like he'd
seen the point of one of those Magic Eye pictures, but didn't know what he'd seen.

He thought back over his father's notes. What had Howard Stark seen? What was the next step?

Tony scrubbed his face again in frustration. Was it the poisoning killing brain cells, or was it the
booze? Or was it simply his imagination...

Tony gave up and hoisted the entire Expo model up over his shoulder, then put it down again very
quickly. He was going to need help.

Coulson was not at all pleased when Tony came back into the house. Even less thrilled when Tony
gestured to the Expo model. "Give me a hand with this, will ya?"

Coulson drew a gun from under his jacket, and jabbed it into Stark's neck before he could even
register the movement.

"AGH!" Tony yelled. "Would you people stop that?"

"Do. Not. Break perimeter again without my permission." Coulson said firmly, reaching for the
Expo model and hoisting it out easily.

Tony stared at him. The man didn't look like a body-builder in that cheap suit; but it had taken
three guys to get the whole Expo model down, one slice at a time. Coulson had hoisted a whole
section out by himself.

"Any problems while I was away?" Tony asked as they carried it downstairs.

"All quiet." Coulson reported. "Agent Romanov can direct anything back toward Miss Potts."

"She's going to notice if I go completely quiet."

"No she won't." Coulson said. "Lt Colonel Rhodes managed to answer a lot of questions and give a
lot of people what they wanted last night. Nobody has anything left to say to you."

"Just like that?" Stark asked in disbelief.

"Pretty much. You should check CNN."

"Will it depress me?"

"Yeah."

"Then skip it." He sighed hard. "You think I should have just given Rhodes the suit anyway?"

"It's kept them all away this long hasn't it?" Coulson returned.

Tony sighed, putting the model together. "I don't trust the military." He said. "I trust Rhodey. Or I
did. Still do. I think. But he's not the only soldier in the world. Someone orders him to hand it over,
he will. I can't trust all of them." Stark attached the second piece of the model and sighed, more
thinking out loud than expecting an answer. "Vanko was able to build the technology. Who knows
who else might get there? Was I wrong to want to keep it secret?"

Coulson was silent a moment. "I was recruited for SHIELD out of the CIA." He said. "When I was
with the Company, my job was to track Nuclear warheads. Back during the Cold War that was easy
enough. There were a finite number of them, and we knew who had them all. Then the Soviet
Union collapsed and suddenly there were dozens of groups who were desperate enough to sell them, or countries that could get hold of them. Weapons that these people did not understand, couldn't build themselves, but they were more than willing to sell them or use them on people. No. I don't think you were wrong to keep something like Iron Man to yourself. Anyone else would be willing to use it, without gaining the respect for it that comes from having to figure out how to build it yourself."

Stark took Coulson in. "Thank you." He said sincerely. It was the first time someone had simply agreed with him about this.

Coulson nodded. "If you attempt to leave the house again, I will stick you with my tazer and watch Supernanny while you drool on the carpet."

"So the moment of camaraderie is over then?"

Hammer came in, his team dragging the equipment cases behind him. They had all been searched for recording devices of any kind before even being let into the room, which could mean only one thing.

And he was right. His eyes went straight to the hollow silver body laid out before him as he came forward to Allen and Rhodes. "Oh. Oh! OH! Oh yes, baby! Happy birthday to me! Is there such a thing as a joy-gasm? It's beautiful."

Rhodes and Allen just stared at him, inscrutable.

"Rhodes, can I call you James?"

"No."

"Colonel Rhodes, I know I'm a civilian and all, but I think I just fell in love with you. I don't know how you did it, but Christmas came early this year. Just tell me one thing: Did you happen to get a picture of Stark's face when you flew away in this... this gorgeous suit!"

"Hammer." Rhodes barked.

"Right." Hammer straightened out. "So. What do you need?"

"We need to know what you can with it."

"Well, first I'm going to upgrade your software. I don't know what Stark was using to run his HUD, but I can make it better. Then I'm going to upgrade your interior. I don't know how you got into this thing Rhodes, but I promise it'll fit like the proverbial glove. Then-"

"Weapons, Hammer." Allen interrupted. "We called you here to see what you could do for it's weapons capability."

Hammer's eyes went dark and intense. "Well you came to the right guy."

Within seconds, Hammer had his cases open and was going into his presentation. Rhodes was focused on the weapons. He had seen Stark in salesman mode, and knew when to listen and when to tune it out.
"One thing that I always hated about video games is the notion that one soldier can carry about twelve different guns and not have it slow him down. Well, here we go gentlemen. We have here a soldier that can carry them all on his own bulletproof shoulders. The only question you ever need to ask yourself again, in any battlefield, is what you want to hit back with to make all the bad guys cry." Hammer went to the first case. "So let's get started. First, the small and concealable, fast and deadly. 'Where did that gun come from?' will be the second last thing to go through your enemies brains when you quick draw the .22 repeater. 42 round clips, double stacked with automatic reload option and Teflon bullets. They call them cop-killers, so you know that the nasty opponents will take it personally when you start throwing it back at them."

Rhodes and Allen just stared at him, inscrutable.

"Too ghetto?" Hammer thought out loud, undeterred. "I agree."

He set the handguns down. "How about this? Single pump action 12 gauge shotgun with five round shell cartridge and secondary grip on the pump action handle. This baby will knock down an elephant at more than thirty yards. At close range the scatter cloud won't let a mosquito through. Put a rifle bullet in the chamber and it'll go through a stone wall. It is iconic. It is the ultimate in a hand cannon. The tool to intimidate and conquer."

Rhodes and Allen just stared at him, inscrutable.

"But what am I saying? Knock down an elephant? You're not a hunter, you're a soldier." Hammer immediately moved on, undeterred. He turned back to his case and pulled out a large machine gun. "Gentlemen, in a previous life, this could have been considered an M-16, if you want to compare a butter knife to a lightsaber. It is now a hand-crafted tool of pure death-dealing, old fashioned home grown justice. Twenty Six rounds before it even warms up, Seventy Five before it needs a reload. Totally redesigned and rebuilt in Belgium. They make something so much better than waffles. Lightweight, breaks down into undetectable parts, adjustable handle, good for right and left handers. Single shot or automatic fire. No safeties, because there is no safe when you stand against this gun."

Rhodes and Allen just stared at him, inscrutable.

Hammer was almost expecting that, putting the gun down without so much as taking a breath. "But we're not outfitting Jason Bourne here, we're building a superhero. You need something exotic and unexpected." He returned to his case and picked up a shorter gun which looked more like a jet black handheld pitching machine. "I give you the M-8, 40MM grenade launcher. Ammo is adjustable for smoke, explosive, tear gas or signal flare. Single piece Ammo chamber with quick action reload and it can dump every shell out in less than 15 seconds. Turn that suit into the ultimate in crowd control. The Hippie-Hitter. One Man Armies came long before Iron Man with crowd dusters like this puppy."

Rhodes and Allen just stared at him, inscrutable.

Silence. He opened the small box dramatically, and pulled out a small gleaming ebony cannister, which tapered on one end to a wicked needle tip. "This is the ultimate personnel weapon. It is the closest thing to a bullet that can fly around corners and hunt you down personally. It is the smallest bunker buster ever made. This baby will bust the bunker under the bunker you just busted. It is the highest level in armor piercing. It will go through anything, thanks to it's sidewinder accelerators and
diamond alloy skin. It's a smart weapon. So smart that it could write a book. A book that makes Ulysses look like it was written in crayon. And then it could read it to you. It holds at it's heart a charge of Semtex-C-1 composite that can consume everything in a contained space and bring down any wall built by human hands, up to, and including the pyramids. This is the very definition of a silver bullet. It will make Godzilla run away. It can fly through an obstacle course, find a specific bad guy, drill him clean and then sign it's name on the body. If God didn't hurl lightning, he would want to buy this." He ran the eight inch bullet under his nose like a fine cigar. "It is my masterpiece. My pride and joy. My crowning achievement. It is a source of unholy and unmerciful destruction and precision death. I call it 'The Ex-Wife'."

Rhodes and Allen just stared at him, inscrutable.

Silence.

Hammer put the 'Ex-Wife' down gently, and blew up, losing it finally. "Oh come ON! You're like Stonehenge here! Give me something! This is what I got, and it is the best in the world. You've gotta give me just a hint of what you're thinking!"

Rhodes finally spoke. "I think I'll take it."

Hammer beamed. "Excellent! Which one?"

"All of them."

Tony set up the Expo model in the workshop. "Jarvis, give me a scan please."

The holo-emitters scanned over the model carefully, as it had done with car engines, Iron Man suits...

A holographic copy of the model was projected in the garage, and Tony left his workshop behind to get the space to work in.

Waving his hands about, Tony began rotating the image, turning it on three axis' to see different angles.

"May I ask, sir," Jarvis put in. "What are you looking for?"

"Hell." Tony whined, scrubbing his face with his hands brutally. "It's here Jarvis. I was looking at it... and I just... I saw something. It was a shape. It was a... god, I don't know. For just a second, I thought..."

He looked at the hologram again. He needed to look at it right. "Remove the buildings."

Jarvis did so.

"And the gardens. The trees, all of that."

The only things left in the large floating projection, were the roads, and the huge Eco-Dome in the center. It looked, not unlike an atom.

"Sir, are you suggesting that your father may have left a coded diagram of an atom in the Expo?"

"Of course not Jarvis." Tony scorned. "If my father had something to tell me, he could have gotten the message to me privately in any one of a thousand ways. But... there is something here. Maybe it wasn't meant to be, but I got the idea for a repulsor from a ceiling fan set on high... Now if I can
Tony stared at the near-Atom model shape carefully, trying to stretch his mind out...

Tony studied the shape in front of him. No. There was no atom here. There was no element here. It was just a passing thought.

Tony blinked. His father had told him once, that science and discovery almost never happened in a straight line. Da Vinci had created submarines and helicopters long before there was any knowledge in the field of undersea exploration, or heavier than air flight. The idea was only science fiction, because science fact had not been understood yet.

He went back to the counter and opened his father's notebook to the last page.

---

**Einsteinium**

**Californium**

**Fermium**

**Eureka!**

---

Tony looked from the page, to the hologram, and then tapped a few keys on his pad, bringing up the Periodic Table of Elements. He looked up the elements listed.

Tony threw his hands up and the image spun crazily, following his movements automatically. "EUREKA!" Tony yelled.

The listed elements had one thing in common. They were all synthetic. If there was no element that would do the job, then Tony would have to create one.

There it was. Now. What was it?

Tony began manipulating the image, moving the protons further, binding the neutrons in...

The lines matched up silently, suddenly looking like an infinitely more complicated dodecahedron.

"Congratulations, sir." Jarvis said, following the planning session. "The projected new element does meet the necessary requirements to burn cleanly in an Arc Electrical reaction."

"I did it." Tony breathed. He turned and bowed to his inspiration. "You were right. We never get there in a straight line. We did it, dad. Dead for decades, and still taking me to school."

"Unfortunately sir, the designed element does not exist." Jarvis quickly interrupted.

Tony suddenly realized his father's problem. The elder Stark was constrained by the technology of the time. The synthetic elements of the periodic table were largely transformed versions of natural elements. The artificial ones had a very short half life. To make a complete transformation...

There was simply no high energy output generators with nearly enough power.

But the thirty years that followed had created things like particle accelerators and supercomputers.

He jumped up. "Get ready, Jarvis. We're going to need a major remodel."
New Elements

Vanko had to move fast.

Once, Ivan had watched the two most dangerous prisoners in Siberia kill each other in a knife fight. In prison the rule was simple: When there was a fight, be invisible. But these two prisoners were the most dangerous men on the inside. Nobody, Vanko included, had escaped their violence or their threats, so when they turned on each other, Vanko watched.

What nobody knew, was that they did it over a misunderstanding, due to a rumor that Vanko had started. Both men had threatened Vanko. So he tricked them into killing each other.

Once both of them were dead, Vanko was able to organize his eventual release without having to cross swords with either of them

*When you cannot take your enemies, you make them take each other.*

But now, Vanko was ready.

After a week of working on the suits, Vanko convinced Hammer that drones were better.

Another week and Vanko convinced Hammer that mainframe access would make the programming much faster.

Another week and Vanko convinced Hammer that a second workstation would allow him to duplicate the software across all the Drones.

Another week and Vanko managed to convince Hammer that letting him buy equipment online would prevent anyone else from finding out who was building these things.

When Hammer had quietly stopped checking in to see what progress had been made, Vanko went to work investigating. Hammer still hadn't corrected the weakness in his software. Vanko lost more respect for the man. After he'd blasted through the firewalls the first time, Hammer hadn't bothered to close the backdoors in the servers.

Vanko knew that Hammer had a new Ace. A soldier had stolen the Iron Man tech. Vanko heard this news and altered his plans again. A second Iron Man could tip the balance of power against him.

---

Tony remembered his father had told him once, that the Periodic Table of Elements was not always complete. He said that scientists had not always known each of these elements, but knew they were there. The atomic number of each and every element had such a pattern to it, that those who knew how to find such things could see that there were gaps in the table, and even what the unknown elements would look like; long before they had actually been found in nature…

Knew what they would look like…

Now Tony knew what he needed. He even knew what it would look like. He was able to project it's form and it's capabilities. The new element fit the… the pattern of the universe so clearly that Tony was sure it wasn't just fantasy.

But it would take a lot of power.
One advantage to having SHIELD play household nanny was the quick delivery of all parts. One simply did not have a Particle Accelerator lying around the house. Not even Tony Stark.

Tony was struggling to get his project finished. He was against the clock, and didn't know how many tries it might take to make this work. He was pretty smart, but there were a number of variables with any high power output. Particularly when you were experimenting with creating new elements.

The Particle Accelerator was effectively a household version of the much larger Hadron Supercollider. A large metal tube, bound together in sections. It was slowly constructed in the hollow wreck of his living room. The workshop was still more or less intact, but Tony had to feed the house Mains into the Accelerator directly. The workshop was completely offline as all the power was fed into the new equipment. Jarvis's hard drive had been brought upstairs to monitor the power levels.

Coulson walked in. "You don't answer your intercom."

"I'm not hungry, Pepper; just leave it on the table." Tony said automatically, trying to level to equipment.

The one addition to the Supercollider was an industrial laser's focusing lens, built into the edge of it. Tony had been trying to fix it in place neatly, but the section of the tube had been brought out of alignment by the added weight.

"What the hell is this?" Coulson roared.

Stark looked up in surprise, and found Coulson holding up the unmistakable Star and Stripes of Captain America's Shield. It was... incomplete, sections removed and laid bare, wire grillwork underneath. Coulson was holding it with undisguised hostility. "How the hell did you get this?"

Stark held up a hand. "Not what you think. That's not the original. It's still under guard at the Smithsonian. When the Army restarted the Super-Soldier program I started tinkering with the designs. I don't know who spilled a cup of coffee on the notes, but that's an original. I was just building a new one."

"Why?"

"Vibranium is a fairly new element, discovered after Captain America died. This one will be much stronger than the original when it's finished. In fact, bring that over ya?"

Coulson did so, bringing the half-shield over, and Stark slipped it under the Particle Accelerator without hesitation. The unfinished Shield buckled under the weight and crumpled.

Stark picked up his laser micrometer again, and grinned. "Ah! Perfectly level. Now I can get to work."

Coulson winced at the crunching sound. It was sacrilege to use The Captain's Shield as a table leg. "I have to go."

"Okay. Can you get me a triple espresso with-"

"Not down the street, I have to go. There's a situation in Mexico that The Director wants me to handle. There's still the surveillance team outside. They'll make sure you aren't disturbed."

Stark took that in. "Then I guess this is goodbye. If I can figure this out, then I'll see you next time."
If not... It was nice knowing you."

Coulson came forward and the two men shook hands. Coulson didn't let go right away. "Hang in
there. We still need you."

Tony took that in. Coulson was the first person who agreed with him. And he'd saved Pepper's life
once. And he'd helped clean house at Stark Industries after Stane died... and even he was telling
Tony about how he was relied on. Needed to be in gear...

Coulson left, leaving Tony with his thoughts. And his equipment.

Tony took the three elements together and cut them into shapes that fit together. Three elements,
all of which had a portion of the atomic structure. Fire or heat would not melt the atoms into each
other, only the material. High energy discharge might break the atoms apart, and reform them as a
whole.

If it worked, the merge would hold permanently.

The Particle Accelerator was sealed, one large tube in a perfect circle. Tony keyed in the
passwords and activated the machine.

The magnets came alive, and electrical energy exploded to life. The room was filled with the
sounds of unreal acceleration, the circular vacuum tube keeping the protons contained and
frictionless as the magnetic coils sped them faster and faster. Power was generated, and the room
started to quiver.

Tony checked the power levels, and moved over to the focusing lens. He turned the focusing lens
tightly and the Particle Accelerator opened; throwing huge amounts of power in proton form at
near speed of light velocity. The focusing lens caught these protons and directed them into a laser.

When moving at the speed of light, even mere protons became lethal weapons, and the laser beam
fired across the room... and missed!

*God! Should have checked that first! Poison's making my brain mush.* Tony scrambled to the lens
and tried to turn it toward the stand.

The lens was too hot, and he had to grab a wrench to turn the wheel from a distance. The laser
sliced its way through walls, through furniture, through the stand that mounted the target
materials...

The three metals were wrapped in focusing glass, the electrical energy diffusing, still at full power,
into the three metals, till it flared into bright white-hot brightness.

Tony pulled his safety goggles tighter against his face as the room whited out.

Justin Hammer had found a break in his schedule to fit some golf in once he got to New York. And
as it happened, White had been able to find Senator Stern. The two of them played a full eighteen
holes as they discussed the Iron Man situation. Stark had not been seen or heard from since his
party, and news that a suit had been stolen out of his home had leaked out within hours. But that
suit had not been seen since either. The government and the Armed Forces were suddenly doing
their own tap-dance, trying to keep things under control.

"The problem," Stern was saying. "Is that SI has already put up a patent lawsuit. The additions you
made to Colonel Rhodes' suit haven't convinced them otherwise. We may be facing a pretty
protracted mudslinging fight."

"You're concerned you'd lose?" Hammer quipped, making a nice long drive down to the green.

"Oh, we'd win of course." Stern scoffed. "But I'd rather Stark hand over the reins gracefully."

"Stark isn't graceful." Hammer said coldly.

"It's nice to meet someone else who understands that." Stern said, equally cold.

Hammer licked his lips as the Senator took his shot. "What if, hypothetically, we could have an Army of Iron Men, without Stark, or his lawyers, even being involved?"

Stern reacted, and missed the golf ball completely on his follow through. "Hypothetically?"

Hammer grinned wider. *Checkmate.* "And hypothetically, what if I could promise you a way to run a war, a military strong enough to conquer the world, without coffins with flags on them coming back every week."

"You're serious?"

"If I were, would that be worth something to you?"

"I'd say yes." Stern said evenly, trying not to seem eager.

"Tonight I've booked out the main concourse at the Stark Expo. I have a little something I'd like to share with the whole world, and I thought Tony might like to see it. I happen to have a few tickets. Are you doing anything tonight?"

Hammer's cell phone rang before Stern could respond. He checked the number. It was Vanko.

"Hello?"

"Hammer. Programming is tricky. Can not make deadline."

"WHAT?"

"Will salute." Vanko told him.

"Salute?" Hammer hissed. "What the hell does that get me Vanko? A puppet on a string can salute."

Vanko grinned. *A puppet on a string. How... appropriate.*

"I'm talking with Senator Stern. He heads the armed services committee. Now maybe you're having trouble with this part, but this is a weapons demonstration. You have to demonstrate something!"


Deathly silence.

"We'll talk about this when I get back." Hammer hung up on him.

It was an amusing diversion, seeing how far he could push Hammer. He had noticed that his bed had been replaced with a cot after the first week, the food had changed and become less lavish after the second change, and after the third week, armed guards had begun following him around, at the
edge of his workspace.

Vanko knew the point. He was having his freedoms denied, one by one. Punishment for being inventive.

The whips and the suit had been ready long before his guards had appeared, and Hammer had closed down all the surveillance to prevent any chance of Vanko being linked to this workspace.

His own toys were ready, and the rest was misdirection and window dressing.

Hammer had no idea who he was up against. Vanko was so much harder than that.

After subjecting the new element to high energy discharge for close to three hours, Tony started messing with the power settings, experimenting to see if it would take any more charge. Too much power and the new element would overload and be destroyed, lost forever. But too little charge applied, and the new element would destabilise; as most synthetic elements had a very short half-life.

Eventually however, he brought the power back and left the new metal to rest. It stayed there, glowing brightly.

Tony took a long moment to consider it. It was triangular, instead of the typical rectangle, a necessity of how it had been mounted in the fame. "Jarvis?"

"Congratulations, sir. As far as I can see it is not losing any molecular cohesion, and the atomic structure does match your proposed predictions. You have done it."

Tony stared at it. It was gleaming in the shadows of his wrecked home. He had done it. He was going to live. He had found the way.

"Thanks, dad." He whispered.

Tony was jazzed. He was going to live. Going to live. The idea was disturbingly distant. He had spent so much of his time convincing himself that he was already dead…

He looked around his shattered house. The result of his months of heartbreak.

He had a lot of work to do.

He reached over and grabbed the phone.

No dial tone.

Tony smirked. He'd lost his phone privileges. Well, it was hardly surprising after he snuck out the last time. He could wait.

The thought made him laugh. He could wait! He had time!

A new thought struck him. If the future Arc Reactor was going to have a lot more power, then it was probable that his body was not the only thing that would need to undergo some testing.

"Jarvis, bring up the Mark IV plans, please. I have a few ideas…"

Vanko took stock of his guards. They were huge and muscled. But they knew how to handle
themselves. Vanko could tell from the way they stood. They were more than just thugs, they were skilled. So Ivan made himself invisible in plain sight. No threat here guys, no challenge. Just a guy lying out on his cot, a good five feet outside your reach.

Hammer came into Vanko's room, looking cold and deadly. Vanko did not meet his eyes. He was stretched out comfortably on his cot. The bird was perched on his knee. There was really no other place for it.

"Hey there." Hammer said, still sounding cheery, but now it was clearly an act. "How you doing? You comfortable? You cosy? That's good. Got your bird there?" His mouth was tight, his hands were on his hips. "Thought you didn't like the bird. Well, you're friends now." He turned to the guards. "Take his bird."

One of the guards came forward, snatched the bird in one huge hand and stuffed it into a pillowcase, provided from the pillow Vanko was leaning against.

Hammer saw this. "His pillow. Take that too."

The guards stepped forward and stripped the cot; despite the huge man slouched on it.

"And his shoes. Both of them." Hammer said, finding the next thing that was immediately apparent. The bird was swinging around in his hand, still clutching the pillowcase, squawking crazily.

Vanko was left barefoot on a stripped cot, guards surrounding him, and his 'jailer' glaring hatefully at him. "You see that? I took your stuff. How does that make you feel? Kinda pissed off? Betrayed? Like you got cheated?"

The fact that he spelled out what Vanko was supposed to be feeling brought Ivan to the sudden realization that Hammer did not hear the word 'no' very often and didn't much care for it. What a child.

"Now, Ivan; we had ourselves a simple arrangement here. I get you out of jail, and you give me suits. You have instead provided me with sixteen drones that barely move. Do you see my problem here?"

"Tell me, Justin... Can I call you Justin?" Vanko mocked in Russian. "Justin, when you got me here, exactly how did you think it was going to go? Did you really believe that a man who could build you those Reactors, would be too stupid to see that you would have to kill me when I gave you what you wanted?"

Hammer's mouth was a tight thin line as he pretended to smile. "Y'know, I don't know if I told you this; but I DON'T SPEAK RUSSIAN!" He screamed.

Beat. The game was over. It was time to pick the winner.

Hammer and the guards all instinctively stepped back just a bit as Vanko slowly and calmly got off the cot.

Vanko stood upright, and in flawless English, spoke his piece calmly to Hammer. "You don't know much about me, nor did you bother to ask, so let me make it clear. My name is Ivan Vanko; I am a student of the finest schools of Russia, and America. I am considered lower than you due to the curse of politics and geography, but do not take that to mean that I am in any way inferior to you. If you believe that you have the power over me because you have the ability to take things, then you are more of a fool than I thought. You have no idea, the things that I have had taken from me, and
still claimed victory. The only thing that you have ever said which I had the slightest agreement to, is that I required your resources. And because you were so ignorant, so desperate for revenge and completely lacking in any manner of forethought or conscience, you handed me everything I asked for." He said with great eloquence. "You asked for suits, and I gave you toys that don't work while you thanked me for it. Stark would never have fallen for it. So, Mr Hammer, if anyone in this little conversation is going to reassess their views on our little arrangement; IT'S YOU!" He roared the last two words with such sudden, ferocious menace that Hammer actually jumped back.

Vanko sat down calmly. "Now get out!"

Hammer was staring, suddenly realized how much the Russian had played him. Hammer found himself reviewing the last month and wondering, of all things, where the huge man had learned to speak English...

Vanko was slouched calmly on the stripped bed, the same position he was in when Hammer entered the room.

The billionaire took in one shuddering breath after another, and held to the one card he had left to play. "I have my own supply of Stark tech now. Since you've kindly provided the Arc Reactors, and the military has kindly provided the rest, you have more than outlived your usefulness to me. Your contract is hereby terminated." He said coldly. "And now if you will excuse me, I have to dress for tonight." He turned to leave and looked at his guards. "Once I'm gone, kill him. And make sure there's nothing left that can identify him."

His guards came over closer, as Hammer walked out coldly, the door shutting behind him with a slam.

Vanko slid his weight forward to the edge of the bed. Both men reacted, moving to the left and right. They knew how to fight as a team.

Vanko let out a breath. It wouldn't have been the first time he was outnumbered in a jailhouse fight. He checked the room. The cot was not secured. The walls were bare and only the door made of metal...

"I bear no grudge against either of you." He told his guards calmly. "I have a purpose. I have killed to achieve it. If you force me, I will kill again. If I succeed or fail, your master will take the blame, and you will be left to bear the brunt of that. It has happened to me, and I am sorry. Leave now. I have no particular desire to cause you pain."

His guards drew a gun, one each. "Get up. Face the wall."

Execution style. Vanko thought. He stood and faced the wall.

Vanko watched the shadow on the wall carefully and picked his moment. The gun came up, and Vanko took one step back, tracking where they were by the shadows cast on the wall. he moved faster than he'd ever moved, the gun was suddenly beside his head, and Vanko brought both hands up, clasping the man's gun hand.

His partner yelled, and aimed his own weapon, when Vanko twisted the arm he had in his grip, keeping the first guard between his body and the gun.

The second guard couldn't get a clear shot, and made the fatal mistake of trying to spare his partner's life.

Vanko threw both he and his victim back, smashing all three of them into the wall. One of the guns
went flying; Vanko was up first and turned to face them head on; settled into an attack crouch, snatching up the fallen gun.

Both guards froze, and Vanko grinned toothily, calmly disassembling the gun into three parts with his bare hands and tossing them aside.

The guards came up, and Vanko was suddenly between them, in close and deadly. Neither of them could get the clear shot. Vanko smashed one hand up into the nearest nose, his head snapping back in a blast of blood. The gun went flying, and Vanko snatched it up, throwing it across the room, under the cot.

Both guards reacted quickly to the fact that they were all unarmed, slightly unnerved at the idea that Vanko was more than willing to toss the weapons away himself.

"Get the gun!"

The two guards moved at once in different directions, one lunging for the cot, and the gun beneath it, the other lunging for Ivan. Vanko let the second hit him in the face, instead opting to go for the former, tripping him from behind as he moved.

The action let one of the guards get a solid punch to the head in quick, but sent the other one falling against the metal frame of the cot, and he slumped from the blow to the head.

Ivan shook off his own pain and turned to the other guard. "One down, one to go." Vanko grinned.

The guard did not respond. He attacked.

The fight was quick and brutal and vicious. Vanko knew that his guards could handle themselves, and had to work to keep ahead. The blows were short and quick, aiming for the eyes and throat and joints. It was a battle that required reflexes to block instead of strength to overpower, and Vanko almost found himself on the losing side, as his huge size and massive strength worked against him suddenly.

Finally, Ivan had managed to work his opponent over against the wall, and he lunged, wrapping his hands around the guard's neck. The guard started hitting back, raining blow after blow, which Ivan took without flinching, not letting his grip weaken.

Vanko saw movement out of the corner of his eye, and quickly spun his opponent around, just as the sound of gunfire rang out. Vanko had managed to move his opponent into position as a human shield, and Vanko's enemy suddenly went slack.

Taking a heartbeat to get his bearings, Ivan saw the first guard, back on his feet, clutching his head with one hand and the second gun with his other.

Ivan did not toss the body aside, instead he charged, using the body as a battering ram. Three more shots rang out, all of them taken by Ivan's grisly shield, till the Russian got in close enough to toss the body aside and push the gun hand away. It fired again, the shot going far too wide, and Ivan brought his other hand up, pile driving his last enemy in the face again.

He dropped, apparently dazed, his eyes rolling in different directions.

Vanko sighed and quietly collected the punch-drunk man. "I am sorry brother, but in my defence, I did give you fair warning. I have seen many men killed without having been shown that consideration. All you had to do was walk away."
Minutes later, Vanko made his way out of the 'cell' to the workshop where he had spent his last six weeks, and saw that all the drones he had built for Hammer had been removed.

Vanko checked, and realised that Hammer had reworked the suit hardware and weapons with his usual team, but simply uploaded the Drone AI software into Stark's suit. Vanko couldn't help but laugh out loud at that. Stark's suit must have had a wireless uplink, and since the Hammer software was all handwritten by Ivan himself...

A few minutes of typing, and Vanko had confirmed that Hammer had left the software unchanged, and Ivan had access to the new Iron Man suit. A quick check on the access list confirmed that only Justin Hammer was able to make changes or give instructions to the automatic suit controls, or the drones.

But Hammer still had not corrected for the back door in the software that Vanko had used to breach the firewalls on the first day he walked in. More than likely, the deadlines he was putting on his people had forced them to leave their own way in so that they could keep updating what they had made.

Vanko played with the connections a moment, and could activate the handheld computer that Hammer had taken with him, the handheld that would give him control over the drones while on stage. He activate the handheld, though it was turned off, (a trick he had learned from a disavowed CIA Agent during his time in prison) and confirmed that Hammer was yelling at stagehands, demanding that the suit and the Drones be placed in position quickly.

The show was about to begin.

Vanko abandoned his workstation and turned quickly to an ordinary web-browser, checking the itinerary for the Stark Expo. Tony Stark was not scheduled to appear.

Vanko grinned. That would change.

Weapons demonstrations required very strict preparation. Emergency crews were always on hand, and needed to know exactly what each and every portion of the demonstration would involve. If a machine gun went off, the crew off stage needed to know if it was part of the show.

Pepper was organising the latest in a thousand odd things that the Expo required her say-so on, given she was CEO, and present at the festivities, when she noticed that Justin Hammer had sealed off the entire main concourse in preparation for his presentation that night. Nobody had seen what he was demonstrating.

Pepper had tasked Natalie with the mission of finding out why.

"Natalie?" Pepper called her over. "Any word on what Hammer's so cheerful about?"

"You were right. He's unveiling something like Iron Man tech." Romanov reported. "He's reserved the entire Main Stage, he's had guards posted around the backstage access, and he's called in a lot of markers to have the entire Press Corp available. The release says that he 'will answer the doubts brought against him by Stark at the Senate Hearing.' He's also personally invited the Armed Services Committee, and a good number of the Top Brass."

Pepper swore under her breath. "He's cracked it then. Do you think it's a coincidence that he made it happen less than a week after Rhodes stole a suit?"

"I think that you know the answer to that as well as I do." Romanov said. "Incoming."
Pepper turned and found Hammer closing in on her neatly. "Pepper, my favorite person on earth! Did you hear? It's going to be a great show!" He held out two tickets. "I wanted to deliver these personally, make sure you were invited. I hope that you and Tony can come! I reserved two seats for you. Best view in the house!"

"Tony couldn't make it." Pepper said coldly.

Hammer nodded sympathetically. "Still drunk? Or just hiding? Are you sure it's safe to leave him alone?"

"Listen, you-"

He reached out and put the tickets in her hand forcibly. "Find yourself a date. At least one of you can be an adult."

Romanov's hand flashed out and caught Hammer's wrist. "Remove your hands from Miss Potts." She snarled.

Hammer jumped back about three feet in a hop. Fire raced up his arm and he seemed to count his fingers; as Romanov, now more of a trained attack dog than a PA, stepped between Pepper and Hammer firmly.

Hammer struggled to regain his footing, still smarting from a similar slap down from Vanko, and let the veneer of calm drop from his face. "Potts, I want you there. Tonight I personally put the last nail into Stark's coffin, and you're going to watch."

Hammer turned and stalked off.

Pepper was openly staring at Romanov, who demurred lightly. "I do not like that man at all, Ma'am."

"Pepper!"

Pepper turned and saw Rhodes running up to her, wearing a blue jumpsuit. "Hi... um..."

"Hello, Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes." Pepper said politely. "How are you today?"

Rhodes felt the barbs hit him and winced. "Pepper, I just need to know: Are we okay?"

"No, Lieutenant Colonel, we are not." Pepper said calmly. "You had better get ready; Hammer tells me it's going to be a great show."

She turned on her heel and walked away from him sharply.

Romanov was right behind her. "You have to go. You know that, right?"

Pepper nodded. "If I don't go, there'll be a whole bunch of reporters asking me why nobody from SI was there. And if that show is what we both think it is..."

"Yep." Romanov confirmed. "Have you spoken to Happy since we left LA?"

Pepper flushed. "Um... no. Why? Did he say something?"

"He's back in your room. He's been looking for you."
Pepper let herself into the room quietly. Hogan was flipping channels with one hand, had the phone glued to his ear with the other. He looked up as the door closed, and he put down the phone.

"Hey." Hogan looked pleased to see her. "Tony's phone is still off the air."

"I know." Pepper said quietly, not looking at him.

"I'm probably being silly, but since we left LA, I've been getting the feeling that... that you've been avoiding me."

Pepper didn't answer, wasn't looking at him.

"Pepper?" He probed gently. "Right before we left LA, Tony came to see us. Is there something going on?"

The question was not jealous. It was simple, and sincere, and Pepper could not think of a single reason why he didn't deserve the honest truth.

"When... when Tony and I were talking... there was... There was a moment where we almost..." She flushed bright red.

"A Moment." Happy repeated, as though trying out the words.

"Nothing happened. It was little more than just eye contact. But what almost happened should never have almost happened and it made things a little weird for me with you. And absolutely tragic with Tony. So... well, it's not like there weren't a thousand things for me to do when we got here..." She stammered. She never stammered or babbled with anyone but Tony... "I was just embarrassed."

Happy was silent.

"Please say something." Pepper said quietly. "Please."

"Pepper..." Happy said quietly. "Are you still in love with him?"

Pepper felt her heart stop, and then start pounding impossibly hard. "Still?"

"I know you've felt for him before, and after Afghanistan he changed, for the better... but the last few months he changed back, more like himself than ever, and I saw that you were fed up with him. I thought that maybe you had put it behind you..." He took a breath. "Pepper, if I thought that you hadn't, then I never would have asked you out in the first place..."

Pepper licked her lips. "Happy, Tony and I were never like that."

Happy nodded slowly, like that was exactly what he expected her to say. "Okay then." He said. "So why were you too embarrassed to tell me that you made eye contact with a man who is now on the other side of the country?"

Pepper struggled to find a good answer to that. He was just too damn perceptive when it came to her. She started to speak, when her phone rang.

She and Hogan stared at each other. Her phone rang again.

Happy let her off the hook, yet again. "You should answer that."

Pepper pulled her cell phone. "Potts."
"You've been in there for three minutes." Romanov's voice answered. "Do you need an exit?"

"Yes. Thank you." Pepper said gratefully.

There was suddenly a knock on the door. Romanov stuck her head in, waving her own cell. "Excuse me, Miss Potts?"

Pepper kept the phone to her ear. "Yes, Natalie?"

"I'm afraid you have to take this call Ma'am, it's very urgent."

Pepper gave Happy an apologetic look, and pretended to cover her phone. "I'm sorry, Happy; but we'll have to finish this conversation later."

Hogan was not pleased, but nodded his agreement.

Pepper ducked out with Romanov, and both of them put their phones away. "I'm sorry if that was presumptuous, Ma'am, but-"

"It's okay, Natalie." Pepper said, sounding exhausted. "Not often do I feel like a coward, but I do right now."

Tony kept tinkering. "Jarvis, how does the modular connection hold up to the new power levels?"

"All removable sections of the suit are operating at full power sir."

Tony nodded, and started unlatching the new wrist pieces. "Lasers are cool and all, Jarvis, but if they keep burning out the lenses after one discharge... Well, put the new components with the rest.

The new Iron Man was designed to be constructed in pieces. Tony could mix and match whatever parts he needed for each assembly.

"May I say, sir; how pleased I am that you are so involved in a new project? I had calculated a 65% chance that you had given up on all interest in preparation for your death." Jarvis said plainly.

Tony started disassembling the particle accelerator. "What can I say? I'm-"

The phone rang.

"Ooh!" Tony enthused. "Got my phone privileges back!" He darted across the workshop and answered. "Pepper? Is that you?"

"Stark." A thick Russian accent growled jovially. "You were right. Use a non-conductive material to keep the charge. I tried it. Worked wonders. Can't wait to show you my new whips."

Tony paled. He knew this day was going too well. He quickly muted the phone call. "Jarvis, trace the call!"

The screen popped up with several scrolling numbers as Jarvis began the trace. Tony un-muted the phone line. "Ivan. I knew you were too ugly to get killed in a jail cell. How's the weather where you are? Good for flying?"

He could hear Ivan smirk. "I've been watching the news. The Sharks came fast didn't they, just like I warned you. They say you're not a superhero any more. Well, that's a shame. Superheros are always so predictable."
Tony checked the screen. The trace had closed in enough to run through two satellites and at least one phone exchange... New York? Vanko was in America?

*Keep him talking, Tony!* "They always win; if that's what you mean." He said aloud. "So, where you calling from. I'll come get you."

Vanko laughed. "Well, the trace you have on this call will find me soon enough. I do wonder if you can get here in time to stop me though. You gave me such great bait to dangle at you. What you did to my father over forty years, I will do to you in four minutes. See you soon."

The call disconnected, and Stark turned to the screen. The call had traced to... a Hammer Industries Warehouse?

**HAMMER!** Tony thought violently. *This time that little troll is going to die!*

*You gave me such great bait to dangle at you. What you did to my father over forty years, I will do to you in four minutes. See you soon.*

Tony replayed Vanko's taunt and knew where he was going. Hammer was presenting something at the Stark Expo, and Vanko was calling from a Hammer warehouse. Who knew what Vanko had built?

**Tony! It's bait!** He warned himself. **Vanko wants you there. That's why he called! Don't show up, and he can't get you...**

**Pepper is in New York.** He debated with himself. **If you don't show up, he'll force you.**

Tony, you know that you are in no shape for this. Even if the new Reactor doesn't poison you, even if the new Reactor makes your suit more powerful, you flat-lined a week ago. you are not in top form. There's another suit out there, backed by the US Military, that's the whole reason why Rhodey took the damn suit, specifically so that they wouldn't need you for this. **Call Rhodey. Call the SHIELD agents posted outside, have them alert Fury. That's what you do.** Tony thought pointedly to himself. **But on the other hand... nah.**

Tony grabbed the new Arc Reactor core, and yanked his shirt up.

"Sir, we still have no idea how the new Element would react under combat situations, or for that matter how your body will react to it!" Jarvis shouted.

Tony slipped the new core into the Reactor, and slapped the thing into his chest. "You wanna run tests? Start running them!"

Tony ran for the workshop, there was fire in his eyes and fury in his motions; when the Reactor flared and suddenly Tony roared. "Argh! I can... Gah!"

Tony knew what was happening. The new high output Reactor was pouring a much higher power flow into the electromagnet. The magnet was repelling the shrapnel in his chest, and it was moving back because the magnetic field was so much stronger. But the tiny palladium particles, repelled from the palladium core by the magnet before they could be burned up... Those particles had been filling his blood, killing him slowly, but now those tiny bits of metal were moving, being repelled through his body quickly.

The metal waste was moving away from his chest, being forced through his body... Tony could feel it leeching away from his chest, away from his heart.
He dropped to his knees and spat out something black and sticky. He could feel more of it moving up his throat. Tony forced himself to stand. "Taste's like metal and... coconut... I can feel it moving... it's... WOOOOOOAAHH!"
Hammer came into view, the music loud enough to make the audience inaudible. Pepper glanced around and didn't see too much applause or cheering going on. Hammer was a relatively unknown. Especially compared to Tony Stark. He danced across the stage. Actually danced.

Pepper and Romanov were both watching with thinly veiled contempt.

Hammer did his final little routine and posed as the huge screen behind him came to the end of the music with a flourish.

Some of the crowd were applauding quietly. Most were simply waiting to see what was going to happen. Nowhere near the public reaction that Tony Stark had; which is what Hammer was aiming for.

"For centuries, our brave men and women of the Armed Forces have held the proud role of protecting this country from all enemies, foreign and domestic. And then a few years ago, in a widely publicised shift, we turned that job over to one man, with an idea. And idea that he kept to himself. And idea that he was selfish with. Nevertheless, it was a fantastic innovation. One that the world embraced in all its spectacle. It was without question, the way of the future." Justin took in the crowd and spread his arms wide. "Well today the press has a new problem. They're about to run out of ink."

Pepper looked around the audience. Senators, Generals, Captains of Industry, popular mainstream reporters in the front row; Expo personnel and Stark Employees in the second section, the public behind them and in the wings. Hammer had placed his audience personally. The ones that he wanted eating out of his hand had the best view, people he was trying to beat right behind them, people he wanted to applaud were surrounding them.

The music came crashing back as spotlights focused on hammer again. "My tribute to this great nation! I give to our protectors... The Hammer Drones!"

The generals were leaning forward, the Senators were all eyeing each other, drawing up the battle line, the reporters were straining with their cameras...

"Army!" Hammer roared, as though summoning something. Behind him on the stage; the stage door opened, and on the left of the stage, as if responding to Hammer's gesture, four metal men, looking a lot like Iron Man, only standing ramrod straight, and covered in khaki paint. The music swelled into a orchestral rendition of 'The Caissons Go Rolling Along'.

"Air Force!" Hammer summoned, and from under the stage raised four more Machines, painted in light blue and grey, as the music swelled into 'Into The Wild Blue Yonder'.

"Navy!" Hammer commanded and from the stage raised four robotic warriors, with fins and deep ocean blue paint, while the music crashed into the opening riff of 'Anchors Aweigh'.

"Marines!" Hammer roared over the applause as the crowd finally started to cheer and from the stage raised four more metal solders in Marine green, and the music crashed into a rendition of 'The Halls of Montezuma'.

Hammer was grinning manically. He was winning the crowd over! They were falling into line! "Better than a bunch of cheerleaders!"
Pepper checked. The Generals in the front row were watching with great interest, people were starting to grin and nod, clapping along with the music.

"But there will always be a need for people in combat. Our brave soldiers will always be there on the front lines. And with that in mind, I present to you, the crown jewel of the Hammer Industries Defence line. Piloted by Lt Colonel James Rhodes, I give you The War Machine!"

From under the stage, dead center in the front came a familiar silver suit, redone completely with heavy weapons, and a new gun metal grey and blue paint job. But it was shifting posture slightly. It was not a machine. It was a suit.

A suit that Pepper recognized.

"For America and her interests," Hammer delivered the coup de grace. "Hammer Industries answers the call to serve!"

War Machine came crisply to attention and saluted.

Sixteen drones behind him did the same in flawless unison.

Hammer saluted them all back.

The crowd whooped. Watching Iron Man was always show, simply because it was beyond awesome to look at, and here on stage were over a dozen. Add in the music and the lights, and the huge viewscreen waving a flag behind them all, and nobody could deny the moment.

Only two in the audience were unmoved.

Rhodey... Pepper thought miserably. Dammit Rhodes, I trusted you.

Romanov sent Pepper an equally bleak look.

In the sky, hurtling toward the Expo at unreached speeds, Tony was taking the whole thing in over his HUD; seeing the whole show.

Sixteen drones. If Vanko built them all...

Plus War Machine.

Jarvis ran a scan from the TV feed and put up a quick extrapolation of the suit. A light schematic ran over Tony’s HUD, using the files on the Mark II as a base. From what Tony could tell, there had been no refit, only additions. The shoulders were enlarged and the pain had been upgraded to include gun-metal blue across the torso and legs.

The most obvious differences were the weapons. From head to toe, the suit had heavy weapons loaded and attached. Missile launchers on the forearms, grenade launchers around the wrists; and over the right shoulder, mounted on a powered swivel was a large six barreled mini-gun.

The shoulders had been enhanced with more supports. From what Tony could tell, they had just welded a bunch of guns onto his suit.

"Jarvis, can you contact Rhodes on a link that will not be audible?"

"Negative, sir. There have been changes to the software interface. Most likely to make the suit AI accept weapons. I cannot interface with the wireless link in the Mark II. I can try and override the
new software."

Tony thought about that for a moment. If he was going to live through this, he was going to need Rhodes on his team. Hard enough to do without hacking the suit on his back…

"No. Redirect all power to boosters."

Iron Man leaped forward faster, praying that Vanko wasn't waiting somewhere along his route in ambush.

Vanko was sitting calmly at the workstation in hammer's warehouse, his screens putting up over a dozen viewpoints. He could see the whole thing from the Drone's optics, he had the feed from the Hammer technicians backstage open on his screen, keeping track of them, he had a link to hammer's own PDA, in the billionaire's pocket...

The War Machine's HUD was currently the main feed, and the motion sensors picked up a sudden distant movement.

Vanko sat up straighter and started taking control, one feed at a time.

There was a sudden roar in the sky, and everybody looked around with interest to see what Hammer was going to unveil next.

Pepper didn't turn. She knew that sound.

There was a spot of light moving on the horizon. In seconds it grew like a meteorite about to hit, when suddenly the trail of light that it left behind it flared and the thing swept into the building like a missile.

The Unmistakable Iron Man swept to a dead stop at the edge of the stage and clanged down.

The crowd went out of it's mind! Lo Behold, the original himself had come.

Hammer grit his teeth. He was not about to let Stark steal his thunder. "Hey!" He cheered. "Look who came to give his blessings!"

Iron Man walked right past Hammer and rushed up to War Machine. "Rhodey, you need to listen."

"Tony, let's not do this now. There are civilians in here." Rhodes knew that if Stark was drunk again, that wouldn't help. There had been civilians at the birthday party too.

Stark knew exactly what his friend was thinking. "Listen to me. I'm sober. You need to trust me for the next five minutes. Did you give Hammer the Arc Reactor?"

"No." Rhodes assured him. "That wasn't part of the project. It was never intended."

"Every one of these drones is running an Arc Reactor."

"WHAT?" Rhodes was stunned. Sure, he had seen the circular lights on all the Drones, but Hammer had told them that it was a different power source and that the lights were just for show; purely to invoke the Iron Man image. If Hammer had gotten Arc Reactors from somewhere else…

"Vanko. He built them for Hammer. They're working together." Stark hissed. He could have screamed for all that could be heard over the crowd.
"Vanko's alive?" Rhodes' mind started racing. If Vanko was alive, then Iron Man and Arc Reactor Tech was a genie waiting to escape and wreak havoc. And over a dozen had already been built… And he had helped them! He had given them the top gun in the pack!

Stark, convinced his friend was not involved, went back to Hammer, bunching his fists. "Where is he?"

"Where's who?"

"Ivan Vanko."

"Never heard of him." Hammer grinned.

Iron Man was about to show Hammer exactly what Stark Technology could do to a smug face, when Rhodey suddenly yelped and Tony's HUD flashed with Lock On warnings.

"Tony! Tony!" War Machine yelled digitally.

The huge mini-gun swiveled toward Iron Man, and the crowd behind him suddenly stopped cheering, seeing the gun point in their direction. The Drones all reacted too,

Iron Man stepped back, crouched into combat posture. "Is that you?"

"It's not me! I have no control!" War Machine yelled. "Tony, get outta here!"

Tony kicked himself. It was a trap, and he walked into it because Vanko had left him no other choice.

"Let's take it outside." Iron Man warned, and pulsed his jets, taking off and rushing for altitude, right out the top of the main stadium.

Rhodes roared in futile rage as he felt his own suit take off after him.

Sixteen Drones, suddenly exploding into action, raised their weapons skyward, aiming after Iron Man, all of them firing thousands of rounds to the roof of the stadium. Glass shattered, raining down on the crowd, who broke and ran screaming for the doors at the sound of the first shot.

Hammer stood, staring blankly at the Drones as they all marched past him, blatantly ignoring him. "Salute, huh? Seems they can do more than that." He said numbly to himself.

There was screaming. There were... bodies. The drones had apparently started moving on other targets once Stark had escaped.

Hammer wandered off the stage, in no particular hurry. He pulled his PDA, started tapping commands to shut down all drones. The gunfire continued in the distance, more screaming, more explosions...

Hammer put the PDA away and pulled out his cell phone. He called the warehouse. No answer.

Hammer tossed the phone over his shoulder, lost. It clattered over one or two bodies wearing general's uniforms...

Hammer made his way backstage where technicians were working frantically. Hammer wandered slowly in their direction.
White was already on top of the technicians, and turned to make his report to Hammer. "Sir, we don't know. We lost all control a moment ago. There's no reason for it. They're saying that the commands coming in are written in some code language that they've never seen before."

"Try Russian."

Russian computer codes and encryptions were written in an entirely different way than American codes. His technicians likely wouldn't be able to crack it.

Hammer met White's eyes. "Did you call the warehouse?"

White looked back evenly. "A few minutes ago. No answer."

Hammer felt the truth hit him right between the eyes. Vanko had taken the entire Expo in seconds.

"Hammer!"

Hammer turned and saw Pepper and Romanov storming up to them. "Yeah. That's the face I wanted to see. Look, you guys get lost. I get that you want to blame somebody."

"What the hell is happening?"

"It's not us!" One of the technicians yelled instinctively.

Hammer pointed at him. "You shut up and get back to work. Potts, we can handle this-"

Pepper was ignoring him. She was moving in on the tech that had spoken. "If it's not you then who is it?"

Hammer got in her way and stuck a finger in her face. "Listen you stupid b-"

Romanov moved like quicksilver, and Hammer felt his glasses explode as the side of his head slammed into the workstation. "Tell me who did this. Give me a name." She ordered.

Hammer tried to straighten up and failed completely. "Vanko. Ivan Vanko."

"Where is he?" She snarled ferociously in his ear.

Iron Man couldn't begin to think where to save people first.

The marine drones had cleared the stadium, people running out in front of them, as they reached open ground they raised their heavy cannons and started firing mortars at the area, blasting up sections of the ground as people ran. There were already casualties. Some of them children!

And stopping to try and save them would be suicide.

The Air Force and navy drones had taken off in flight, all of them chasing after Iron Man with Vanko's bloodthirsty intent.

And then of course, there was War Machine.

The former Stark suit was by far the most dangerous. The weapons were huge and it's abilities beyond that of a Drone.

Rhodes was yelling from behind. "Tony, you got twelve on your six, plus me! Cut left fifteen
degrees to keep them tripping over each other. I've got the lead! Heat Seekers have tone!"

"Who the hell puts heat seekers on a shoulder launcher?" Stark roared back.

"Put it in a memo! Bank! Now!"

Iron Man did so and narrowly escaped death by explosive ordinance. "Jarvis! Does the Mark II suit still have the wireless uplink?"

"Affirmative, sir. I can detect the signal, but it is currently receiving data from an unknown IP."

"Tony, hard right!" Rhodey yelled.

Iron Man did so, and saw Drones closing in from the sides. "Jarvis, hack the wireless! We gotta break in!"

Romanov had cast aside all the trappings of her Assistant persona. Happy had kept the car close enough, and came screaming up when the gunfire started. He saw her coming and fairly leapt out of the car. "Pepper!" He shouted. "Where-"

"She's fine. Take me to Hammer Industries." Romanov commanded.

Hogan stopped short. "Hammer? Are you nuts. We have to-"

"Iron Man can handle the Drones. I have to get Vanko."

"I have to help Pepper."

Romanov didn't even break stride. "Then give me the keys."

Beat.

"I'm coming with you." Hogan said as she passed him and got in the car.

"Tony! I got a lock!" Rhodes yelled.

"On what?"

"'On what'? On you!"

Iron Man spun crazily, trying to throw off the missile lock as War Machine fired a AA-missile spread. Constant spinning while flying straight ahead, confused his silhouette, and the missiles drew in closer to each other as they got nearer their target, till two of them collided and caught the missiles in a burst of flame.

War Machine came rocketing out of the smoke and fire, undaunted; with seven of the thirteen remaining airborne drones in formation behind him.

Tony pulled left; back toward the Main Stadium, and saw the four other Drones; in marine camouflage, gunning at the crowd, blowing up cars and stalls along the perimeter, keeping the civilians trapped within a box of explosions and bullets, before wading in to aim at them.

Iron Man swooped down low again, trying to keep the angles on the incoming fire away from the people, as the Marine Drones spotted him and aimed their guns upward again, giving the civilians
precious seconds.

Iron Man leveled out. He needed a miracle fast!

"This is suicide, you know that." Hogan shouted over his shoulder.

"No, it's not."

"Lady, Hammer's got about a hundred guards; lots of them ex-military, electronic security, laser grid doors, and who knows what else. We got a PA and a driver."

"Drive faster." Romanov told him and started stripping off her clothes.

Hogan looked incredulously at her in the mirror and felt his jaw drop open at the hinges from the sight of all that flawless skin. "What the hell are you doing?" He demanded once he found his voice.

"Watch the road!" Romanov emptied out her purse and unrolled a long black cloth.

Hogan returned his gaze to the road and quickly swept between two motorcycles, somewhat illegally. He glanced back in the mirror and saw she was letting her hair down. Literally. Thick red hair curled over a jet black cat-suit, Fingerless gloves adjusted weapons holsters attached to her thighs and bandoleers armed with things that Hogan couldn't guess at criss-crossing her hips.

Romanov noticed when his eyes went straight to her chest, a feeling she was experienced with; but this time on the SHIELD insignia her uniform bore.

To his credit; Hogan took in the fact that she was an agent and responded accordingly much faster than Stark did. but then he was brain damaged and hung-over at the time. Hogan merely sat up straighter in his seat, gripped the wheel tighter; and set his jaw grimly. "Do you have backup coming to Hammer Industries?"

"No. I can handle it."

"Lady, you may be bullet-proof, but I'm not."

"Well then why the hell did you come?" Romanov demanded. "Pepper was back at the Expo."

"Well what could I possibly do for Pepper that she couldn't do herself?" Hogan snapped.

Romanov stopped at that one. He wasn't just talking about tonight.

They traveled in silence for a moment. "Happy." She said finally. "I come from a field where failures are public and successes are secret. In my life, you can always tell the people who are needed; and still go unnoticed. It's been my experience that if those people went anywhere, the world would end. There are worse ways to spend your life. It's not what you lack, it's what you're asking in return."

Hogan stared straight ahead for a moment. "God. You didn't miss a single thing did you?"

"I'm very thorough." Romanov reported. "Drive faster."

Hogan put his foot down. "Where were you hiding the guns?"

"Don't ask."
"Jarvis, give me a map of the expo." Stark commanded.

A blueprint of the Expo layout popped up on his HUD, with the location of himself marked as the blueprint spun with his movements, keeping the directions equal.

Tony scrambled to come up with an idea. He had War Machine and almost half a dozen "Flares!"

Iron Man opened up with a pyrotechnic display, sending white hot heat seeking decoys in every direction. One or two of the drones followed, but quickly got back on his tail, veering away from the flames.

Tony swore within his mask. The Drones weren't just big dumb heatseekers. Vanko was directing them, correcting their targets when he tried to throw them off.

Well Vanko couldn't give them all unique attention, and in close quarters flying, there wasn't a drone yet that could respond to remote control fast enough.

Iron Man swooped down low to the ground, heading for the parking structures, weaving in and out of the pylons of the larger buildings, creating a rocket speed obstacle course.

The Drones came swooping in right behind him, trying to scatter formation enough to weave through the path he led. One of them didn't make it and shattered with an explosive roar against the stone.

The rest of them opened up with their heavy rifles; rounds going off everywhere around Iron Man. Some slammed into his metal skin, knocking him about, some went wide, exploding the pylons into bullet ridden wrecks, some went too low, shattering windows and ventilating cars that the people were trying in vain to escape to.

Iron Man pulled up. The longer he stayed close to the ground, the more likely that people were going to get hurt, and the more likely Iron Man would be knocked wide on one of his hairpin turns, wiping himself out.

Tony would have crossed his fingers if it wouldn't throw off his flight. He was running out of real estate fast. If he tried to out maneuverer them, they would split up and let him waste time trying. If he tried to out think them, Vanko could take direct control. If he tried to run, they would keep pecking away at him.

Romanov was out of the car before it stopped moving. Happy was with her in seconds. "Stay in the car." She told him.

"Like hell."

"I can't guarantee your safety." Romanov warned.

"Don't care." Hogan snapped. "I'm with you."

Romanov nodded and made a small device appear like a conjurers trick. She put it against the door of Hammer Industries and the electronic keypad fizzled in seconds. Romanov kicked the door open, fire in her eyes and merciless calm in her movements.
Happy fought the urge to simply stay away from her when the first two guards came around the corner and attacked. Happy threw himself past her and took the first one head on, slamming a fist into his jaw.

Romanov flowed past him like an angry storm and pounced on the second.

The guard on Happy was fighting dirty and brutal. For all his experience in knowing how to take a punch, Happy had been trained as a boxer, not a wrestler. He kept an eye on Romanov out of the corner of his eye. She was fast and graceful, moving like something out of the Matrix. Hands, feet, elbows and knees flashing like a tornado, taking the guard apart.

At the end of the hallway, two more guards came rushing. Romanov filed that away. Hammer's guards worked in pairs.

Romanov spared Happy a glance. He was taking a beating, but dealing back just as hard. He was finally getting the point that this was not a boxing match.

Romanov ignored him. He was not her mission. She had warned him. She moved for the guards. She gathered speed, and as the guards drew weapons, she went down, suddenly sliding on the linoleum floor, slipping between both of them before they could react at her new stance. She was between them and tossed two disks.

The flash grenades went off, making both men drop their weapons and grab at their eyes.

Romanov stayed on the floor and spun around, sweeping their legs out from under them. Fury had commanded that there be Zero Body Count during her mission. If she could actually use her guns, this would have been over long ago.

At the end of the hallway was the intersection leading to the offices one way, the elevators the other way. Four guards, two from each end.

Happy was getting the hang of this. His opponent was trying to throw him. Apparently this particular guard was a black belt.

Happy was a boxer. Rule one of fighting was that if you put a black belt against a boxer, the black belt wins. But if you have them fight in a phone booth, the black belt couldn't move, and the boxer was king.

Happy stayed in close, not letting his opponent get a grip on him. He kept himself in close enough that his opponent couldn't get any solid blows. Happy however, forced his opponent to take it like a boxing match. Jab, jab, jab. Happy had always been good at the endurance fight.

Romanov took all four of them at once, keeping her feet light and her attacks quick and sharp. When one man managed to get a grip around her arm, she levered his grip till she had him in a full nelson, throwing him skull-first into the wall.

The second guard met her tazers, the third was snared in a trip wire that came flashing from her sleeve, looping coldly around his neck. The fourth realized that she was taking no prisoners and went for his gun. She stood straight and let him aim, and before the gun got near her, his arm was fully extended. She caught it, broke it, turned herself upside down and had his head between her knees, flipping him down hard in a more vicious version of what she had done to Happy.

The scissor hold took two seconds to make him stop thrashing, and Romanov was up again, moving for the evacuation plan on the wall.
Happy's opponent looked like a raw hamburger. He was still fighting ninja style, trying to keep Happy off balance, not realizing that happy could take any number of blows to his torso and gut. Happy kept jabbing away at his face, softening up his nose and jaw again and again, before finally the man weaved enough to show how punch-drunk he was, and Happy hauled off and decked him.

Victorious, Happy turned away from his fallen opponent and faced the hallway.

It was littered with half a dozen unconscious bodies. Romanov was at the end of the hall reading the building directory. Romanov was not out of breath, nor did she have so much as a hair out of place. "Warehouses and laboratories are a few floors down."

Happy followed, somewhat embarrassed as she made her way to the elevators. "Look, you're good, but it's still their house. They've got cameras and everything. They'll know where we are."

The elevator stopped.

"Told you." Happy groused.

Romanov pulled her badge and held it up to the camera lens. "Federal Agent." She shouted to the ceiling. "This time tomorrow Justin Hammer will be in jail; and Hammer Industries will be destroyed. Do you want me to add obstruction of justice and threatening a Federal Agent to you yourself personally, or should I report that you were co-operative?"

Beat.

The lights came back on and the elevator started moving again.

"Wise choice." Romanov agreed coldly.

Iron Man was trapped. If he moved too far away from the Expo, the Marine Drones would start shooting at the crowd. If he came in too close, they would start shooting at him.

If he came in too low, the bullets whizzing past him would kill the civilians on the ground. If he went too high, he would have no cover or protection.

Vanko had a man who could fly, a man who was largely bullet-proof, trapped in a three dimensional death-trap!

*If you can't shake them off, wipe them off.* He told himself, and gunned his jets, angling for the ground again. He flew the length of the decorative water feature, right up the strip of the main street. The Expo was indeed a small city, and on either side of the main strip were the various demonstration and stalls, letting the more popular projects and innovations have long term shows during the year long Expo.

And right in the center, at the end of the decorative water feature, was a large globe of the earth, drawn in steel girders and welded metal plates.

Iron Man slowed his speed just enough to get the drones in close. He made to go around the globe, but at the last second, bent at the middle and pulled a hair raising turn toward the globe itself, tucking his arms tightly as he slipped between two steel girders, less than a foot of clearance on either side.

At such dizzying speeds, the drones couldn't help but follow their program to chase him; Vanko couldn't take them all under his control in time, and four of the six drones wiped out on the globe,
which groaned under the impact.

The other drones apparently gave up on the chase and had turned to fly for the main Stadium.

Iron Man headed back toward the Stadium after them quickly, in what had become the third lap of the Expo, praying that the promenade would not be covered with bodies when he got there.

"Tony! Tony, I didn't go with the drones, I'm still on your six!" Rhodey reported as War Machine was still firing, this time missiles again.

"Jarvis would you get through the damn firewall and shut him down already?"

"If I were holding anything back, sir; I would tell you."

The door to the warehouse kicked open and Romanov came in carefully, her guns leading the way.

The room was empty. There was a large computer with three screen hooked up to it, and in front of it a pair of bodies.

Romanov went straight to the computers, as Hogan checked the guards pointlessly. They were dead.

Romanov started tapping away at Vanko's workstation.

"Can you understand that?" Happy asked.

Romanov smirked icily. "My name is Natalya Romanov. I speak Russian." She spoke with a surprisingly natural Russian accent as she checked the screen. "There are multiple feeds. I don't know which one would be Rhodey."

"Open them all."

Romanov did so, and the workstation screens were filled with video feeds. most of them were moving crazily, one of them painting a target on Iron Man, up close and personal, and one of them was coming from hammer's PDA. His face was visible in the videophone option, Pepper at his shoulder, watching everything he did carefully.

Romanov selected the feed from War Machine and started tapping away at the keyboard again. She could not break the encryption that Vanko had put into place, she could not shut them down.

The network security was equally solid, so she could not change the target. But the War Machine had not come through Vanko. It had been delivered by Rhodes.

Romanov checked. The War Machine had much less secure firewalls. Vanko must not have had the same opportunity with War Machines that he had with the drones.

The readouts were reporting that War Machine had someone trying to hack the software; but the two AI's were speaking different languages. She set the firewalls to English. Jarvis was in within seconds.

"What are you doing?" Hogan demanded.

"Rebooting Rhodey."

Happy reached forward and brought up another feed on the next screen. "Pepper? Are you there?"
Pepper heard Happy's voice coming from Hammer's PDA and snatched it straight out of his hand. "I'm here. Where are you?"

"We're at Hammer Industries."

"What?" Hammer demanded.

Pepper turned her back on him pointedly. "Why are you there?"

"The boss was right. Vanko was here. He's alive. I have no idea where he is now, but there are two dead bodies in this room, as well as a bunch of other stuff on these computers. Send the police-what?" He was talking to somebody off the line.

"Happy?"

"Yeah. I'm gonna put you on speaker phone."

A moment later, Romanov's voice. "Don't send the cops here. SHIELD is already on the way. Make sure Hammer doesn't get away."

Pepper sent a look over her shoulder. Hammer had taken in the whole conversation and deflated slightly. Pepper waved down some of the rushing guards. They recognised her as CEO, and quickly rushed over. She had a quick, pointed conference with them, and they quickly surrounded Hammer.

Justin Hammer didn't hear any of it. He was far away from this place, already on the next problem before him.

*Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I come before you today, a humbled man; forced to take a long look at...*

*No.*

*Your Honor, I swear, that I was responding only to the desperation of the times, caused in no small part due to Tony Stark's...*

*No.*

*Mr President; this was just a tragic mistake. With evidence that other powers had developed Iron Man technology; I hard-wired the Drones, our defence against these enemies specifically, to seek out Iron Man tech and destroy it. What happened at the Expo is simply a poorly timed arrival by Mr Stark, which resulted in these Drones following their programming. If Mr Stark had consulted with anyone, given us some warning, this whole unfortunate affair could have been avoided.*

Having made up his mind, Hammer allowed himself to be led away. "See you in court, Pepper." He called over his shoulder. "I take it back, by the way. You do have a knack for this."

*War Machine and Iron Man were the only machines that were immediately apparent in the sky, and were lopping around each other crazily. Iron Man finally spun about and brought himself to a quick hover in midair, firing a repulsor that caught the silver body in the middle, making him spin crazily before he righted himself.*

*But the move cost him, and Iron Man was suddenly in a hover, as War Machine opened up with all*
his automatic weapons, none of them were even aiming in a direction that Rhodes could see, and Iron Man was caught unaware.

The two of them went tumbling toward the ground, and hit the roof of the Eco-Dome, where Stark Eco-Innovations were being tested, something of a self contained terrarium the size of a five story building.

Technology was replaced with carefully cultivated nature, and Stark found himself flat on his back in the middle of a moonlit glen, filled with trees and gently babbling streams.

If it wasn't for the fact that he was trying to keep the mini-gun's lethal rain away from his face; he would probably find it a nice spot.

The Mini-gun was an inch from pointing at his face, and both War Machine's hand were wrapped around his throat as he tried to fend both attacks off.

Iron Man reviewed his options. Flares? No. Rhodes had him cold. The War Machine was holding him down with both hands as the mini-gun fired. Iron Man had one hand trying to push Rhodes away, and the other hand wrapped around the spinning six-barreled gun trying to keep it away from his face.

Micro-missiles would bounce.

He couldn't spare a hand to fire a repulsor.

Uni-Beam might crack the armor, but would probably crack Rhodes too.

This was insane! Vanko had taken his best friend hostage!

Then suddenly the pressure eased instantly and the mini-gun went silent.

Iron Man was still pushing back and managed to toss War Machine almost twenty feet.

"I have successfully accessed War Machine, sir."

Iron Man led his head rest back, taking in one deep breath after another.

Romanov followed the fight on the screens as Rhodey's suit suddenly interfaced with another AI from Iron Man, and was quickly overcome. War Machine had shut down, and was now being rewritten. Iron Man had taken over War Machine from the inside, and Romanov suddenly had another feed; Iron Man's HUD coming through War Machines interface. "Mr Stark?"

Tony's face looked up at his HUD in surprise. "Agent Romanov?"

"Mr Stark, Justin Hammer has been taken into custody, hammer Industries have been secured, no sign of Ivan Vanko, and War Machine has had the hostile programming removed." Romanov reported. "You've got your best friend back."

The choice of words meant more than just the obvious, and Tony came to realize that most everything she and Fury said came with more than one meaning. "Thank you Natalya. Remind me to buy you something that you can't afford for yourself."

"I will." Romanov said blandly. "I have your HUD available here too. Your vitals are looking good, and the power outputs much higher than normal."
"How do you know what normal output is for me?"

"We know everything. Congratulations. Looks like you did it."

"Yes. For the moment anyway, I am not dying."

"Not what?" Happy blurted.

"Not WHAT?" Pepper screeched.

Romanov blinked. The feed from hammer's PDA was still active after Happy's conversation with Pepper, and apparently she could hear every word that was being spoken at the workstation, including those from the other feeds.

Tony wasn't sure where he voice was coming from, but between the workstation at hammer industries and Jarvis' ability to improve audio feeds, he could hear her voice clearly. And she sounded angry. "Is that you?"

"You were dying? And you didn't tell me?"

"I was trying to tell you. I just couldn't think how to word it correctly."

"Pepper, I'm dying." Pepper said. "Three words. I just correctly worded it for you. What the hell were you waiting for?"

"Um… the right time."

"Two seconds after you thought of it would have been nice!"

"I tried. Really."

Pepper growled. "You owe me one hell of a birthday present this year."

"It's your birthday?"

"Not yet."

"Oh good." Tony let out a breath of relief. "I promise, I will make a full formal apology once I'm done fending off an hammer-oid attack."

"You'd better." Pepper snipped.

"We could have been to Venice."

"Could have, should have, would have." Pepper responded.

"Save it for the Honeymoon." Romanov snapped at both of them, looking at the screens. "Stark, you have incoming. Looks like the fight is coming to you."

"How many drones?"

"All of them."

Hogan looked over her shoulder at the screen and saw a plan of the Expo, and the transponders on all the drones. The fight was not at all far away from the Stadium.

*Pepper!* He thought in horror, his earlier doubts flying out of his head. He had to get back there.
"Can you handle things here?"

"Go." Romanov told him. "Sorry about the Honeymoon line."

Hogan bolted for the door.

Rhodey came to, and saw Tony staring down at him from a open mask. "Wake up, Rhodey! Come on buddy snap out of it!"

War Machine's eyes lit up and Jarvis sent the command from Iron Man to War Machine. Rhodes' mask flipped open and Tony slapped his face lightly. Rhody started to blink slowly, before focusing his eyes and coming back to himself. "Ohh-h-h-h Man." Rhodes groaned. "You can have your suit back."

Tony reached out a hand and pulled him back up to his feet. "We're going to be shooting things in a minute. Can you fight?"

"Yeah." Rhodes nodded. "Listen Tony, I never wanted Hammer to so much as see this thing, I swear."

"No, Rhodey. Not your fault. mine. You were right, I put you into an impossible-

"No, it's your fault." Rhodes agreed. "I'm just saying that I'm sorry."


Rhodes looked around with an experienced eye. "Well, we don't want to stay here. Higher ground all around us. It's the perfect kill-zone. This is where warriors go to die. We want to put the big gun at a higher elevation."

"Okay. While I do that, where will you be?"

"Tony, look at me! I'm the heavy artillery here."

"Yeah, I'm looking. You army types never do anything subtle do you?"

Rhodes was about to zap him back, when the sound of exploding glass filled the Eco-Dome, and drones appeared. All ten of the survivors, flying various colors and plenty of hardware. The drones landed in staggered formation; surrounding them.

War Machine and Iron Man stood back to back, covering each other as their mask's clamped shut. Game faces on.

Tony took in the enemy, his engineer brain noticing something. "Jarvis, give me measurements between the Drones."

The HUD projected measurements on the view, showing that each drone was precisely spaced apart evenly. Too evenly for them to still be under control.

Romanov had routed Vanko, and the Drones still hunted him.

Well then, there was only only one thing for it.

"Come ON!" Iron Man roared digitally, and the whole world exploded into violence.
Jarvis had taken War Machine's AI and rewritten it. Rhodes was painting targets and the HUD was firing the mounted swivel cannons like the grenade launchers and the mini-gun.

Iron Man's hand repulsors were actually meant to be weapons instead of flight stabilisers, and Iron Man was firing two shots a second, over and over, blasts of pure power that could bend through steel.

The Drones were fast and accurate beyond human eyes, but they were still built by Hammer assembly lines. Hammer had not created anything like Stark alloys.

The Drones had the numbers, the suits had the endurance. Bullets clanged off their metal skin by the hundreds, and so the drones started to open up with heavier weapons. And that was when the fight intensified. War Machine grabbed Iron Man and shoved him down as the air above them was split by speeding missiles, Iron Man fired a wide repulsor blast, Jarvis adapting the lens quickly to knock down another spread.

The Drones fought with precision. The Drones fought without fear. The Drones fought without pity.

The Suited men fought with teamwork. The men fought with anger.

Tony lost himself briefly in the moment, lost in the Zen-like trance that came with flying as Iron Man, his brain washed away and instinct taking over. The last months had been filled with confusion and guilt. What escapes from his situation he had embraced was wasteful and had ultimately caused him more problems than relief. Well no more. His life was saved, and his months of saved frustration and self recrimination had found a target at last.

Rhodes covered Tony with diligence. After months of fighting a losing battle to keep people away from Tony Stark and finally being the one to cross him personally; after months of shifting loyalties and uncertainty, Rhodes had found the way. A soldiers first duty was to his men. There were no questions in this fight. No doubts about loyalties. He had Iron Man absolutely on his side, and an enemy that he needed help to defeat.

The Drones closed in slowly, trying to get closer for the kill shot, both Suited Men shifting around, step by step, keeping each other out of the range of heavy weapons, their own fire-power knocking the drones back, wearing down their armor, but not doing serious damage.

The balance ended when one of the Drones got in too close, and War Machine lunged, pulling the robot in close enough to use him as a shield from the other incoming fire. The mini-gun on his shoulder aimed at the drone's face up close and personal, and the relentless stream of bullets chewed through the Drones' face instantly. It dropped, dead weight.

"Their brains are in their heads!" War Machine yelled to his counterpart. "The Drone computers aren't internalised!"

Iron Man heard him and started painting targets. Hammer had put the brains in an extremity? Just like Stane with the externalised systems. Didn't anybody have a clue?

One repulsor blast after another went blasting out, smashing down Drones, knocking them down. Rhodes behind him was doing the same.

As the Drones lost their numbers, they moved in closer to compensate, the fight growing tighter, getting closer and uglier.

"Jarvis, route Uni-Beam power to the proton accelerators!" Stark yelled.
"Sir! The new module has never been tested with the armor-"

"Do it anyway!" Stark yelled. "Rhodey! DUCK!"

War Machine did so, and Iron Man opened up with his newest addition to the arsenal. Two lasers, modelled on the proton accelerator that had formed his new Arc Reactor. One lens mounted on each wrist, and it sliced it's way through the Drones like a hot knife through butter, just as select parts of his home had been.

The lasers stayed operational for a full two seconds before the lens cracked and burned out from the heat.

In those two seconds, the war was over, and the Drones lay dead and wrecked.

War Machine stood up. "Should have opened with that one."

"Doesn't work for long. It's a one off." Stark explained. "That was fun!"

"Tony!"

"What? It was!"

There was a sudden roar of jets. Both of them looked around the dark faux-woodland night.

A moment later there was a loud metal clang and suddenly the night got a whole lot colder. There was another attacker, this one clearly a suit and not a Drone. Iron Man could detect Arc power coming from it, but the Reactor was internalized somewhere, protected and out of sight. The suit had no visible weapons, but it was a good two feet taller than either of them. There were no markings. No paint job. It was purely functional. It was not flash in any way. It's systems were all internalized. It's eyes were glowing but narrow. It's neck was built up, keeping the joints covered. All the joints had plates covering the weakened moving sections. A suit of armor wearing a suit of armor.

It was a combat machine. It was made to destroy. It was made to have no weak spots.

Tony knew.

Even before the thing's mask opened, Tony knew.

Ivan Vanko's grinning shark face was revealed. "Stark. This is going to be one hell of a fight! I can't tell you how much I've been looking forward to this. Like the suit? I designed it with just you in mind!"

And a pair of long wickedly glowing whips extended from Vanko's armored forearms.

Iron Man tensed, curling his fingers and opening them around his brightly glowing repulsors.

War Machine held up a hand. "Stand Down, Tony. I got something special for this guy! Gonna give Vanko a taste of the Ex-Wife!"

Iron Man turned to face his friend. "The what-now?"

War Machine pained a target directly over Vanko's heart. His built up shoulder lifted, and there in a mounted launcher, was the famed cigar mini-missile. The launcher began to spin, building speed and power, there came a whine of pure bloodthirsty charge, and the deadly Ex-Wife fired...
It struck Vanko square over the heart, and bounced off instantly.

All three men stared down at the small ordinance as it spat out a few more bursts of jet flame pathetically, and petered out with a thoroughly unimpressive whimper.

"Hammer Tech?" Iron Man guessed.

"Yeah." War Machine admitted sheepishly.

"You get what you pay for."

Vanko laughed and his helmet clamped shut.

"This is not going to be easy." Rhodes commented, making the understatement of the year.

Vanko took the first shot. he brought the whips up and lightning struck in the dark, snapping War machine across the chin. Rhodes's HUD went crazy from a moment from the discharge, and he was flying back off his feet.

Iron Man tried valiantly, firing with repulsors first, moving in closer; inside the range of the whips.

Vanko took the hits from the repulsors, and deep dents were cut into the armor. If it bothered him at all, it didn't so much as change his posture. Vanko couldn't get enough distance to crack the whip, so he drew back a fist and clubbed Iron Man in the skull, hard enough that Tony could feel the armor dent. He wavered on his feet, strong enough to hold position, not enough to take such a beating for long.

Still in close, Vanko lifted a leg to stomp him into the ground, and Iron Man struck, coming up with both fists to try and knock Vanko when he was off balance on one foot.

but Vanko was not off balance. Stark could hear pneumatic working in the other leg, and Vanko didn't fall from the blow. Whiplash kicked out, and Tony was sent sprawling, rolling across the dirt.

War Machine was suddenly right there, opening up with his mini-gun, firing point blank into Vanko's neck, until the six barrels all ran red hot. Vanko's armor was marked and scored by bullet-holes, but Iron Man could detect extra layers under the vital areas.

Stark was stunned. Who the hell was this guy? The places he could damage wouldn't be worth hitting, and the places he needed to hit were layered. he couldn't be thrown off balance; his power source was concealed; his weapons were attached physically and used no ammo... Whiplash was a superior Armor to War Machine and Iron Man put together.

Hell. Stark thought darkly. What do I do with this guy?

Lightning cracked again and War machine's mini-gun was suddenly sliced clean of. Another lightning strike and so was his missile launcher. War machine launched a grenade into Vanko's face, the explosion clouding his vision.

Iron Man fired his repulsors, lifting off the ground, swooping between them.

As predicted, Whiplash focused his attention on the one he wanted dead the most, following Iron Man.

The airborne suit drew his fire and the whips cracked up, snapping around his ankle. Iron Man was
yanked down to ground level real fast.

Lightning cracked again and again. Iron Man was flayed open by the whip, his back and neck scourged by glowing wounds in his steel hide. It was vicious. It was Vanko taking out his frustration and rage, whipping Stark into the dirt again and again.

War Machine appeared from the dark and slammed Vanko in a full on tackle, his ordinance all used up and his weapons torn away. Rhodes smashed his steel fists into Vanko, looking for the dents in the armor. There were many.

Whiplash did not so much as spare Rhodes a glance as the smaller man attacked futilely. He kept his focus on Stark.

War Machine’s HUD started pointing out portions of Vanko’s armor that were already torn on the surface, digging his fingers into the bullet holes. He dug his fingers in for a good solid grip and started peeling Vako's armor off.

Vanko had barely noticed him, lost in the feeding frenzy of making Stark’s armor bleed, one slice of armor off his body after another. His HUD suddenly came alive, warning him that his armor had been breached, and he looked over to his side and saw the other man peeling him open.

Stark was set aside for the moment, and the whips came around again, cutting gouges straight into Rhodey now too. Stark rolled over, face up, sat upright in the dirt, and his Uni-Beam exploded into white-hot fire, brighter even than the crack of lightning that came from Whiplash. The hit caught Whiplash in the chest, blasting most of the layers that Rhodey had peeled back for him.

Vanko broke off suddenly, suddenly realizing that the single minded hunt for Stark had cost him his protection. But his opponents were more than wounded too.

Whiplash struck, lighting flashed again and again, the cables flashing too fast for either to follow, until both Iron Man and War Machine had been caught in his whips, one wrapped around each neck.

Iron Man recognized the tactic from the racetrack. The last time, he had forced Vanko into close quarters by wrapping the whip around his own body. Vanko's face was still heavily armored, even if he had huge holes in his suit now, not enough to land a punch.

Vanko keyed the power controls in the whips, and fire raced into both men's armors, putting them both on their knees.

All the readouts on his HUD were going nuts from the discharge, and Tony could feel the suit opening around his neck...

War Machine was reaching for him, trying to reach the whip around Iron Man's neck...

And Tony had the idea. He raised a hand toward his friend. "Rhodey! Gimmie a hand!"

War Machine recognized the gesture, and pointed his Repulsor at Iron Man. *If you're gonna play Russian Roulette, bet the farm.*

"FIRE!" Tony choked out a scream around the whip at his throat.

"NOW!" War Machine roared back around the whip at his own.

Two repulsor blasts fired out, colliding again as they did at the party. The repuslor blasts collided,
powered each other, attracted and repelled magnetically at once.

The blast of power exploded exponentially, causing a shockwave that sent all the combatants flying.

Tony was still connected to Vanko by the whip, and he felt himself flap back and forth under the maelstrom had made like the tail of a kite

And everything went suddenly still.

Happy came running up the steps. "Pepper!"

She turned, looking shell-shocked. "Happy."

He closed the distance between them, wrapped her in his arms and gave her a kiss. "Thank god. You were right about Rushman. She's not-

"She's a SHIELD agent." Pepper interrupted. "Sent to keep a leash on Tony after he bailed out of whatever it is SHIELD wanted Iron Man for."

Happy nodded. "I think she just saved the bosses life."

"Tony saved himself Happy." Pepper said numbly. "He's... he's been dying for... weeks at least."


Pepper had her face in her hands. "And I didn't see it."

"Yes you did." He soothed her. "You saw it; you just didn't know what it was."

Pepper wiped her eyes. "He could have died Happy. If he had I would have been…" She took a deep breath. "Happy, I've been sitting here replaying the last few weeks in my head, wondering how I missed it, and hating myself for not being there for him. Because if Tony had died, I would have felt like I lost…"

Lost the man I loved. Happy finished the sentence in his head.

Pepper, even if she hadn't said it out loud, realized who she was talking to and looked up, worried. Deathly silence.

Happy looked gutted for a moment, and then set his jaw. It's 'be a man' time. He told himself firmly. "Pepper," he said aloud. "I know."

Pepper looked halfway between heartbroken and relieved. "You do?"

"I've known how you feel about him for some time. It's 'be a man' time. He told himself firmly. "Pepper," he said aloud. "I know."

Pepper looked halfway between heartbroken and relieved. "You do?"

"I've known how you feel about him for some time. It's... roughly the same way I feel about you." He said, getting it out before he could stop himself.

"Oh Happy…" Pepper whispered, feeling like dirt. "I'm so sorry. I wish-"

Happy put a finger over her lips. "I know. I wish things were different too. These last few months, I saw you and T- Mr Stark drifting apart…"

"We were." Pepper confirmed. "And now I know why."
"And I figured if your feelings for him were changing, then maybe I might have a shot with you." Happy finished. "I won't make trouble. I promise. I won't make things weird."

Pepper smiled, though her eyes were brimming up a little. "I think we both know that's not going to be so easy."

Happy seemed to think about that. "Did Tony ever tell you how he and I met?"

"No."

"Ah. Well, then I won't either. Let's just say, that I owe him a lot. Maybe more than you do. Enough that I can bow out gracefully." He smirked, just a little. "Besides, who would want to be the guy that dated Lois Lane after Superman?"

Pepper smirked, just a little.

"No, seriously." Happy piled on. "If he's Superman then you're Lois Lane, and me... I guess I'm Jimmy Olsen."

Pepper laughed. "Oh, come on. Can you see Tony in glasses?"

Happy laughed. "No, but then two days before Afghanistan I never would have seen him as a superhero either."

"True enough." She chuckled. It was his way, to make things easier on others, to be self-deprecating and funny... Pepper smiled. And gave him a hug. And then a peck on the cheek. "You're a quality human being Happy. You deserve someone who loves you as much as you love them."

Happy returned the hug gently, saying goodbye to someone who wasn't going anywhere. "Listen, I'm going to head back to Hammer Industries, see if there's anything I can do back there. Tony gets me to transport a lot of his secret stuff, so if there's anything there that needs..."

Pepper nodded. "I'm going to stay here and wait for Tony to get back."
Pepper had been waiting patiently for Tony to come back, praying that he would. It was not a new feeling for her, waiting for him to come back safe.

Tony was going to live. And she never even knew he was dying.

She had spent the time since Happy had left staring up at the stars and replaying the last few weeks in her head. Tony had been dying the whole time. And she had chalked it up to booze and adrenaline hunting.

Tony had changed after Afghanistan. Was she really so willing to let him change back, just like that? Why hadn't she noticed?

He had tried to tell her once. She knew that now. At least once, the day after the party, and she had shut him down, because she was busy running his company.

NO! She yelled at herself. You aren't that! You aren't like that! Pepper, you aren't one of those people who get some high powered executive job and forgets all about the people you love because you're busy working.

Did she love Tony?

Yes. She had, for all purposes, admitted as much to Happy, and when he had said it, she did not argue.

She had feelings like that for a while, even before Iron Man. But she had never even let the thought fully occur to her. Not when he was out risking his life. And not before Afghanistan.

What would happen? She and Tony would spend the night together, and the next morning Stark's new PA would have been waiting downstairs with her freshly dry-cleaned clothes and a cup of coffee; Happy would be waiting to drive her home?

It was that thought which kept her from just pouncing on him for oh so very long.

Tony was going to live. And she never even knew he was dying.

He had better come back alive. If he died now, after all this, I will kill him.

---

The best thing about pain, is that it means you aren't dead yet.

Tony opened his eyes with a groan. He'd heard that before while visiting a Marine Base, but over months of slowly rotting to death, he didn't believe it.

His HUD was still functional, and Jarvis was giving off a list of damaged components. It was a long list. His HUD was displaying a schematic of Iron Man, with huge sections painted in flashing red.

The sound of a babbling brook and the sight of all those moonlit trees brought Tony back to himself in a great hurry, and he sat up sharply.
War Machine was over on the other side of the Eco-Dome, having been thrown there by the blast. He walked over and slapped the mask round a bit, metal on metal, until Rhodey sat up. "Ugh. We have to stop meeting like this."

"Hey, look at you! Off hand quips and everything. You're gonna make a great sidekick."

"Sidekick? Oh hell no. I'll never quip again!" War Machine groaned, getting to his feet. "Vanko?"

Iron Man jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Over there."

The two suits looked like something that would be hauled out of a junk pile. Both of them were bashed, dented and torn beyond all repair.

And so was Whiplash.

The huge suit had been totalled by the blast, having been heavier and the armored plating torn off. The helmet was cracked and both whips severed. His legs were at unnatural angles and only one arm was moving.

The one arm came up and felt under the mask for some kind of release. It found the catch, and the helmet opened, revealing Vanko's bloodied and swollen face within.

Vanko spat out a mouthful of blood and teeth, and grinned at Stark. "You lose." He laughed weakly.

Iron Man stepped forward, ready to strangle him, when there came a low beeping noise, in a slowly increasing tone. When things beeped, it was probably bad news. The flashing warning on the HUD confirmed it. Power levels were spiking.

"His suit is rigged to blow!" War Machine yelled.

More beeping. From everywhere.

"So are the drones!" Romanov yelled over their link. "Stark, I have two drones who never made it to the fight in front of the Water Feature, and one that crashed during the chase at the entrance to the Main Stadium. All others are crashed at the Globe or destroyed in the Eco-Dome."

"Main Stadium? Pepper!" Stark yelled and Iron Man took off.

War Machine jetted up skyward also, but let him go. "The two surviving drones, are they near people?"

"Negative, I was able to shut them down, but the detonation is on a separate."

"Never mind! If they won't hurt people, they don't matter! I'm heading for the Globe!"

The beeping had grown to a high pitch and Rhodes gunned his jets, taking off a top speed, heading to the other end of the Concourse for the giant Globe of the world.

War Machine flew in just as the beeping grew to a single pitch and the Arc Reactors detonated.

The Globe of the Earth was missing a few girders and plates as the chase had caused a few of the drones to wipe out against it. But the superstructure, the size of a building, was still upright, until the wrecked drones at it's base had exploded.
Pepper was still at the steps to the Main Stadium, waiting for him. She was so lost in her thoughts that she never heard the beeping coming from the pile of debris at the base of the stairs.

There was a roar in the sky, of familiar jets, and Pepper quickly looked up, searching the stars for him eagerly.

In a blaze of light, Iron Man came screaming toward her, and Pepper realized with a start that he was coming at her like a missile. She tried to figure out if she should run or duck, when Iron Man came in close, fired a blast of repulsor thrust forward at her, catching her in a sudden whirlwind blast, and checking his momentum.

The replusor nearly threw Pepper off her feet, but for a split second she was able to see him clearly, when he lunged forward and Pepper felt her body get slammed and wrapped in metal limbs, before they both went shooting up into the sky.

In the same moment, a massive explosion ripped the ground beneath them, and Pepper screamed as both the flame and the wind sent her world into a spin.

The base of the Globe had been wiped out neatly in the explosion, and the huge structure started to groan, then tilt, and finally the metal broke free from the ground under the weight and collapsed downward.

War Machine closed in on it, and his HUD projected the stress points. He flew to the nearest, and dug his fingers in, gunning his boot jets hard as he could to bring it down gently.

It took all of Rhodes' strength to hold on to the Globe, it took all the power in his Arc Reactor to keep it level, and it took pure luck for Rhodes to steer the immense weight while his hands were full, but the Globe did not have far to fall and War Machine was able to check it's momentum enough that it came to rest lightly instead of rolling away.

Small explosions had rung out at the same time, and Rhodes turned to look, seeing small mushroom clouds of flame. One was at the Main Stadium.

"Did Tony get to her in time?" Rhodes asked aloud, hoping Romanov would answer.

She did. "Yes. She has Hammer's PDA. I still have the feed, so she escaped the blast."

"Is she all right?"

"She's currently flying without a suit. They're headed for the rooftop of building nine."

Jarvis obligingly put up a blueprint of the Expo and Rhodes took off to intercept them.

"I wouldn't interrupt them!" Romanov shouted at him as he gunned it.

Pepper had the good sense to wrap herself around Iron Man tightly, and he was able to get his hands free enough to stabilize his flight, and bring them both down on a rooftop neatly, the mushroom cloud of flame still rising at the stadium.

Iron Man set her down, and his helmet opened, the damaged faceplate jamming on it's hinges. Iron Man reached up and ripped the whole helmet off, Tony Stark staring back at her urgently. "Are you okay?"
"I quit!" Pepper yelled, most of her still hurtling through the sky. "I don't know what on earth made you think I could handle this, but you were wrong. You crazy bastard! Why didn't you tell me you were dying dammit? Do you have any idea what that does to me? That you're willing to hand over the entire company and you won't tell me something like this? To say nothing of getting shot at, blown up, and thrown through the sky! Well to hell with you! I'm done! I quit!"

Tony felt the words hit him. She probably meant it too. And why shouldn't she? Every word she had said was true. Tony had treated her terribly the last few months. Probably a lot longer than that. "I understand."

Pepper blinked, caught off guard. "You do?"

"I've put you through way too much." Tony agreed. "I mean look at this! This, and Rhodey, and me, and the company, and Monaco, and who knows what else... And it's only been six weeks!"

Pepper suddenly stammered, realizing he meant it.

Tony found himself staring into her eyes again, and tried like crazy to find the right words. This was The Moment. The moment to say exactly the right thing. Such moments did not come too often, and he'd been screwing them all up so far.

He wanted to tell her that he understood why she needed to leave. He wanted to tell her he had no anger. He wanted to tell her he loved her. He wanted to tell her he was sorry. He wanted to tell her that if she left the company, he would still want her in his life.

"Well... yeah, but that's like dog weeks for you!" Pepper started to say. "I know that it'll cause problems for you, given that I've only been CEO for-

Tony tried to tell her all these things, except that somehow it came out as a passionate kiss which stopped Pepper mid-word.

Tony could feel the lips under his freeze solid, and Tony held his breath, willing anyone who might be listening to make the planets turn his way, just this once; if never again, to please make this moment work...

And then, holy of holies, Pepper's lips started to move, responding to him. It lasted long enough that Tony started seeing stars against the inside of his eyelids. Finally, they broke for air. They stared at each other a moment, both feeling the world spin, for more than one reason. Her eyes were dark and deep.

He wanted to put her mind at ease. Tell her that if she still said no, then he was okay with that. Wanted to explain that he didn't deserve her and that of all the girl he knew...

"Weird?" It was the first word out of his mouth. He was giving her a way out. "I was..." Tony started to say when Pepper pounced and planted another one on his mouth that took his breath away. Her fingers were digging through his hair, and her body pressed against his armor. It suddenly dawned on Tony how long she had wanted to do this; because he could count the days she had waited in every searing heartbeat.

Finally, she released him. Her eyes were still huge and dark, her lips slightly swollen; and she took a breath in for the first time in what felt like years.

"No." She rasped hoarsely. "Wasn't weird at all."

The sound of jets reached them, and both instinctively glanced upward, fearing a surviving Drone.
War Machine had come around to check on them, and apparently had decided against landing as he got closer.

"Geez guys, get a roof." Rhodes' quipped.

Romanov keyed her mike. "Thought you vowed never to quip again?"

"My last one, I swear. We probably shouldn't be watching this."

Happy had made it back to Hammer Industries, and entered the workshop just in time to join Romanov; who was watching through War Machine's HUD, seeing the whole thing. Romanov glanced at Happy out of the corner of her eye, seeing him staring at the electrifying kiss with his jaw hanging open. "How you doing over there, Hogan?"

Happy shut his mouth and swallowed. "I'm fine. No. Really, I'm good. We had already broken up anyway."

"When?" Romanov asked in surprise.

"About five minutes ago."

"Ah."

"Well... um, if you'll excuse me a moment, I'm just going to go down to the park and stare mournfully at couples as they pass by."

"Do that, and get back here fast." Romanov told him. "We've got a lot of cleaning up to do here."

War Machine was clearly visible in the sky, and having verified they were safe, he tossed them a salute and looped away flying off into the night sky.

"I liked it better when only I could do that!" Tony complained.

"Get over it." Pepper drawled warmly and kissed him again.

Getting away from the Expo was no mean feat given that he could not fly all the way back to LA with a passenger, and Pepper wasn't game to call Happy to give them both a lift back to her hotel. They made their way back to the Main Stadium, and Pepper went with him to the green room, where the droids that had disassembled the suit during the Opening Ceremony remained in storage. Between the two of them and the robot arms, they were able to disassemble what they could, and cut away the damaged sections. Pepper had not willingly gone more than two feet away from him since their first kiss. As more and more of the metal was peeled away, Pepper could feel her pulse rising.

So could Stark. "Pepper, I know you've got no reason to trust my intentions here but..."

"Just promise me I won't be another notch on your bedpost."

Stark shook his head ruefully. "I knew you were worried about that. Pepper, I swear, you aren't some girl. You're The Girl." All that was left was the gloves, and Tony disconnected them from the Arc Reactor and pulled them off, stepping away from the robotic arms. "I promise, there's no way that I'm gonna-"
Pepper pounced and kissed him again as the suit was finally peeled away, the skin-tight black jumpsuit the only thing left. Tony very much responded. She raised a hand to his Arc Reactor, running her fingers over the smooth cool metal gently as they kissed hotly.

"Why, Miss Potts, where were you hiding this all these years?" Stark gasped once they broke. "I knew you had a volcano under all that professionalism."

"I quit, remember?" Pepper drawled, pulling him in again. "I never had to be professional with you again."

"That sounds like fun." Stark murmured against her lips in surprise. "Wait, you meant that?"

"I did. You might be able to talk me out of it though." Pepper said around his tongue. "My hotel's about five minutes away." She said. Oh my god! Did I really just say that?

Oh my god, did she really just say that? Tony thought as he kissed her eagerly... and suddenly realized something. "Whoa. Mm." He brought his hands up and pushed her back slightly. "Pepper; wait. Gotta stop." He ground out and shoved them apart, past arm length. "Stop!"

Pepper felt the wall hit her shoulder blades and she froze, completely derailed. "Wha... What's wrong?"

"We can't." Stark groaned out, hating the universe fiercely at that moment.

Those two words hung in the air between them, both of them breathing hard, eyes a little wild.

"Why. On Earth. Not?" Pepper demanded slowly. "Don't tell me that after all this, now that we're finally here, you've decided that you don't want--"

Tony held up his hands quickly. "No, not what you think. I swear, I want to... oh man, do I ever want to... but there's something you need to know."

Pepper fought to keep her cool, almost screaming in frustration. "What?"

Tony reached the base of his black jumpsuit, and took off the top. When his black and putrefied chest was exposed, the Arc Reactor glowing in painful contrast, Pepper fought not to throw up. He looked like some horrific Toxic Waste monster.

Tony couldn't look at her. The first time they had gotten here, they had finally got past everything... and the mere sight of him nearly made her ill.

Revulsion had faded, sympathy had taken over. "My god..." She whispered. "Does it hurt?"

"Yeah. It's getting better though. I found the solution. but obviously, I'm not in top form, and I'm... I'm not..." He ran out of words. The moment was dead, and all that was left was this.

Pepper hands came up to cup his face gently. "Tony..." she whispered. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I wanted to. I tried to. But Pepper, if there was one person in the world that I didn't want..." He broke off and pulled the top back on. "I didn't want you to see me like this."

Pepper kissed him again, soft and sweet. "I could have been here."

"You were needed where you were. You were needed where I should have been." He gestured at his chest. "You were right. people were counting on me to be Iron Man, and you were counting on me to be Tony Stark."
"I could have been here!" Pepper insisted. "I should have been."

Stark almost felt like he was going to cry. "I'm sorry, Pepper. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I didn't tell you."

Pepper tried to hug him without touching his chest. "So, where does that leave us?"

"Well." Tony struggled to think. "I'll heal. It'll take a while to detoxify all this crap outta my chest, but it'll get there, and if tonight was any indication, I'll be better than new."

"And we're going to have some clean-up to do after the Expo. Plus you'll need a new PA now that Rushman's off doing whatever she actually does for a living..."

"And... us?" Stark asked. "I mean, you're supposed to be with Hogan..."

"We broke up." Pepper promised him quickly. "It didn't work out."

"Really?" Tony couldn't help the grin that spread across his face. "That's a shame..."

Pepper swatted at him and bit her lip. "Things have changed. but I don't think they've changed as much as we both think. if we can't make time for each other with all that's going on..."

Tony shook his head. "When I knew I was going to die... patching things up with you was the only priority I had left."

"I believe you. Let's see how you'll do now that you're going to live." Pepper nodded. She took a breath. "Hammer, Rhodey, Stern... they were right about one thing."

"What's that?"

"You can't put the genie back in the bottle." Pepper said. "You have to deal with that too."

Tony nodded slowly. "I'll... I'll call Fury in the morning." Stark took a breath. "I know that's not what you want to spend tomorrow doing, but it's the only way I can keep a lid on it; and this thing with Vanko proved that I have to keep a lid on it."

"Tony, you're Iron Man. And a billionaire. There's always going to be something more important." Pepper agreed. "But, if we can't figure out what we want from each other after this long, then maybe it's because we're never going to be a priority in each others lives."

Tony read the point of that one loud and clear; and took a breath. "And... if we do make each other a priority?"

"Then we'd better get the Expo and the legal, and the company, and your health fixed pretty fast while we've got the time; because once we start; I imagine we'll be busy having an awful lot of unprofessional moments." Pepper said matter of factly.

Tony grinned wolfishly. "Looking forward to it."

Agent Romanov had been recalled to SHIELD Headquarters and was telling Director Fury about the latest on the clean-up. "All incriminating Evidence has been collected, Hammer industries staff have been interviewed, we're backtracking how Vanko got to America, and for that matter to Monaco. All equipment has been seized, and those who were aware of Vanko's involvement have been detained until further notice. Hammer is currently in jail, demanding his attorneys. Sir, are we planning to make a deal with Justin Hammer?"
"You think he's got anything to deal with?"

"He had Vanko for months sir. If there's something we haven't found, or worse, if people find out that Hammer got the tech from Vanko..."

"Agreed." Fury thought for a moment. "Stark called this morning. Now that he's stuck a little longer among the living, he wants back in on the Avenger Initiative."

Romanov did not say anything.

Fury looked up at her. "Speak plainly."

Romanov remained fully at attention. "Sir... times of great distress have a way of transmuting people into things they never expected. Mr Stark has had the misfortune of having undergone two such great tests. My investigations suggested that the first made him into something truly unique, and the second threatened to undo all the work that he had done. Vanko was the result of solutions to yesterday's problems, which caused new problems for today. It is worth noting that such a thing provide lessons for the now. War Machine may have been the solutions to today's problems, but it's the man in your job who has to think about what the end result of that choice may be for the future. With that in mind, the original Iron Man brings with him a great deal of baggage, but with the respect for history and the power of this weapon. While undercover I discovered that the strength of what Mr Stark's invention offers comes from more than just Iron and Steel. And I think that if that X-Factor is what we need it to be; and if we want it for the Avenger Initiative, we need more than just the hardware."

Fury took her in, weighing that, giving nothing away.

She laid down the folder, with the words 'TOP SECRET' all over the top of it. "My final report, Director."

Fury picked it up. "Thank you Agent Romanov. And while we're still on the subject of Iron Man and Vanko, there's a promising lead in Moscow that requires your talents. We have a flight chartered. Get going."

"Yessir." Romanov turned on her heel and left.

Fury picked up the report and started flipping through it, when his computer chimed. "Director, I have Special Agent Coulson on a secure line for you."

"Put him through."

Coulson was sweating under the bright summer sun in Mexico. The sun packed stone beyond the desert was pockmarked with any number of craters and crevasses. One more had been made a few days before. The crater was a good hundred feet across, and at least thirty feet deep in a perfect bowl. The air was filled with the smell of burnt air, even days later, and the only witness to the event was sitting on the edge of the crater, on his knees, staring up at the merciless sky with awe. He had not moved in days.

Coulson traded a nod with the man's guards, and asked him a few questions before calling The Director. "Sir?"

"This is Fury. Report."

"Director, we have a contained situation here. The early reports were only half correct. There was
only one witness, and he confirmed the report. He described it as a 'War of Lightning'."

"You said 'Half Correct'?"

"Yessir. There is evidence. I'm looking at it. There is an artifact left behind. No sign of who left it, or why. But this crater it's in is not a natural formation. And according to our witness, it wasn't there last week."

"I've seen photographs of the 'Artifact' in question." Fury responded. "Either this is a very elaborate hoax, or it's real."

"I'll be honest, sir; I don't know if I can believe it."

"Lots of people didn't believe the world was round." Fury responded. "It's not that the world changed, it's just that we noticed." Fury sighed. "Stark is going to live. And he wants to meet me about the Avenger Initiative."

"That's good news sir. Looks like the team is coming together."

"If this is handled badly Agent Coulson, the 'War of Lightning' might be the Avenger's first problem. Can you bring the hammer somewhere more secure?"

"No sir. We've been trying... unsuccessfully."

"Until we can find a way to shift it, secure the area; and do it quietly."

"Yessir."

Coulson signaled his men and gave the appropriate orders. "The Director wants the area secure. How do we get our people here quietly?"

Agent Shultz answered him. "The area's fairly isolated. There are no supply points or highways in the area. We can have our people concealed in civilian trailers. Shouldn't be too hard to get our people here." Shultz grinned. "You want to give it a try?"

Coulson blinked. "What do you mean?"

"Nobody can budge the damn thing. The guys have been taking turns trying the 'Excalibur Test'. You going to give it a go?"

Coulson smirked. "Why not? If I can move it, we can all get out of the desert at least."

Coulson knew he wouldn't succeed as he climbed down the side of the crater. He just wanted to get a closer look.

The hammer was large. It would take anyone a good two handed grip to handle it. It was sitting in the crater on heavily cracked stone, with a huge rectangular stone head, on top of a dark polished wood and leather handle.

Written along it's edge were words in some Nordic script that Coulson couldn't read, bar the one word he recognized.

Mjöllnir.

Thor's hammer stood immovable in the thirty foot deep crater it had dug for itself, having arrived amid a sudden 'War of Lightning.'
The bar in Moscow was gritty and dark. Most of the booze served was home made, and half the lights were broken. An obvious place for disreputable dealings. Nobody liked to look up past their drinks, or the people they had come with. So when a notably beautiful redhead came in, wearing a large wool lined overcoat, nobody looked at her.

Romanov looked over the room and found the one she wanted. Rustov was a small oily man who worked in a shop, but made his real money counterfeiting Identification for anyone who could afford his rates. Intelligence had reported that this was the man who had got Ivan Vanko into America, and Romanov was going to find out if anyone else was involved. If Vanko's secrets had died with him, so be it. if there were others out there with Arc Reactor blueprints...

"Rustov?" Romanov whispered.

He looked up at her, and drank in her face. "Yeah."

"You did a job for someone I know. Ivan Vanko."

Rustov tensed. "I know nobody by that name."

"I'm not police." Romanov assured him. "Can I buy you a drink, and explain what this is about?"

He agreed, and Romanov ordered a double of something very strong for herself, and a beer for him. She poured half her drink into his beer and came back to the table, pretending to sip from her glass.

"I am Natalya." Romanov drawled in her best Russian accent. "Ivan was my brother."

Rustov took a sip and said nothing.

For the next twenty minutes, Romanov made her case, posing as a close relative of Ivan Vanko, who had just found out he had died in America. She was trying to figure out where he had been this whole time. Rustov was not inclined to tell her anything, so she had kept the conversation going, letting him talk. As the conversation continued, Romanov would get them refills and spike his drinks with her own, until the man was slightly tipsy and didn't realize it.

Rustov's voice started to slur and Romanov started to press for more information.

"Rusty," She said. "I don't want to make trouble for you. Times are hard, I know that. but there's so much between me and my brother that went unsaid." Romanov started to cry, big tears forming in her eyes, but not yet rolling down her cheeks. "I just... I just really need to know where my brother went. And why."

The 'crying woman' tactic was one that had worked on harder hearts than this fall guy. "Oh... sweetie. I'm so sorry. I didn't know why he wanted the ticket. Obviously he never told me. And I didn't get it for him."

"Then who did?" Romanov probed gently. "I... I would really be grateful if you can help." She blinked back more tears. "Please. Help me."

"I got the ID and the ticket, but not for him." The man's face changed and Romanov felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up.
"You see," He continued. "His name popped a red flag internationally. But only his, so I went looking for siblings I could substitute a name for. He had no brothers or sisters." He let the smile drop. "So who the hell are you? You think I can't taste the crappy moonshine in beer this cheap?"

Romanov felt it spiral, and dropped the act. Her hand flashed out and caught his. A gesture for anyone watching, a threat to Rustov. "Who vouched for him?"

"Who are you?" Rustov demanded.

"You said you never got the ticket for him, but he used it. So somebody must have set it up. Somebody who didn't want to do it themselves. So who came to you? Who paid? Who vouched for Vanko?"

Rustov smirked. "Is that accent even real?"

Beat. He was getting comfortable enough to make jokes. Romanov was up in seconds and had Rustov's head down against the table. "Give Me A Name." She snarled.

Cha-clik!

Romanov glanced over her shoulder. The bar was filled with toughs, had none of them had a problem with hitting a woman. Most of them were ignoring her, but somewhere out there someone had drawn a gun... She did not release her hostage. "A name. Now."

BANG!

Her prisoner jerked and went slack in her grip. She spun and saw someone ducking out of the front door, impossible to see clearly. The bar-room thugs had stopped ignoring her, and stood, starting to move in.. Romanov felt blood flowing between her fingers, and she tightened her grip. "Give me a name. Give me a name and you'll have the best funeral money can buy."

"M-m-m... Mandarin. He said he wor..." Too late. Rustov was gone.

She released the body, spinning around. Half a dozen guys, all of them looking like they fought for a living, and all of them closing in on her. They were armed with knives and broken bottles. Idly, she wondered if Mandarin, whoever he, she or they, were; had hired them, or if they were just looking for a fight. She knew it wouldn't take long to clean them up, but by then the gunman would have long escaped.

Romanov flexed her fingers and cast aside her overcoat, teeth bared and eyes giving a Black Widow gaze across the room. "Okay. Let's do this!"

Offhand, Tony didn't imagine that this was the sort of place that Fury met in often. A warehouse with boarded up windows. Someone had picked Tony up in what looked an awful lot like a cab; and dropped him off. But very few cabbies had earwigs and cheap suit and ties.

Once Tony got into the warehouse, he found that the inside of the dirty broken down structure was hiding solid cement walls and view-screens with SHIELD logo's all over them. Beyond that, the only thing in the room was a table with two chairs and Fury waiting for him to sit down.

Fury was reading a file labeled 'Avengers Initiative.'

Stark leaned forward. "Who else have you got?"
"Who else?" Fury echoed. "Who says that you're in here any more?"

Tony sat, and Fury got to the point. "I told you once already Stark, you are not the center of my universe. For all the press has been saying that you keep World Peace, fact is, I can do without you. My life would actually be easier if you never existed. And now, you want me to overlook all that; and make you part of the Last Line of Defense."

"Yep. Pretty much." Tony confirmed. What else could he say to that?

"Stark, I don't doubt you'd be helpful. But you're a problem. You will not be the only person on this team. If you'll start fights I don't need, then I don't want you here. You fight when you ought to run, run when you ought to make a deal. That way of doing things is not what I want defending the world!"

Tony put a hand up. "I get that. I do. But those decisions I made, it was because I was expecting to be dead by now!"

"And the reason that the people closest to you didn't notice, was because it was exactly how they expected you to act." Fury bit back.

Tony didn't have an answer to that. "They didn't notice, because it was how I acted before Afghanistan. How I've acted in between a death sentence and a hostage situation was to make myself a superhero."

Fury let out a breath through his nose, giving nothing away. He reached under the table and slapped down a folder, with the words 'TOP SECRET' all over the front. "Agent Romanov's full report. Turn to page nine."

Tony did so. He saw the words 'Personality Profile' and his heart sank. "Ahh. Mr Stark demonstrates several character failings. His mind is fast and accurate, with the ruthless brilliance needed to see through combat scenarios to proper solutions. His weaknesses come from emotional liabilities. Stark demonstrates compulsive and self-destructive behavior and textbook narcissism?" He looked up at Fury as though it was a joke.

Fury glared.

Tony looked down. "Agreed." He conceded. "In my defense that was last week."

Fury glared.

"And I was dying. That does tend to bring out the worst in me. But that's fixed now."

Fury glared.

"Look," Tony said. "Agent Romanov was smart, but to be honest, she was catching me at my worst, and she was sort of hot-headed. I would admit that I do tend to put on a show when a beautiful woman is around, and when I learn that said woman could probably kill me and just make up a reason why; that act gets a little more ridiculous. I wouldn't let her opinion of my character prevent you from brining me on board. I can think of several hundred women who's opinion of my character-"

Fury saved him from himself by interrupting. "Well, as it happens, Agent Romanov agrees that you would be a great asset."

Tony beamed. "I knew that woman was sharp. And perceptive too. She has great instincts for
people. As any secret agent should. Her testimony is a tribute to your skilled leadership Director!"

"Shut up and read the last paragraph."

Tony did so.

Iron Man is without question, the sort of weapon that will define the next generation of Special Threats to the safety and security of the world. Tony Stark himself, is the only meta-normal on file that can actually be considered one of us, as without the suit he remains a normal level human. The fact that he is the only one to foresee the potential problems presented by Vanko and War Machine; and the only one to create the Iron Man weapon, makes him a valuable addition. It is the opinion of this Agent, that the only barrier is his personality and his character.

Iron Man should be approved for the Avenger Initiative.

Tony Stark should be strongly considered an unreliable asset.

Tony set the folder down and looked back at Fury. "I've told you. I am Iron Man. The suit and I come as a set. We have Rhodey now, so you can go with him if you want... but to be fair, if his suit gets busted, he can't build you another one. I can."

Fury glared.

Tony wilted. "Give me something will ya? Am I in? Out? Left? Right? In a box by the door?"

"Mr Stark... we're going to take you on, as an outside consultant. Should you be required, we'll be in touch. If you want to be something better than that, you'll have to earn it."

Tony nodded. "Right now, I'll take it. And now I have to go."

Fury grinned. "Yes, I heard. You have to go accept a medal. You do realize that if you come to work for us, you won't get nearly as much press attention. Unless you screw up."

Tony grinned mirthlessly. "Swell."

The official story was that Hammer had built the Drones based on technology collected from the mark II, and that he'd made the deadlines by sacrificing several safety requirements. That, coupled with the publicly known history of Hammer Industries with Iron Man technology, it was easy to claim that the drones had simply malfunctioned. Hammer himself cut a deal with someone to plead guilty to manslaughter of over thirty people, to keep Ivan Vanko's name out of everything, and thus avoid a charge of Treason. Hammer was going to jail for the part he played, but as far as the public was concerned, Vanko had never come to America, and had died in his jail cell in Monaco.

The official story behind War Machine was that Tony Stark had willingly given Rhodes the Mark II to keep the military away from his won suit; and that when Stark had too much to drink, Rhodes had selflessly stepped in, at great risk to himself; to keep anyone from getting hurt. Given that it largely fit with the facts, and that it avoided prosecution for the Army, for Stark, and for Rhodes; people were willing to accept that at face value.

The military had accepted the official line too, glad that they were not in the middle of a protracted fight with Stark over stolen technology. They had their own problems to deal with, having implicated themselves in the deaths at the Stark Expo by throwing their full support behind
Hammer Industries. Having turned their wrath at the loss of two generals, one of them a member of the Joint Chiefs, on Justin Hammer had given Stark industries plenty of room to maneuver, and control their own press.

Stark Industries came out on top once again, due to the fact that Tony Stark had long denied anyone access to his technology. In light of the events at the Expo, this stance had painted him as the forward thinking visionary who foresaw something like the disaster coming. The official story was that Rhodey was given the suit willingly, and so when he was the only other suit that was defending people instead of slaughtering them, it made Stark look like he'd made a good choice, and made Rhodes the latest superhero on the world scene.

The politicians had their own damage control to do. Taking the Mark II had settled the arguments about Iron Man tech, and the events at the Expo made Stark look like he had seen it all coming, and thus the people that had gone against him so ferociously suddenly looked like complaining, short sighted children. Senator Stern had been the first one to reverse his grand crusade against Tony Stark, having been assigned to present both Stark and Rhodes with their official commendations.

"...and so it is, that I have the great honor to present these Medals for Honor and Valor in the face of great danger, to Mr Tony Stark, and to Colonel James Rhodes. On behalf of the American People, we give our thanks to these men, who demonstrated what true heroism is." Stern finished his speech on the steps of the Capitol building, as Tony and Rhodes posed behind him formally, Rhodes decidedly uncomfortable with the scrutiny of the public.

Stern turned away from the podium, and if he had any trouble getting out such a glowing testimony, there was no sign of it on his face as he pinned the medal on Rhodes' chest. "Colonel, you do your country, and that uniform, proud. We thank you for your distinguished service."

Rhodes saluted, standing at attention. "Thank you, sir."

Stern came over to Tony with a similar medal, and Stark couldn't help himself. "Loved the speech." He said under his breath. "How's your lovely daughter these days?" The Senator took a sadistic delight in ramming the pin into Stark's chest.

Tony smothered a scream as Stern fixed the medal properly. The Senator gave him a savage smirk. "Sorry about that. It's amazing how much pain you can get from one little prick."

Tony was aching from the need to jump up and down yelling 'I-told-you-so!' at the top of his lungs in full view of the world, but now that he had his head on straight again, he kept it together.

Better than Stern did anyway. "Let's take a photo, shall we?"

The Senator stood between the two heroes as the press closed in, snapping photos like crazy. Without hesitation, Tony threw an arm around Stern and pulled him into a half hug. His father had taught him that one. When you win a fight, you don't banish your enemy, you make him sit in the front row and have everyone watch him applaud as you take your bow.

Tony waved to the crowd, and so did Rhodes, still getting used to the public spectacle.

Tony raised a hand and made a V with his fingers. "To Peace!" He called, and the crowd went nuts. Pepper was in the first row, beaming, and applauding the loudest, looking proudly up at him.

Stern pulled away as fast as the cameras had gotten their photos, and Rhodey and Tony came closer together, standing somewhat back to back, both of them waving to the crowd, in a perfect
hero shot.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I know, I tossed the 'Two seals fighting over a grape' moment, but if Tony and Pepper had been dancing around each other that long, the moment didn't deserve to become comic relief.
Between IM2 and Avengers, I had to invent a few sections to bridge the gaps. I didn't novelize The Avengers, because that's an Ensemble film, and this fic is about Iron Man exclusively. Avengers bridged the gap to IM3.

Everyone assumed that Tony was unpredictable; and he was, but not in the mornings. Like many people, Tony Stark enjoyed the comforts of a morning routine.

Every morning he would wake up at the crack of noon. Jarvis would have anything he needed to see projected onto the bathroom mirror for him. Pepper would have coffee waiting, and give him a list of things to sign or ignore, and he would sign his name approximately twenty to forty three times between the stairs and the workshop; where he would seal himself in for the duration of the daytime.

Nights were unpredictable as hell.

On the days when he had company on waking up; he would get up before dawn, and sneak out before whoever-she-or-they-were woke up. He would go down to the workshop and sleep there until Jarvis woke him up, and Pepper had dealt with whoever-she-or-they-were. She would come downstairs and give him a look of mild disapproval; and give him things to sign.

But then things had changed. Iron Man hadn't changed Tony Stark's morning routine. That was all Pepper Potts.

Having Pepper next to him in the morning was preferable to having her 'take out the trash'. The fact that he had to brew his own coffee had given him a moment of panic. It was the first time in years and years that he had a girlfriend. The first time that he had ever prepared coffee for someone else.

Then he discovered that Pepper slept naked, and the transition wasn't actually as difficult as he'd thought it would be.

"Good morning." Jarvis said smoothly. "It is nine am; it's 74 degrees in Malibu, with light clouds." Tony groaned and pushed his face into the pillow. "Surf conditions are fair with waist to shoulder high lines; High tide will be at…"

"Mute." Tony groaned; accepting the fact that he wasn't going back to sleep any time soon. Jarvis went silent; and Tony turned over to see Pepper sitting up next to him; with a blue-tooth headset under her messy bangs, a tablet computer across her knees, and her phone in one hand.

"Good morning." She said without looking at him; tapping away at the screen with two different stylus pens.

Tony woke up and reached for her. "Hey! I thought we agreed: No business when we were naked!"

"I know." Pepper told him, eyes still on her phone. "That's why I put my socks back on." She tapped on the screen. "What are you doing with the Penthouse?"
"I don't read those magazines. Anymore."

"No, I mean at Stark Tower in New York. There's a blueprint addition here for the Heliport."

"Oh. That?" Tony yawned and reached for her. "Small idea I had."

She successfully dodged him again. "You're putting a Construction line in at the Tower, aren't you? Iron Man lands on the heliport; becomes Tony Stark in seconds; you stroll into your office and mix yourself a martini, shaken, not stirred." Her tone was warm and teasing.

"Hey! Other superheroes get to do cool stuff like that. I gotta stop by the auto-club first?" He shot back, and pounced again.

Pepper dodged nimbly. "I thought you got over that with the Suitcase Suit."

"Suitcase suit can't fly." Tony retorted. "And you can't tell me you were a fan of the Football. Remember?"

"I remember it took us an hour to cut you outta that thing once Whiplash was done with you." She murmured.

Stark Tower was the first collaborative project that they'd both been part of since becoming a couple. Pepper had given her input on projects before; only half the time had her advice been taken, but in this case; she'd been given more authority over it than most. The New Stark Tower would be the most efficient building ever built; and designed for the comfort of all the cubicle workers employed there. Some couples decorate, she reflected, and some couples design skyscrapers.

Tony pounced one last time; and Pepper slid out of the bed; taking half the sheet with her. "Ah!Ah! No time. We've got a phone conference."

"We agreed no business talk!" Tony whined.

"The call is in half an hour." Pepper shot back primly. "You think I'll be done with you that quickly?"

Tony started to fire back a retort, and almost swallowed his tongue. "That's tough to argue with."

Pepper leaned in and kissed him long and soft and slow. "Go make coffee."

Tony mock-saluted crisply. "You've become very bossy since I made you the boss."

Pepper grinned and let the sheet drop on her way to the bathroom.

Pepper had taken the rumors about her and Tony in stride for more years that she could remember. Before her; there had never been a PA that lasted more than a month; and people had been assuming that they were sleeping together for a long time. So when they actually started dating; nobody really blinked.

The few journalists that actually knew the truth had commented on it; but the ones that hadn't assumed the worst were spinning it as a romance. The ones spinning it as Pepper sleeping her way to the top didn't last long once Tony had Stark Industries buy a few newspapers.

Los Angeles' latest power couple was one of the most unique. A CEO and a Superhero. Though the list of actual Superheroes in the world was starting to grow, most of them didn't date Fortune
500 Executives. As a result; they were getting some attention.

The two of them were spending more time in New York than usual. The business arm of their headquarters was there, and Pepper had to take a jet, as opposed to Tony; who could fly across the country without a plane. So Tony found he was spending more time in New York than he usually did.

Their weekends were always in LA, so the Stark Industries Monday Morning Staff Meeting with the department heads was now done over the phone.

Nobody on the Board of Directors thought this was strange. In fact, they thought it was progress. Stane had left a black mark on their Board Meetings, and Pepper had actually managed to get Tony to pay attention at least; so the rest of the company took it as a win.

"Media Relations." Pepper called into the speaker-phone.

"We've managed to spin the story quite nicely." SI's Media Relations Director answered. "The official account is that Stark gave Colonel Rhodes the Mark-II."

"I've got a birthday party full of guests who say otherwise." Stark said, not a trace of embarrassment in his voice. Pepper gave him a warning look; and he grinned impishly. He knew that she hated to be reminded of that night.

"The guests say that you were out of control; and that Rhodes tried to shut you down. We tell them that's true; but that he didn't have to steal anything to do it."

The cover story was a good one. Rarely had a Stark birthday party gone by without the birthday boy getting loaded and offering one or more of his guests their own car; their own Mansion, their own Island...

Pepper gave the last word. "Tony was under enormous pressure to hand at least one of the suits over to the Government. Giving them the Mark-II meant that Iron Man would stay the best; but would make everyone else happy. It fits; because nobody will want to argue with it."

"Just to make sure; the Military wants Iron Man available for a Photo Op with Rhodes. Iron Man and War Machine together; without Justin Hammer being involved."

"We'll make a note." Pepper called. "Security?"

The answer was prompt. "We've got the same guards as the San Andreo Nuclear Plant on standby to protect the Arc Reactor. Blueprints of the facility have all been run by SHIELD, and the technology has been kept a secret. After Whiplash, everyone was agreeable to that."

Pepper ticked it off and moved on. "Engineering?"

"We've hit a snag with the ARC Reactor." The report came through. "The Reactor is almost up and running; but adapting Arc Level power flows through regular city power lines is proving... impossible."

Stark growled. "Voltage."

"Yep." The answer came. "The power lines just can't handle the charge. So we either find a way to make the Arc Reactor like everything else; or we redo every power cable in Los Angeles."

Stark shrugged. "Well hey, how hard could that be?"
"Tony." Pepper gave him a look, and called into the phone again. "Can we get the city to accept the fees? Or at very least give us permission?"

"Legal is working on it now...but it's a tough sell. LA has an energy provider; and they're calling in $750 an hour lawyers of their own. Nobody's ever seen ARC Power except Iron Man... and the things that have that kind of power do have a way of..."

"Blowing things up?" Tony quipped.

"In so many words."

"Harry, here's what you do-"

"It's Jeff." The voice protested.

"Whatever." Tony ignored that. "You get on the line to whoever gets to vote yes or no, and you give them an offer. You tell them what it will cost to make all of L.A. emissions free within a year. It'll be a hell of a thing for the mayor to announce."

"I did that." Jeff reported. "He said no. And the current Energy providers, whoever they are, will say that Arc Tech is untested and dangerous."

"Then you tell them to watch New York." Pepper said firmly. "Because in a few months; Stark Tower will be powered by Arc Reactor Technology; and it'll keep all the lights on clean and cheap for a hundred years."

"The Tower will be our beta test?" Jeff called. "That could be risky."

"But it's our risk to take and nobody else's." Tony told him. "Then we'll announce that the first city to run emissions free skyscrapers was New York and not LA, and we'll announce who turned us down. The Mayor's Office will call you back and make you the same offer they turned down. When they do; you charge them an extra fifty percent." Tony looked to Pepper. "We're gonna charge them all a Cowardice Tax."

Pepper nodded approvingly, with a big smile on her face. "Folks, that's it for today. Have your reports on my desk by the time I get back to New York." She reached out with one hand and disconnected the call; and squeaked as Tony pulled her in for a savage kiss.

Tony broke for air, teasing his fingers along her neck. "I like to close the meeting with a moment of aggressive power and dominance as much as anyone. But when did the Tower become Arc Powered?"

"Thirty seconds ago." Pepper told him. "Make it happen."

"Ooh." Tony mock-shuddered. "You've gotten too good at running the company without me. I'm in danger of being declared a Kept Man."

Pepper pulled him in for a possessive kiss; smiling against his lips. "Hmm. Well, I like the idea of having my own personal Superhero; but I also like it when you get all Master Of The World. Such a dilemma."

"You like it when I get like that, dont'cha? Makes you want me?"

As little as two months ago, she would have shrugged off the whole conversation professionally. Now she put a long lingering kiss on his lips. "As a matter of fact..."
"Upstairs." Stark told her firmly.

"See? You're still all forceful and commanding when you need to be." Pepper teased; and headed for the staircase; where Tony was leading her by the hand.

"Sir." Jarvis suddenly put in; a note of urgency in his digital voice. "I have an incursion at the main entrance." Jarvis' voice dropped to a digital scrawl; and a familiar shape came in from the front door before either of them could worry.

"Agent Coulson." Pepper smiled politely at him. "Welcome back. Last time we saw you, bad things were about to fall down on our heads. What brings you by this time? Or did I just spoil the surprise?"

"Yeah, I get asked that a lot." Coulson said with his usual long suffering smile. "Mister Stark. We need to talk."

Halfway to the stairs, Stark was not pleased to hear that. "Now?"

"Right now."

"Well, you might find it a little embarrassing, but okay; come along then." Tony kept pulling Pepper toward the stairs, and she tugged herself free of his hand.

"We can reschedule." Pepper told him patiently.

"Not willingly." Stark commented flatly and turned his gaze on Coulson. "What could you possibly want?"

"I'll be happy to tell you, but some of the people in this room aren't cleared for this information." Coulson said carefully. He looked to Pepper. "No offense to you, Miss Potts."

"None taken." Pepper waved it off. "Remember; I'm dating a superhero, there are any number of things they never tell the Damsels in Distress."

"You're not the Damsel in Distress, you're my work wife." Tony pointed at her seriously.

Pepper smirked. "I'm impressed; you were able to say the word 'wife' without throwing up spontaneously." Nevertheless, she took the hint. "There's probably something that needs my attention in another room." She said agreeably; and headed upstairs.

"All right; you've got thirty seconds." Stark said to Coulson; eyes firmly on Pepper as she climbed the stairs. "Go."

The meeting with Coulson took a good deal longer than thirty seconds. Longer than anyone expected; and Pepper noticed the time almost too late to get moving.

She came downstairs to tell Tony she was leaving, and discovered that he had shifted to the workshop. She came down the stairs and was about to enter; when she noticed Tony's shoulders were hunched; and Coulson was almost at attention. They were both poring over some photos that she couldn't see.

Instead of letting herself in, she hit the intercom to tell Tony she had to go... and she caught a snippet of their conversation.

"...buried under the ice for a long time before my dad found it. His notes led me to think that it was
inactive."

"Not inactive." Coulson told him. "But we couldn't figure out how it worked. Technically we still can't, but after the battle; we had an idea of where it originated."

"If Doctor Hottie is right about the Einstein-Rosen Bridge; then it means the power source actually comes from... well; all existence in all universes everywhere."

"Which brings us to you." Coulson said. "We've approached Doctor Selvig..."

Pepper quickly decided she wasn't meant to be hearing any of this and left the intercom; sneaking back upstairs as best she could.

Tony let nobody into his workshop; except for her, and sometimes Rhodey. If Coulson had been admitted; then the situation was serious.

The matter didn't apparently affect her or Stark Industries just yet; but it weighed on her mind more than a little bit as the morning progressed.

She had thought that being CEO would have taken a lot of the knuckle-headed things off her desk; but in truth it had just made her opinion more official. There were dozens of press requests about the Justin Hammer trial; and hundreds demanding details about her relationship with Tony Stark.

She knew how to handle them; which ones to ignore; which ones to leave with a different department; and the day to day running of a massively powerful industry went on.

Stark arrived in the early afternoon and came straight to the CEO's office. He placed a large cup of coffee in front of her; the officially recognized olive branch in their relationship, and she picked it up and slurped a third of it in one long sip. "So." She said as she set it down. "Must have been interesting."

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting." He sighed; though it was clear his mind was a million miles away.

"What did he want? Or shouldn't I ask?"

"He wanted me to find a way to open a gateway to another dimension where the Ancient Norse Gods live."

"Oh is that all?" Pepper took it in stride. "Am I cleared for that information?"

"Nope." Tony grinned. "This is usually a good time to make a joke about you being fully debriefed."

Pepper tapped at her tablet a little longer and finished with a flourish; putting the devices down; and giving him a kiss. Opening shots exchanged; they could now focus on work. "Now. What the hell are you talking about?" She asked him.

He flipped a micro-sd card off his thumb toward her like he was flipping over a coin; and she hooked it into her phone without a word. Her screen lit up with footage of a huge mechanical man; walking down a street in a dusty town. It was built like a man, only several stories high... And instead of a face; it had a gaping maw that shot fiery death. Pepper shivered; having a sudden flashback to the Iron Monger.
The more she watched it as it shredded the town it walked through, the more she saw the differences. Iron Monger was pieced together. So was Iron Man; though in a far better way. This thing felt a lot more... organic. It was alive; but inhuman.

"There's been a 'thing' in New Mexico." Stark was already lounging in an easy chair at the corner of the office; tapping away at his transparent phone; making notes. "Our world just got bigger. Fury's... furious. He didn't have his team together in time; and I wasn't informed until after the fight went down."

Pepper looked closer. "What did he expect you to do against that?"

"Same thing I did against all the other supervillains I've met." Stark said without hesitation. "Actually... I'm told he's more ticked off that he couldn't get enough forces on the ground in time. If it wasn't for Mister Hammer; we might have had a problem."

"Justin Hammer? What was he doing there?"

"Not...ew. no, not Justin Hammer; Mister Hammer. It was... Keep watching; you'll see."

"It's New Mexico; how much faster could you get anything there?" Pepper asked logically.

"My dad had this idea for a fast response unit. He modeled it after an aircraft carrier. Like a lot of his notes; there was no way to make it happen... But now, I think I might be able to pull it off."

Pepper looked over with an affectionate smile. When he got onto a new project; it was very easy for him to block out everything else; including her. She didn't mind so much because she knew she was one of the exceptionally few people that he held onto, even during his insane workaholic phases. She also knew that when he emerged from his workshop; he'd realize what day it was and make it up to her. A lot. A naughty smirk crossed her face as she thought about it.

"Pay a penny for that thought." Tony said wickedly. "Is it about me? It's about me, isn't it?"

Pepper quickly schooled her expression and rose from behind her desk. "So. To work?"

"To work." Tony conceded; and they left her office headed toward the elevators.

"A few more things I want to put on your radar." Pepper said as they walked. "First of all; the idiot lawsuit made it to a hearing. I don't know how; but the Intellectual Property thing made it to Pre-Trial. I can kill it before it gets to an actual courtroom; but I wanted you to know."

"Fine."

"Second; the Justin Hammer trial has been moved back. Legal says to let it; because at this point he's less than nothing to us, or to you. Putting him in jail is for the people hurt at the Expo; which is not our problem."

"The trial got moved back so that all those Generals and Politicians can cover themselves." Tony waved it off. "Less than harmless to us because the military isn't my problem any more."

"Yep. I'm letting Rhodey have their names; he can get anyone he doesn't trust removed from the War Machine."

"Good."

"Speaking of War Machine, you can't put off whatever photo op with Iron Man the Joint Chiefs
want. Justin Hammer is starting his defense; and it all comes back to you and your ability as a superhero. Legal is trying not to beg; but they've got eleven fights going on at the moment; and having a quick sparring session with Rhodey where people can see you will make four of them go away."

"I'll pencil it in." He promised her.

Pepper ticked it off. "And lastly; I'm moving in with you, and the Maria Stark Foundation benefit has been shifted to tomorrow night."

"I won't be there." Tony said without blinking, and then he froze. Pepper was two steps closer to the elevator before she realized that he wasn't with her. "Wait... You're what?"

"Temporarily." She promised. "My apartment is just not cutting it in LA any more. The corporate offices are in New York; the Factory Complex is in LA, and I'm not close enough to either of them."

"Never been a problem before."

"Before; I was your PA. I had to be at your house early; and you lived in Malibu. Now I have the same hours; but I have to be in a totally different part of the city to talk to the other side of the country; and that's becoming problematic. Plus; the head of a Fortune 500 company needs a certain amount of security; and my landlord is freaking out." She gave him a look. "You never noticed that every phone conference with the board of directors took place over a speakerphone in your kitchen? There was a reason I stayed over those nights."

"Well yeah, but I thought the reason was fantastic sex."

"That too."

Stark smirked. "So your solution is to move in?"

"My apartment complex is under siege from my own security team. I can't be CEO, let alone Iron Man's girlfriend, and live in a typical downtown apartment building."

Tony considered. "You know, Virginia..." He said, overly casual. "I was just thinking; that the majority of your job would actually be easier if you were based out of New York."

"A new low." She commented brightly. "I suggest keeping a toothbrush at your place and you ship me across the continent."

Tony grasped her by the shoulders and turned her toward the glass wall; looking out over Los Angeles. "Imagine that's New York. The Ultimate MegaCity. It has more wealth than Fort Knox, the busiest port; the best shopping, the best food, the best skyline... but there's one thing it doesn't have. And that's you."

Pepper smiled a little; letting him make a fuss over her.

"Now, imagine that skyline; with Stark Tower in the middle of it; reaching up to the stars. The lights, powered by the Arc Reactor, making it a beacon of light when all the rest pales and flickers and goes dim... and at the top of the tower; the apex of the world... stands you. Fanning yourself with a fistful of hundred dollar bills in one hand, and a martini properly chilled in the other."

"You want me to live in an office building?" Pepper snorted.
"The Office building in question, is still in the early construction phase..." Tony drawled. "Hey, you came up with the idea, you designed most of it... Put an extra four levels on top, and it's all yours. Your own Penthouse. Cut out the commute to work completely. It will be your castle; your tower; from where you look down on the lesser mortals."

Pepper leaned back into him, rolling her eyes a little at his dramatic delivery; but it was what she loved about him. "Well..." She drawled. "If I'm going to be living there; I'll want to be a... larger part of the planning process."

"I would expect nothing less. You already designed most of the building after all."

"And there'll be a guest room for when you stay over." Pepper drawled.

"A guest room?"

"Yup. Next to the air vents; where the rest of the building will pump all the heat out." Pepper teased.

"You're mocking me, right?"

"Maybe." Pepper said warmly and gaze him a squeeze as she resumed her course for the elevators. "Take me the Foundation Benefit tonight; and we'll see if you can talk me into adding a jacuzzi."

"Oh that?" Tony snorted. "I never go to those things."

"The Benefit's for your mom's Foundation."

"Which is why I always see what everyone's donated and then match the total donations, dollar for dollar, plus an extra twenty percent." Tony retorted. "But you've known me a long time. When was the last time I went to one of those parties?"

"As I recall; I was wearing a backless lavender dress at the time." Pepper commented.

Tony said nothing; but his eyes glazed a moment.

"Had you thinking about it, didn't I?" Pepper grinned; as the elevator doors opened.

Tony smirked. "Pepper; I get that you think you can manipulate me with those bedroom eyes of yours... and you can. But we both know that those parties have never really been my scene... And now that you've got and made me respectable, there's no reason to show up at all."

"Oh, I know." Pepper nodded agreeably. "That's why I thought I'd go with Agent Coulson."

Tony spun toward her in disbelief as the elevator doors closed between them.

"Mister Stark isn't jealous that you're on my arm tonight?"

"Phil, I don't know quite how to break this to you, but I'm not on your arm... you're on mine." Pepper said lightly.

Coulson took that in stride as they both stepped out of the limo and faced the society photographers assembled at the red carpet.

Pepper was wearing the lavender dress; more because she knew the photos would tweak Tony's nose the next morning. Coulson had arrived in his usual suit; but she had a tux waiting for him. It
was eerie how well he was taking it. His expression was composed; his stance relaxed...

"Ever been to one of these before?" Pepper asked. "Because if you're not used to it; the attention can be a little jarring."

"Miss Potts; I don't know quite how to break this to you..." He said with assurance. "...but you won't find my face in any of these photos, anywhere. Ever."

Pepper blinked. The camera flashes had been intense when they'd noticed her coming in. People were already shouting questions, wondering where Tony was; and why he wasn't with her. The gossip magazines had killed for less.

**Steady, Pepper.** She warned herself. *It's not the first time you've underestimated this man.*

The two of them entered the elegant ballroom. Pepper smiled a little; reminded of the Firefighters Charity Gala. It was all warm lights and expensive furniture. An orchestra, with all the musicians wearing white tie tuxedos, was playing a soft jazz standard; and half the ceilings were glass; giving them a view of the spotlights and stars above. This was a room where Power and Money lived.

She checked Coulson subtly as they ordered drinks. She ordered champagne, he ordered a beer. He was at ease around Power; but less so around money.

"So, you do this often?" She teased. "An Black-Tie Event, an exotic beauty, never get your photo taken, throw in a car chase; a running gunfight, back in time for champagne?"

"You expect that to happen tonight?" Coulson asked her. "Because if you are, you can relax, I'm armed."

She could never tell if he was being sarcastic or not. he just had one of those expressions that was impossible to read. "Phil, I was joking."

He twitched a little; and Pepper smothered her amusement at the fact that he was more thrown by someone using his first name than by the A-Listers circling them.

"Listen." Pepper told him as they made their way around the ballroom. "The company is funding a big part of this, and I'm CEO, so in a few minutes, I have to make a quick speech, thank people for their money; that sort of thing."

"I memorized the itinerary." He nodded agreeably. "You might want to wait to go on stage until I check a few people out. There's a woman to your four o'clock position; and a couple over by the bar. They've been watching you since they walked in; and they're not just curious."

Pepper looked casually and sighed. "The woman is a groupie. Her hope was to steal Tony away from me by the time the party ended and then brag about it on facebook. The couple over by the bar are protestors. The worst they'd be packing is a can of spraypaint. We've run into them all before."

"I'll alert security." Coulson promised...

...and she hooked his arm in hers before he could leave her side. "Will you relax? Security already knows."

Coulson didn't seem impressed. "Two guys on the door, another two at the stage; and-"

"Ah!Ah!" Pepper interrupted. "Stand Down; it's a party."
Coulson settled; and she suddenly realized his beer glass was full. She'd seen him sip it, but he hadn't been drinking; just holding the glass to fit in. In fact; she wasn't quite sure what the man was doing here at all.

"Miss Potts?" The MC appeared at her side. "We'll be ready for you in just a few minutes."

Pepper gave him a nod, and turned to Coulson once they were alone. "You mind if I ask you something?" She said casually. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"You invited me."

"Well, yeah. But if you're going to act like my bodyguard all night; you might as well have stayed at work and pulled a night shift. Why'd you come here?"

Coulson regarded her a moment. "When Mister Stark was dying, you didn't know. I did, but... We had to spy the information. He didn't tell you, and he tells you everything. The... Project that we were hoping to get Mister Stark to join is in trouble; and none of us can figure out what's going on in that red and yellow helmet of his."

Pepper blinked. "Phil, are you here to spy on me? Get a profile together?"

Coulson hesitated; and then took a sip of his beer. "You should get up on stage."

Pepper let her gaze linger on him for a moment; and made her way toward the stage. Did I just get drafted? Does SHIELD want me as Iron Man's 'Handler'? She wondered. But then, isn't it true? Who else would you call if you need to get Tony Stark to take something seriously? Who else can handle him?

The crowd quietened down as she tapped on the microphone. "Ladies and Gentlemen..." Pepper began.

The band suddenly crashed into an Orchestral arrangement of Black Sabbath's "Iron Man", cutting Pepper off mid-word. There was the tiniest beat of confusion...

"Look!" Someone squealed from the back of the room. "IT'S IRON MAN!"

The assembled people all whipped out their phones; and the collective press all raised their cameras. Pepper was suddenly the least of their concerns as everyone looked to the sky.

Pepper rolled her head back; looking up though the glass ceilings, and sure enough, hovering above the party, gleaming in the spotlights; a human star against the night... was The Invincible Iron Man.

The Red and Gold suit glided past the skylight until it was out of sight; and then came back over like an out of control missile. Iron Man buzzed the skylight once, twice, three times, from all different directions; and the camera flashes intensified each time.

Iron Man returned a moment later; hovering in the vertical position; slow enough to give the cameras a good look at him as he waved; then came back for another pass and posed in mid-air, giving them a 'Peace' Sign...

It went for several minutes; as everyone at the benefit craned their necks trying to keep him in view. Iron Man was putting on a show.

Pepper sighed, putting her speech notes away. By the time Tony was through showing off; there
would be very little she could say.

Coulson joined her as she stepped off the stage. "It'll be good for the Benefit." He offered.

"It'll be incredibly good for the Benefit." Pepper agreed. "That's not why he did it though."

Coulson was looking past her; and she turned to follow his gaze. The Orchestra was hamming up the chorus of the song, even as they tried to sneak glances at the show going on above. But one of the musicians was barely caring. She wasn't looking at her music; and looked disgusted at the crowd. The cello in her hands kept playing properly though; so nobody could fault her on doing her job.

"There's always one." Pepper smirked. "Every party like this, surrounded by the 1%, there's always one person who isn't the least bit impressed."

"I know." Coulson commented. "But until just now, I thought that one person would be either me or you."

Pepper found that to be hilarious.

"IS THAT WAR MACHINE!?!" Someone screamed ecstatically; and the camera flashes intensified, once again.

Tony was performing another acrobatic loop; when his readouts went berserk for a moment; and something flashed past his HUD; sending him into a sudden spin. It was the most common way he found himself in trouble in the air and Tony was able to react to it without stopping to think. Iron Man managed to get his feet under him and go into a hover, just in time to catch himself before he smashed through the glass ceiling below him.

"Ha!" A familiar voice whooped in his HUD. "That was fun!"

"Rhodey?" Tony turned back and forth; trying to get a look; when he saw a second manned missile swooping down. He booted his jets and flew out of the way quickly. They passed each other close enough; face to face; that Stark could see Rhodey waving at him smugly.

"I liked it better when only I could do that!" Stark called up to his friend. Through the glass ceiling below him; he could see the camera flashes going off like an out of control lightning storm. About a thousand newspapers had just seen Rhodey send him tumbling. This was not acceptable. Tony painted a quick target over War Machine, and Jarvis obligingly locked on. Stark gunned his jets and the chase began.

The people below were all watching eagerly as the fireworks started; just in time for the two flying metal men to outrun the explosions of light and color as they soared upward faster than the eye could follow.

Rhodey let out a quick shout as Iron Man flashed past him quick enough to send him into a tumble. Tony had flown vertically; so that everyone below got to see it happen.

"Ha!" Tony exulted. "I got close enough to see the 'Property of US Army' sticker on your ass!"

"What about you? Hot Rod Red? When's your sponsor gonna demand his cut?"

"Okay Soldier-Boy, let's see what you got!" Tony grinned; but Rhodes could tell there was none of the resentment or anger than came from their last race through the sky.
The two of them took off at full speed through the night; going like out-of-control rockets. They crossed whole neighborhoods in split-seconds, too fast for the people below to get their cameras out and snap a picture or a bit of footage... so it seemed only fair that they double back and give them another chance. Iron fed his repulsor power into his boot jets and shot past Rhodey, then tilted his armor up and went skyward, with War Machine in hot pursuit.

"Sir, the Mark-II Armor is not rated for this altitude." Jarvis reported with some urgency. "I'm sure you remember the-

"Icing Problem!" Tony said it with him, and looked down. Rhodey had ice building up on his skin.

"Oh, hell!" Tony growled and dove. "Rhodey, Dive! Dive now!"

War Machine did so, and the two of them swooped back toward the city.

"I gotta build you an upgrade." Stark sighed.

"I never would have gone that high, y'know?" War Machine responded. "I read the report, I know how you took out Iron Monger."

"Using the icing problem didn't work on him." Stark retorted, but he was glad to know that his friend was aware of the suit limitations. "Round Two!" He exulted and opened up to full throttle again.

The last time Iron Man and War Machine had sparred; Rhodes had been an unwilling passenger in his own suit; which is why Tony suddenly realized that this round was much more difficult. Rhodes was always aware of which was up, no matter how tight his spin. Tony was tempted to head for the skyscrapers and weave through them; but knew Rhodey would never play that game when there were civilians in the area.

Iron Man threw his hands forward and opened all his flaps. He came to an almost comical Roadrunner halt in the air, and Rhodey flew right past him. "Gotta be smarter than that in a dog-fight fella! This isn't a jet you're flying, this is an Arc Reactor."

"Be aware of your surroundings Stark." Rhodey shot back. "For example: We're far enough from the city not to worry about breaking windows." And Iron Man went tumbling out of control as the air was filled with a sudden Sonic-Boom.

The wave of air sent him downward; almost hurling him toward the ground. Tony struggled to get his repulsors under him again. His readouts were spinning wildly; the out of control horizon before him making it impossible to figure out what any of his readouts said...

*Clang!* His freefall came to a sudden and jarring halt.

War Machine had caught him suddenly. Tony shook off the confusion of the spin and realized that Rhodey had caught him seconds before he hit the ground.

"Nice catch." Stark admitted. "The horizon was spinning so much I couldn't get a read on which way to stop the spin."

"My bad." Rhodes seemed thoroughly embarrassed by it. "We were away from the buildings and... Look, next time; don't try and figure it out, just make yourself spin under your own control; then you can figure out when to stop. Assuming your stomach is strong enough."

"This is why I came to you when I first started building this thing." Stark told him. "I needed a test
pilot I could trust."

"How about now?" Rhodey asked him. "You never answered me before: Who does Tony Stark trust more than anyone. And you can't say Pepper, because that's way too obvious."

Iron Man's HUD lit up with a candid shot of him and Pepper in the workshop; and started playing Jason Mraz and Colbie Caillat's *Lucky*. A familiar musical ringtone. "Speaking of Jimminy Cricket, I got a call."

Rhodey chuckled and gunned his jets, flying back toward the city. Stark followed, and answered the call. "Hey you."

"Your timing sucks." She said by way of greeting.

"You hate public speaking, my timing is excellent." He told her innocently. "Besides; you said I had to take some photos with Rhodey to clear up some PR and Legal matters."

"I did say that." She agreed. "And then you said you wouldn't be caught dead at this party."

"I'm not at the party; I was actually a hundred feet above it. You guys on the ground were the ones shooting fireworks at me."

She snorted. "Having fun?"

"I don't know quite how to say this... But Rhodes is a better flyer than me."

"There's an Air Force Academy that would suggest this to be true." She told him gently. "So there's no reason you should be embarrassed when I tell him you said that."

"You will not." Tony said, very serious.

"Will so."

"Will not."

"Will so."

"Tony!" Rhodes broke in. "Three o'clock low."

Tony looked; and his HUD zoomed in on a street on the outskirts of LA, where some random kid in a pair of torn jeans was trying to break into a car. Iron Man's HUD took a scan of his face and put up a complete criminal record.

"My Display says the car belongs to someone else." Rhodes chimed in. "We should do something."

"Iron Man and War Machine together... for a carjacker?" Stark said blankly. "Jeez, you really don't know the meaning of the word 'overkill' do you?"

"In about five minutes; neither will that moron down there." Rhodes commented.

"There's a guy across the street recording the theft on a phone." Stark offered, looking over the situation. "What do you say we give him a real show?"

"What are you doing?" Pepper demanded, unamused from what she'd heard.

"Just doing what we can to scare a juvenile delinquent into going straight." Tony said innocently.
"Call you back."

The kid was trying to slip a wire past the driver's side window; when he heard a sudden clap of thunder and something passed the edge of his vision; moving like a meteorite. He spun and saw a blur of red and gold; slamming down to ground level with a clang, not five feet away from him.

"Step Away From The Vehicle!" Iron Man growled digitally; and raised both hands. From his forearms, his shoulders, his torso; there extended over a dozen small munitions, plus two repulsors and the Uni-Beam glowing dangerously.

The kid spun away from Iron Man in a panic and found War Machine waiting behind him; aiming everything from a wrist-mounted rocket launcher to heat-seeking missiles, to a mini-gun at his face. The kid caught a glimpse of his reflection in the gleaming metal figures; and saw his face and body was painted with dozens of targeting lasers.

There was a tense moment... and the over-matched kid promptly passed out, falling face first to the pavement.

From across the street there was a chorus of wolf-whistles and wild applause. Both armored men looked up at the apartment building across the street and found they had an audience.

"Serve and protect!" Stark called out jovially; and traded a metallic high-five with War Machine, before they both took off into the night sky.

"You really know how to work a room." Rhodes commented. "That video the guy was filming is gonna go viral."

"And then some." Stark grinned. "Hey, getting into it was your idea." Tony was about to say more when his HUD lit up explosively. The Avengers Icon was splashed across his vision; and he suddenly received a coded transmission. "Hold On. Fury's sending me a News Flash."

"Something big?" Rhodes asked sharply. "Because if you need to head for a hot-zone, I'm with you."

Tony read his display as the decoding program quickly spelled it out for him. "Whoa."

"What? What is it?"

"You know, there's a rumor going around that Stark Tower in New York will actually be in your name." Coulson commented.

"Not the Tower, just the top four floors."

"Mm. That's why the top four floors have the name 'STARK' written across it in twelve foot neon letters."

"Well... It's not like I own the entire building," She admitted. "Wait. Tony and I were discussing that this afternoon; how'd you hear about it so fast?"

Coulson just looked at her like she should know the answer. His gaze had flicked back and forth to the young blonde woman who had been playing the cello. As the orchestra called a break and someone began playing some music over the sound system.
Pepper had noticed the Agent's interest and hid her smile. "Say, Phil?" She said casually. "I have to make a quick call. Would you mind getting me another drink?"

Coulson glanced from her, over to the bar where the young woman was waving over a bartender. "Whatever you say, Miss Potts."

Pepper let the smile show through a little as he headed over.

Coulson stepped up to the bar just as the blonde was receiving her drink. "Another Champagne please." He said to the bartender. "And whatever the lady just ordered is on me as well."

The young woman was not impressed. "Thanks, but I can handle it." She told Coulson. It was meant as a polite brush off.

"Actually; I was hoping I could ask you something?" Coulson told her matter-of-factly.

The cellist sighed; like she was expecting someone to do exactly this. "Sure. Ask away."

"You play the cello. Do you use Eva Pirazzi or Vision strings?" Coulson asked without hesitation. *When a frontal attack is too risky, come in sideways to avoid resistance.*

The woman blinked; surprised at the question. "Vision strings." She answered reflexively. "Do you play?"

"Not myself no, but I make it a point to learn a bit about everything." He gestured back at the side-stage where the orchestra had set up. "You heading back to work right away?"

"No, the... we're on break until the dancing starts." She explained. "But after the pre-fireworks show; I doubt the schedule is worth much."

Coulson registered the tone. "You didn't approve? Most everyone else seemed impressed."

"No, I thought it was an impressive show." The young woman admitted. "As impressive as all the trained dolphin shows at Seaworld. Do a few backflips while the people applaud."

"What *would* impress you?" Coulson probed. "Offering to pay for a drink doesn't seem to do much good. Superheroes having fun don't impress you either."

"I don't mind when *anyone* decides to act like a kid. Kids don't take themselves too seriously. The happiest people I know are the ones that don't take themselves too seriously. But the guy's a Superhero and a Bazillionaire... So what *does* he take seriously?"

Coulson didn't even hesitate. "Her." He said; gesturing to Pepper; who was on the phone across the ballroom.

The blonde woman looked over; and smiled a bit. "Well... That's not so bad." She looked back to him and seemed to focus her eyes on him properly for the first time. "So. What brings you here? Because you clearly aren't one of the guests. At least not one with money."

"I'm here as... call it a working observer." Coulson brushed it off.

"Ah. And what have you observed?" She asked him.

"That... you came here tonight to work; but you must have requested the job because you had to adjust the instrument twice; which means it wasn't yours. You clearly weren't hoping for a look at any of the guest list; or even Iron Man, so you must be here to support the Foundation. My guess
She blinked. "Not bad." She admitted. And she held out a hand. "Jenna."

"Spec-" Coulson caught himself as he shook her hand. "Phil. And just so you know, if you weren't playing the music? I'd ask you to dance."

Jenna actually smiled; pleased with the response.

At that moment Coulson's pager went off. He checked the screen and froze.

"You have to go." She guessed.

"I'm afraid I can't ignore this number." Coulson admitted.

Pepper came running up to them as fast as she could in her long evening-dress and stiletto heels. "Agent Coulson!" She blurted. "I just got a call..." She paused and turned to Jenna for a quick breath. "Hello." She turned straight back to Coulson. "You'll never believe what Tony just told me."

Coulson held up his pager. "Tell him you're not cleared to know these things."

Pepper realized what she had just interrupted; and gave them both a tight smile. "I have something I need to take care of, probably." She told them both awkawardly and retreated.

"Agent Coulson, huh?" Jenna commented. "Okay. I'm impressed now. Just how did you manage to get the famous Pepper Potts to drop that little tid-bit? Because don't get me wrong, the 'Secret Agent' bit is a great pick-up line; but having a Fortune 500 CEO set it up shows some class."

"Yeah, listen, before you say anything; you should know that there's no way I'm going to be able to prove what I do for a living, nor should I; but I think you're beautiful and classy and smart and if you give me your phone number, I'd like to give you a call next time I'm in Los Angeles."

"If you were really a spy, you'd probably have my phone number already." She teased.

"I do." Coulson said as he answered the page. "But making it obvious would be creepy. And tell your mom happy birthday for me." With that, he turned on his heel and hit the secure speed-dial on his phone, leaving a gob-smacked cello player staring after him.

The Arctic circle was slowly disappearing. For the most part; this was a bade thing. But as the Ice slowly receded a little further; something long buried became visible.

Iron Man got there first; and painted the target from above on his HUD, guiding the recovery team to the precise location.

The SHIELD jet was capable of vertical hovering; even in the unpredictable winds at the Arctic Circle; and came in to land near the enormous wreck. It was at least two hundred feet long; and even after having spent so long under the ice; Tony could see the sleek lines of it; the sliver polished hull. It was shaped like a modern flat V-Wing Bomber; but much bigger; and with an almost retro style.

And so much of it still intact. The Futurist in him marveled at it. German engineering at it's finest. That kind of engineering skill nearly conquered the world once. He reminded himself.
SHIELD made the first entry; coming into the open, icy cavern. The first team shuddered as they came inside the dark space. It was more than just the Arctic cold around them. They could all feel it as soon as they stepped inside. They had just walked into a tomb.

"Remember." Coulson said over their headsets. "This thing was nuclear capable, the first man-made thing ever to be equipped with atomic weapons. Search Teams will stay back until we can confirm there's no radiation hazard. Mister Stark; that includes you."

The Hazmat teams went in first with their Geiger Counters. They also had helmet-cams, and everyone was glued to the footage. Hovering a hundred feet above; Tony had the feed up on his HUD. He saw a lot of curved ceilings; fairly tight quarters; a few gun racks on the walls, stocked with retro-futuristic rifles of some kind...

The Hazmat teams went all over the fuselage.

"Wait!" Coulson said suddenly. "Ryan? Go back a step."

The camera feed shifted back obediently.

"Look left." Coulson directed.

The camera moved.

"Holy God." Coulson breathed; and half a dozen Agents, including Iron Man, expressed similar sentiments. Without being told; Ryan stepped forward and picked up a large round shape. He reached out a gloved hand and wiped off the layer of frost... revealing the gleaming Red, White and Blue.

"...it can't be." Someone said. "It CAN'T be."

"Are you telling me we might actually have found Captain America's resting place?"

"All right. Hazmat, fall back to Recovery-One. Search teams to Recovery-Two, ASAP. We're advancing the salvage mission."

The loss of Captain America had been the biggest shock of the war. To this day; nobody had known for sure where he was buried. The rumors were that the Nazi's had stolen the corpse for their own experiments; others thought that he had been lost at sea. Without knowing exactly how it happened, there was no way to know if there would even be a body left.

But The Captain had been the symbol; no matter how good he was on the battlefield. His death had resulted in a recruitment rush that had given the Allied Forces a much needed push during the closing days of the Invasion. There was a statue of him in Arlington; an the only surviving Shield held a place of honor in the Smithsonian.

And nobody had ever known how close the United States had come to defeat.

Iron Man suddenly realized that they didn't know. The majority of the SHIELD Team didn't know what they had found here. "Coulson, go private."

Coulson paused for a moment; and answered him. Jarvis put the frequency up on display and recoded to accept the transmission automatically. "They don't know?"

"Captain America is considered a superhero; and that puts him under the category of the Avengers Initiative. All that stuff has been deemed Classified. Everything from the configuration of the
Flying Fortress to the last known location. They didn't even know Captain America went down here."

Stark let it go. It was a grim reminder that the semi-disbanded 'team' that he was almost a part of did not exist in a vacuum. There were no doubt a million things that Fury wasn't telling him either. As Iron Man and head of Stark Industries; he had all the cards, saw all the angles. Being part of something like SHIELD meant he had to take what he was given. "My dad knew." Stark offered. "Fury sent me his journals; and he went all over the place looking. It must have refrozen under the ice before his search could get this far."

"He was close." Coulson offered from the SHIELD Recovery Aircraft, flying to meet him. "He was only off by twelve miles."

"My dad was good; but by the time he got a search together..." Tony left the thought unfinished. "No satellite coverage. No laser beacons. Dad's greatest frustration was that he was limited by the technology of the day." He sniffed a bit. "But then, I guess we are too. The Avengers is supposed to be the Ultimate fast response unit, and I'm the only one that can get anywhere fast." He brightened a little. "Actually; remind me to talk to Fury about that. You know you were saying it was annoying that you had to get a Navy Carrier together, put the crew under gag-orders; all that stuff? So I was thinking, what if you had your own Carrier?"

"We do; but it was in the wrong ocean." Coulson waved it off. "By the way, that's another thing you shouldn't tell your girlfriend."

"Well, that's my point. What if I could get your carrier into the right ocean for you at will?"

"How? Can Iron Man carry that much weight?" Coulson seemed surprised. "Actually; cancel that. Recovery-Two is coming in to land in a second, and this conversation is for Secured Lines only. We'll talk about this later."

SHIELD sent its agents swarming into the fuselage; still largely buried under the ice. The hull was breached in many places; with ice sticking into the wreck here and there. In some places; the ice had fused so closely with the metal that it was hard to tell where they parted from each other. Iron Man joined the search also; able to blast through the ice; and lift heavy debris out of the way. "Logically; he'd be on the bridge." Coulson said, his breath misting the cold air. "He had communication with the ground when he ditched it."

So they worked their way forward.

"There's no crew." Someone commented as they reached the cockpit. "There are workstations; but there's no crew anywhere. Not even bones."

"Agent Coulson." Even Iron Man's digital voice seemed hushed in respect. "I found him."

Agent Coulson hurried over to join Iron Man, and sure enough...

Like everything else in the wreck; the body was perfectly preserved by the cold; coated in a layer of icicles. But even with a faint tint of icy blue to his skin; he looked identical to each and every photo that had been plastered all over the western hemisphere.

After Seventy Years, they had found the Tomb of Captain America.

"The First Avenger." Coulson said with open awe. "My God, I never thought..."
"The First Avenger." Iron Man agreed.

Coulson suddenly remembered himself. "Atten-SHUN!"

Every Agent, Soldier, Sailor and Operative in the wreck; and listening on the radio swiftly came to stand at full attention.

"Captain Steven Grant Rogers, United States Army." Coulson intoned. It was a battlefield ceremony. The kind that soldiers got on battlefields. "Rest In Peace, Captain. You're going home."

Those in uniform saluted. Iron Man did not.

Inexplicably; Tony Stark suddenly felt ashamed. His conversation with Rhodes months ago, came back to haunt him with a vengeance. *I'm not this guy Rhodey, I'm not Captain America! Will these people speak in whispers when I go down one day?*

"Everyone. Until we get Captain Rogers clear; this is not a recovery site; it's a tomb. As such; we will act accordingly until we remove him to a proper location."

"Agent Coulson." Tony said awkwardly. "Are you telling me you packed a coffin?"

"No, but the ammo containers will do the job. They're the right size; and they're sealed airtight. Pack him with ice; treat him gently. Recovery-Two can fly him back to the Aircraft Carrier while we work here."

It was an unconventional instruction; for an unconventional situation, and everyone quickly followed their orders.

Coulson kept staring after Recovery-Two as it lifted off and turned south with it's cargo. Iron Man stepped up next to him. "You seem like a fan."

"You're not?" Coulson seemed surprised. "I would have thought the world's first Superhero would have been a source of inspiration to you. Or at least some interest."

"Everyone was interested." Iron Man shrugged that off. "People in our profession a lot more so... But you're the only one here staring out after the body as if flies away."

Coulson's expression was always that same relaxed mask of gentle good-humor, but he still looked a little embarrassed. "Yeah, I'm a fan. A collector, actually. I must be the last guy in America to buy war bonds with the Captain America logo stamped on it."

The two of them looked after the jump-jet for a while; not saying anything.

"It's Fate." Coulson said finally. "It's Destiny."

"The Avengers are coming apart Coulson." Iron Man broke it to him gently. "The military won't let you have War Machine, I'm considered barely trustworthy enough to be on your mailing list, your combat archer is a better shot than I am, but he can't fly. Hulk is... Well, need I say more?"

"I know." Coulson said plainly. "The Avengers Initiative is close to scrapped as it is, but I don't care! It's gonna work!"

"Because we found a Cap-sicle?"

"After fifty years; we find the first Superhero, the First Avenger, just as the world gets to the point
where we need superheroes again." Coulson waved a hand over it. "What else could it be? The Universe is giving us what we needed when we need it most! It's Destiny."

"Stop saying that." Iron Man told him. "We found a fifty year old wreck; and America's most famous missing man. What exactly did this give the Avengers that they didn't have a week ago?"

Coulson went over to the Salvage Table; and picked up Captain America's Shield; every bit as much a symbol as the man that had carried it.

"The one thing that bad guys never have. Certainty that our cause is just." Coulson told him; holding the Shield up so that everyone could see it. "We have Conviction."

Tony didn't know what to say to that. "I hope it's enough."

Stark didn't notice at the time, but the rack of gleaming HYDRA Weapons was empty.

Watching on the monitors from the Aircraft Carrier; Fury turned off the feed and sighed. "We got more than that."

"And then some."

Fury turned sharply as Maria Hill, his second in command, came into the Monitor Room. "Recovery-Two landed a few minutes ago." She reported. "The first reports say that the HYDRA weapons are pretty well preserved too."

"Good." Fury agreed. "I'd hate to put our trust in them, but hold onto it anyway." He straightened his shoulders. "And tell the Med-Staff to treat the body gently. When we report it; someone's gonna want to throw a parade."

"Yeah, about that..." Hill said. "Um... We took the body down to the Medbay. And when we started to thaw him out, one of the Med-Tech's noticed something he didn't expect."

"What's that?"

Hill took a deep breath. "Well... um... A Pulse."

Fury stared at her. "Would you say that again please?"

"You're not serious." Coulson said in disbelief.

"I'm not saying I agree. In fact I agree with you." Stark told him in the same soothing tone he used with Pepper whenever he acted too much like himself. "I'm just saying, nobody's been able to figure out the Super-Soldier formula since the first Beta-Test. The closest you ever came to recreating it was the Hulk. Now we've got the original back, what do you think all those generals and Admirals are going to want? To throw the body a parade, or dissect him and make a legion of Super-Soldiers?"

"The man who took this bomber down was more than just a formula." Coulson argued.

"I agree."

"As a symbol he practically financed half the war-bonds drive, as a soldier he saved thousands of others, tore down walls that nobody could get close to..."
"Again, I agree." Iron Man turned up the volume to speak over him. "We are, in fact, in agreement. I'm just saying... that was seventy years ago."

Coulson held a hand up and pressed a hand to his ear, listening to something on his earpiece. Even in the Arctic conditions; he suddenly turned pale. "I-I'm sorry Director..." He responded. "Would you say that again please?"

Stark was surprised. He checked his feed again, and there was no incoming messages from Fury. He wasn't even picking up the transmission. Fury had gone all out to make sure that there was no chance of someone listening in. "What? What is it?"

Coulson looked up at Iron Man, eyes glowing in thrilled awe. "It's Destiny!"

"Stop saying that!" Iron Man growled.
Months passed, and things settled into a new routine. Captain America recovered; and began a crash course on the new century.

Stark Tower was completed; and those that followed the project noted that the top three floors were used as a private residence and helipad for Tony Stark... and that a lot of the apartment space had been designed by Pepper Potts.

Only a few people who understood the blueprints were fully aware of who was making changes as the building was constructed; but once they mentioned it; the news went viral. The stock market seemed hesitant on the subject; wondering if Stark Tower could possibly live up to the hype; wondering if the news that CEO Potts was getting more personal influence over the major projects division would be a stabilizing factor on the unpredictable Tony Stark; or if it meant that Stark was losing control of his designs.

The tower kept growing taller; at an unprecedented pace; and America's favorite Power Couple were seen more and more often in New York; seeing to the construction personally. Some wondered if this meant a wedding was coming.

Pepper had long been used to ignoring rumors about her and Tony Stark... but the rumors she ignored had always been scandalous; usually dirty; mostly baseless...

She knew better than to mention them to Tony; but he had already heard them.

Every time the rumors got to be a little too much; he would don the armor and help construct Stark Tower personally; and the crowd would go wild; a thousand photos of a superhero would go viral; and everything went on as normal.

Tony had shifted Stark Industries out of the weapons export business; and into the Clean Energy Market; and was quickly pronounced the leader in the relatively small industry.

The death threats that came against Stark and Iron Man daily stopped coming from warlords and foreign agents; and came instead from the coal and oil industries.

Stark Tower reached it's maximum height; including the Penthouse; and Tony promptly gave the Penthouse to Pepper; making her the legal owner of the top floor. She accepted it graciously; since she knew the main reason he'd done it was so that she'd have a permanent residence that he could visit. Her apartment in LA was completely inappropriate for Stark Industries CEO. For one thing; the corporation was in New York; and her apartment was in LA. She was hesitating to actually move all her things, but she was spending more time in the Penthouse, or at Tony's than at her own apartment.

The Tower was not the only construction project gaining speed. Fury had envisioned the Avengers as the fast response team to world threats, but there was no way to transport them to hotspots. Iron Man was the only one who could get anywhere with any speed.

SHIELD had possession of an aircraft carrier for mobile operations. Stark had 'consulted' and found a way to make the enormous ship truly 'mobile'. It was an unprecedented project that took months to perfect... And Stark was furious that he'd never get to show it off to anyone, not even Pepper.
He was king. Without anyone knowing that he was doing anything at all, his enemies had all vanquished each other. Nobody in Asgard had been put in danger, where Thor would have charged down every gun with a smile on his face.

And then it had all gone so very wrong. His brother had changed in his time with the humans. Their lives were so transitory. Thor and Loki had walked the world of human men when they thought a stone-head axe was the height of weapons power.

Father had turned Thor loose with the mighty Mjolnir for the first time that day. The humans had worshiped the lightning.

Loki had done what his nature had demanded of him, slipping in and out of the humans, watching and learning. He had taught them how to tame it so that they could bring it warmly into their weak thatched homes. And while the Storm God they all praised rattled the sky and lit up the frigid night with cold electric fire, the humans would huddle around the fireplaces, owing their lives to the Sly Loki.

They had nothing left to offer the humans, and Allfather knew it, taking them home, tutoring them further in the ways of the Throne.

Four thousand years of wenching, brawling, drinking and gorging, and Thor had learned nothing. But Loki had learned. He had learned respect, patience, cunning, care... He had learned that a house divided could not stand, and that dividing a house was so much easier than it ever seemed from the inside.

He was King. His enemies had turned on each other and he had left them all in the dust. No one from Asgard would have to suffer the cruelty and chaos of war. Thor would have raised an army and led them into a slaughter. Loki had the matter dealt with, and nobody had known he had done anything at all.

Loki had understood that sometimes for the greater good, you had to step back and lose what you wanted. As second in line to the throne, he’d had to step back all his life.

Of all the people to teach Thor about self-sacrifice, it had to be the humans. Of all the people to teach Thor to give up what he wanted for the greater good, it had to be right then, when all the Realms were in his silken grasp. Of all the times for Thor to grow up and make the bold sacrifice... it had to be when Loki would fall too.

Loki had fallen a long way, for a long time. The void could not touch him, not the way it would a mortal, but he hung, untethered from all the Realms, until something found him.

At first, he was awed, to find out that there were beings that lived outside the realms. His awe quickly fell to disgust when he realized what they were, mere scavengers hunting for the refuse of Higher Planes.

He sat in a cage that could not hope to hold a god, and let himself listen to them squabble.

They were scavengers. They hid in the non-space between the realms and collected the debris that rained through. They had no idea what the Bifrost was, and Loki was content to whisper in their ears, let them get more and more possessive of useless garbage. The Scavengers fought viciously over salvage rights.

Loki applied a little illusion, making some of the choice salvage appear and disappear, and his
guards were ready to kill each other over perceived thefts.

And when the time was right, Loki walked out of his cell and took one of the Scavengers craft, passing out of the Non-Space and into a Realm that even the Bifrost had not seen.

His new location was one of darkness, where only the strong survived. It was better than a world of parasites. His new hosts had locked him up too. He didn't resist. Sly Loki was always at his most dangerous when locked up.

The new Realm spoke of eagerness. They sought conquest, they searched the realms, hunting for something, and Loki was content to wait, letting them turn against each other, working each other up with his gentle guidance, until he found out what they were looking for.

The Tesseract.

When he learned what they sought, he fell out of his seat, laughter gripping his sides. They sought a relic from the trophy rooms of Odin Allfather himself.

A relic that had been... misplaced, during the war with the Frost Giants.

Loki couldn't help but see the perfection of it. Earth was the realm where his brother had made his name, where Father had given him his first... and last chance. It was ultimately the world that had brought centuries of planning to nothing.

And now Loki saw the chance to own it, and possess it. Let his brother have the realm of the gods, for Loki would rule, immortal over the weak mortals. A True God, ruling for endless lifetimes, over something that his brother loved more than his own life.

"You?" The Chitauri commander hissed. "You know where the Tesseract is?"

"I was the one that moved it." Loki said.

The Commander snorted and walked away, not believing. Loki waited.

Another week, and the Commander came back to challenge his story again. Loki gave him nothing.

Another few days, and the questions became more pointed, and applied with force and pain. Loki bore it without fighting back, and spoke softly in his torturers ears. Another few days, and those that abused him swore fealty to him against their own dark masters.

Another week, and there was a coup in the ranks of the Chitauri.

And then Sly Loki offered them a deal.

It had taken Pepper almost an hour on her first day at work to realize that Tony was a leg man. She was used to her stilettos getting that kind of attention; so once she had adjusted to the transition from 'Office Crush' to 'Workplace Romance', she would do a beta test of her own. One Mondays, she wore the tall spike heels. Tony looked. On Tuesdays, she wore the flats. Tony didn't look. On Wednesdays, she wore the flats with a shorter skirt. Tony looked. On Thursdays she would arrive at his home in cut-off jeans and take her heels off at the door. Tony was all over her.

So it was that she happened to be wearing just such an outfit when Iron Man came to disconnect the Tower. The power grid within the building had been finished, and the Arc Reactor had been secured in the safest part of the building.
The lights went out for just a moment, and all the city lights of New York gave her enough glow to see by. A moment later, the building’s own power supply kicked in, and the lights came back up. "How does it look?"

"Like Christmas." Tony returned, delighted. "But with more... me."

Pepper smiled a little as he came into land. She looked out the one-way glass at the heliport. Iron Man came in to land at the edge of the platform, and began striding toward the door. And sure enough, just as he'd envisioned it, the machine arms emerged from the platform and kept pace with him, turning the superhero into her Tony by the time he reached the door.

Pepper studied the power readouts as he came over. "Levels are holding steady... I think."

Tony gently pulled her away from the workstation, toward the bucket of champagne. "Of course they are, I was directly involved." He poured them each a generous serving. "Which brings me to my next question. How does it feel to be a genius?" He smiled as Pepper blushed. "Don't be modest. All this, came from you."

Pepper shook her head. "No. All this, came from that." She laid a hand over the Arc Reactor in his chest to make the point, letting her fingertips rest over the cool metal.

"Give yourself some credit, please. Stark Tower is your baby." Tony took the opportunity to draw her in a little closer, lips getting close enough to taste. "Give yourself... twelve percent of the credit."

She drew back sharply. "Twelve percent?"

Tony was grinning, enjoying life. "An argument can be made for fifteen."

"Twelve percent? For my baby?"

"Well, I did do all the heavy lifting. Literally, I lifted the heavy things." He clinked their champagne flutes together, since she wasn't going to. "I'm going to pay for that comment about percentages in some subtle way later on, aren't I?"

Pepper knew he was teasing. Before they were dating, she'd take it with gentle good humor. But now that she was his girlfriend, she could enjoy it a lot more. "It's not gonna be that subtle."

"I'll tell you what. Next building is gonna say 'Potts' on the tower." Tony promised.

Pepper leaned in closer again. "On the lease."

As the two of them pulled each other in for the first of many kisses to follow, Jarvis interrupted. "Sir, the telephone. I'm afraid my protocol's are being overwritten."

Pepper was concerned for half a second until she heard the familiar voice of Agent Coulson. "Stark, we need to talk."

Tony moaned into Pepper's mouth, and not in the good way. It was not the first time that SHIELD had interrupted a romantic moment. He pulled his phone and connected without looking. "You have reached the life model decoy of Tony Stark, please leave a message."

"This is urgent."

"Then leave it urgently!"
At that moment the elevator doors opened, despite the Penthouse security, and Coulson came in personally.

"Security breach!" Stark called to the room in general.

Pepper was not so obviously disappointed. in fact, she seemed happy to see him. "Phil! Come in."

Tony looked at her sharply. "Phil? Pepper, his first name is Agent."

Pepper ignored that, still looking at Phil. "Come on in, we're celebrating."

Tony grit his teeth and pretended it was a polite smile. "Which is why he can't stay." He grit out to Pepper.

Coulson held out the file. "We need you to look this over as soon as possible."

Tony saw his celebratory night with Pepper turning into smoke before his eyes. *Okay Stark, you stand up, find out what Coulson needs, and you prove to Pepper that you can be the bigger man about it. That's what a man does. He told himself seriously. But on the other hand... nah.*

"I don't like being handed things." Tony said childishly.

Pepper took his growing tantrum in stride. "That's alright, cause I love to be handed things. So, let's trade." She passed her glass of champagne to Coulson and took the file from him, then passed the file to Tony and took his glass off him in return. "Thank you."

Tony wasn't quite ready to grow up yet and held the file like it was diseased. "Official consulting hours are between eight and five every other Thursday."

Coulson's expression never changed, whether he was making small talk or in the middle of a gunfight, but his voice was severe. "This isn't a consultation."

Pepper looked up, very interested. "Is this about The Avengers?" Coulson looked sharply at her, and she backpedalled. "Which I... I know nothing about."

"The Avengers Initiative was scrapped." Stark complained. "And I didn't even qualify."

"I didn't know that either." Pepper promised quickly.

Stark was still throwing his quiet tantrum about having his night interrupted. "Yeah, apparently I'm too volatile, self obsessed, don't play well with others."

Pepper couldn't resist the impish smile at Coulson. "That, I did know."

Agent Phil Coulson was not impressed. "This isn't about personality profiles anymore."

"Whatever. Miss Potts, got a minute?" Pepper went over to join him, and he lowered his voice. "How fast can we ditch this guy and get back to where we were? Because I thought we were having a nice moment there."

Pepper kept her voice low too. "I was having twelve percent of a moment. This seems serious, Phil's pretty shaken."

Tony opened the file at last. "How can you tell? And when did he become 'Phil'?" Stark finally unfolded the file and discovered it wasn't a set of papers, it was instead an interactive set of video and audio files. A flick of his wrist, and the images appeared up on the workstation. Hurried
Pepper looked up at the destructive scene in awe. "I'm going to take the jet to D.C. tonight."

"Tomorrow." Tony said reflexively, not looking away from the screens.

"You have homework." Something else exploded on the screen. "You have a lot of homework."

"Well, what if I didn't?"

"You mean... if you finished?"

Stark nodded quickly, and Pepper felt Coulson's eyes on her. A year ago, Stark would have let the Avengers be someone else's problem in favor of a night with her. She was worried that SHIELD saw her as Iron Man's Handler, and now she had neatly made sure that Tony had agreed to help, instead of debating whether or not to get involved at all.

Pepper glanced over her shoulder at Coulson, then leaned in, lowering her voice. "Well, um...then..." She whispered a few ideas in his ear, using graphic, Technicolor detail, and even Tony Stark blushed.

Coulson looked away in embarrassment, still happy for them. For a man who made his living spying on others without being seen, he blushed rather easily.

Pepper pulled away and kissed Stark lightly on the nose. "Work hard."

Pepper fell into step behind Coulson as he headed back for the elevator. "So, is there any chance you're going by LaGuardia?"

"I can drop you off." Coulson nodded, trying not to stare at her legs.

Pepper smiled as the elevator doors closed. "Good, now I want to hear all about the cellist. Is that still a thing?"

Stark didn't even hear them. Ever since seeing footage of the Hulk vs Abomination fight, he knew that sooner or later, the fight was going to come to his door. he knew that sooner or later, something bigger and nastier than he was would appear in the world... And he would be tasked to fight it.

*I'm not that guy, Rhodey. I'm not Captain America."

*Thank god we got the original back.*

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The Tesseract was more than power, it was truth.

The Tesseract spoke to him of Authority. It spoke to him of the different ways to exercise the use of power and control.

The humans were rebellious, volatile, but ultimately, eager to be led. They would fight for centuries in the names of the gods they made up; and when their religions failed them they swore fealty to flags and politicians, and when they grew disillusioned with that, they would idolize some random athlete that happened to be popular this season.

The humans wanted to put their faith in something. The humans were struck with awe in the face of power, especially the kind of power they did not understand.
Loki took in these lessons with grim certainty. He had always known it was the truth. Humans were eager to serve anyone who would give them what they wanted. They were a people made to be led, and he would lead them.

And then it spoke to him of other kinds of power. The Human Realm had changed in the last few years. It spoke to him of the Alchemists, who had sought power over the natural world. It spoke to him of the Machinists, who had turned metal and energy, as they had even in the days of the Norsemen.

And it showed him things that even a King of Asgard would find hard to believe. The details came to him in sudden fits of information, flashing out at him against the ether.

A burst of explosion, a metal man in the sky, a flag held high, drawn on the face of a gleaming silver shield... And... green?

"Hulk, SMASH!" The bellow came at him suddenly.

Loki gasped as he wrenched himself free of the gleaming cube's influence.

All the newcomers to the Helicarrier were given quarters. Agent Hill wasn't quite sure how Stark had managed to get a travel bag packed and delivered to the carrier, given that he'd hitched a ride with Romanov in Berlin, with nothing but the suit of armor on his back, but sure enough, he had a bag full of personal effects; including a change of clothes.

The first meeting of the world's first Superhero team... had not gone well. To be fair, it was a complete disaster. They had captured the bad guy with a minimum of civilian casualties... and by the time they got back to base, their prisoner was laughing at them.

Stark wasn't sure what was worse. That Thor and Captain America were disappointed or annoyed with him... or the fact that he felt the same way about both of them.

Iron Man was a media sensation. Banner was a fugitive... They had two living legends on board, and none of them could stand each other.

Rogers expected him to be a superhero, and a soldier. 'Yes, Sir' and 'No, Sir' and nothing in between. Back in the 1940's, there were only two superpowered people on file. The Red Skull and Captain America. The Fascist versus the Boy Scout. Well; things had changed in sixty years. Stark Industries was always the forward most edge of what was new; and this guy was out of a Norman Rockwell painting.

He wanted Pepper. She made things better.

Pepper was signing papers when her next meeting came in. She invited them all to sit down, then checked her calendar. There was nothing on the books. "Gentlemen. Was I expecting you?"

The Stark Legal team looked at each other awkwardly. "Miss Potts, Ma'am, we were expecting to be meeting with Mister Stark on this matter."

Pepper took it in stride. "Mister Stark has been pulled away on a priority mission. Iron Man business. He asked me to handle everything until he got back."

"Well, there's the thing, this isn't a matter for the Stark Industries Legal Team. The corporation is not being sued, Tony Stark is. Personally."
Pepper blinked. "I thought Tony was protected from personal liabilities through our legal umbrella."

"He is, but this is an intellectual property dispute, and it predates the formation of our liability shields. The lawsuit is from a time before Mister Stark was even a part of the corporation."

Pepper reacted. "Oh for crying out loud, is this the jackass from MIT again? What was his name? Spiner?"

"Yes Ma'am."

Pepper scowled. "He's been trying to find a judge willing to hear that case for almost a year."

"Well he found one." Her top legal experts reported. "Judge Mason of the District of Columbia, has ordered that Tony Stark appear before the court to face charges of intellectual property theft regarding the Iron Man Device."

Pepper squeezed the bridge of her nose for a moment. "All right. Here's what's going to happen. You're going to get the best legal team that SI has together, and all of you are going to take a leave of absence, so that Tony can hire you as his personal attorneys instead of his corporate team. Then, you're going to make this go away, and you're going to do it as quietly as you know how. The second Tony walks into a courtroom, this becomes a billion times harder to stop."

"Yes Ma'am."

"I mean it guys, Tony is a human starting gun since the Iron Man announcement. This moron wants money and attention. Tony raises his right hand, and he gets everything he wants, win or lose."

Her phone started ringing, belting out Black Sabbath's open riff to 'Iron Man'. Everyone in the room pretended they weren't smiling, knowing exactly who was on the line.

Pepper took their significant glances in stride. I the past few months, reactions to that ringtone had changed from 'the boss was calling' to 'her boyfriend wants her'. She handled it gracefully and drew her phone out. "Excuse me, Gentlemen; I have to take this."

Everyone rose quickly from their seats and headed out. As the door closed, she answered. "So. Forty-Eight hours with the Avengers, one International Press event out of Berlin. Do I start buying canned goods, or is it crisis averted?"

"Crisis under investigation." Tony reported in her ear. "How's it being reported? Berlin? Did they get my good side?"

"You should hear the neo-Nazi groups ranting about how Captain America has risen from the grave to declare war on Germany again. Since nobody knew where he was buried, spotting him in Berlin seems downright normal." Pepper quipped. "The more serious news anchors are trying to figure out who the guy with the staff was, and how Captain America showed up to fight him. All those Generals who were trying to figure out where Iron Man came from are back on TV talking about the super-soldier projects... which of course brings up the Hulk vs Abomination fight..."

Tony snorted.

"So. What do you think of him?" Pepper asked warmly.

"Rogers? He acts the way my grandfather would have." Stark snorted. "Weird; seeing a 20-
something Mister Universe type with the brain of Mike Brady."

Pepper chuckled. "I want to meet him."

"No."

"Why not?"

"...cause."

Pepper smiled. "You're cute when you're jealous."

"Oh it gets better. There's a new player. Loki's brother showed up."

Pepper shivered a little. "Am I cleared for that information?"

"Nope. But I told you all about New Mexico already. Now he's here." Tony sighed a little. "You're gonna laugh at me for this; but... they're all so much younger than me."

Pepper did laugh.

"I told you you'd laugh." Tony rubbed the back of his neck. "You know me, Pepper, I don't exactly have a record of clean living. There's a map of the world on my face some mornings. These guys... all the ones with powers anyway, they look like they all just walked in off the beach volleyball scene out of Top Gun."

"Thor is a Norse god. There are legends about him that predate Christianity. Captain America was born over a century ago..."

"I know." Tony said stubbornly. "I'm just crabby. I get crabby when I don't have you around."

"You get crabby whenever you stay in a place that doesn't serve whiskey." She drawled.

"You first; then whiskey." He groused.

"High praise." Pepper chuckled warmly. "So what's really bothering you?"

"I don't know exactly. It's like... I don't know, but I think Fury's hiding something?"

"What?"

"I don't know, he's hiding it well." Tony sighed. "Jarvis is encrypting our calls right?"

"Ever since Justin Hammer got a look at the Mark 2." Pepper promised. "Look... You didn't get this from me."

"Okay." Tony said with a smirk.

"Look in the cap on your aftershave." Pepper said in a low voice, even with the encrypted line.

Tony went to his bag and popped the cap off the small bottle. He shook it, and a tiny electronic device fell out. "Is this what I think it is?"

"It's based on your lock chip. Phil gave it to me, after you signed on. I think he was expecting me
to need control of an armor one day, and gave me a way to get around the safeguards you put in."

"Ooh." Tony said delightedly. "Pepper, you've been hanging around with a bad crowd."

"No kidding." Pepper agreed in a shaky voice. She'd just committed a near textbook definition of high treason, and she knew it.

"Mister Stark, to the laboratory, Mister Stark to the laboratory immediately please!" The Public Address system called.

Tony jumped up. "I have to go."

"Me too, the plane is landing."

"You phone home okay?" Banner asked Tony as he came back into the laboratory. "I tried to make a call and... well, let's just say I wouldn't trust the phones here."

"That's why I brought my own." Stark nodded. "What do you think of the others?"

"Honestly?" Banner sighed. "I got no idea. You were a legend back at MIT, Captain America is a legend all over the country, Thor is a legend across the entire planet, and has been since the time of the Vikings. Then there's me, and I've been a fugitive for most of the last five years." He waved at the screen. "Fury says he wants me, and not The Other Guy, but... You probably could have set up this scan."

"Maybe, eventually. But I'm glad you came. You're the only one on board I can relate to." Tony sighed.

Banner found that extremely amusing. "What?"

"It was your experiment that made you. You lock horns with presumptuous morons in uniform who demand control of something they don't understand and don't deserve... and you're more like me than anyone else on the team. Rogers takes the mask off, he's still super-strong. Romanov doesn't need a mask to be deadly. We ever get the Hawk back, you can say the same about him. Thor is a freaking Norse God, no matter what you dress him up as... You and me, Bruce. We're the only ones in the bunch that are split down the middle. One half of our lives is flesh and blood and mortal, and the other half is bad-ass as hell. My dad said that peace means carrying a bigger stick than the other guy. You've got a whole forest worth in there somewhere. I meant what I said: You should be strutting, not hiding. Iron Man is the nuclear deterrent. Take my suit away, what am I?"

"Genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist, inventor, scientist..." Banner said without hesitation.

"Tinker, tailor, soldier, spy." Tony drawled sarcastically. "And won't Loki be impressed by that?"

"The Ten Rings were." Another voice put in, and both men turned to see Fury step in. "You had all that taken away, you still won."

"And it took me three months and a lot of scrap metal." Stark shot back. "I don't think Loki is going to give us that kind of time."

"I agree." Fury said with a curt nod. "I reviewed the footage. He had a million years or so to make his escape while you three were putting on a show for him. Romanov kept her gun camera on him the entire fight." Fury's glare turned savage. "The only thing Loki was missing was a bag of popcorn."
Tony was about to make a quip, when Fury's glare turned white hot, and even the unsinkable Tony Stark wilted. "Not... our finest moment."

"No." Fury agreed, in a voice so icy Banner shivered, doing his best to be invisible at the back of the laboratory. "Loki wants to be here."

"That would appear to be correct." Stark said delicately.

"In the mythology, Loki was god of mischief." Banner put in. "In Berlin, he could have gotten what he wanted in a dozen ways and nobody would have known he was there. He wanted people running. He wanted the show."

"Not mischief." Fury mused. "Chaos."

Maya Hansen was a difficult woman to work for. She was one of the five smartest people on the planet, but had chosen a profession that was still largely a boys club. She'd been born ten years too early to take advantage of the younger generation that would consider a woman an equal, and had to spend her life fighting expectations. Before the age of ten she had to face teachers who were more prepared to think that she was cheating, than accept a girl could be five grades ahead of her age.

After that came professors who hated the fact that a sixteen year old girl could correct their math, and didn't mind freezing her out. She would raise her hand and be ignored.

But getting a scholarship to MIT at seventeen was a revelation. The fact that she had 'developed' by then didn't hurt, surrounded by geeks and bookworms; who knew how smart she was and everyone was interested in her. The career minded ones wanted her on their projects, the rest just wanted her.

She tried not to show favoritism to any of her teachers, especially given the fact that until MIT she had despised them all, but MIT had a small select group of elite minds. They had been selected carefully by one of the former graduates there, a painfully eccentric genius named Sal Kennedy.

He worked with students individually in his own workshop, which was a chaotic mess of whiteboards full of equations, notebooks full of ideas, computers running simulations every second, and dozens of tables covered with disassembled electronics, chemistry sets and active equipment that nobody could guess at.

Maya looked on those days as the happiest of her life. It was pure brainpower, pure creativity. Sal's field was emergent technology, and Maya knew within half an hour that she had found her calling.

She worked with Sal a few hours a day, and then he dismissed her and worked with one of his other students. She never really worked with any of the other handpicked students, though she knew who they were. Tony Stark, Reed Richards... The group was small. She had asked Sal why he had picked her.

He had said... That his handpicked students had the future in them. He wanted to work with the Futurists.

And then she had graduated... and found that the world was not as welcoming of a Bright New Future as she and Sal were.

Clever Loki was at his most dangerous when locked up.
The raw power that the Tesseract had shown him still took his breath away, every time he allowed it to return to the forefront of his mind. Loki had the knack of turning power against power. The Hulk unleashed, surrounded by every foe that had volunteered to stand against him... It was almost too easy.

It was made easier still by the cage he found himself in, the weapons that surrounded it... The Beast in Banner was the greatest threat of violence that this limited world had yet seen... and SHIELD had equipped the entire Helicarrier to fight him.

Banner was smart, for a human. If Loki had seen that instantly, Banner would have figured it out by now.

Cunning Loki could sense that there were more secrets and suspicions on board. It was inevitable. He was surrounded by spymasters and secret identities. They had locked up a Master Manipulator in the safest place he could possibly be, while his jailers turned on each other, almost without his help.

Including his 'brother'. Watching the mortals spar with Thor, while trying not to beg him for help at the same time was entertaining.

And as the mortals witnessed the storm god wield the lightning in their favor, they huddled close to the gift that clever Loki had given their world. Once, it was a simple fireplace they clung to; and now it was Hydra Weapons, made from the Tesseract that Loki had smuggled to earth.

The only difference was, they didn't invite strangers to come and share their fire out of concern. Now they kept them hidden and secret. The greed was stronger... but the mortals never changed.

Loki smiled a little as he heard the Beast's roar across the ether. The Beast Below was gaining ground, and Banner was losing his grip. All he would need was a little push...

Loki pulsed a little more of his influence from the staff out into the Laboratory... And drank it in as the mood in the room shifted from barely restrained hostility to sudden fear as Banner's hands closed around the hilt of the staff.

Unwatched by all but the cameras, Loki allowed himself the tiniest smile... As his minions approached to tip the balance.

The vision of the Hulk came to him again, and Loki shivered. His greatest tactic was turning his enemies against each other. To turn the Incredible Hulk upon the Avengers...

To turn the Incredible Hulk upon Thor Odinson...

To control such an unstoppable force... If he could defeat that... control the Beast...

Loki shivered pleasantly. This world would be his within the day.

**BOOM!** The Helicarrier rumbled with a distant explosion... and then the floor tilted.

The meeting with the Lawyers had lasted for hours and hours. They spoke in seven syllable jargon that Pepper had long since given up trying to follow. She had experience with that, after years of listening to Tony talk about engineering and particle accelerators, and repulsor lenses, and fabrication methods and a hundred points in between. You just had to nod like you were listening, wait for them to exhaust themselves... and then ask for a summary, in such a way that didn't make you look like an idiot.
But it was so much harder this time. Pepper was beyond frustrated. The man she loved was currently gearing for war, with a Living Legend, a Norse God, a redhead that had once replaced her, and one of the World's Most Wanted Dual Personalities at his back...

And she was stuck in her new office, going around and around in circles with Lawyers.

"What it boils down to is, that these things come in a series of stages." The head of their legal team explained. "First we try injections, which will be ignored. Then comes the chance to settle out of court. That's where our action really begins, because if we-"

Pepper was about to interrupt when her cellphone buzzed. She tapped a button on her bluetooth headset to send it to voicemail, and was about to fire back at the lawyers, when all their cellphones started to ring at the same moment. So did all the phones on the office level, and the TV suddenly went blank, before displaying a text message: Answer Your Phone, Pepper!

The lawyers all looked at each other in jaded awe as Pepper sighed and took her phone off voicemail. "Tony, this isn't a good time."

"You have no idea." He said with a sigh. "Get out of the Tower."

Pepper lowered her voice. "I hate the lawyers too, but-"

"No, I mean get out of New York. Get on the jet, and just go. Anywhere but New York. Don't ask me why, with luck you'll never find out. Just move! Are you still on the line? You should be moving! Don't bother to hang up, just-

Pepper disconnected as she went cold and hot all over. "Gentlemen." She said calmly. "A... priority has arisen. I have to get back to LA immediately." She rose from her chair swiftly, leaving the room somewhat stunned.

Pepper made it to the door and glanced back. Her Penthouse overlooked all of New York City... she had loved the view, and now it made her cold inside. God, all these people... What's going to happen, Tony?

And then her gaze went from the city in general, to the five people in the room, staring at her as she abruptly left them. They were staring back at her with shock, even some fear. They knew who had been calling. They had to.

I can't just leave them here with nothing can I? Pepper asked herself. "Actually..." She heard her voice say. "This is important... have any of you ever been on the Company Jet? My treat. We can talk business over some First Class champagne..."

They were all on their feet instantly.

One small Rescue. Pepper told herself. Five people Rescued out of millions.

Her mind went to Tony then, an honest to god Superhero... And for a moment, she felt ashamed. How many people could he be out there saving if he wasn't spending time with me?

She shook that thought off. I have saved Tony's life twice now, when I gave him back the first Reactor, and when I went into SI and hit the button... and if I hadn't been in love with him, I wouldn't have made the effort.

Iron Man was faster than the quinjet. They were halfway to New York, he was almost there. His
HUD painted a marker over a familiar plane in the distance, going in the opposite direction. Stark One had left New York. He let out a breath in relief, despite himself.

"I have Miss Potts on the line for you, sir." Jarvis reported. "Shall I send it to voicemail?"

Tony hesitated. "No. Put her through."

"Tony?" Her voice said, and though her tone was full of worry, he immediately felt ten pounds lighter. How could this woman have an effect like that on him so fast?

"I'm here." Tony said. "I saw Stark One take off, please tell me you're on it?"

"Along with everyone I was currently in a meeting with." Pepper said, a little lighter now.

"I give you a warning like that, and the ones you choose to take with you are the lawyers? You couldn't find someone carbon based?"

They both chuckled, just a little bit. The nervous, thready laughter that came when nothing was funny.

"He's gone, Pep." Tony said finally. "Agent Co... Phil. He was killed about an hour ago."

Long silence.

"...what?" Pepper choked out. "How?"

"Trying to stop the bad guy." Tony said. "Or so I'm told. I wasn't there."

"Are you okay?" Pepper asked.

"I liked him." Tony admitted. "More than I ever let on. He... trusted me. Back during the whole Whiplash thing? He was the only one that didn't think I was just wrong."

"Yeah." Pepper whispered.

"And the others? They liked him too. He worshiped the Captain. Thor respected him. He was Romanov's Handler on a few missions... It's weird, how this unassuming guy in a cheap suit was the one thread that went through all our lives."

"I know." Pepper nodded. "Happy told me once that the guys who never get noticed are the ones that make the world keep turning."

Iron Man was over Manhattan now, and his HUD gave him a zoomed in view of Stark Tower. There were massive power readings coming from the roof...

...And a familiar face on the Penthouse Balcony.

"Hey, Pep?" Tony said softly, barely hearing his own voice over the sudden flat hate that bubbled away in him. "You know that scene in all the James Bond movies where the supervillain calls Mr Bond in and they have dinner, discuss a little world domination, and toast each others imminent death?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm about to have that moment myself. Be safe."
"You too." Pepper said warmly. "And if you can't be safe, be smart. Love you."

"Love you too." Stark disconnected the call, and came in to land at the Penthouse.

As the machine arms came to disassemble him as he strode toward the doors, Tony felt an anger he hadn't felt in a long time. Not since Afghanistan. Not since the Ten Rings. Raza had been something of a revelation. Stark had never truly despised anyone before. The hate was something clean and forceful and direct. He had hated Raza enough to fight back. Now this murderer was making himself at home in Pepper's home, and Stark hated him enough to wait for backup.

It had happened again.

Tony was ready to break something at the realization. It was happening; all over again. Someone had taken the things he had built; the things meant to keep the world on an even keel... and used them for death and destruction.

And this was so much worse than Whiplash. So much worse than Iron Monger.

This was Open War.

There were enormous flying Behemoths, somewhere between a blue whale and a sloth, gliding between the buildings, covered in armor of its own.

Hundreds of small aircraft, like sleds that could fly. They swept down the streets, methodically, gunning apart every vehicle, every storefront, every sidewalk. Their attacks were carefully laid out, going down one street at a time. Until one of the Avengers tried to get in their way, and suddenly it became like savage wasps.

The Behemoths were 'shedding' more ground troops, seven foot tall warriors that had no problem clambering up and down walls, or gunning down children. Hundreds of them, thousands of them. They were wielding spears with HYDRA-like blasters on them.

Hawkeye was a better tactician than Stark had given him credit for, and a flawless sot. Stark didn't know if the soldier had any enhancements, but there was no Olympic medalist that could match him.

Hulk was the only one of the team that could knock down a Behemoth, and he leaped from one to another in huge bounds, tearing apart anything his big green hands could reach... But he was the only one of the Avengers that the Chitauri actually ran away from. They rarely got far once the Hulk took notice.

Captain America was down below, rallying anyone with a badge or a gun, people flocking to the Shield once again, forming the line between the Invaders and the Innocent. Romanov was in the air somewhere, holding a sled-pilot hostage as she chased after Loki.

Thor was their main offense and defense. He was flying and landing like he was on springs, slamming a dozen Warriors off their feet, sometimes smashing their heads clean off their shoulders, his Hammer going out like a bowling ball merged with a boomerang. It was thrown, it blazed a path through the enemy, it came back to it's wielder's hand. Every other strike, Thor would raise it high and a burst of sudden, unnatural lightning would fork across the city's clear blue sky, lighting up whole squadrons of sleds.

And Iron Man was flying like a manned heat-seeking missile, pulling insane hairpin turns, wiping off pursuers. Flight Combat tactics had been uploaded to Jarvis after the Hammer-Drones had
chased him around the Expo. He knew just when to launch a missile, just when to release the flares; just when to turn his stabilizers...

But it was all a holding action, a band-aid on a gaping wound, because far above, the Chitauri kept coming...

And far below, people kept dying.

*And none of it would have been possible, if not for the Arc Reactor.*

"Stark, you got a missile incoming, heading straight for New York!" A voice came over his HUD. "Impact in two minutes!"

*A missile? They just decided to write off the whole damn city?! We've been at this for less than ten minutes!*

Stark swore and accessed Air Traffic Control. The airports were all directing flights away from the city, and had a bogey coming in fast. There was only one thing it could be. He redirected everything away from his weapons and put it all into his jets.

*Eight million will die by fire if I am slow.* Stark thought harshly. *Dad, did you ever think I'd have to catch one when you invented it?*

Within seconds the streets were clear again. Three blocks from the battle, and people had their phones out, snapping pictures of the Behemoths and the wormhole, as though there wasn't a war going on eighty feet away.

"I can close it!" An exhausted sounding Romanov called suddenly. "I can close the portal!"

And just like that, everything was perfect again. "Waitwaitwait! I got a missile heading in, and I know the perfect place to put it!"

Iron Man reached the Brooklyn Bridge at half the speed of sound, and suddenly cut his jets, putting it into another hairpin turn that threw his body against inside edges that he didn't know the suit had. The Missile passed by overhead, and

*Repulsor Tech is based on electromagnetism.* Stark thought to himself. *So, turning your gauntlets into magnetic grapples shouldn't be hard...*

"Sir, you have put all available power into the propulsion system." Jarvis put in. "And given the energy expenditures of the battle, plus the no doubt extreme power requirements of overcoming the missile's own guidance system, there will be no chance for the Reactor to recover any charge. You are, quite literally, running on empty."

"Will letting go of the missile and calling a time out suddenly make me and all of New York Nuke-Proof?" Stark grit out between his teeth.

"I think you know the answer to that, sir." Jarvis responded unflappably.

"Then keep going!"

But Jarvis' point was well taken. Stark could feel the reactor dimming in response to the enormous drain of the Suit under these conditions. He could feel the magnet weakening, and the shrapnel moving again.
I've been back in the states more than two years, why didn't I get that damn shrapnel removed long ago?!

"Stark, nobody's coming back from that!" Captain America called. And he was right. Moving at this speed, with his hands magnetized to the missile, which was trying madly to break free of him and go in another direction, he'd never be able to pull out before going through the portal with it. And the way the Invaders were pouring through, it would be seconds before the missile hit something hard enough to detonate.

He'd be stuck with a nuclear explosion on the far side of the wormhole.

Jarvis put power readouts on his HUD. 9%

Stark kept going.

Jarvis spoke quietly. "Sir? Shall I call Miss Potts?" 7%

Anything you say to her now will be a goodbye. Tony thought. Which... I suppose is the point. 6%

"Sure. Why not?" Stark said weakly. 5%

Her Picture popped up before his eyes, and he could hear the sound of a phone ringing. And ringing. No answer. The one time she doesn't have the phone glued to her hand... 4%

Still, her face stayed on the HUD. There are worse things to have as your last sight... 3%

And then he was through the wormhole... 2%

He could hear the sound of SHIELD Agents cheering over his connection for a split second, before the connection was lost. Wherever this dark, cold place was, it was outside of reception range. 1%

He saw more armies, more warriors, more Behemoths, and still bigger monsters yet to come. Thousands of them. Millions of them. Enough to drive all humanity into the sea... 0%

And then he saw nothing.

There were millions of cameras in New York. One of the news channels had cameras with telephoto lenses on rooftops, getting the show as best they could from a safe distance. She saw Iron Man... She saw the missile... She saw him fall.

And then he fell below the line of the buildings, and she couldn't see anything.

And the news didn't even bother to try looking for him, or any of the others. They were too busy looking to the sky, where the wormhole used to be. The newscasters were getting excited, reporting that the war might be over, the Invasion stopped...

Pepper snatched up her phone, and called Tony. No answer. The call said the recipient was not in service... Which scared her half to death. Iron Man is out of service?

The news replayed scenes from the battle, over and over.

And then her phone rang. She pounced on it. "Hello? Tony?"

"It's me." Romanov's voice answered. "His suit took some damage, so we had to get his helmet off.
He wanted me to let you know he survived; and that as soon as someone finds a can-opener, he'll be in touch."

"Where is he?" Pepper demanded. If Romanov was delivering a message, it meant he wasn't able to contact her himself.

"Classified." Romanov said tightly. "He'll contact you after debriefing."

Pepper could hear the tiredness in her voice, and didn't care one bit. "Tell me where he is." She growled. "Or I'll send the specs of that Thermonuclear Missile he was hauling to every news organization in the world. We don't produce weapons anymore Romanov, so somebody had to launch it! You want people asking questions?"

"Do not threaten me, Potts!" The Black Widow's voice turned so ferocious that Pepper sat down swiftly. "In the last six hours, I have interrogated a Norse God, been hunted by the Hulk, had a life and death fight with the closest thing I have to a friend, lost my handler, fallen out of the sky, been shot down, fought an Alien Invasion, survived a nuke, sealed an inter-dimensional portal, and at this moment I am trying to get the blood of three different creatures outta my hair. And it's not even 4pm yet. If I have to go through you as well, I'm going to start getting irritated. Understood?"

Pepper swallowed, intimidated. "Yes Ma'am."

"He's fine. You want him? Plenty of people do, but you're the one he'll want to see. So sit down, shut up, have some caviar, and wait."

Pepper paused. "Thank you for letting me know he was okay."

"Don't mention it."

"Are you okay?"

"Wiped a little red out of my ledger; and lived to tell about it." Romanov said shortly. "I have to go."

Some had thought that sudden, public proof of alien life would send massive shockwaves through all humanity. But on the surface, it was surprisingly peaceful. By the time anyone realized that an Alien Invasion had happened, it had already been defeated. Humanity was feeling pretty good about things, adopting their heroes as part of the family. It was as if all humanity had taken on something bigger and badder than they were, and won in less than an hour.

After fifty years watching a billion Sci-Fi movies, and having things like Stark Trek and Star Wars become part of the vernacular; the general population was more ready for the presence of aliens than anyone would have guessed. There were no riots, no collapsing regimes, no sudden wars breaking out...

But there were a few casualties. The inevitable questions were asked. Did Roswell really happen? Did the government know aliens existed before the Invasion?

Was there a Second Invasion coming?

A few in various government lost their jobs, a few amazing revelations came out, a few scorned scientists and theorists were vindicated, and life went on.

A day or two passed, and Stark found himself in the Helicarrier's Infirmary. He was not a good
patient, and he was completely insufferable until someone brought him his luggage. He'd contacted Pepper immediately of course, and given her the whole story, clearances be damned. Telling the tale was one thing. Getting cleared to leave was another. Pepper promised that she would work on it from her end, and Tony smiled, having no doubt she'd be visiting soon.

Stark was tapping away at his transparent smart-glass phone, as Steve stepped into his room. Of all the Avengers, Stark had taken the worst of the injuries, and had been transported back to the SHIELD helicarrier for treatment, and to make sure the press couldn't get to him.

Steve came over, still in the Captain America Suit, though the hood was off and he wore a bomber jacket over the top. "I owe you an apology."

Stark didn't look up from the screen in his hands. "Loki was playing us, even from three decks away. None of us were saying anything particularly polite."

"I know." Steve nodded. "But I'm not talking about the laboratory. I was talking about... after that. When we were talking about Coulson. You were right, you're not a soldier. I forgot that. Back during my last war, even your dad saluted. He was a lot like you, but he was part of the war effort. He worked for the Army Department, just like I did."

Tony sighed, and turned the screen around to show Rogers what he was looking at. It was footage from the fight. Someone with a cameraphone had caught the moment Stark had fallen through the portal, being chased by a fireball. Even from the distance, it looked like the portal had closed on him. "I... had no idea it was that close." Tony confessed. "It was what you said about Coulson... when you asked me if it was the first time I ever lost a soldier. Because it's not the first time for you, is it?"

Steve looked down. "No." He confessed. "I lost a lot of soldiers during the war. One of them was my best friend, ever since I was a kid..." Steve paused. "It's what they do. What I do. You couldn't wrap your brain around why Coulson would take on Loki alone when he was so outclassed... During the Blitz, the Nazi's seemed like a juggernaut too. But we beat them." Steve looked over. "It's what you do now too. That move with the nuke? It was exactly what Coulson did. Bucky would have been impressed."

"Yeah." Tony nodded, the light in his eyes a little dim. "I just... I didn't realize it was that close."

Steve looked over his chart. "Looks like you trashed some ribs. The doctors say that shrapnel next to your heart shifted a few inches. That can't be good... But apparently the worst of it is behind you."

Tony read something on his screen and sighed. "This isn't the worst of it Steve. The worst of it was cleared to be aboard the Helicarrier six minutes ago, and is no doubt marching up the corridor right now."

"Tony!" A familiar voice shouted from outside the room. An instant later, the door flew open, and Pepper came in, arms akimbo.

Stark fought to sit up; ignoring the way his bandages ground against his broken ribs. Pepper was on him instantly; kissing him passionately.

They broke for air after a long time. Pepper pulled back enough to get a look at his war wounds; and she jumped back like he was on fire. "Oh! Sorry!"

"Absolutely no problem." Tony promised and pulled her back for another make-out session.
Steve looked notably uncomfortable at the passionate display.

Tony broke the kiss this time; and slid an arm around her waist. "Now then. There's someone here you wanted to meet." He almost purred. "Now that I've had a chance to..."

"Claim your territory?" Rogers deadpanned as he rose. "A pleasure to meet you, Miss Potts."

She shook his hand demurely; but still flushed as he bent to kiss her hand. "Pleased to meet you. I hope we didn't make you uncomfortable."

"Not at all." Tony answered for the Captain. "He likes redheads too."

Rogers set his jaw a little; and Pepper jabbed Tony's busted ribs with one finger.

"It's fine." Rogers assured her. "People made out in the forties too. Usually in the backseat of a car, and usually with a little more decorum and discretion once they reached Stark's age..."

"Ouch." Pepper commented on Tony's behalf, before spinning back to her boyfriend. "You want to tell me why Twitter has a couple of hundred snaps of the Avengers at a Shwarma place after the battle?"

"We earned it." Tony offered weakly.

"Want to tell me why you went there instead of a hospital?!" Pepper demanded, flashing back to his drive-thru order after Afghanistan.

Tony swallowed. "Well, um... The suit injects painkillers, makes damaged portions rigid so that I can't move them... it basically was a walking splint. And with my helmet trashed, I... sort of didn't notice that I was injured."

"The doctors say that this delay was not a good thing." Steve put in. "But he'll live."

New York was recovering, bits and pieces of the invasion were being collected quickly by SHIELD, and the damage being repaired. Everyone was demanding the Avengers be turned loose on their adoring fans; but so far; Fury had managed to keep a lid on it.

Nobody in authority wanted to claim credit for the superhero team... because then they would also have to take responsibility for almost exploding all New York.

Pepper was there every day, slipping out now and then to handle business. SHIELD was trying to keep a lid on any one of a billion burning questions; and Pepper was pitching in with everything she knew about killing stories and putting better ones in place.

"All right; here it is." Pepper said. "The official story we'll be sticking with is that the nuclear missile was Fury's idea; because he had ordered you to do exactly what you did."

"We didn't even have contact with Fury when they hit New York." Rogers pointed out, not happy.

"The only people that know that are SHIELD." Tony waved it off. "Fury gets the blame if it goes wrong; and whoever he reports to say they gave him the job with full confidence; that way everyone gets the credit, and nobody gets that blame."

"Why can't we just tell people the truth?!" Steve almost exploded. "We didn't know if we could save New York; and if we couldn't, then Loki would have had a beachhead in our world. Enough to conquer the globe. We had to cut them off!"
"This isn't the war!" Tony argued. "Wars are things that happen on the other side of the world now; not things that could lead to invasions of US Soil. That kind of war isn't an option; those kinds of sacrifices aren't options any more!"

"It was that day!" Steve shot back. "And if their armies had come through... we would have lost. Sometimes you just can't save them all!" Rogers paused for just a second. "Your dad would have been willing."

"My dad was willing." Tony growled out. "The year after you took an ice nap, my dad was one of the architects of the Manhatt- No, forget it." Tony settled back into his bed; suddenly furious. "Pepper, when the hell can I get out of this godforsaken hospital?!

"Actually; I was hoping to keep you here a little longer." She shushed him soothingly. "Because the sooner you leave; the sooner you have to face a few things that-"

"Work? Really?" Tony whined.

"I just need your permission for a few things."

"You're CEO. I need your permission for things now." Tony shot back.

"Not this." Pepper shook her head. "This isn't an attack on Stark industries, this is all on you."

"The Intellectual Property thing again?" Tony whined. "I just got done with..."

"I know." Pepper sighed. "Sign on the dotted line and we can claim your injuries require us to fly to Venice for your recovery."

Tony froze. "Venice? Really? You know, now that you mention it; I feel sicker every day!"

"What's the problem?" Rogers asked, mildly curious.

"There's a moron that I went to school with, named Peter Spiner." Tony explained. "He's claiming that he came up with the Iron Man idea, and that I stole it from him. He's taking me to court. Or trying to at least." He glared at his girlfriend. "Pepper, if you can't handle it, would you just come out and say it already?!” He snapped bitingly.

Having the anger suddenly directed at her wasn't expected; and all three of them froze.

Pepper rose; heading for the door with dignity. "I'll handle it." She said shortly; not looking at him.

Steve Rogers followed her out of the room.

Pepper fought to get herself under control once she was out of his sight. A gentle hand laid on her shoulder; and she looked up to see Captain America himself was offering her a kind smile. "I'm fine."

"Of course you are." He agreed instantly. "He loves you so much. After New York; the one thing he wouldn't shut up about was you."

"I checked the footage." Pepper offered. "I saw the nuke. And my phone says that I missed a call from the same timestamp. He tried to call me when he grabbed the missile." Even with his safe in the next room; she shuddered violently. "There's only one reason you call someone at a time like that."
Rogers gave her a reassuring look. "You know, Peggy; I did the same thing when I knew the game was over."

"Beat."

"Peggy?" Pepper repeated his slip.

Rogers froze. "Sorry, did I... say that?"

"Yeah."

"Sorry." He seemed mortified.

Pepper changed the subject. "Did you really mean what you said? About how people would accept New York as an acceptable loss?"

"No such thing as an acceptable loss." Rogers shook his head. "If you lose one, it's a tragedy. But I fought in the biggest war this world has ever seen. I have shaken hands with Churchill himself. He made that call. It's... When they came through that portal over New York; and the dust and the wreckage and the bodies were everywhere? I've done that before during another Blitz. It's all too easy to forget that it's not the same thing."

"I suppose it would be." Pepper shivered. "I can't imagine going through it once, let alone twice."

"So be patient with the big lug. He's got too much of his father in him."

"I never got a chance to meet his father. You didn't like him?"

"He... seemed too cavalier. He saved my life; and made it possible for me to win eight different ways against impossible odds... And was more interested in showing off for the girls than in saving the world."

Pepper smirked. "That I can believe."

He saw her smile and silently declared victory.

"So." Steve said as he came back into the hospital room. "How does a teacher afford to take a millionaire to court?"

"Millionaire?" Tony repeated. "Sure; when I was eleven."

"Fine." Steve took it in stride. "How does a teacher afford to take a billionaire to court?"

"I'm so glad you asked that question." Pepper said with a smirk. "The lead counsel for the prosecution is a Assistant District Attorney."

Tony's ears pricked up. "Which district?"

"Columbia, New York. A district which gave us Steve Rogers; the Egg Cream, and Senator Eugene Stern of the Joint Armed Services Committee."

"Stern." Tony said the name explosively. "The man doesn't know how to take a defeat and keep running, does he?"

"Well; there's your defense." Steve offered. "Nobody's going to take this seriously if you point out
that your enemies are paying for it."

"That's how you pay for everything." Pepper told Steve. "You find a guy who agrees with you and either use him, or agree to let him use you."

It wasn't the first time Steve had been left confused by the modern world. "I don't get it, you just saved the planet... very nearly atomized yourself..."

"'Nuked'." Tony corrected absently. "The term is 'Nuked' now. 'Atom Bomb' is too... retro."

"Whatever, my point is... why is this guy trying to get a quick buck off a national, or for that matter; an international hero?"

"Because I've got money to spare. He figures I'll settle out of court and he'll get a meal ticket for a while."

"Why would you settle? You're in the right."

"Yeah, but if I have to go into a courtroom and say so; then it'll take time, money, effort, it'll be a circus, everyone will put their opinion in and argue back and forth about who said what."

"So what?" Steve was honestly confused. "This guy is lying. He's trying to steal something that isn't his; and he's betting you're going to give him everything he wants just because you won't want to waste time talking about it? How does that not seem like a confession of guilt?"

Tony snorted. "You've been asleep for too long, Rogers. This is how Rich Boys live now."

Long silence.

"It's not right." Steve said finally. "Say what you want about the Stark name, Tony... and I can say quite a bit... but Iron Man was all you. You built it. You did something nobody else in the universe has done; and you did it first, and you did it in a cave with a box of scraps, and with a gun to your head. That's amazing. Why does everyone hate something amazing if they can't have it too?"

"Because that's how it is."

"Back during the war... Hitler annexed Austria in one piece without a shot being fired. That flag went up everywhere and they kept telling the world that nothing had changed. They kept saying that this was just how things were now; and what really had they lost?"

Tony didn't answer.

"This guy is lying; and he's calling you a thief. You're a lot of things, Tony; but you've never stolen anything."

"Except women." Tony put in; but it was clear his heart wasn't in it.

"You want to make this go away; that's fine; but... You show up in court; you'll have a million eyes on you while you set the record straight. It's how you make the lies stop."

"No, that's how we give them more things to attack me with. My lawyer meets his lawyer and we pick a number out of a hat." Tony yawned. "This thing starves if we deny it attention."

"Don't starve it, drag it out into the light." Steve said sincerely. "Lies cannot be allowed to go unchallenged. The Truth is something that has to be defended; every bit as much as a city, or an ally."
Pepper and Tony just stared at Captain America. It wasn't idealism, it was honest, earnest belief in a principle.

After a moment, Pepper leaned in, and broke it to Captain America gently. "Captain... Steve... nobody thinks that way any more."

"Yes." Rogers sat back with a sigh. "I've noticed that."

"When did you become a cynic?" Tony demanded of his girlfriend.

"Somewhere between, 'Hi, I'm Tony' and 'what color underwear are you wearing?'" Pepper shot back.

Tony paused. "I should..." He paused again. "No. I'm not getting involved in this."

"Good boy." Pepper nodded. "Sign on the dotted line; and we can arrange to have some of our lawyers off the Company Payroll long enough to handle it."

Tony signed without looking. Pepper's phone rang as he did; and she tapped the headset at her ear. "Potts."

Rogers knew all about bluetooth technology now. After a flying aircraft carrier; wireless communication was less shocking to the man out of his time.

Pepper listened for a moment, before her eyes widened and turned on Stark in open disbelief.

"YOU WANT TO LOAN BANNER THE COMPANY JET?!" Pepper screeched.

"What?" Tony barely blinked. "He needs a ride."

"You wanna lock the Hulk in a pressurized metal tube at thirty five thousand feet."

"Doctor Banner insisted that the craft be flown by autopilot; that the crew be dismissed with pay for the week, and that the flightpath be directed over areas away from people. I have no idea where he's going, the flightplan is supposed to take him around the world, and he's going to jump out at some point. Apparently he doesn't need a parachute. The plane keeps going, and lands back where it started."

Beat.

"Oh." Pepper said finally. "Okay, well... that sounds like a fine set of safety precautions."

Tony pointed at her, looking to Steve. "There. See that? Mistrustful. No faith in me whatsoever."

"If you were dating you, would you trust you?" Rogers quipped.

Pepper was expecting him to fire back a retort; but Tony Stark just settled back into his bed with a dark look in his eye. "Not for a second."

The history books had spoken often of the close of the second world war. The men involved in the Manhattan Project had an assured place in history, and their lives were known well.

Every one of he hundreds of documentaries, books and biographies of the scientific minds behind the Nuclear Age had made mention of Howard Stark, and one of the most famous photographs ever taken. In the years that followed the close of the war, Howard Stark had sunk an enormous
amount of his fortune into rebuilding Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

On a visit to the ruined city, Howard Stark had noticed one of the few walls left standing, and the shadows of people, their 'ghosts' burned forever into stone by a sudden atomic flash. No weapon ever made had ever left a photograph of the dead behind... Until Howard Stark had helped invent one.

Howard Stark and fallen to his knees before the forever shadows of the victims and wept, head in his hands. A War Correspondent had snapped a photo from the perfect angle, without the millionaire ever knowing he was being watched.

It was an image that had gone down in the annals of history with the Sailors Kiss on V-J Day, Planting the Flag at Iwo Jima, the always infamous Mushroom Cloud...

A few wrecked sections of New York were left untouched in honor of the victims, and joined the 9/11 memorial as part of the city's heritage. Footage of silhouettes flash-cooked into the walls filled the news for a while. Pepper had tried to keep Tony from seeing the Hiroshima-like images, which was a waste of time.

On his release from the Helicarrier Medbay, Tony had fought his injuries to be there himself. He did not break down in tears, he just lost energy with his injuries and fell to his knees from exhaustion, having pushed himself too hard too soon.

It was spooky, how close the images matched. The same shadows, the same candle-light, father and son with the same posture... A million websites ran the two pictures side by side. Howard Stark from the Manhattan Project, breaking down before the victims of his work, and his only son, years later in the actual Manhattan, doing the same.

So few people put it together. Howard Stark was feeling guilty, because he had created the weapon. With the official story leaving out a few facts... Pepper was one of the few people that knew Tony blamed himself for creating the Arc Reactor, which Loki had used to open the door.

The Memorial had a constant supply of flowers put there every morning, and dozens of candles that never went out, even in the wind or the rain. Pepper was the only one that knew for sure who knew where they came from. She had signed off on the orders herself.

"I can't do it!" Maya hissed into the phone. "What do you mean why?!" She went on a moment later. "Don't you people watch TV? My project got popular again!"

As she spoke, soft and furious into her cell phone, she looked over her shoulder every second. Her office had been bugged often, as had her desk phone. Every time she had found a listening device and removed it, someone would come into her office while she was out and plant another, but she was fairly sure she was safe for now... unless the voice on the other end of the phone had their way.

"I can't give you what you're after!" Maya hissed. "They're not shutting me down any more! The vials can't just 'fall off a truck'." She listened a moment. "I'm not worried about losing my job, I'm worried about being executed for treason!" She listened again and went pale. "You wouldn't!" She rubbed her eyes. "Of course you would, why ask? What am I supposed to say to my superiors?" She demanded. "They're keeping close track! Nobody will believe you just stole them! Either way I'm dead, so why should I die helping you?"

The man on the other end of the phone had already disconnected.
SHIELD didn't have markers for the dead. Those Killed In Action had no families of their own. The few relatives they had were lied to. Nobody outside the Division knew the truth. They held their own memorial for the casualties among the Helicarrier crew.

The Avengers held their own private memorial in the laboratory. There was no body. That would be up on the repaired flight-deck in a row of coffins.

"First time I met him..." Stark said finally. "He was trying to get my attention, and I blew him off for a girl. Of course, that girl was Pepper. Best decision I ever made." Tony shrugged. "But the second time I met him, he was keeping my secrets, protecting my interests, watching my back. I promptly ignored everything he said, just for the hell of it. But the night before, he saved Pepper's life. That alone was enough for me to offer him his own island. He turned me down." Stark chuckled, despite himself.

Captain America, in full uniform, leaned forward. "I'm told, that the first time I met him, I was under about a foot of ice. I've seen the footage, and the first thing he did was arrange an honor guard for my body. When I was awake... I think that in a world where successes are unknown and failures are fatal, Agent Coulson would have traded a hundred medals for the chance to be our friend."

Natalya Romanov lifted her own drink. "When I first came to work for SHIELD, Coulson was my handler. I knew how to fight, how to interrogate, how to talk my way in every door. He taught me... Everything else. He taught me to be an Agent, to think like a good guy... and that the world would fall apart if all the people that went unnoticed stopped their work for just a day."

"The first time I met him..." Thor Odinson eulogized. "He was taking away things important to someone important to me. Trying to keep secrets that she would uncover. One warrior knows another, and we were united in the protection of this world. When I returned... he was the first to protect those that matter to me, before Loki could use them against me. His example was one I had to follow, standing in opposition to something he could not hope to defeat. I was only mortal for a few days, but I could do no less." He hefted his Hammer. "I owe that to him." He raised a pint. His drink was three times the size of anyone else's. "To Phil, Son of Coul." Thor boomed. "Hail the victorious dead!"

Nobody bothered to correct him. "To Phil!" They all toasted.

There was a silent moment as everyone drank, and retreated into their own thoughts a moment.

"So, what's next?" Tony grated, trying to sit more comfortably on the edge of the desk.

"Fury has released Loki to me." Thor said evenly. "He still has a charge of treason and attempted genocide to answer for at home... and quite frankly... you don't have a cell that can hold him forever."

"I'm happy to have him be out of the world." Rogers nodded.

"What of the Tesseract?" Thor boomed.

Tony Stark and Steve Rogers traded a look. It wasn't lost on any of them that Fury wasn't here for this conversation. It felt like a conversation they'd already had, when the team had discovered the Phase Two Project.

"The Tesseract has to go with you." Stark heard his voice say.
"Hold on." Rogers held up a hand. "That's not our call, is it?"

"It just became our call." Stark said. "The Tesseract isn't ours..." He looked to Thor. "Which leads me to wonder how the Nazi's got hold of it. Missing for a few thousand years, and you didn't notice when the Red Skull started working with it?"

Thor folded his immense arms. "Let us say only that there were more sides fighting that war than you ever knew."

Every eye swiveled to Captain America, who went notably silent at that statement.

Tony turned to the rest of the Avengers and spread his arms wide. "For years now, I've been trying to keep a lid on my own invention. I've been trying to keep my enemies, and even my friends from taking this invention that could save the world, and turning it to evil. I can't even build an emissions free tower without some Demi-God turning it into a beachhead for an alien invasion."

Silence.

"The universe has been alerted to our existence." Rogers said. "And the first contact was an invasion. The second contact might yet be worse. Part of me wonders if Fury was wrong to develop the Hydra Weapons."

There was a moment as they turned that over in their heads.

"I've been on the run for years." Banner said finally, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "I'm not running from supervillains and dictators. I've been running from my own government, my own former paymasters... It's not as simple as saying that a weapon will only be used for defense."

"I first visited this world when a race called the Frost Giants came to conquer you." Thor put in. "They were a match for anything you've seen this week. My father declared that it was the duty of the strong to defend the weak, and my people went to war. We came to this world and fought back the invaders on your behalf... I returned two generations later to ensure that they had not returned... All the things we had taught your people, you were using on each other." Thor spread his hands wide. "Imagine what you would do with what you've learned now."

"Einstein dreamed of a world with limitless power, no more poverty... And guys like Fury and... and my father, turned it into the atom bomb." Stark said. "Maybe I'm a cynic, but that doesn't mean I'm wrong."

"Why are we still arguing about this?" Barton said suddenly. "The Tesseract isn't a weapon, it's a doorway. Loki didn't come to earth and steal the Tesseract, it was how he got here. The Invasion didn't come from outer space, it came through the Tesseract. We hold onto that thing, and whoever else in the universe wants to start a fight can come right to our door."

"The Archer is correct." Thor agreed.

"A doorway." Rogers mulled. "One of many?"

"Not so many." Thor shook his head. "But one that I will need, nonetheless, if I am to get Loki back to Asgard."

"That seems to be the clincher." Stark commented. "If we do this, then... Fury would say that the Tesseract can be used to send them home, but still stay here."

"Fury might be convinced." Thor countered. "But his masters will not."
"Fury's on thin ice with whoever gives him orders." Tony put in. "If he orders the Tesseract taken out of the world, that's it for him."

"Then... maybe we'd be wise to keep this off his desk."

"Then maybe you shouldn't be talking about it when I'm able to hear you."

Everyone spun and found Fury in the doorway, Hill right behind him.

"The Avengers Initiative have been put under review." Fury said. "People in power often think that just because their stupid-ass ideas are ignored, it means that those of us with common-sense aren't being loyal enough." Fury came into the room and sat on the edge of a workstation. Just for a second, the exhaustion was starting to show. "The dream was insane. To bring together the mightiest, most confident, most headstrong people, and throw them together in the hope that it could save the world. And it worked. I made promises to get you all here, and you all came through." He looked at them as earnestly as he could. "You came through on your end... and I... And Coulson, had faith that if we need you again... you'd come."

Silence.

"Agent Hill, move these... civilians, out." The Director said without looking at her, and headed out of the room.

Pepper had sprung Tony out of the Helicarrier Medbay, and had been told to meet him at the airport. They were immediately on their way to Venice... Once they made a stop in New York. Tony needed a lift to the Memorial site.

Pepper stayed back and let him pay respects. She was surprised how few people were around, but assumed SHIELD had something to do with that. She was certain of it a moment later as others came, and she was stunned to realize that she was the only one to witness the Avengers final meeting. Thor and Loki vanished in a flash of light, and the heroes all went in different directions.

Tony had sent her a quick look and jumped into a convertible with Bruce Banner, and Pepper swallowed. She went to the airport as instructed, and found Tony waiting for her. Stark One was nowhere to be seen, and neither was Banner, Stark Two was fueled up and ready to take them to Venice.

Pepper knew instantly that something was different. Tony was different. He took no interest in the beauty of the city. If she asked to go somewhere, or see something, he always went with her, but his mind was clearly on other things.

He was still in recovery, and spent a fair amount of time in bed. She brought in enough food for both of them and they cuddled together, just being close to each other.

She still had her phone, and he had his tablet. Between eating and sleeping, they lay together with one arm around each other, and the other working constantly. She was running the company, and he was drawing one technical design after another on his tablet. She peeked over his shoulder and discovered he was designing one Iron Man Suit after another, after another. Something had broken loose within him and Tony was suddenly bursting with ideas.

After a week, she judged he was recovered enough and started wearing the cut-off jeans and heels again. He saw it and got the message instantly. They were tearing each others clothes off in seconds and she knew instantly that something was wrong.
He was never rough. Not with her, but there was a new kind of hunger to him now, something desperate and needing, like he was trying to convince himself of every inch of her skin. She had expected something like that and had responded, until she had realized that he was stopping her from touching him back, ignoring his own needs, while almost obsessed with hers.

It was urgent, more ardent, but somehow Tony was completely passionless about it. It had felt like he was trying to make something happen, as he sought her body with his. She returned his need willingly, until they were both left gasping and exhausted, but Pepper could tell that Tony's emotions were all over the place.

She never said anything, but twice during their time in Venice, Pepper woke up to find herself in a near stranglehold. In his sleep, Tony was clinging to her for dear life. His arms were possessive and protective, and she appreciated the intent, but he was holding on like he expected her to turn into smoke and vanish any second.

But the worst part, was that she could tell he was awake the whole time.

Sal Kennedy's home was on the furthest edge of San Francisco as he could make it. A grove of trees surrounded it, close enough for Maya to think that Sal had built his home right into the middle of them deliberately.

She parked her rental car and came up the drive, getting a closer look at the place. She suddenly realized that the trees bore fruit, though it was entirely the wrong season, and none of the fruits looked right.

The roof of the house was covered in solar panels, as were a few open spaces on the walls, and as far as she could tell... the house was off the grid. No power lines, no antennae, nothing that seemed connect him to the outside world.

No wonder I couldn't find contact details. She thought to herself, and walked up to the door. She knocked... and the door swung open. She felt spooked suddenly, enough that she didn't call out, and she crept into the house.

The house was custom designed. From the front door she could see all the way through to the back wall, which was nothing but big bay windows, giving her an unobstructed view of the trees and plants out back. As far as she could tell, the living room, the bedroom, the kitchen and the workshop were all the same open space. She felt like she had just stepped into Sal's old office at MIT. But now instead of electronic gizmos and equations, there were living things. The chemistry sets were all distilling and combining odd mixtures, giving the place a strange natural, but chemical smell.

She suddenly realized that Sal had switched to engineering plant hybrids, seeing some of his mad creations growing in various glass greenhouses across all his workstation tables. Herbs, fruits, a blackberry bush in miniature, a tomato bush that was growing perfectly square tomatoes, and off to the left, a few mushrooms, growing under hot lights, which should have been impossible.

There was no television, no phone she could see, the few nods to technology were the solar cells, the smart-glass that tinted with the light outside, and the one computer, running simulations on four screens.

And hunched over a familiar looking pot plant, harvesting a few leaves, was Sal Kennedy, with his back to her, in an outrageous Hawaiian shirt. Maya suddenly placed one of the scents teasing at her nose, getting a flashback to her college days.
"Sal, you could get arrested for this." She said by way of greeting, jerking her thumb at the terrarium.

"Nothing I'm growing is illegal." Sal told her without turning, completely unsurprised to find he had company.

"I find that hard to believe." She commented, coming over.

"They're not." Sal insisted, turning around. "Every plant in here is a new species. Don't even have names yet. It's not illegal because there's no law banning them yet." To make the point, he went over to one of his elaborate chemistry sets and picked up the beaker on the Bunsen Burner. "Tea?"

"Earl Grey?" She shot back.

"On the porch." Sal waved, and bustled over to prepare it. Maya went out to the back porch and found two bean bag chair around a very low table. Steeling herself, she sat on it, cross-legged. She got a look at his acre sized backyard, which looked like a miniature farm full of various crops, as Sal came out with two mugs.

"So." Sal said. "It's been a while, Maya."

"If you missed me, you could have made yourself a little easier to find." Maya shot back. "I hear your brother is going to run for President."

"Bah." Sal scorned, sitting his large stocky frame down next to her. "Sal was always too straight-laced for his own could. At ten years old I could have told him that politics was never going to make things better in the world. Don't know why he'd want to go so... establishment."

"Mm." Maya took a sip of her drink and paused. "Wait. Your brother is named Sal too?"

"I was named Salman, which provided for some pretty predictable nicknames growing up, so I shortened it." Sal explained. "My brother was named Salvador, but apparently when he ran for Senate, he got some polling that said the public would react badly to that, so he shortened it like I did." he took a long drag off his hand-rolled smoke. "What can I say? Parents are sadists."

"His staff know you're genetically growing new hybrid forms of weed in here?" She asked as she sipped.

"Excuse me, but this one is straight tobacco. No tar, no nicotine, no problem. I perfect this, and I can either save hundreds of thousands of lives per year, or put big tobacco out of business. Either way, it's more than my brother could ever do as President." Sal shot back. "And I could honestly give a damn what his team of Keystone Cowboys think. I don't think they can find me anyway." He blew out another stream of smoke. "Speaking of that, how the hell did you find me?"

"Were you hiding?"

"No, but I live off the grid, I don't even have a TV."

"How do you follow the news?"

"I'm subscribed to a few newspapers." Sal told her.

Maya burst out laughing. "You were teaching me about Emergent tech this side of ten years ago. You get your news from the same tech we used in the 1700's?"
"Better than watching a news station that gets it's Breaking News off Twitter." Sal scorned. "Emergent Tech went sour in so many ways, turned into weapons, and ridiculous diversions, and better methods for spreading gossip and pornography. My generation was promised colonies on the moon and flying cars."

Maya waved at his home garden. "So you went from a world leading Futurist to a reclusive Naturalist in just ten years."

"Pretty much. The future ain't what it used to be. Tai Chi and Chai Tea for me." Sal looked at her seriously. "But you didn't come here for that. So let's talk about something really important: Do you like my beard?"

Maya took another sip primly. "You look like a walrus."

"And the time has come, the walrus said, to talk of many things." Sal recited without flinching. "Of shoes and ships and sealing wax, and cabbages and kings." He lifted his own mug and took a sip. "What's on your mind, Future-Girl?"

"Not the future, Sal; not today. It's depressing." Maya sighed. "I thought we might try the past for a while. You remember Tony Stark?"

"Remember? He was one of my best customers when you two were still at MIT." He hefted the homemade cigarette to make his point. "What about him? He save the world again?"

"Millennium midnight, we were at a Tech Conference in Switzerland. We had a few drinks, wound up in bed, I woke up first and by the time I'd brushed my teeth he'd slipped out. I never heard from him again." Maya sighed. "I wish I was as moral as he is."

Sal stared at her. "That... is downright unsettling. What happened?"

Maya lay back in her bean bag chair, letting the irregular lights from the lava lamps inside play over her face. "I... In a way, Stark and I were competitors, though he never knew it.

"I thought you were gene splicing plants?"

"No, you're gene-splicing plants." Maya scorned. "I was trying to unlock telomeres. I could do that in plants, I could do it with people too. But Stark... He invented the one man army, and nobody knew, least of all him, that we were all racing to beat him to it, without guns or armor or gadgets being involved. I was working on a way to make soldier's stronger and faster and smarter, better eyes, better hearing. Gene therapy. A human made superhuman... but then Iron Man appeared, and so did the War Machine, or whatever they're calling him now. Just like that, gene therapy was too slow, too risky. Generals still think of Genetic Tampering as Science Fiction. Prefer hard metal and big guns. So I lost my funding, vanished instantly." She sipped her tea. "So I had a choice to make. I had to find a way to make something that was a match for anything Iron Man could come up with... Something so big and bad that even the Avengers would look antique... and I had to do it in such a way that everyone would be forced to see it."

The older hippie man seemed fascinated by that. "How?"

Maya shook her head. "No offense, but if I even spoke the word out loud, you'd be buried in a deep dark hole, and I'd be shot. No trial, no arrest, I'd never see it coming, I'd line up at a coffee machine, and someone would find my surprised looking corpse soon after."

His face twisted. "What the hell are you doing building something groundbreaking for people like that?"
She glared back. "Do not judge me! You left your post as one of the most brilliant people in the world and moved out here to perfect the genetic makeup of a pot brownie. I've been trying to accelerate human evolution by a billion years. 'Guys Like That' are the only ones willing to put money into that."

"Them and Google."

"You don't want to know what Google was asking for." Maya shuddered. She slugged back more of her tea. "What is this? It's not Earl Grey."

"Well, it was when I started tinkering with it." He grinned.

Maya leaned back again. "All the arguments debated endlessly about stem cell research, and what's playing god, and what's too much like Frankenstein, and what's... You know that after the Human Genome Project was completed, the Pharmaceutical Companies started patenting our genes? One day someone's gonna figure out how to switch off the gene that causes baldness, or heart disease... or god forbid, the aging process. Whoever finds it first is gonna rule the world... If they can just get it done!"

Her voice had grown loud and passionate, and he looked at her hard.

Maya reined herself in with difficulty. "Well... Anyway."

He looked cannily at her. "Maya... you came here to talk to me about something. The only thing you've talked about is the state of research in the medical field, and the trials and tribulations of Tony Stark. You don't want to talk about that."

"Yes and no." She sighed. "In a way, that's all I can think about. You remember that unauthorized biography that came out after he outed himself as Iron Man?"

"Yeah."

"Well, after the New York Invasion, I read that book." She explained. "The Ten Rings, The Jericho, Whiplash, Stark Tower... Seems like the complete story of his life is people taking the things he makes and using it to kill innocent people, and him trying to stop them."

"To be fair, it's a problem all the weaponeers have to deal with." He offered. "It's why everyone civilized banned chemical weapons and biological weapons. The inevitable fact that they'll get out of control eventually."

"Don't you believe it." She scorned. "They all say they ban that crap, but I whipped up something that makes Ebola look like a mild cough. It was my audition to get this job."

He took a drag on whatever it was he was smoking. "Wow. Either this stuff is getting better... or you're in real trouble. You don't mind tossing that out, but you can't talk about this thing?"

"I am... less that the great Tony Stark. The guy drank, screwed, smoked and sleazed his way through his entire life... and when he decided that his industry was a moral failure, he shut it down instantly." Maya said softly, staring into space. It was like she was giving confession. "Never mind the billions of dollars, never mind the personal power and the national need. A guy like Tony Stark, who drowned his conscience in Scotch by the age of fifteen, was willing to turn his back on all of it because he could not live with the shame of his work."

He broke down sobbing. "Except I knew exactly what I was making... and I didn't even blink."
The old man reached out automatically, rested a hand on her shoulder. "What have you created, Maya Hansen?" He said, soft and slow.

She sniffed; and answered him; though soft enough that he didn't hear her, as she spoke the name with dark awe. "Extremis."

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Another two weeks passed, and the two of them had returned to the states. Pepper was fending off the demands of an ever increasing number of people who needed to talk to her in person, and Tony was too well healed. She didn't think his spirit had healed as well as his body, but it was time to get back to the world and they both knew it. They flew back to the US, Pepper to New York, Tony to Los Angeles.

The Stark Legal Team had worked day and night to solve the annoyingly persistent legal attacks by Spiner. Somehow, the fact that the Avengers had just saved the world and Stark's name was golden, was not enough to dissuade him from picking a mudfight.

Pepper had been forced to catch up on several weeks worth of work, and had left Stark to his own devices for two days. Her calls were being blocked by Jarvis, which meant Tony was working. Pepper hoped that was good news, since his work sometimes had a stabilizing effect on him.

She had left a hundred messages stating that he had to be at the New York Office for a specific meeting about the coming lawsuit... and he hadn't shown.

Pepper was furious. Iron Man could make it from coast to coast in less than an hour. She had put the company on hold during one of their busiest moments to go with him to Venice for weeks, and Tony couldn't take an hour to answer her?

She hadn't gone back to the Penthouse that night. She had instead gone to the airport and boarded Stark One. She was angry, but she was worried too. He'd given her enough reasons to be concerned about his emotional state, and because of work, she had left him alone for three days. Jarvis had instructions to alert her if something... unhealthy happened to Tony, but she knew he could get around that.

It was pouring rain when she arrived in LA, and she didn't have an umbrella. Another thing to go on the list of reasons she was mad at Tony Stark.

She let herself into the house and could smell the delivered groceries starting to turn in their bag on the counter, she growled under her breath and started marching toward the stairs. Her stilettos rang out on the floor sharply as her annoyance started to show in her stride.

The glass had been completely soundproofed, but she could see movement within, and relaxed slightly. he was okay. Which meant he was just an insensitive, uncaring louse, and anger grew to replace her worry.

The second the doors opened to her passcode, a wall of heavy metal hit her. She scowled and hit another few buttons, killing the music.

Tony was at his workstation. "Don't turn off my music." He said without even turning around.

"You missed the meeting." Pepper said tightly. "That was an important meeting, Tony. It would have saved you so much...what the hell are you doing in here?"

Pepper had been away from the LA house for a few days, and to her amazement, the workshop had been... transformed again. Now, all the cars, all the monitors, all the workstations had been shoved
to the side, and in the middle of the floor was a vast open space.

A circular shaft, and fifteen feet wide had been carved into the floor of the workshop. The only things not moved, were the main workstation, and the gallery of the first six Iron Men around the outer wall of the

Pepper peered over the side and saw that the walls of it were stone and concrete. Tony had been digging out the cliff face that his home was built on, creating a massive underground... vault.

Tony followed her gaze. "I decided to upgrade."

"Upgrade what?"

"Well, I was tinkering with the War Machine design, and it suddenly hit me: The Mark II was a dinosaur compared to Iron Man, but it was still able to hold off a few armies worth of firepower. Even the old suits are way too dangerous and powerful to become museum pieces, so..."

"I'm surprised you're holding on to them." Pepper observed. "You wanted me to toss the Mark I Reactor in an incinerator."

"And if you had, I'd be dead right now." He shot back.

Pepper ran a hand through her hair absently, her mouth becoming a thin line. She didn't like to be reminded about that part of his life.

Tony looked up. "Wait a minute. There's something turning me on about you and I can't think what it is." He studied her for a moment and snapped his fingers. "Your hair is wet. It's the 'just showered' look."

"It's raining cats and dogs outside." She excused.

"What?" Tony blinked. "Jarvis said the skies were clear for flight until Friday at least."

"Tony." She broke it to him gently. "It's Saturday."

Tony blinked. "Really?"

"Have you been down here for six days?" Pepper asked in jaded awe. Even at his most single minded, Tony usually noticed that he hadn't had a drink, or a meal by the day three mark...

Tony looked up guiltily. "I needed to make room." He said quietly, sounding like a little kid. "I had to make room for my stuff." It was as though that explained everything.

"Make room for what?" Pepper asked, feeling a chill go up her spine. "I mean... what exactly do you need to..." She broke off suddenly, seeing the intensity in his gaze as he rose from the Vault to stand before his latest red and gold suit. For a moment, with the workshop lights off, except for the ones surrounding the Suit, Tony was scrambling out of the hole on his hands and knees.

Pepper felt a chill, seeing Tony crawling before the gleaming Armor he had created. Just for a split second, Tony was almost bowing before Iron Man...

She shook it off quickly. Tony was Iron Man. He couldn't be getting that lost inside a helmet. He was just too... Tony Stark to be at somethings mercy.

Tony, who had not eaten or slept in a full week, went straight to the wetbar and poured himself a double.
She felt another chill. "Tony?" She said, hearing inexplicable weakness in her voice. "Take me out to dinner tonight."

"We have reservations?" Tony scratched his head, trying to remember if she'd said something about that before.


His eyes went to her with sudden focus. "New York, huh? The Tower?"

"You've been neglecting it." She said lightly. And me.

Tony read her mind, knowing exactly what had brought her back suddenly to his doorstep. It had been over a week since they'd spent any time on the same coast, and he was ashamed to realize that he hadn't even noticed. "New York it is!" He said, suddenly enthused.

He led the way out of the workshop, with her following close behind him. She peeked over her shoulder at the dark workshop, and just for a second... The Assembled armor seemed to be looking after them.

She knew it was impossible, but the imposing blank face seemed to be looking at her, as though weighing her up.

Pepper shivered, and hurried after her boyfriend. "Well, anyway." Pepper said brightly, forcing cheer into her voice. "About the meeting you missed? Good news. Our legal team took Spiner an offer of two million dollars to go away and take his stupid lawsuit with him."

"And?"

"He said no." Pepper reported. "Said he could get twenty times that by going through with it, from the book deals alone, win or lose."

Tony snorted. "That's good news?"

"Not really, but I got a better idea."

"What is it?"

"Buy them off."

"I thought that didn't work."

"Not Spiner, his backers." Pepper explained. "We know that Stern is in back of this, and so is the DA. Now, the next Presidential is heating up, and Ellis is running on a defense platform. If Iron Man gave him a donation of 1.5 million dollars..."

"You want to give him 1.5 million dollars of my money?"

"That's right." Pepper said. "Because we give that to his campaign, and he'll be willing to take Stern on board as one of his campaign advisers; and Stern will quickly decide not to bite the hand that feeds him."

"And the DA?"

"With Stern trying to get a job at the White House, the DA can be encouraged to go after his seat, and Spiner is left looking around, wondering where his backup went."
Tony laughed. Pepper straightened her back, very pleased with herself. It was the first time that Tony had laughed since The Avengers. "Okay, do it. But promise me that this is the last I'll have to hear of Peter Spiner."

"Don't worry boss, I got it handled."

The plan backfired spectacularly.

Pepper knew the second she woke up that there was something terribly wrong. Jarvis had woken her at the Penthouse with his usual morning updates, but hadn't mentioned a single headline. He had, however, mentioned that there were forty one messages waiting for her.

Pepper had the story pieced together pretty quickly, and steeled herself with her first cup of coffee of the day. Tony wasn't answering his phone. Pepper stopped trying and called Happy instead.

"I was wondering how long it would take you." Happy said by way of greeting. "How bad is this gonna get?"

"Pretty bad. Happy, I need you go into the house and put the phone in Tony's hand directly. Don't let him ignore you."

"Right." Happy promised and the line faded to background noise as Happy moved from the garage into the beachfront house, then down the staircase. There were several seconds of loud knocking, over and over again.

"Geez, Pep." Happy said quietly into the phone. "You should see the place."

Pepper heard that and felt a chill, wondering what Tony had turned into while she was away.

She was about to answer when heavy metal music came blaring out of her phone, and she jerked her head away until it suddenly cut off.

"What?!" Tony's voice demanded a moment later. "I'm working! Never send your lackeys to interrupt me when I'm working..." He caught himself swiftly. "...dear."

"Are you sitting down?" Pepper asked him nervously.

"No." Tony said blandly. "What is it?"

"Well, remember when I told you that I fixed the Intellectual Property Lawsuit?" Pepper almost squeaked.

"Yeah." Tony said, voice flat with grim anticipation.

"Well, it's sort of... broken again." Pepper explained. "And remember how I said it would be the last you hear of Spiner?"

"I remember something like that, yes." Tony said, voice going darker.

"Well, that's not exactly the way it turned out." Pepper swallowed. "I, um... I made the contribution to Congressman Ellis' Campaign... And his staff understood the deal. They had to give Senator Stern a job. And they... um... said no."

"Really." Tony said darkly.
"Yeah, apparently he's radioactive, politically. Nobody running for president wants anything to do to him." Pepper explained. "The ironic thing is..." Pepper let out a short bark of bitter laughter. "...a few months ago, they might have been willing to take him... but that was before an Alien Invasion... which you sort of ended. Stern has made a career out of attacking you, and they don't want to be tied to your enemies right now, even if we're begging them to do it."

"Oh yes, Viva New York." Stark scorned.

"Somehow..." Pepper licked her lips. "And here's where it gets unpleasant."

"Well gosh Pepper, it sounds pretty unpleasant already." Tony snarked.

"Somehow, Senator Stern got word of this." Pepper explained. "And he was... displeased."

"Geez, he finds out someone he hates is playing a fortune to get him moved out of the office he's been vacuum sealed into since forever, and he's not happy? **What were the odds?**"

"Right." Pepper agreed. "Well, Stern has never been one to keep quiet about things that anger him... and he's been shouting it from the rooftops that Stark Industries were paying 1.5 Million to try and rig a trial concerning who really deserves the credit for the Iron Man Invention." Pepper sighed. "The scandal has... encouraged the Justice Department to fast-track the case." Pepper explained, her face as red as her hair. "And of course... Spiner has been making the rounds on the morning shows..."

"And suddenly all those 'Spiner is a money-grubber' stories have turned into 'What is Stark hiding?' stories..." Tony finished.

"Yeah. Long story short, the trial has been moved up to... this week. And You'll be getting a subpoena soon. I'm told we can get that overturned. The trial won't go any higher than me, at worst."

"I am this close to just showing up with a bunch of tools and daring Spiner to **build** a damn Arc Reactor. If he can do it, he can take the stupid suits." An electrical trill came through the phone, and Tony spoke to someone other than her quickly. "I didn't mean that, I swear. You complete me, you know that!"

*Is he talking to his armor?* Pepper asked herself. "Tony, I'm sorry." Pepper said aloud. "Um, we might be able to minimize the scandal by telling people it was my idea... which it was."

"You do that, you'd have to resign." Tony told her.

"I've already written the letter of resignation."

"Pep, you're talking to a guy who's had no end of embarrassing scandals after offering people of the opposite sex a lot of money to get something in return." Tony waved it off. "Give the bastard his trial."

The Trial was a media circus. The courtroom was relatively small, and was full to bursting with cameras and reporters.

The Trial was televised, and audiences around the country watched as the fate of a superhero was decided in an open court.

The judge had made his warnings about demonstrations, and threatened to seal the courtroom to
everyone if the media got out of hand.

And then Spiner had stood up, intending to make his own opening statement to the jury, without the aid of his lawyer. He rose from his seat and strode over to the jury, leaning against the railing. He spoke dynamically, like a motivational speaker, winning people over with rhetoric alone.

"We were so young then, with the world at our feet, and the future ahead of us. Back then, there were no rivalries, no hunger for profits, there was only ideas. Tony Stark and I had a dream." Spiner said grandly. "It was an unrealized dream to be sure. It was science fiction, to be perfectly honest. The result of too much beer, and too many comic books. But where brilliant minds dream, the ideas take root."

Stark knew he shouldn't watching, but he was. He was watching the screen, testing the new modules for his armor. He was wearing one arm of it, right up to the shoulder, and the boots. Deep down, he knew the real reason he was wearing three out of four repulsors.

"More things are invented in the dorm rooms of Harvard than in any other place. So many good ideas are pushed to the back-burner, or forgotten altogether in favor of more... tangible goals. But Tony Stark and I saw the future in the Iron Man. We agreed that when we had the chance, we would make it happen."

Spiner paused for a beat to let that sink in.

"Make no mistake, ideas can be stolen... and so can a dream shared." Spiner made his pitch. "And while I personally am alive because of what Iron Man has done, the truth, and justice, must have its day."

It was enough. Tony fired his gauntlet at the television. The recoil spun him around hard.

*Lies cannot be allowed to go unchallenged. The Truth is something that has to be defended; every bit as much as a city, or an ally.* Captain America's voice came back to him, and though Tony had laughed in his face a the time...

*Stay out of it, Stark. Going down there doesn't make it better, it makes it a hundred times worse. The odds that you can kill this before it grows are against you, and the odds that you could make it front page news for longer are good. Let your lawyers handle it. That's what you pay them so much for... Stay OUT of the room.* He told himself savagely. *But on the other hand... nah.*

The latest version of Iron Man could go from coast to coast in less than an hour.

Tony saw the New York skyline and felt his heart speed up dramatically. Enough that his HUD started beeping a warning.

"Sir?" Jarvis asked. "Is something wrong?"

Stark didn't even hear him. He could see the tower. He could see the exact spot where the wormhole opened... and closed.

"Sir?" Jarvis pressed.

Tony shook it off. "I'm fine, Jarvis... but let's land at the courthouse, okay? Use retinal scan to
make sure nobody else can enter the armor but me, it'll be secure enough."

"Excuse me sir, but the Heads Up Display does not have a retinal scan feature."

"You have two minutes to create one."

Pepper was on the phone in her office at Stark Tower. She had been watching the televised trial, but switched it off when the opening statements began. She hoped Tony wasn't watching.

Happy Hogan pushed his way into her office, looking tense. "Are you watching this?" He asked her, already marching toward the television.

Pepper felt her heart stop and turned to face the blank screen. "On." She commanded, and the screen lit up with the trial... and Tony Stark making his way into the courtroom. He was in the same suit he had worn to the Opening Ceremony of the Expo... which meant that he had flown himself there.

Pepper sent a quick glance to the Heliport. "He didn't land here, did he? I would have noticed that, surely..."

"He didn't land here." Happy promised. "What's he doing at the courthouse?"

"Acting like himself." Pepper grit out. "Come on. We better get down there."

The prosecution could only call Spiner as a witness to his own case. The majority of the trial would have been rebutting the details and minutiae. Stark's Lawyers couldn't believe it when their client actually showed up, demanding to testify immediately.

The camera flashes intensified as Tony's Lawyer stood up. "Your honor, I call Tony Stark."

Every eye on the place was pointed at Stark as he rose and walked to his place at the stand. The cameras flashed so fast that it was like being in a lightning storm. He hadn't faced this many flashing lights...

_The lightning, the plasma, the fires, the nuke, the lightning, the flares, the shooting, the Arc Reactor..._

Tony shook it off quickly and raised his right hand, taking the oath. He'd been arrested enough time he didn't have to think about it. _That was weird. Did I just have a flashback?_

"Mister Stark." His Lawyer began. "Can you describe for us please, the manner in which you conceived the Iron Man device?"

Stark was still as a statue. _Work the opening Tony, work the room._ "I don't talk about it much." He said. "When I was captured in Afghanistan, they uh... tortured me for the better part of a day. It was punishment for my refusal to co-operate."

Murmurs broke out suddenly in the courtroom. This was new information. Tony looked, and suddenly saw a familiar flash of red hair. Pepper had arrived.

"I first thought of building a weapon, when my head was being held face down in a tub of dirty water that some of the terrorists used as a toilet. They kept me under until I stopped thrashing, and then they hauled me up and slugged me with the butts of their rifles to make me cough it up again.
They did this for hours. That was when I thought of building a weapon to kill them all."

The murmuring grew stronger.

"When it ended..." Tony said, his tone flat. "They hauled me out and showed me the camp, and the miles of desert around it. It was their intention to demonstrate that I had no chance. But everywhere I looked, I saw crates of Stark Weapons. That was when I knew it couldn't be a normal weapon, because I was outnumbered forty to one, and they had routinely taken my weapons as their own. So I decided to make the suit wearable. Something they couldn't just rip out of my hand."

It was a flawless execution. Stark was making his case more powerful, and gaining the sympathy vote at the same time. Spiner had come at them with dynamic rhetoric, and Stark had taken it apart with a cold, hard, frighteningly plausible reality.

"It wasn't a dream. It was a desperation move. One born of torture; not out of profit." Tony said eloquently; and there was dead silence. "I did not have a dream, I wanted a way to kill them all. And I did." He turned his eyes on his now silent opponent. "We did not seek to save the world. That came later. I just wanted a way to kill over forty terrorists before they tortured me again." He paused. "And Mister Spiner can have as much of that as he wants."

Dead silence.

"Spiner and I did not have any kind of shared vision to create something wonderful." Stark finished. "At the time, I was a weapon manufacturer. Everything I made was designed to kill. Including the first Iron Man. And when I was done, I escaped, and then I decided I had to make things right."

Dead silence.

Tony's lawyer let the silence hang for just long enough to let it sink in. The whole room belonged to Tony Stark. Finally, he turned to Spiner's legal team. "Your witness."

There were no further questions.

The police had cleared the side entrance, and some of the hallways. Tony headed back toward his armor, Pepper keeping pace with him. "So." She said finally. "Big day. Back to the Penthouse?"

Tony froze, suddenly terrified. Back to the Penthouse... In the Tower... In New York... Directly under the spot... "I want you out of the Penthouse." He said suddenly.

Stunned beat.

"What?" Pepper blinked. "The repairs are good, the structure was intact; it's perfectly saf..."

"Move in with me." Tony interrupted her suddenly. "I know the offices are in New York, but they were when Stane was CEO, and he handled it from the factory. I liked having you moved in with me, and I want... I want that every day. Move in with me. Don't go back to the Tower. Let's go back to LA, get your stuff out of storage, and move it all in. You know I've got room."

Pepper was stunned. Also touched. Tony was a playboy four years before... and yet with her, he hadn't shown any signs of a fear of commitment. Pepper took it as a sign, that of all the girls he knew, she was the keeper. But this was unexpected.

The request was completely out of left field, it was sincere, it would change everything, and it was
seven steps ahead of where all concerned thought they should be.

It was exactly the way Tony Stark would ask.

So why did it feel so out of character?

"I will." Pepper heard her voice say. "And don't worry. You're not losing me any time soon."

He had flown the suit to the airport. By the time Pepper had arrived, Stark One was ready, and Tony was out of the suit.

The fact that he was flying with her, in his private luxury plane, usually meant that he wanted to renew their membership in the mile high club, but she found the disassembled Iron Man suit... laid out on her usual side of the bed.

She tried not to read any symbolism into that.

Tony Stark talked a lot. He kept up a constant stream of patter at every opportunity...

But on the way from the airport to the LA Beachfront House... He didn't say a word. In fact, he'd said surprisingly little since leaving the courthouse.

It was frankly scary. She knew him better than he knew himself most days, and now he was a mystery to her.

"Your testimony made Youtube." Pepper said quietly, trying to get some kind of read on him. "The comments are... interesting. They mostly support you, but... Some of them are disappointed."

Silence.

"...disappointed?" Tony asked finally, as though he'd only half heard her.

"They were expecting a show." Pepper excused. "Like with the Senate Hearings."

Tony said nothing.

"You know, I was thinking something similar." Pepper said conversationally. "The Senate Hearings could have resulted in the suits being taken off you by force... and you were having fun."

Stark said nothing, looking out the window again.

"Tony... that sense of fun is what made you into a superhero. It made Iron Man a suit instead of Death-Machine. It was meant to be something that turned you loose... now it's what? Something that jumps out at you and cages you up. What's going on?"

"It's... it's not fun any more." Tony admitted. "It stopped being fun around..." His breathing was getting harder, more frantic...

"Tony?" Pepper laid a hand over his, and his fingers tightened convulsively around hers. His breathing returned to normal instantly, her touch calming him instantly. "You never talk about it."

Stark said nothing, leading the way into the house.

"About Afghanistan?" Pepper pressed him. "That's the first time you even mentioned what
happened since you came back."

Stark said nothing.

Pepper reached out a hand and made him stop moving. "Tony. Why didn't you tell me any of that? At least, before you tore strips out of the courtroom like that."

Tony looked at her, and Pepper shivered. He was looking at her, but he was seeing something else entirely. He wasn't even in the room with her when he spoke. "His name was Yinsen." Stark said. "And he was as smart as I was, only instead of making money with it, he decided to turn his genius into ways to keep people alive in places that were forgotten by all but the warlords. He found ways to keep people alive when Stark munitions shredded their bodies open." Stark tapped his chest. "Including mine. He was good a person that he even saved me after my inventions sent him customers for twenty years. In return, I promised to break him out. I told him I would build something to save our lives."

Pepper knew the answer already. "What happened?"

"He died, saving my life a second time." Tony said, and his voice was flat, like he was reading it off a screen. "The invention I built was the Mark I. The only thing I ever made that saved a life was to save my own. And I killed at least forty people on my way out."

"And then you came home." Pepper pointed out. "And you saved me."

Stark said nothing for a moment. "When I was being tortured? I saw the Arc Reactor in my head. I saw my salvation." He pointed his eyes in her direction, and just for a second it felt like he was actually looking at her. "I heard it too."

"Heard it?" Pepper was confused by that. "Heard what?"

"Heard you." Tony said simply. "I could hear your voice calling my name." His voice dropped to a broken whisper. "I knew I loved you then."

Touched, and more than a little heartbroken, Pepper threaded her fingers through his, intending to lead him upstairs to his bedroom and spend the rest of the night making achingly sweet love until they both forgot that bad things existed. He squeezed her fingers lightly and went to the staircase.

The other staircase.

She was trying to go upstairs to his room, he was trying to go down to his workshop. A room that was rapidly becoming Iron Man's Lair more than anything else.

"Not tonight, Tony." She whispered. "Not tonight."

"You want me to let you in?" He told her, voice still flat. "This is what's in my head now."

Pepper steeled herself and followed him down to the workshop.

It was worse than she thought. The hundred or so versions of the Iron Man Suit he had designed while in Venice had been created. At least a dozen of them, in various stages of assembly. Big heavy armors, solid golden armors, jet black armors... Some of them missing limbs, or helmets, some of them with the electronic innards spread out on the floor messily...

Pepper could hear the machines whirring as they machined new parts. Dummy and Butterfingers
were rolling back and forth with still more suit parts in their grip, and Tony let her fingers go, quickly giving her a tour.

"See, at first I thought the problem was assembly. Those damn machine arms I need to put it on... it was ridiculous, there was no way to make that practical." He started talking faster. "You have any idea what Shield's doctors had to do to get me outta that suit?" He danced over to the nearest armor, and as he grew close... it opened like a clamshell.

"Whoa." Pepper commented blandly, though worry started to show on her face.

"I know, right?" Tony enthused. "It worked so well, I'm going to make them standard on all the armors I make. A combat suit with an ejector seat! But that was a ridiculous idea, so it took me a full day to make it happen, because I couldn't get the power flows to stay the same with a modular suit...

"Tony..." She began.

"And then I realized that the problem was never the amount of power, it was the reaction times!"

"Tony..."

"So I started looking into interfaces, and the problem was how to translate motion controls into Suit Commands."

"Tony, stop." She said firmly.

He was still dancing back and forth, from one gleaming suit to the next. "But I was still working on that, when it suddenly occurred to me that there was no way the suit would be able to stand up to the kind of powers we've seen so far, so I went looking into upgrades...

"Tony!" She raised her voice.

"And then the ideas just came flooding out. I mean, the suit is rated for high-altitudes and external pressure, but with this kind of technology, I swear, I could fly Iron Man straight to the moon, so I started looking into building the Mark XI, which can carry a human pilot way beyond orbit..."

"Tony, stop it."

"The processors have been working day and night trying to render all the armor sections that I've been dreaming up, the beta testing alone..." He was talking so fast she could barely follow him, getting more and more worked up.

"Tony." She reached out to shake him by the shoulders. "You need to take a breath." She was getting worried. After weeks of being flat and unaware of the world around him, he was suddenly near-manic.

"And that's when it hit me!" Tony almost screamed. "A CLOAKABLE SUIT!"

Pepper slapped him. Stark snapped out of it instantly, his eyes suddenly focusing on her. For a moment, they stared at each other, the only sound was Tony's rushed, ragged breathing.

Pepper rubbed her eyes a moment. "Everyone said that trying to date the 'Maxim Maniac' would be a mistake. They all expected you'd ditch me by now for another woman. Or three." She gestured at the latest armor, mid-assembly. "This is somehow worse. Tony... it wasn't ever like this. What happened?"
"Pepper, nothing happened." He said stubbornly. "Nothing new anyway... I just..."

"You want it to be perfect." Pepper said for him. "In a world with Hulk, Captain America, Thor, Hawkeye, Loki, and who knows what else... you want an armor that will make you perfect."

Tony said nothing. He just held out a hand to her. She took it, and let him pull her close, standing in the center of the Workshop floor. A moment later, as the two lovers held each other, the floor beneath them began to lower, and Pepper looked up from his shoulder to look around them, and they sank into the Vault.

Row after row of suits. All of them assembled, in a full circle around the edge of the elevator. It kept descending, and Pepper craned her neck back to see them all, as row after row or Iron Men looked out at her with their blank soulless eyes. Their gaze seemed to beat against her. There was more power surrounding her tightly than any thousand armies could hope to match. Cramped in so tightly, with the open air drawing further and further away above them, it was frankly intimidating, even scary.

She held Tony tighter, as he seemed to revel in the embrace of his creation.

It's going to be interesting. Pepper though with jaded awe. All of us living together.
Okay, here's how this is going to work. I plan to novelize the third movie, but it won't be word for word. Because of the stuff I've invented, it's a little off canon, so I'll be following the structure of the movie closely, but I'll be adjusting dialogue and some of the background.

It won't be far off, but it won't be precise, since I'm largely working from memory; and be adjusting to make the whole story fit together. Inspiration for prose and adjustments comes from the Iron Man Comic Series 'The Five Nightmares' and of course, 'Extremis'.

Tony had nightmares. He had five of them, in fact. Not transitory ones about the bad days, or the nastier fights, or the night his parents died. These were dreams that haunted his soul, even when he was awake.

The first, was that Pepper would leave him. He knew that she didn't like what Iron Man was doing to him now. Once, she had been so proud of him, of the man he'd become, of the choices he'd made and the sins he'd atoned for.

More than once, someone had commented that Stark drank a lot, and now that he was a superhero, that couldn't possibly be good. To date, he'd only gotten drunk and used the armor at the same time once...

But the truth was more horrifying than that. He wasn't nearly as addicted to booze as he was to Iron Man. Plus, his usual personality was unpredictable, reckless... he had the profile SHIELD had done to prove it. He routinely threw meticulous plans out the window, and ignored all common sense, all logic, and all the advice of his allies. It was a personality flaw that had caused his father's best friend, Obadiah to try and have him killed.

His First Nightmare was that his many flaws would drive away everyone and everything he had... until he hit bottom.

Some days, it didn't pay to get off the shelf.

Tony had slept in his workshop more than once. When Pepper was in New York, he never went near his bedroom. Pepper knew it, and had taken his cot out of the workshop. She thought it would drive him out of the workshop to sleep, but instead, Tony slept in the backseat of his cars. And when the cars had been moved out of Iron Man's Fortress, he worked until he couldn't stand up and then he slept on the workbenches.

Jarvis still woke him up on time. "Good morning, sir, It's 6:30 AM in Malibu, the weather is sunny, with 80 degree highs and medium swells. You have nineteen new messages; and if I may direct your attention to the television, there is something that requires your immediate attention."

Tony groaned and sat up. "On." He commanded the television.
The first thing he saw was a banner that made his blood run cold as ice. Ten interlocking rings in a big intimidating circle.

The Ten Rings were on Television.

"Are we recording this?" He demanded first thing.

"The full spectrum of sound and visual, sir." Jarvis promised. "I will play the sequence from the beginning."

Tony sat cross-legged on the floor, his whole mind dedicated to the screen.

The screen was filled with a test color pattern, overlaid with the familiar Ten Interlocking Rings. The image quickly shifted to a man. It was a candid shot, not posed, or prepared. The man was tall; with a ponytail down past his shoulder, but the sides of his head were shaved.

He was older, but commanding, surrounded by gunmen and rabid crowds; some screaming support, some screaming in anger. But where The Man walked, there was stillness. He was untouchable.

The footage was frenzied, quick clips of people shooting, the desert being attacked; sudden explosions all over the place...

The longest shot was of The Man presiding over a public execution of a half-dozen people; waiting on their knees.

Then The Man spoke, and his voice was cultured; powerful, irrefutable. "Some call me a terrorist. I consider myself a teacher."

The executions were swift and brutal; there were children dancing happily beside the ringleader. The image shifted to The Man himself on a stone and iron throne, wearing green oriental robes, like an Emperor of old. His hands were folded neatly in his lap; and every finger bore a huge ornate ring, each one with a different insignia. "Americans; are you ready for another lesson?" He spoke into the camera. "In 1864, in San Creek, Colorado; the US Military waited until the friendly Cheyenne Braves had all gone hunting. Waited to attack and slaughter the women and children left behind, and claim their lands."

Another hard cut away from The Man led to a dizzying range of photos of bodies, of explosions, or things burning, and people screaming...

"Thirty nine hours ago, the Ali Al-Salaam airbase in Kuwait was attacked." The Man said with gravity. "The target, a quaint military church, set up for the families of the officers. All the women and children... While the soldiers were out on manoeuvres." He smiled into the camera, as though amused by the historical irony. "The Braves were away."

The next cut was of many people, some Arab, some Asian, some Western, all of them brandishing rifles and chanting vows of vengeance.

"President Ellis, you continue to resist my attempts to educate you, sir. And now you've missed me again. You know who I am. You don't know where I am."

More images flashing, a kaleidoscope of death and destruction.

"And you'll never see me coming." The Man finished, drawling out the last word with enough
And then the talking heads were back on the morning shows; trying madly to sound professional. They would have to fill in precious minutes until the household names appeared behind their news-desks for spin. The clip was being played again in the corner of the screen.

Tony's first step was to reach for the phone. "Happy?"

Hogan was silent a moment. "Yessir." He groaned.

"Did I wake you?" Stark checked the clock, then went back to the screen. "No, I don't care: Time to earn your paycheck, Head of Security. SI just went full alert. All of it. Lock it down, now."

"What?"

"Hogan, I'm serious. Turn on the TV."

"What channel?"

"Any of them."

Happy was awake instantly. "Oh God, what happened?"

Tony didn't answer, he disconnected the line. Happy would find out soon enough. The second he disconnected; Jarvis spoke up. "I have Agent Romanov trying to reach you urgently, sir. She has been quite insistent."

"Fine." Tony waved vaguely, and Jarvis made the connection. "Nat?"

"Don't call me that." Her voice responded instantly. "I assume you've seen the news?"

"It's them." Stark confirmed unnecessarily. "It's the Ten Rings. I thought you said I'd finished them off."

"Yeah... well, we lied." Romanov sighed. "The guy who just announced himself. You saw his hands?"

"And the big ornate rings on each finger? Yeah." Tony sighed. "Raza had a ring just like it."

"In about an hour, the State Department will announce that they have a name for this guy. It'll be spun as quickly discovered information, discovered by the brilliant Intel Community, but the fact is they've been after this guy for months and came up with nothing. He calls himself The Mandarin."

"Mandarin." Stark repeated, drawing the word out.

"When Whiplash was defeated; we tracked down his entire life." Romanov reported. "I found the man that supplied him with a fake passport so that he could get to Monaco. The supplier was killed before I could get more than a name."

"Let me guess..."

"Mandarin." Romanov nodded. "And I wouldn't be surprised if he was the one that got your father's
files out of SHIELD too."

Tony felt his hands start to shake. It was Mandarin that commanded the Ten Rings. It was Mandarin that had turned loose Whiplash. It was Mandarin's people that had kidnapped him in Afghanistan. It was Mandarin that had made him a prisoner, made Yinsen a prisoner, that had supported his enemies, and even his friends in their efforts to kill him...

His own personal nemesis had a name.

"Stark..." Romanov said, as though breaking something to him gently. "The Avengers are classified Level Seven. Threats to the world only."

"Threats to America not big enough?" Stark scorned.

"Threats to any one country or leader are a tricky business." Romanov explained. "It... motivates people to use superheroes for their own political and personal gains."

"Seriously?" Tony scorned. "That's why you're..."

"Wait for it." Romanov interrupted.

Tony turned back to the television. There was a shot of the White House, with the gleaming oversized Christmas Tree out front. It was a painful reminder that President Ellis had been saddled with this a week before the Government was due to shut down. The image shifted swiftly to the Press Briefing Room, where everyone swiftly came to their feet. President Sam Ellis was making a statement.

"The United States does not negotiate with terrorists." Ellis said first thing. "The fact that a Warlord has announced his intentions on our airwaves does not change that."

"He doesn't have to negotiate." Stark told Romanov. "Mandarin didn't make any demands. This wasn't a threat, it was an announcement."

"I know, keep watching." The Black Widow told him swiftly.

"Our Intelligence Forces have already identified this new Terrorist leader as Codename Mandarin. A minor player, with no significant allies. Until recently, he had never been heard of."

"I was elected on a platform with one sacred vow: To keep America and her interests safe. forty American Civilians, including women and children have been killed at his order, and now the Mandarin will face the swiftest and most dangerous tool of Justice at the US Military disposal."

A sudden flurry of camera flashes lit up the press conference; but not directed at the President.

"I know him, as Colonel James Rhodes." President Ellis proclaimed. "You may know him by a different name... as the Iron Patriot."

What was clearly War Machine had just strolled into the Press Briefing Room, and saluted. A hundred photographers and reporters burst into applause as the newly minted Iron Patriot came to the podium, and shook hands with the Commander in Chief.

"Are you freaking kidding me?!" Tony screamed at the television. "The Ten Rings just went live to
"Like I said." Romanov said coolly. "People like you can't work for any single nation. And you know that, because you keep going internationally to cool down hot-zones."

"Iron Patriot." Stark scorned again. "Like the Mark-II is a goddam racecar."

"Stark. Focus." Romanov told him. "There's... an Op being planned."

Stark turned to his armor. "Good. Where are we going?"

"Not you, just us." Romanov said tightly. "SHIELD only. All of us. I'm not calling to brief you, I'm calling to warn you that you won't hear from us for a while."

"I thought SHIELD only mobilized fully for an end of the world scenario." Stark mocked. Then froze. "Oh. Just realized what that means... never mind. Anything you need me for?"

"If you can find the Mandarin and mount his head on top of the Empire State Building, it would free up my afternoon." Romanov said blithely, and the line disconnected.

Stark let a breath out between his teeth. "Jarvis, call Rhodes."

Rhodes was originally the liaison between Stark Industries and the US Military. As such, he had to be based near the business' facilities. Since Stark had shut down the weapons production, Rhodes was about to be transferred elsewhere, when he suddenly became War Machine's pilot.

The rumor was, that he was about to be transferred to Washington as Iron Patriot, but for now, Andrews Air Force Base was still his primary staging ground.

Not far from Andrews, was a bar that served food; for the majority of the Air Force Officers. It was a hangout for all the hot-shot pilots. Out the front was nothing but a row of motorcycles and sports cars, as testimony to the cocky adrenaline junkies that usually ate and drank there.

Landing in a parking spot, Iron Man still drew attention, even after Tony Stark had simply stepped out of the armor, strolled inside and ordered a burger and fries. Rhodes was waiting for him, apparently eating a salad.

Tony came over to the table, and stood before him. "Before I sit down, there's one thing I need to know." He said darkly.

Rhodey held up his hands solemnly. "I had nothing to do with the name change."

"Good. Then we are still friends." Tony told him with the proper severity, and sat down, as his food was delivered.

"What are your sources telling you?" Rhodes asked quietly.

"That... I'm going to have to handle this myself; at least for now." Stark returned.

Rhodes nodded, unsurprised. "We got blackballed by SHIELD too. For what it's worth, I've been put on the Mandarin Task Force, so you got me on your side."

Tony snorted. "They mentioned you, actually. You know the only reason you're not on the Avengers? Because you're the only superhero out there on Government salary."
"Hey, good things come from having the whole Government and Armed Forces backing you."

"Like free detailing for your ride, Iron Patriot?"

Rhodes rolled his eyes. "I know." He groaned. "Apparently War Machine sounded too aggressive for an American Asset fighting internationally. They showed me the poll."

"Absolutely no sense of gravitas." Tony scorned. "Try it out, it sounds ridiculous. 'I Am Iron Patriot'. You know, just in case the actual red, white and blue was too subtle, now that Captain Freakin' America himself is back from the dead. No class, no style."

"And you're all about style." Rhodes commented under his breath.

"Ha! Rogers said the same thing." Tony quipped. "There's a video on Youtube, of Newt Gingrich holding a smartphone. He goes on for almost five minutes about how the technology can revolutionize the world, if only we knew what to call it. Seriously. Nearly five minutes trying to figure out what to name something that already had a name. Politicians, they spend half their careers just taking polls and trying to name things."

Rhodes toasted that. "Whereas superheroes actually have to do things."

"So help me do something." Stark finished. "Tell me about Mandarin."

"It's classified." Rhodes told him honestly.

Tony just munched on his fries. "Really. So they cleared you to know about all the cool stuff like the invisible flying aircraft carrier?"

Rhodes looked at him blankly. "The what?"

Tony smirked. "Talk. In the broadcast, he said that the President 'Continued to block his efforts' or something. This wasn't the first threat?"

Rhodes sighed and peeked over his shoulder. The bar was full of families, a few cameras pointed their way... nothing in recording range. "Look, there have been nine attacks. The public only knows about three. And only one of those has been tied to Mandarin. Intel says he expected the news to pick up the first two bombings on their own. They didn't, so he hacked the Networks. Nobody knows how he did that yet."

Stark looked back at his plate. "It's the Ten Rings, Rhodey. I have more experience fighting these guys than the Marines and the Air Force put together. Someone should have called me in."

Rhodes glanced over his shoulder again. "There's a reason why they didn't."

"That being?"

"Listen, Tony... Between Afghanistan, and Iron Monger? There was a three month period where you went dark. A lot of the Brass wanted you brought in for questioning. And deprogramming."

Tony almost spat out his mouthful of food. "What?"

"You were in captivity for three months, and the first thing you did, after apparently escaping all by yourself and not telling anyone how you did it, was shut down the United States' primary supply of weaponry." Rhodes plead his masters case, and not for the first time.
"They thought I'd been turned?"

"The thought occurred. And those Generals are now suggesting that maybe you left something behind when you escaped the Ten Rings."

Stark was stunned. "What? Why do they think that?"

"They can't figure out the blasts." Rhodes explained. "The heat, you see. Way too much heat at all the bomb sites; but no sign of any bomb parts. They can't figure out what kind of explosive was used. But they did find one rather... terrifying characteristic."

"That being?"

"Blast shadows on the walls left standing. Human shadows."

Stark felt hot and cold all over. He set his burger down quickly as his hands quivered.

Rhodes nodded somberly, misinterpreting the reaction. "Like Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the New York Invasion Memorial. There's only one thing that can leave that kind of signature, and that's a nuke. But there's one other device that can cause the same result without radioactive fallout."

Stark nodded coldly. "An Arc Reactor."

"Now, there's only three of them, right?" Rhodes pressed. "One in the Tower, one in your chest, and one in my suit."

Tony hesitated for half a second. To be able to fly under Jarvis' control, the suits each needed a power source. Locked in the Vault, buried in the cliff-side under the foundations of his Malibu home... There were close to fifty Arc Reactors in operation.

"Just three." Rhodes pressed. "That's it, right?"

"Of course." Tony nodded easily. But he was starting to feel a tightness in his chest, as if something was squeezing his lungs. He took a quick gulp of his icy cold drink, trying to shake the strange feeling. "They don't really think..."

"A small group think. Mostly the Cold War Generals. Guys that don't trust their friends any more than their enemies, but the President has been off the campaign trail a month, and he doesn't want to pick a fight in his own ranks this close to Christmas with a new House, new Senate, he's still dodging questions about changing his VP three weeks before the election was called, and now he has a new terror cell taking over our networks. There's only so many sides you want to fight at the same time."

"Which is why we have to pick a fight for him." Stark grated out over his sudden lack of oxygen.

Rhodes was looking at him carefully. "I talked to Pepper. She's worried about you. She said you're not sleeping well..."

Stark was notably silent. He was still not getting air. His heart was starting to speed up to compensate.

Rhodes wasn't content to talk this time. He was looking hard at his friend. "Tony? Something going on?"

Stark was about to respond, when two kids came up to the table, looking like they'd won the
lottery. The girl was ten years old, and the boy was about half that; holding a big square piece of paper. "Hello." They chorused.

"Hey there." Tony grinned.

The girl gestured at the younger one, who looked down at his picture shyly. "He wants to know if you'd be willing to sign his drawing. It's of you."

Tony smiled winningly, but he still felt like he was sucking in air through a straw. "I'd love to..." He jerked a thumb at Rhodes. "...if you tell this guy that Iron Patriot is a silly name for a superhero."

The girl's head tilted at the boy, who still looked down shyly.

The girl rolled her eyes as his shyness. "He thinks 'War Machine' was way cooler."

Tony gestured elaborately at the kid like that should be the end of the argument, and pulled out a pen. The boy put his drawing down on the table.

The drawing was stylized, with an exaggerated view of the muscle-bound superhero on the scene. It depicted the battle of New York, the exact moment that the Chitauri had been coming through the newly opened portal... And Iron Man, flying upward to fight them head on.

Then he saw the writing. Iron Man was calling for help... from the artists ten year old sister. A bit of fun at any other time, but... It wasn't of the moment he rose to fight back. It was of the moment he fell to his death...

Tony gripped his pen so tightly that it cracked, but he didn't notice. "So... uh... who do I make it out to?"

The little boy looked hopefully up at his hero and tugged on Tony's sleeve.

Even as he was signing, Stark bent over enough for the shy kid to whisper something in his ear. "What did you see through the Portal?"

It was like a sudden burst of light being thrown on things. Like the picture on the table suddenly made everything clear. The nagging sense of panic that was twisting at the outer edge of his senses suddenly went into sharp focus...

...And Stark collapsed against the table like someone had pole-axed him in the head.

"Tony!" Rhodes was shocked, and was on his feet instantly, but Tony didn't even hear him.

Tony was gasping for air, eyes bulging. The kids looked terrified; and he shoved them aside, almost knocking them over as he barrelled for the door. Everyone was looking at him as he wrenched the door open.

By the time he got to the street, he was almost crawling, but Iron Man was still waiting for him, the empty suit at attention by the curb. As Stark approached; the hardware picked up the sensors in his body, and the armor opened for him.

Stark fought to stand upright and stepped into the suit, which closed perfectly around him... and Iron Man dropped to one knee.

"Jarvis!" Tony gasped out. "Run a scan. Check the-the-the brain, and the heart!"
"I am scanning sir." Jarvis said unflappably. "The only off readings are from your repository system."

"So it wasn't put in my food, it must have been an aerosol. You have to warn Rhodey, he was close enough to..."

"Sir, there is no presence of foreign contaminants in your system. From my readings, I would surmise that you are having a very severe anxiety attack."

Stark was stunned, but not really surprised. He was pretty sure he'd been having them off and on all week. "A Panic Attack? Me?"

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She loved him, but he was making everyone crazy. And for once, she wasn't talking about Tony Stark.

Pepper had shifted from Tony's Office in the LA Facilities and taken over Obadiah's old office, after trying her hardest to talk Tony into demolishing the room on principle. He had insisted; and after a week, she found out why. Obadiah's glass walls and doors had a clear view of the workspaces. She could see everyone from her desk; and that gave her an understanding of how everything was working. It could have made her feel exposed; but she reminded herself that Obadiah had planned an assassination from this room without anyone knowing, so there must have been some measure of secrecy.

Case in point, when she had summoned Happy Hogan for a meeting, she had a clear view of everyone scurrying to avoid him. Anyone not lucky enough to escape was quickly interrogated mid-stride on all the new security protocols, of which there were many.

When he reached her office, she waved him in through the glass walls, and he entered. "Say Pepper, you d-"

"Happy." She interrupted. "If you ask to see my security pass, I'll deck you. It was this side of a year ago that you were seeing the complete picture; you know exactly who I am, so siddown."

"Yes, Ma'am." Happy quickly shut his mouth and sat down.

Pepper picked up a piece of paper from her desk. "Congratulations Happy, this is the first time a personal complaint has been registered en mass against anyone other than Tony. The custodial staff have all demanded you leave them the hell alone."

"Cleaning supplies? Kind of their job." Pepper told him. "Besides, the problem isn't so much the inventory suggestions. It's the fact that you suggested firing them all."

"Not firing them, downsizing them. Tony's figured out how to let Jarvis pilot an Iron Man suit, so a janitor-bot shouldn't be a problem..."

"Happy." Pepper told him. "I get that you want to excel at this, but all these new rules are rapidly becoming a straight-jacket. Four Operations Managers couldn't get to their own desks since you locked up the elevators and the stairwell doors to accept security passes only. There's a classfull of kids trying to figure out what they did wrong, because Iron Man doesn't want them to come visit any more..."

"Pepper." Hogan hissed under his breath. "It's the Ten Rings."
Pepper froze. "What are you talking about?"

"The Ten Rings were the ones that hacked all the airwaves. The boss saw it too, and the first thing he did was tell me to make this place a fortress. They came after him, he blew them all up, and now they're back, and they're killing people by the hundreds. I don't think it's a ridiculous idea that they might be after him, or his business, or you."

Pepper chewed her lip. "The last time someone tried to kill the boss in this building, it didn't come from the outside. The guy with the vest made of dynamite is less dangerous than the guy you invite in."

Happy nodded, conceding the point.

"And speaking of dangers being invited in, I have an appointment." Pepper brought their meeting to a close.

"Dangers?" Hogan was suddenly at full alert.

"Not like that. I have a history with this guy."

Happy just looked at her.

"None of your business." She clarified.

Happy just looked at her.

Pepper sighed. "He tried to date me once... several times. I said 'no.'"

Happy's face fell slightly. "Was I the only non-millionaire chasing you?"

"He wasn't a millionaire at the time." Pepper excused, as though that would make it better. "Trust me Happy, I have no interest in Aldrich Killia-"

Knock knock.

They both turned to the newcomer at the office door.

"Hi-i-i-ya." Pepper blurted, a little dumbstruck. "Aldrich? Is that really you?"

The man in the door was dangerously handsome. His suit was dark, his eyes were sharp, his posture flawless, his teeth perfect, his skin untouched by blemish...

Everything about him said confidence, money... and danger. He was like a renaissance painting of Lucifer himself; and he gave them both a disarming grin that somehow made him perfectly likeable. "Pepper, you look more beautiful than ever."

Pepper was still staring. "You look... Aldrich, you look great. Really, really great. What have you been doing?"

She was looking at him a little too starry-eyed and Hogan stepped forward protectively. "You should have been issued a-

"Happy." Pepper cut him off. Pepper flushed. "Oh." She suddenly remembered herself. "Sorry, this is our Chief of Security, Happy Hogan."

"Mister Hogan and I have met, after a fashion." Killian said with a long suffering smile. "His
signature is all over the new security directives that my assistants and I had to agree to on our way in." He held up his security pass. "I like a man who runs a tight ship."

Happy knew nothing about Aldrich Killian; but he knew that he would have liked him, if he hadn't hated the man instantly.

"Stand down, Happy." Pepper told him, ever the peacemaker.

Happy nodded and stepped out of the office, and went less than two feet; finding the first chair in the waiting area that he could find.

Toward the other end of the foyer was Killian's guy. He wore a Crew Cut, and an expensive suit that he clearly hated wearing. Crew Cut was rolling around in the plush chair like a bored five year old. Every magazine was rifled through in seconds, one or two of them he tore pages from; every woman that walked by he sized up, like he was deciding if they were worth standing up...

Happy knew nothing at all about Crew Cut, but didn't like him either.

Happy sent a quick look at Pepper's office, and found that she was leaning in closer, while the uncomfortably attractive man made his pitch.

"Well, after you lost track of us, we actually got a few patents in; and sort of went from there." Killian explained. "After spending years dodging the Presidential Ban on 'immoral' biotech research, the Think Tank has finally settled on something really impressive." Killian explained. "We call it: Extremis."

Pepper's face had dropped a little during the opening lines, but he hadn't noticed. Pepper bit her lip and hoped it was better than it sounded. Biotech firms had come to them before looking for legal protections over their questionable research; but Tony's stance hadn't changed: *Blacksmiths don't play God*.

Killian pulled a silver, expensive looking toy out of his pocket and tossed it on the desk like it was nothing. Pepper winced instinctively, expecting to hear something break, but instead, the device landed easily; and snapped on. An instant later, the light in the room dimmed; and her office was filled with points of light.

"Regard the human brain." Killian intoned.

Pepper was regarding all right, liking what she saw. She had been following Tony around for enough years to separate style from substance, but this was remarkably immersive an experience. *How did he turn the lights down in my office?*

"Oh wait, that's the universe, my bad." The projection shifted; drawing inward a little; with lines of feathered-light drawing from one point of illumination to the next, turning the universe into a network of connected stars. The images weren't that different. The message he was trying to convey was instantly understandable. The mind is infinite. *That's the brain.* Killian said with a predatory grin, and Pepper shivered. She'd been sucked in within seconds.

"Impressive." Pepper commented, trying to keep her expression even.

"Thanks. It's mine." Killian said with a smirk. "What you're looking at is a live feed from the portable electrode scanning my brainwaves right now." He held out a hand to her and she took it automatically, a little caught up in the spell that the show was weaving, he pulled her up close, and the ballet of light and color changed in tune, one portion of Killian's neurons gleaming excitedly.
"You see what you do to me?"

It was exactly the kind of line he would have tried ten years before; except that he hadn't seemed so... edible, back then. Pepper flushed, and was glad that the lights were low, and that Tony was a good distance away.

"Now this, is what I wanted to show you. Extremis enhances the bio-chemical potential. Potential that no human could ever reach on their own..."

The guy has his security pass, you have no reason to mistrust him, and without a halfway plausible reason, you can't toss the guy out through a plate glass window. Hogan told himself. If only you knew someone reckless enough to do it without a reason, and senior enough in the company to get away with it.

He was dialing Tony in seconds.

The Mark-7 armor that Stark had kept at the Penthouse was experimental. An experiment that worked, fortunately, or Loki would have tossed him off the mortal coil before the war even began.

The armor was standard, but the construction phase was new. The idea was, Jarvis could fly the suit to Stark; and then the suit would assemble itself around him.

It worked.

Once the breakthrough was made, replication and innovation was the easy part. Having a suit that could remain in one complete piece and let him in at will was such a successful innovation that he made it standard on all the suits. His workshop was machining out one new suit after another, day and night. And now that Jarvis could steer them without a pilot, the process was remarkably streamlined.

Stark had developed modular armor before. Having the suit assembled in pieces made it easier to repair damaged sections. He'd developed micro-repulsors before, for use in the small cluster-munitions. Making a suit that could assemble itself in mid-air seemed like an easy step.

It wasn't. Weeks passed, and Stark's self-assembling armor was becoming dangerous. The full assembled armor would open for him to simply step into it... And then it would snap shut way too early. Stark had very nearly been cut in half more than once.

Stark had rewritten Jarvis over and over, trying to perfect the guidance system for the micro-repulsor jets. The house AI could fly the suit to any location by remote now. In fact, he could almost certainly fly and command them all at once. But for some reason, directing them to the wearer just wasn't working by remote control.

It was election night when Stark finally made the breakthrough. The Mark 7 armor had a homing device. Two wristbands to be used as a reference point for the armor to home in on.

But a self-constructing suit, meant to come in several pieces and assemble itself at the point of the wearer needed reference points too. Optical line of sight and laser guidance was proving to be... unpleasant.

Stark realized quickly that the upgrade didn't have to be done to the armor... It had to be done to him. He needed to become Iron Man, inside and out.
Creating a miniature homing beacon that his body wouldn't reject was becoming easier. He'd had to face the rejection problem with the Arc Reactor. Stark Industries had actually developed two new forms of plastic and metal specifically for transplants. Nobody knew that Stark himself had been the first test subject.

After developing something that his armor could home in on, he needed a lot of them. If his armor was going to fly out of his home and come to him in pieces, then they all needed to be on target. If one of them was an inch off to the left...

So Stark had begun injecting the homing devices into his body. A neat row down each side of each limb, plus a dozen more across his torso and abdomen. One or two injected a little lower than he was comfortable with. Each injection point was left raw and bleeding for a while.

Pepper was gonna be pissed about that.

The first experiment was a qualified success. The armor came to him in segments as required... but powered by repulsors, they flew at him like missiles; and Tony was suddenly trying to dodge his own armor as it charged him from every direction.

At first, it was fine. If the empty gauntlets had been off y half an inch, they would have broken every bone in Tony's hands, but they glided in smooth as silk; the seals had tightened on destination, and the Armor panels had slid into place up his arms...

And then suddenly it was like trying to catch a fast-ball with his crotch. Then another with his foot, then another with his head, then another with his stomach...

Tony never admitted to fear under any circumstances; but he had to concede that this was perhaps not his best idea ever.

One piece came in way too fast and slammed him square in the backside, with enough force to send the half-assembled Iron Man flying across his own workshop.

"Ow." Tony whined without getting up.

"It is indeed a privilege to watch your mind work, sir." Jarvis drawled. "I have Mister Hogan on Line one."

Stark rolled to his knees as the armor fell off him lifelessly. "Put him through."

"Hey, boss. I think your territory is being invaded."

"The Offices or the factories?"

"Your girlfriend."

Tony shifted the call to his Portable Transparency, giving him a video conference with his new Head of Security. "Whaat?"

"She's in a meeting right now with some guy called Aldrich Killian; and he putting so many moves on her, he might as well have brought a chessboard."

"Ooh, you've been working on your quips." Stark teased, relaxing. "Happy, don't stress about it."

"Hey boss, she left me for you. I'm happy for you both, but you start taking this girl for granted, and I'm gonna kill you on principle, because she's the best thing that'll ever happen to you."
Don't I know it. "Happy, I put so many moves on her; the same day she became my PA, I should have been arrested. She knows how to handle lecherous guys like me."

"Yeah, well... Maybe. I'd swear this guy looks familiar, though." Happy said, his tone going a little distant as he thought it over. "Aldrich Killian. That name mean anything to you?"

"Not a thing." Stark said, heading down a level. His Vault was dug clear into the cliff-side, with twenty feet of steel and rock around it. The level above that was the workshop. There was a five foot space in between, full of Stark's wine collection, and a comfortable recliner. Pepper called it his 'Man-Cave' and he slept there when he could be bothered to leave the workshop, even by ten feet.

"Pepper said he tried to date her once." Happy offered. "Often. She said she turned him down a lot."

"Still nothing." Tony sat up straighter in his chair. "But fill me in."

"Real attractive guy, head of AIM, according to her schedule."

"AIM?" Tony repeated. "Advanced Something Mechanics. That's the outfit that got the promotional photos for Wa... Iron Patriot." He shook his head. "Does that name sound as stupid to you as it does to me?"

"Yessir." Hogan said promptly. "But we're talking about this right now. Anyway, I figured, we've known Pepper the entire time she's been with the company right? So why don't we know about this guy?"

"Probably because we don't care." Tony guessed.

"No, that's why you don't remember him. But you know how I am with faces, so I did a search on his company background? Turns out we actually met the guy. A Tech-Conference somewhere, Millennium midnight?"

Tony almost dropped the tool in his hand. "Switzerland. That was the night I met Yinsen."

"Who?"

"Never mind. Millennium Midnight." Tony shook his head. "Don't remember him."

"Of course not, he's not a blonde with a big rack." Happy snorted. "He's showing her his brain, and she likes it."

Tony tried to think. "It was almost fifteen years ago, and I was drunk. I remember the girl I hooked up with... I seem to recall she was working on a project in her room... I remember the console overloaded and you decided it was a bomb and jumped on top of me, despite the fact I was in bed with a rather attractive-."

"You realize we've gone nearly ten years without that coming up?" Happy growled.

"Good thing it was me, or the mood would have been good and dead." Stark quipped. "All right, Aldrich Killian. It's a name you'd think anyone would remember... Oh, right. The stooped, balding guy, buck-teeth, real big glasses. I remember a business card being pushed at me on an elevator..."

"You told him to meet you on the roof in ten minutes." Happy reminded him. "Somehow, I think you stood him up."
"This is the guy you're worried about?"

"Hell no, he's done some kind of miracle makeover and... Wait, wait..." Hogan stopped him, looking away from the screen intently. "Oh hell. They're laughing."

"They're... laughing?" Tony breathed, horrified. "Are you sure they're not just making out?"

"No." Hogan sounded crushed. "No, he's actually making her laugh."

Stricken, Tony disconnected the call.

The light show was over, and Killian was making his case for Pepper to involve the company. "Imagine getting into this Pepper? No more gadgets, no more smartphones, you could actually put it all in your head. We're talking about hacking the human hard drive..."

Pepper's smile was frozen, and he saw that it was polite and artificial.

Killian grinned benignly at her. "You're not buying it, are you?"

Pepper gave him an apologetic look. "This is exactly the kind of thing that the boss would love to sink his teeth into, exactly the sort of thing we hope will succeed... but it's also the sort of thing that can be all too easily weaponized."

"Pepper, a kitchen knife can be weaponized. You keep shying away from the future, and you get left behind. no guts, no glory."

"I'm sorry Aldrich, but after Whiplash, and The New York Invasion, and a hundred other things, we're trying like mad to rebrand ourselves right now, and we don't need to start another arms race. Tony would."

"Tony." Killian managed to draw the name out. "Hm. When I first heard the news about you two, I didn't buy it. I thought a girl like you had way too much class."

It was the first comment that alluded to their past association, and the first personal attack against anyone.

"I invited 'Tony' to join AIM thirteen years ago. He turned me down. Stark isn't the golden boy any more. There's a dozen teams jockeying for position, and we're going to win. Pepper, time will come when you need us as badly as we needed you thirteen years ago when Tony left me standing on a rooftop all night. We should leave ego out of this, don't you think?"

Pepper no longer found him so attractive, and she put her foot down. "The answer is no, Aldrich."

"Once again." Killian seemed barely surprised. "Well, I tried. I can't say I'm not disappointed. But, such is life." They both rose to their feet. He put a light kiss on her cheek; which set off sparks in her head for a second, and he drew away. "We'll see each other again, Potts."

As he left the office, Killian didn't notice Happy Hogan following along. Happy had seen that Killian and Crew Cut were taking separate vehicles.

Something he'd learned since the boss had become a superhero: You never follow The Man, you follow the man that The Man counts on. Killian was a billionaire, the face of the company. He'd be too smart to tie himself to anything shady. He's have someone for that.
How do you know he's up to something shady? He asked himself. Just because he clearly wanted Pepper to leave with him?

Crew Cut got into a black 4x4, and Hogan took a quick snap of the plates, telling his conscience to shut up.

Pepper had been feeling pretty good about moving in with Tony, but had to admit a certain new understanding of his hours. SI had branches all over the world, and more than once, Pepper had spent the night at the office, having to take a 4am call from somewhere else on the globe. The CEO maintained a private suite there that would rival a lot of hotel rooms.

After a few of these nights, she was always a little nervous when she got home. She had often made the comment that her original job description was to babysit the billionaire... And like a guardian that had been away from a toddler too long, she was a little nervous to see what would be left of the house.

Pepper pulled into the driveway of the Malibu house, and hit the speed dial on her phone as her jaw dropped.

"Hello?"

"Happy, you're fired." Pepper told him by way of greeting.

Happy didn't even blink. "Any particular reason?"

"Because you're almost certainly the only person who could have called Tony and told him about Killian being there today."

Happy was silent a moment. "What makes you think he knows?"

Pepper erupted. "**There's a thirty foot tall stuffed rabbit in the driveway, with my name sewn into it.**"

"The boss likes to make big gestures." Happy excused. "And he has been taking you for granted a little, since you moved in."

"A point that you no doubt made clear when you must have called him this afternoon." Pepper growled, and disconnected.

She stped out of the car and stepped past the huge stuffed animal. It was big and cuddly looking, but big enough to use as a jumping castle. There was a large red velvet heart sewn into his welcoming hands, with the words "**I Wuv You, Pepper**" embossed in gold.

"This is not what 'wuv' is about, Tony." She breathed, and head inside. "Hello Honey, I'm home!"

And just to add the icing on the cake of abnormal, Iron Man was sitting cross-legged on the loveseat, waving as she came in.

Pepper took it in stride. "Darling, what did I tell you about wearing that same outfit all the time? People will talk."

"What? It's new." Tony's voice came through, with the standard digital adjustments. "It's a brand new outfit, and you didn't even notice, did you?"
Pepper smiled. *This* was what they were about, beyond all the oversized toys. "I notice. What is that? Mark-15?"

Iron Man shifted the gauntlet a little inward so that she wouldn't see the Mark 45 logo printed on the side of his wrist. "Yeah, something like that."

"So, did you like your Christmas present?"

"It'll be difficult to top." Pepper commented; kicking off her heels. "And it's not Christmas yet."

"There are Twelve Days of Christmas, or so the carols always say." Iron Man answered her, sounding disappointed. "You don't like it."

"I love the thought behind it. Even if that thought was: hand's off world." Pepper teased him. "And we're in luck, because I've been having trouble figuring out what to get you; and now I know. My Christmas present to you will be a team of renovators to take that wall out and get my present in the door."

Iron Man began massaging her shoulders. "Ohh, lot of tension in these shoulders. And mine are made of a diamond-carbon-titanium alloy, so coming from me, that's bad. Hard day at the office?"

He was teasing her back, and she knew they were going to be okay. She pulled away from the cold fingers and turned to face him. "Open up the faceplate and welcome me home properly."

Iron Man's face didn't change. "You used to kiss the mask." He knocked on his own head and it gave a hollow sounding clang.

"Yes, but now I have options." Pepper drawled. "Let me run down to the garage and get a can opener."

She padded down the stairs, shrugging her jacket off, with Iron Man following her.

When she reached the garage, her jaw dropped; as she saw Tony Stark was there. She looked over her shoulder, just to make sure, and Iron Man was indeed coming down the stairs behind her.

Tony shrugged, like it was no big deal, and the Iron Man Suit matched the movements.

"A new low." Pepper's teasing tone dropped. "You've got 'The Other Woman' over here pretending to be you when I come home? Just out of curiosity, if I'd gone *upstairs*, instead of downstairs, how far would your alter-ego have taken it before you admitted what was going on?"

Tony hesitated. "There's a really good answer to that... and I will think of it... any second now."

Dummy chose that moment to roll over with a tray of food. A sandwich and a juice cup. The sandwich was half eaten, and Dummy waved it under her nose. "Oh my god, and you even ate without me. I thought we had rules about that? No Iron underwear in the house, and we wait for each other on date night. And don't pretend you got tired of waiting; because your brain isn't wired for that."

She was getting annoyed; and Tony felt his own frustration showing through. "Well what can I say? I heard that you might have made other plans for dinner and drinks with Aldrich Killian." Iron Man turned to look at her, somehow glaring at her accusingly.

"Aldrich. Killian." Pepper repeated, going very still. "Happy *did* call you, didn't he?" She snarled.
"Are you checking up on me now, or is he just showing initiative?"

"He was worried about you." Tony said, as though that made it all better. Idiot.

She glared savagely. "There's a thirty foot plushie in the driveway that says it's less him and more you." She snapped; turning on her heel. Iron Man was in her way, and quickly stepped aside, coming around to stand behind Stark. "I'm going to bed." Pepper said tightly, and headed upstairs.

"Wait!" Tony called after her, and both he and Iron Man held out a hand beseechingly. "Pepper, wait. You're right!"

Pepper sighed, and waited, letting him get his thoughts in an order that she could keep up with.

Tony sighed, seeming to shrink. "The big gifts and huge expensive gestures have never worked on you. You're just too... real. I'm sorry about that. I've... I'm a mess, Pepper. I'm a pipin' hot mess. And you know that. I mean... you're the only one that knows that."

This had gone three steps past *mea culpa*, and Pepper waited. This had been building for months.

"I told you it wasn't fun any more; but I can't stop." He waved at the Iron Man beside him, still looking back and forth between them, moving naturally as a real person. "I've got more armors than I'll ever wear... I don't even need to wear them to make them work any more; but I... I can't stop." He looked up helplessly at her. "Nothings been the same since New York. *Afghanistan* wasn't like this. New York is long over, and I can't seem to get past it. I've fought with gods and demons, and... what am I? I'm a guy in a can, and the warranty on my *brain* just expired."

He held out a hand again, and she stepped down to hold his hand in hers. The idea of not holding him in that moment never occurred to her. She loved him too much to let him go without some measure of comfort, and she was under no illusions. She knew she was holding him together with every casual touch, keeping the mania back.

And he knew it too. "I'm a little bit out of control, Pepper. And if you hadn't moved in, I would have cracked up a long time ago. Which is great. I love you. I'm... I don't know what I could have possibly done in my life to deserve being *this* lucky. But, Pep... I can't sleep. I haven't slept in six months. And when I can't sleep, I come down here and make things that are supposed to make me indestructible."

*I know*. She thought to herself, burying the thought, letting him speak.

"So yes, I went a little crazier than usual today." He almost begged. "But there is a threat out there. Mandarin made his threat to the President, to the country, but... we both know that sooner or later, The Ten Rings are going to come for the final round. And now that I can be bulletproof at will... They can still go right for the heart. It's not armored. It's yours. I have to protect the one thing I absolutely can't live without. And that's you."

Pepper hadn't moved an inch, hadn't changed her expression the entire time he'd poured his broken heart out to her. But once he'd finally run out of words, she came forward; and slid her hands up his arms to his shoulders. She did not kiss him, but she softly slid the interface away. Iron Man went still behind them, just a machine again, and she smiled a little, as she was left with her Tony. He bent forward, and she hugged him tightly to her chest, letting them both breathe. He held her close, listening to her heart beating slowly; and his brain slowed down at last.

Pepper broke the clinch, and spoke soft and sweet. "I'm going to take a shower; and go to bed
Tony nodded; not meeting her eyes. "Okay. That's good."

"I agree." Pepper turned and padded halfway up the stairs, before looking back at him. "Even better if you take the hint and come join me?"

"Oh." Tony nodded quickly, as though it had only just occurred to him. "Better. I agree."

Pepper pointed at Iron Man, standing still as a statue now, without the Interface. "'The Other Woman' is not invited."

Tony smiled; just a little at her often used nickname for the suit, and fell into step behind the woman he loved.

Stane was laughing at him. His enormous Iron Monger had a terrified Pepper, holding her up eight feet off the ground. It's fist was big enough to make her look like a helpless doll against him.

"Help!" Pepper shouted.

"You thought you had me beat, huh Tony?!" Stane laughed.

Tony summoned his armor; painting targets all over the place.

"Tony?" Pepper's voice came from some distant place. "Tony, wake up! You're having a nightmare!"

"How Ironic, Tony!" Stane shouted over. "You built that armor to make yourself invulnerable; and you forgot the biggest weakness of them all!" He hefted Pepper a little higher; making it clear what he meant.

Iron Man's HUD painted a target over Pepper's face. **Priority Target.**

"WHAT?" Tony screamed. "Jarvis, what the hell are you doing?!"

"Protecting you, sir." Jarvis said clinically.

All Tony could see was Pepper's face, with the cross-hairs aiming right between her eyes. **Uni-Beam Activated.**

Pepper screamed.

Pepper was screaming.

Tony woke up thrashing; trying to tear apart enemies and monsters that weren't there.

Tony fought for coherence. His eyes were caked together by sleep; and Pepper was screaming; and it was dark, and Pepper was screaming and Iron Man was attacking Pepper!

Iron Man was attacking Pepper!

Tony rolled off the bed before he woke up. "Power Down!" He shouted at the MK 45. "Stand DOWN!"
The Armor obeyed and promptly collapsed into pieces across the bedroom.

Pepper was gulping air, hand to her throat. Tony reached for her and she darted away, afraid to touch him with the armor still in the room.

"Well, that's... Not meant to happen." Tony tried for a quip and came up blank. "Sorry, that's... The Interface follows brainwaves, and of course... I didn't expect the subconscious waves to be... I'll fix it."

Pepper got out of bed. "I'm just... going to sleep in the guest room tonight."

Tony had that panicked look again, the same one he had when he was dying from Paladium poisoning, like he was madly trying to break a bad losing streak. "Pepper, really, it's okay now... Could we just... go back to...I'll fix it, I promise!"

"Tony..." Pepper broke it to him gently. "It's not the first time I've been afraid to fall asleep next to you."

Silence.

"...what?" Tony choked.

Pepper just looked at him. "You know exactly what I'm talking about. I've woken up in a stranglehold more than once the last few weeks. From you... I can handle it. Even enjoy it on occasion. But if you've invited the 'other woman' to join us..." She waved at the disassembled armor scattered across the floor. "I can't handle Iron Man squeezing the life outta me too."

Tony was trembling, and she felt so... sorry for him. She reached out and gave him a long lingering kiss. "I won't go far." She promised.

And then she went, leaving Tony collapsed over the edge of an empty bed. Just him, alone, with his armor.

Tony Stark had Five Nightmares. The first was that his many flaws would drive away everyone and everything he had... until he hit bottom.
The Second Nightmare

Chapter Notes

Okay folks, this is where I start adding some of my own stuff in, and officially go AU from The MCU. Bearing in mind that when I wrote it, it wasn't canon-divergent yet.

Tony Stark had Five Nightmares. The first was that his recent past would escalate, to the point where he would get so wrapped up in Iron Man that Pepper would get fed up with him and leave, along with everything else he had. His First Nightmare was that he would go too far.

His Second Nightmare was that he wouldn't go far enough. That even Iron Man would not be enough to protect the people he cared about.

Happy had followed Killian's guy for half the night, and was starting to wonder if his instincts were wrong. He'd placed a call to the Office and got the guy's name. Eric Saven.

The longer they drove, the more discouraged Happy got about the whole hunt. Eventually though, Saven had left his black SUV, and proceeded through Hollywood on foot. Happy had followed, leaving his car behind. He wondered briefly if the man he was tracking had spotted him.

Saven had kept walking until he'd reached a bench near a hotdog stand outside of Mann's Chinese Theatre. He sat down, just relaxing... And the instant he did so, someone else came running over to join him.

Saven rolled his eyes at the newcomer, and produced a small metal case from his jacket. He put it on the bench between them; not looking at it, or at the eager man beside him.

Happy had chauffeured Tony Stark through too many parties for too many years. More than a few of those parties had dealt with illegal substances. There was no way he didn't recognize what was going on.

Ah, so... Aldrich Killian the billionaire is buddies with a drug dealer, huh?

Happy snapped a photo, and tried to blend in. The stocky ex-boxer in a tailored suit was going to stand out in most circumstances, and a location like this, filled with faux-pagodas and rickshaws only served to make him more obvious. Happy took up position at a rickshaw styled table that sold sunglasses in various styles, and kept watching the proceedings over his shoulder in the mirror.

The Buyer was a nervous, twitching wreck. He grabbed at the small case like a man possessed; and Saven looked vaguely disgusted. Happy took careful notes on his phone, all of which was uploading in real time to the Stark Industries Servers.

The Buyer was grasping the sleeve of Killian’s man with desperate need. The Dealer brushed him off and spoke quietly, and quickly.

There was a momentary red glow from the Buyer, and Happy blinked, unsure of what he’d just seen. For a second, it looked like a dark red light was playing over his skin, but there was no sign of where it came from...
The Buyer put his purchase in his mouth instantly. Happy gave him only a passing glance, more focused on Eric Saven. But even with his focus elsewhere, he started listing illicit substances in his head. *It wasn't a pill. It was too secretive for a pot-brownie. Killian's too high-brow for cheap and easy drugs... Designer drug? Killian's a genetic designer...*

Happy kept pace with his original target. Saven was standing in the middle of the square, casually unbuttoning the top three buttons of his white dress shirt. He turned around and smiled a cold, cruel smile...

...and he was staring straight at Happy Hogan.

Happy knew he wasn't as smart as Tony Stark. Stark usually carried nine topics in his head at a time. But even so, in the same moment, three things dawned on Hogan at the same time.

The first thought, as he saw that predatory smirk, was that Eric Saven must have known he was being followed.

The second thought, which struck him just as he heard the people around him start to scream, was that this must have been a trap.

Feeling like he was moving in slow motion, Happy spun to follow the sound of the screaming. Those that weren't running already were looking back at the buyer. The man was glowing. Not like he was excited or energized; but as though he was on fire... Except Happy couldn't see any flame.

The Buyer was doubled over, and screaming hysterically, as though his body was exploding, inch by inch, as he wrapped his arms around his middle; trying to keep an unholy eruption inside him somehow.

The Buyer threw back his head and roared, as his eyes seemed to shine outward with a horrific inner blaze. Unholy yellow light seemed to pour from his eyes, his mouth... The Buyers skin cracked and opened like lava was breaking through as the people around him shrieked at the impossible, unnatural sight...

The third thought that Happy came to, as he was faced with a sudden wall of unbearable heat, was that Saven hadn't even tried to run, and he was still standing there, laughing...

The heat was nothing compared to the explosion, and Happy felt his body get ripped apart as the Buyer himself exploded with enough force to swallow the entire plaza and everyone in it.

Pepper had only lost her legendary knack for taking things in her stride a total of five times. All of them because of Tony Stark. The first was when Tony had been abducted in Afghanistan.

The second time was two days after he got back, when he needed her to replace the Arc Reactor in his chest. She hadn't said anything given the circumstances, but she had never played a game of 'Operation' in her life.

The third time was several weeks later, when she had almost kissed him, and was struck by the sudden and irrefutable realization that she was crazy in love with her boss, and had been for a while.

The fourth time was two days after that; presented with the sight of bullet-holes in a half-worn Iron Man suit. Something that nobody else in the world had known about at the time.

The fifth time was months afterward, when Stark had suddenly named her CEO.
At all points in between, Pepper had relied on Happy Hogan. Even when the boss was missing, and even when she'd gotten word that he was coming home alive and well. Happy had been her rock, whenever she needed protection from Hurricane Stark. A dynamic that hadn't changed even after she had broken his heart.

Pepper didn't know where Happy had summoned that kind of pure goodness, but she knew the world needed more people like Happy Hogan.

Today she felt like she'd been hit with a freight train. And the one thing she wanted to do was talk to Happy.

Tony came downstairs, rubbing his head with a groan. "Hey. Slept through my alarm." He said when he saw her on the loveseat with her feet curled up under her. "I'm sorry again about last night. I'm going to fix it, I promise." He got close enough to notice her expression. "What's wrong? Is it about last-"

"There's been an attack." Pepper choked out, tears streaming down her face.

Stark was on alert instantly. "The Military? The Offices?"

Pepper said nothing.


"Mann's Chinese Theatre." Pepper broke down sobbing again.

"Hollywood Boulevard?" Tony blurted in disbelief and came over to hold her. She buried her face against the edge of his Arc Reactor and held on tight. "Why? Are you sure it wasn't just an accident? A pipe burst, or something?"

At this moment she envied him completely. Because he didn't know, and she did. And she knew that the moment she told him, he'd be on another Crusade.

"Tony." Pepper slid her hands up his chest to press her fingertips over his mouth, silencing him. "Tony... Happy was there."

Tony froze like a statue. "What?"

Pepper sniffed. "Happy was caught in the blast. I don't know what he was doing there, but the-"

"No." Tony shook his head. "Nono. I told him to stay at the Office and to cover things there." He whipped out his phone and hit the speed-dial. "I told him! H-he's at the office!"

The number you have dialed is out of service.

"Tony..." Pepper said softly.

"Happy's my friend, Pepper. He's at the Office!" Tony insisted and tried the phone again.

The number you have dialed is out of service.

Long silence. Pepper slid a hand down his arm and clasped the phone; taking it from him gently.

Tony chewed his lip a moment. "Are you okay?"

She nodded automatically, before shaking her head 'no', with a sigh.
He held her tight. "I love you."

"Love you." She said into his neck.

Tony broke the hug. "Which hospital is he in?"

Pepper's face crumpled. "He's not in a hospital, Tony."

Tony looked confused for the first time in a long time. "What? Why not?"

Pepper sniffed. "Tony... Happy's dead."

The Broadcast opened with the Banner of the Ten Rings. This time it was a straight black icon over a bright red background. It actually hurt to look at.

Another rapid fire series of intimidating images, everything from news clips to candid shots of death and destruction...

And then the picture promptly settled on The Man himself. The Warlord slammed his fist down on a Fortune Cookie. There were four more in the row.

"True Story about Fortune Cookies." The unspeakably powerful voice began. "You think they are Chinese. You call them Chinese..."

Slam. Another cookie crushed under The Mandarin's fist.

"The Fortune Cookie is, in fact, an American Invention." The Mandarin pronounced.

Slam. Another cookie crushed.

"Which is why they are... hollow; filled with empty promises about the future... and leave a bad taste in the mouth." The Mandarin's hypnotic eyes bored into the camera, a glare so intense that it made an entire nation full of viewers look away first.

Slam. The fist came down again.

"Last Night, I destroyed another cheap American knockoff of an older and wiser culture. In this case, the Chinese Theatre of Hollywood Boulevard. I did that."

Another quick series of images. Some of them were of Mandarin himself shooting at a portrait of President Ellis. Another in the same instant of a dozen children running forward to embrace him.

"Mister President, I know this must be getting frustrating." The Mandarin said politely into the camera. "But don't worry, my work as your teacher, and this season of Terror, is all coming to an end." He smirked. "Graduation Day."

The screen flashed with one image of terrible fire, and then another, and then another...

Until finally; there was nothing but the Banner of the Ten Rings.

Still no demands. Tony thought aloud. This guy has to know that the more often he makes these little announcements, the more likely he's going to be caught... He doesn't need press; the whole country is talking about him...
Pepper had left to go see the body... and Tony had stayed behind, setting up the holo-projectors in his garage to work the investigation. "All right." He said aloud. "Let's apply a little intelligence to this. Rhodie said that there were nine attacks, now ten; but the public only knew about three, now four. What if there's more than that?" He chewed his lip. "Put up the Arc Sensor Net."

The map of the world was overlaid instantly with all different lines of readings. Every lightning bolt that struck the earth was recorded. "Now, what did our sensor net pick up from the Hollywood blast?"

Jarvis provided all the readings. The energy output was off the charts, at least, all the civilian and military charts. The only yardstick that lets us measure this at all... and so were the temperature readings.

"There!" Tony pointed. "That's why we didn't pick it up as an Arc Reactor. The temperature is way too high. That's how they hid it." Tony growled under his breath. "How the hell are they transporting anything that hot? Jarvis, has there been any response to our calls?"

"Nobody from SHIELD has returned our repeated requests for background, sir." Jarvis reported coolly. "I have three different levels of contact information for Agents Romanov and Barton; without either one of them responding. Nor has Director Fury."

"What the hell are they up to?" Tony growled. Tears were forming in the corners of his eyes again, and he wiped at them furiously. What? I wasn't even thinking about him then!

Tony turned away from his television, back to the display. "All right, Jarvis. Once more from the top."

Colonel Rhodes as The Iron Patriot had been put in charge of hunting down Mandarin, and had been given broad discretionary powers. Under that authority, he'd given Tony all the information they had about the bombings.

Tony had laid out all the information on a holographic map of the world.


The holographic display was filled with information. Everything from temperature readings, weather patterns, blast patterns, and pictures. Many pictures. In a totally connected world, everyone had eyes on disasters. "Jarvis." Stark reported. "These pictures are all before and after the blast. Do we have any footage of the blast itself?"

"Negative, sir." Jarvis reported.


"Regrettably, there were no satellites covering the area at the time of the blast. Local devices all seem to have been wiped clean by the explosion."

Tony paused. "All of them?"

"Unlikely, I'll admit, but no footage has been submitted from any source, civilian or military that involves the explosion."

Tony kept going, threading through the pictures, one after another, after another.

One image made him pause. It was a photo of the blast site. One of the walls left standing had
shadows on it. Human shadows. Like Hiroshima. Like New York...

Tony suddenly realized he was about to throw up, and bent double, trying to stop himself from puking all over himself.

*God! Why is this happening to me?* Tony raged at himself, gasping for air again.

"Sir, I am directing the Mark 47 helmet and faceplate to you. Without the feeds from the filtration unit, it'll slow your breathing."

Tony was gasping, gulping air, clutching at his chest, when something hurtled toward his face like a lightning bolt, and Tony screeched as his vision suddenly went blank. *Oh, no, hell no, don't let me puke in the mask...*  

But Jarvis was right, and the air was thin without the rest of his suit... It was like breathing into a paper bag. No matter how Tony clawed at the mask over his face, he couldn't quite make it come off... and eventually Tony's breathing slowed.

*About a hundred reporters are waiting for my statement.* He thought to himself. *Wonder what they'd pay for a shot of me facedown on my garage floor, gasping for air through a steel mask over my head?*

"I have Colonel Rhodes on the line for you, sir." Jarvis reported unflappably.

"Put him through." Tony groaned, sitting up. He was sitting on the floor, in the middle of the large holo-projection, surrounded by points of destruction.

"Tony." Rhodes said sympathetically. "I'm with Pepper at the Morgue. I'm so sorry."

"You haven't heard the worst of it." Tony said. "I got the information you sent? You were right. There's only one thing that puts out that kind of power. It is an Arc Power Reactor. I did this." His voice dropped to a whisper. "I did this. I made the weapon. I killed him. It's happening all over again!"

Silence.

"Tony." Rhodes said finally. "Why aren't you here?"

"There's nothing more I can do for Happy." Tony said roughly.

Rhodes was silent a moment. "I'm not even going to respond to that." He said finally. "Why aren't you here with Pepper?"

Tony shivered. "I'm to blame, Rhodey. I... I can't face him." Tony confessed. "Even if he's dead, I can't go there and see him."

Rhodes' voice hardened. "Tony. Listen to me. She needs you."

Those three words alone were enough to make Tony stand up straight. "I'm... on the way."

The LAPD was kind enough to have the door guarded when Tony arrived. Rhodes met him in the lobby, even as the press screamed for them both.

"How is she?" Tony asked right off.
"Not that good." Rhodes reported. "She's one of the strongest women I know, partner... But while you were in captivity, she was pretty out of it."

"And Happy kept her together." Tony nodded, shamed. "He was still in love with her, Rhodey. She knew it too. He helped her move in with me, and he was..."

"I know." Rhodes sighed.

They were getting close to the exam room, and Tony put a hand up. "Before we go in there... You're running the hunt for The Mandarin. There's something you should know. Before the New York Invasion... We tracked Loki through a device he had stolen from SHIELD. It emitted a low level radiation field. We tracked it using a scanner that covered most of the planet... After we shut Loki down, I asked Fury to keep that sensor net up; to scan for Arc Fields."

Rhodes grew a few inches taller. "What did you find?"

"Nothing." Tony confessed. "The only Arc Reactors I'm picking up are the ones I already knew about."

"Then the bombings aren't being caused by Stark Tech." Rhodes looked relieved.

"Not so sure. The energy readings from the blast are off the charts. The only chart that can measure it is the one I created to keep track of Arc Reactor outputs. There is literally, nothing else that creates that much juice."

Rhodes scowled. "So is it your tech, or not?"

Tony didn't flinch. "We're about to find out."

He tried to enter the room, and Rhodes stopped him. "Tony. One more thing. Happy is... not pretty. In fact, you might have trouble recognizing him."

Stark steeled himself, and went inside.

Tony had been expecting the bodies... But not so many of them. There were more than twenty of them lined up. They lined the walls of the room, each covered in a sheet. The ninth body in the row had a familiar redhead standing over it, head bent in grief.

Tony made a beeline for Pepper. Twenty bodies. Happy is just another statistic now. He deserved better than that. Tony thought bleakly to himself, as Pepper noticed him coming, and opened her arms to him. He had no trouble meeting her hug with his own, and they held on tight.

Tony looked over her shoulder, down at the table; and shuddered. Rhodes wasn't wrong about the state of the body. "God, Happy." Tony let out a sigh.

Tony turned away from the body of his friend, and looked across the room. Over twenty bodies.

Setting his jaw, Tony went over to the worktable and got a pair of latex gloves.

"What are you doing?" Pepper asked.

Twenty bodies. Eight of them were wearing wristwatches. Three of them were intact. None of them were ticking.

Rhodes came over. "What are you looking for?"
Tony cast about to find something, finally settling on Pepper's guest pass. He unpinned it from her jacket, and brought it over to the nearest victim's watch. The two metal pieces brushed against each other... And stuck together.

Tony nearly fell to his knees. "God forgive me."

Pepper came over, curious. "What is it?"

Rhodes understood. "When Tony and I took down Whiplash? We did it by creating a shockwave. Two repulsor blasts, created by high output electromagnetism. The victims remains have been... magnetized."

"It's why there's no visual records of any of the blasts." Tony whispered. "The magnetic force would have wiped everything electronic in the blast range. An EMP effect. Like you'd get from a nuke... Or an Arc Reactor."

"But you said you hadn't detected any." Rhodes said quickly. "What does this mean? Problems with your sensor net?"

"I checked it before I came here." Tony shook his head. "There are only two options. Either The Mandarin has developed a way to hide an Arc Signature from me, which is damn scary, since I invented it... Or he's got something newer and more dangerous than an Arc Reactor." Tony shook his head. "I don't which is worse, because either I'm responsible for these people getting blown up, including Happy... Or Iron Man just became an antique. As out of date as a Dinosaur."

Rhodes shivered. "I don't know which possibility scares me more."

Tony shook his head. "It's such a stupid waste. What was he even doing there?" He blinked. "In fact, what was he doing there? Of all the random places for him to go, he winds up at the heart of the blast?"

"You think he was targeted?" Rhodes blinked.

"He's my friend. He's my driver, he was my bodyguard for a lot of years... He's been at my side as much as Pepper for a lot of public functions. He's a very visible member of the company. If The Mandarin was targeting..."

Pepper already had her phone out. "I got three messages from him last night. First one was four hours before the blast. He was reminding me to check the new security updates for the Night Shift."

"He did go a little overboard, didn't he?"

"I got a memo saying Iron Patriot had to be scrubbed down before entering any SI facility." Rhodes snorted.

Pepper was scrolling. "Second message from him, asking me to Tivo Downton Abbey for him, because he... wasn't at home."

"His favorite show. He loved the Sybil-Branson storyline." Tony explained to Rhodes. "A wealthy socialite falls in love with the penniless family driver and they agree to run away together since their love was worth more than money."

Pepper winced. "Wonder what appealed to him about that?" She quipped sarcastically, carefully not looking at her billionaire boyfriend. "Third message... is from the office. It says he uploaded a
bunch of images and footage to the SI servers, CC'd to me. It was marked as important." She
looked at Tony. "It was uploaded at the same time as the blast."

"And it was on the server, which is at the Office, which means it couldn't get wiped by the blast." Stark was suddenly filled with a dangerous energy. "Good man, Happy Hogan. Pepper, route the upload to Jarvis, right now!"

Stark was already halfway out the door. "Tony?" Rhodes called after him. "Tony, wait! Let the LAPD bring the car around to the rear-"

But Stark was gone.

The Press all but attacked Stark as he emerged from the building. Stark was doing a slow boil as they hollered questions.

"Mister Stark! Your friend-"

"Mister Stark, Hogan's death-"

"Mister Stark, any comment on your friend's-"

It was quietly sickening that Happy Hogan's obituary would start and end with the words 'Tony Stark's Friend and Employee.' A small, hot bubble of pure hatred popped somewhere in Stark's brain. *Is this what's it's like to be The Hulk?*

He was breathing through a straw again, feeling his head and chest in a vise. But this wasn't a panic attack. This wasn't guilt over inventing the damned reactors...

Guilt was strong. Grief was stronger. Rage was Pure Iron.

*Don't bite. He told himself. Don't prejudice the investigation; don't make this about you, don't elevate this and turn it into a personal showdown with Mandarin on international television. That's not what you do... But on the other hand, nah.*

"Mister Stark, did you send your friend to the target area deliberately?"

Stark froze, turning to face that one. "Whaaaat?!"

"Did you send Hogan to the scene of the blast, because you wanted Iron Man to capture the Mandarin instead of anyone else?" The sleaziest reporter of the lot shoved a recorder in his face. "And if so, why did you hide that fact from the proper authorities?"

*We have a winner. Stark's hand flashed out snatched the sleazy reporter's recorder, straight from the slimy hand. "You want a statement? HERE IT IS!"

The assembled members of the press fell into hushed silence.

Tony stepped up to his car, and glared into the television cameras, as if directly into his nemesis' eyes. "This is a little holiday greeting to The Mandarin." He said darkly. "You made two mistakes: One. You pissed me off. And Two: You *really* pissed me off. So here's the deal: As of the moment you blew up my best friend, you officially became a dead man. You're already a corpse, you just haven't fallen down yet. Anyone standing in the general vicinity of Fu Manchu right now? You're dead too. Run for it, before I come to collect your bodies."

The press were rapt, staring at the raw hatred Tony was dishing into their cameras.
"There's no politics here, no agendas, no Pentagon Military, and screw what your people did to me in Afghanistan." Tony growled, and the camera flashes intensified. "This is just pure, old-fashioned Revenge. I've fought enough terrorists in my time, and without exception they are all cowards who shout threats, and blow up children from a safe distance. On the off chance you're more of a man than that; here's my home address: It's 1080 Malibu Point; 90265." Stark bared his teeth. "The world isn't big enough to hide from me. Why draw out the inevitable? I'll leave the door open for you. **Come And Get Me.**"

And with that, Stark switched off the recorder, and hurled it straight into the wall.

Before anyone could react, or shout a question, Stark at into the driver's seat and dropped the sports car into gear, leaving an inch of rubber behind.

Pepper and Rhodes were looking at the television in the Lobby, the closest they had come to catching him. They both stared, aghast at the image of Tony's car driving off like a drag racer.

"...he didn't." Pepper breathed. "Tell me he didn't. Tell me that it was just a very vivid hallucination."

Rhodes already had his phone out. "This is Rhodes, I need a perimeter around Stark's private residence, I need the nearest neighbors evacuated, I need a half mile perimeter around the house. If you have a TV, you just got the address. And five miles airspace. Nobody gets close enough to take a shot, or to make this a circus."

"What are you doing?" Pepper demanded. "We have to get Tony out of there."

"He just threw down one of those damn red and gold gauntlets to The Mandarin, Pepper. I don't know which is worse. That he might just get his wish, or that he'll wait for a hundred years until he gets his way."

Pepper bit her lip. "You'll be there. Iron Man and War Machine together can handle anything."

"It's not War... Never mind. Pepper, I got put in charge of the investigation. If Iron Man just promised to stay at home and wait for the bad guy to come visit, it means he's not going to be out there hunting. My workload just doubled."

Pepper's teeth bared. "I have to get him out of that house."

"You're not going back there." Rhodes said quickly. "He's bulletproof, you're not."

"Should have thought of that sooner." Pepper was already marching.

Stark's sports car came screaming into the garage and skidded to a halt. Tony was out of the car instantly. "Jarvis, do we have the upload from the SI Database?"

"Affirmative sir, and I took the liberty of locking down the house."

"Fine." Tony waved that off. "The upload, is it video?"

"Photographs. Several of them, sir." Jarvis reported.

"All right. Reconstruct Mann's Chinese Theatre in the minutes before the blast. Track everyone in the square however you can. GPS, smartphones, whatever."
The hologram became a ghostly outline of the Theater. There were humanoid shapes moving back and forth, right up to the instant of the blast, where the reconstruction vanished, marking the moment they were blown up.

Stark nodded. "Now do it again, but overlay the photographs Happy gave us. In real time."

The hologram started again, counting down to the blast, only now several sections of the reconstruction were in clear, vivid color. Happy's pictures of the scene were filling in details. Tony pointed. "There! That guy! He wasn't in the reconstruction before!"

"No sir." Jarvis responded. "There was no sign of him, as he wasn't carrying any network capable devices, nor was he in range of any surveillance devices."

"That's a little too convenient." Tony nodded, tasting the solution right in front of him. "Jarvis, run it forward a little."

The countdown to the blast progressed; people moving. Happy's next photo came up. The mystery man was sitting on a bench next to someone in a suit, and they were exchanging a small metal case. The image moved further forward, to show the man open the case and put something in his mouth quickly. "There it is!" Tony growled. "Jarvis, where did the blast originate?"

"Within two feet of that bench, sir. This is not uncommon. Forensic teams have found no sign of debris at any of the sites."

"It was a suicide bombing. He's not close to the blast; he was the detonation point." Tony nodded quickly. "Who gave him the case?"

"The Seller does not appear in any database except our own sir. He was issued with a Stark Industries Guest Pass yesterday afternoon. The name and Identification he gave was Eric Savin; but I am unable to track that name to any other database; meaning it's likely a fake ID."

Tony kept staring at the photo Happy had taken of the deal taking place. "The Buyer. The one that blew himself up. He's wearing dogtags. Any military victims reported in the blast?"

"None sir." Jarvis reported.

"Can you enhance the image enough to read those tags?"

"Working." Jarvis reported, and the image sharpened suddenly. "I'm sorry, sir; but I do not have an angle to read the image."

"No. Not when I'm this close." Jarvis. Put up the map again."

The reconstructed crime scene vanished; and was replaced with a holographic map of the world. There were scaled points recording energy outputs, lightning storms... anywhere there was a lot of energy being thrown around. The blast sites were reading a lot higher. "You are correct sir. The heat from the blast was in excess of three thousand degrees Celsius."

"Right." Tony waved. "Now eliminate claimed attacks altogether. Just show me places that have the same signature."

The map went blank, leaving only the high temperature and energy points. Tony grinned. Where there used to be ten points, there were now eleven. The extra mark was in the United States.

"Tennessee... Why didn't anyone report this?" He demanded.
"The blast predates any known Mandarin attack by more than a year, sir." Jarvis did a quick scan of police reports, news reports... And came back with an answer. "It was ruled as a suicide by explosive."

Tony was on his feet instantly. "Who's suicide?"

Jarvis quickly put up the archived front page of the Chattanooga Daily, which had a profile picture of the 'suicide'. It was the Buyer. The same man that Happy had photographed the night before. The man that had blown himself up the night before, more than a year after everyone else had declared him dead.

Chad Davis. The living bomb that had killed Happy had a name.

"Well, that looks like a lead to me." Tony said, satisfied.

"Yes sir. I am calculating a flight path to Chattanooga, Tennessee now." Jarvis responded.

The sound of a throat clearing made him glance over his shoulder as Pepper Potts came into the room. Her face was unreadable.

"Pepper." He began, and not for the first time. "I know you're mad, but-"

"Mad?" Pepper said calmly. "Jeez, Tony. I'm not mad. I'm not even surprised." She calmly walked over to the wetbar and poured herself a drink. "You want one? 'Cause it looks like we're staying in tonight."

*Oh. We're going with the slow seething kind of anger. Tony thought darkly to himself. That's always worse.*

"Look..." Tony began. "I know it doesn't seem like a big move, but think for a minute: All the television hacks? He doesn't need publicity. This is pageantry. He wants..."

"Yes, not a brilliant move," Pepper interrupted as she toasted him. "Oh, by the way... The National Security Council rang. They wanted to know if you were planning to stay home for long. It's only a matter of time before The Mandarin blows something else up; and now that Iron Man is staying on the couch..."

Tony scowled. She was making good points. *She always does that. Stupid, flawless logic.*

"My god, Tony." Pepper growled. "How can a man with a brain like yours work so closely with super-soldiers and super-spies, to say nothing of supplying the freakin' Pentagon for that many years, only to have learned nothing?"

"Pepper, he's a terrorist. Every terrorist I've fought, and trust me, I've fought more than most people have heard of, they all go hiding behind human shields when the chips are down. And even if he does take me up on it; he's going to come after us sooner or later, we end this quickly, maybe nobody else gets killed."

"Yeah, except you." Pepper shot back. "I lost Happy today, I can't lose you both. And by the way, next time you decide to announce our home address to the world, just remember that I live here too."

Tony spun, as if to fire back... and froze, just looking at her. "Oh." He said slowly, as though what she was saying had just occurred to him. "Right."
Deathly silence.

"Never even thought about that, did you?" Pepper sighed. "I'm going to go start packing. You are going to arm up, and come join me. There's no hotel that will take us, and The Tower is even more public than this place is now..."

"Exactly why I should stay here." Tony said. "Less civilians."

"You mean your neighbors?" Pepper shot back.

"I have a vehicle approaching the front door, sir." Jarvis put in with his typical calm.

They both spun to the smart-glass and watched the feed from Jarvis' security cameras. A rather bland car was driving up slowly.

"It's a rental car, sir." Jarvis reported. "According to the online database, this particular license plate was rented out three hours ago by Dr Maya Hansen."

"That name sounds familiar..." Tony said to himself, thinking out loud. Jarvis obligingly put the profile up on the glass. Her details, her picture, her employment history. All Tony needed was the picture. Oh. His eyes flicked to Pepper automatically. Bad.

She glared at him, then at the image of Maya Hansen getting out of her car, and turned on her heel. "I have packing to do."

"I love you?" Tony called after her hopefully. She didn't answer.

Maya had stepped up the front door, half expecting to be intercepted by a repulsor blast before she got within five feet. Nobody challenged her, and she knocked on the glass doors. There was no answer, but she kept knocking, undeterred.

A moment later, the door swung open for her automatically.

Maya came into the house; not reacting as soft blue lights scanned over her from every angle. She came in and did a double take at the huge stuffed rabbit between the staircases; but still looked around. "Hello?"

Iron Man emerged from one of the staircases and moved towards her. "Close enough. His voice scrawled. "You've been cleared for weapons and explosives." The mask opened and Tony looked out at her. "Well. You're not The Mandarin. Are you?"

Maya's mouth became a very thin line; almost a smile. "You don't remember me. I expected as much."

"Of course I remember you Maya." Tony scorned. "My reputation is blown completely out of proportion."

Maya looked him over, eyes lingering a little lower on his suit for just an instant. "Yes. So I discovered the last time we... spoke."

Well, this is going well. Tony thought darkly. The Mark 45 opened and he stepped out of it. The Interface was on his face, and so the suit stayed together, standing upright.

"I've actually been trying to get in touch with you for days, but I think your switchboard knows to block calls from female voices automatically." Maya said with a touch of disdain. "Then I turned
on the TV and saw breaking news of you announcing where you lived. I'm guessing you won't live here for long, and I need to talk to you alone."

"Right. Well. Don't get me wrong Maya, the years have been kinder to you than they have to me, but I'm sort of with someone else at the moment." Tony told her.

"Really?" Maya Hansen blew right past the fact that he did remember her, and waved at the enormous stuffed rabbit. "If only I'd had a big cuddly clue when I walked in. Where is the lady of the manor?"

"Right here." Pepper called from the next floor up, as she threw the overnight bag down a level so that it landed between them. Maya didn't even flinch, which surprised Tony somewhat. Maya looked freaked out about something when she was pounding her fist on the door; but she wasn't jumpy or hyper.

Another overnight bag slammed down next to the first, and Tony heard something inside it smash open. "Oh, sorry." Pepper called from above, but without sympathy. "Remind me, was that your 80 year old scotch, or your $800 cologne?"

Tony winced. He was having a bad day already, and fixing it was going to be difficult enough without one of his thousands of One Night Stands showing up out of the blue. "Tell me there isn't a twelve year old kid I don't know about waiting in your car." He hissed to Maya through his teeth.

"He's thirteen." Maya told him sarcastically. "You spend $800 on cologne?"

Pepper stalked down the stairs and came over. "Hello." She said politely to Maya. "I don't think we've met. How do you know Tony?"

Maya gave them both a sideways look. "I think you can guess."

"No doubt, but we can talk about this on the way to anywhere else." Pepper told them both firmly.

"That's good advice." Maya nodded. "I have a car outside right now, and nobody will connect it to either of you."

"Sounds good." Pepper nodded. "Miss Hansen, you're welcome to come with us if you dare."

"Doctor Hansen." Maya and Tony both corrected.

Pepper glared at Tony.

"What?" He shrugged. "It's kind of a big deal."

Maya had wandered over to the Mark-42, looking it over. "How does this thing handle high heat?" She asked Tony suddenly.

"Well, it is metal." Tony excused. "Most forms of metal expand under heat, but for something like Iron Man, you'd need..." He trailed off, looking at Maya suddenly, curious. "Why do you ask about high level temperatures?"

Maya met his gaze, saying nothing.

"You need to get your bag and come on." Pepper tried not to scream in frustration.

"Hold on." Tony said suddenly. He had frozen, mid-thought, mid-step. He spun on Maya, as though seeing her for the first time since she'd walked in. "Millennium Midnight. I meet Aldrich
Killian. He asks me to join his new project, something about hacking the genome. I said no. That same night, you wanted help with telomeres. Thirteen years later, Aldrich Killian shows up with a new product called Extremis, which involves hacking the human genome through Telomere reconstruction... And you show up a day later."

"Well, that took you long enough." Maya sighed explosively. "It's not a coincidence. I came to see you because-" She broke off when she noticed the television. "Is that...?"

Pepper wasn't listening. "Tony, I'm serious. Grab your bag."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Come with me, or no sex for a month." Pepper said sharply.

"For the sake of National Security, Pepper!"

Maya waved, eyes still on the television screen. "Hey! Hey! You should see thi-"

"Do you see what I have to put up with?" Pepper raged. "I live in a place where a thirty foot stuffed animal is an impulse purchase, and challenging a Terror Kingpin to an arm wrestle seems like a smart move!" Pepper was on the warpath now.

"What? Where do you want to go?" Tony fired back. "Who would you like to stay with? You said yourself no hotel would take us!"

"Hey! Lois and Clark!" Maya roared at them, fed up.

Tony and Pepper looked at her finally.

"Isn't that your house?" Maya was pointing at the television screen.

Sure enough, on the screen, was the Malibu Stark Home, a clear shot. But in the corner was not the tag of local or international news...

In the corner of the live shot was the Icon of the Ten Rings.

Stark spun to look at the window. Three helicopters were coming across the ocean. One with a large mounted camera on the front. Two dark Apache helicopters flanked it, bristling with missiles and cannons. And as they saw the live image on screen, a missile was already streaming in.

"Oh, this is gonna suck." Tony sighed, making the understatement of the week.

Tony Stark had Five Nightmares. The First was that he would go too far, and drive everyone he loved away. The Second Nightmare was that he would not go far enough; and even Iron Man would not be capable of protecting the people he needed to protect.

An instant later, the missiles hit their target.
Tony had been in enough fights to be familiar with the feeling. As the missiles hit home, everything dropped into slow motion.

*Just once, I'd like time to stop when something good is happening.* Tony thought distantly.

The front half of the house exploded, and everyone was thrown off their feet. Tony summoned his armor, still wearing the Interface.

Pepper was flying backwards, and the entire smart-glass wall had shattered, the shards inches from flaying her open...

The MK-45 responded to command, and leaped between her and the debris, taking the hit for her.

The wall of flame hit them then, and Tony dove behind the staircase. Maya was already scrambling back toward the front door as the support walls gave out and the house started to fall on them...

Tony curled himself into a ball behind the staircase, praying it would hold a little longer.

Pepper looked up at the MK-45 scooped her up under one arm, and started running. Maya yelped as a steel arm went around her waist and started carrying her too. The Armor ran for the front door at Tony's direction.

And then the next set of missiles hit the house.

The walls caved in, and the floor started to tilt. Tony urged his armor to run faster. He wanted so badly to wrap Pepper up in his Armor, make her indestructible... But the modular armor needed something to home in on, and he was the only one with sensors under his skin. Trying to get Pepper into the MK-45 was as likely to carve her up as the explosions.

The MK-45 had reached the front door, which was already buried under half the upper floors. With Maya under one arm, and Pepper under the other, Tony didn't even slow them down. Instead, the Uni-Beam fired. It was a risky move. Without Tony's Arc Reactor to power it, the Modular pieces were sharing their small flight batteries. The Uni-Beam only fired for a fraction of a second. Long enough to clear a path out of the house.

The second she saw the sky, Pepper looked up at the featureless face. "JARVIS! WE'RE CLEAR! Get back in there!"

The armor fell to bits instantly, dumping both women face down on the splintering concrete. An instant later the pieces of armor were flying back into the house.

Tony had to abandon the staircase as the Mansion started to fall, the whole structure coming down. The glass wall behind him had shattered and as the house started to tilt, he knew he'd be falling into the ocean soon.

Scrambling uphill, Tony tried to dodge his furniture as it slid towards the window.

And then the next set of missiles hit, and Tony was airborne.
The floor was cracking, splitting apart like tectonic plates, and Tony grabbed on, as the house went up on it's side. He could see through the floor to his Garage, as the Iron Man Suits MK-1 through MK-7 all exploded from the concussion, their munitions erupting, consuming them all in a fireball.

Tony looked around and saw he was in full view of the window, and the gunships outside. He could see the helicopters hesitate as they saw him, and then they opened up with their cannons, wanting to shred him with bullets, up close and personal.

Tony squeezed his eyes shut. *This is it...*

*Clang.* His back was suddenly covered by a piece of his suit, just in time to block a 40mm round as it slammed into him. Most of him was still in the open and Tony felt like someone had hit him with a meteorite. He dropped, instantly, falling out of his house...

And the rest of his armor dove to catch up with him.

The universe fell back into slow motion, as the pieces came toward him. His Torso Piece had the biggest battery, and thus got to him first. The Armor slapped at him from all sides, making him tumble uncontrollably as he fell. Tony couldn't tell down from up any more.

It felt like a lifetime ago since he'd sparred with War machine, but he heard Rhodey's instruction. *Don't try and control the spin, get your own spin going; and control that.*

But he still wasn't able to guide his flight. His Gauntlets were missing...

He saw them suddenly, falling alongside. His gloves had run out of juice, unable to reach him. Tony reached out for them...

As he hit the water, he was mostly Iron Man again. The air shook with a hellish groan as the house above started to break apart.

Iron Man wasn't exactly a submarine, especially when he wasn't fully assembled. Tony was trying to keep his arms above water, as the ocean poured into his suit around his exposed wrists.

He was trying madly to reach his gloves, pulsing his boot jets to move him across the surface of the water... And he finally got a grip around it. He slid his gloves on, and the connections set.

"Power now at 80%" Jarvis reported.

"All Right." Tony growled, tasting blood. "Let's see how you like it when someone's shooting back at you!"

And the Invincible Iron Man exploded up from the waves, toward the trio of helicopters.

From the bottom of the cliff, he aimed his Uni-Beam up and painted a target over the gunships...

*Uni-Beam: Activated.*

In less than a second, one of the helicopters had vaporized completely. The other two were suddenly aware of him, having missed his drop with all the other debris.

Tony bared his teeth as they circled around to aim at him. "Bring it on!"

Once they were clear of the house, Maya got a grip around Pepper's wrist and pulled the redhead toward her car. The blast had shattered the windshield, pushed the car halfway down the driveway,
and Maya quickly fished for the keys.

Pepper was a smart girl, and had been in enough life and death situations to know that she'd just get in the way. She knew that Tony loved her and that if she was close enough to get stuck in the crossfire, she could very possibly get him killed by dividing his attention.

So when she dove into the passenger seat of Maya's Rental, she knew it was the right choice. The car shifted into reverse with a squeal of tires, and they backed away from the battle quickly, even as the entire three story, billion dollar house slid right off the edge of the cliff.

"Well..." Maya said finally. "There's something you don't see every day."

Tony could detect the missile locks, and grinned. The missiles would never get close.

"Power now at 11%" Jarvis reported.

"WHAT?!" Tony screeched. "Check the power feeds!"

"I am unable to run diagnostics on-"

The Helicopters fired again. Tony gunned his jets, making the easiest evasive manoeuvre he could make...

...diving straight down into the water.

The missiles struck the surface, suddenly useless. Iron Man circled around under the water, swooping back up to explode out of the water and strike back.

"Power levels back at 91%" Jarvis reported.

"Jarvis, what the hell is wrong with this suit?" Tony raged.

"Unknown sir, it is a prototype."

*Use it or lose it.* Tony told himself and launched himself out of the water like a missile.

An instant later the house landed on him. The weight and the explosions together had torn it free of the foundations, and it had fallen off the edge of the cliff; directly onto him.

Iron Man slammed into a wall of concrete and was suddenly dragged back down into the ocean.

"Power Levels now at 14%" Jarvis reported clinically, as the entire house sank to the bottom of the drink, and took Iron Man along with it.

Tony wrestled with his house, his wine cellar, his couch, his tablecloths, his bed, the particle accelerator, the Porche, the refrigerator...

"God, when did I get all this stuff?!" Tony raged, trying to get back to the surface again.

The huge stuffed rabbit proved to be too big to dodge, and too soft to just smash through. The waterlogged stuffing dragged him down; as his power drained away. Frustrated, Tony tried madly to claw through it, ripping at the fabric, when the house superstructure hit him in the midsection...

Tony groaned in sudden pain as the armor was squished between the edge of a concrete foundation... and the stone ocean floor. The wreck of the house kept moving as more of its weight...
settled into the ocean, grinding Iron Man along stone. Tony could feel his armor bending inward from the weight. The modular seals would only take so much before they broke apart again...

He had no grip, no traction. Iron Man could tear its way free, but he was flat on his back, and had no way to push up with his jets all pinned.

Alarms were flashing back and forth on his HUD. His power levels were jumping up and down from fully charged to almost nothing and then back again in seconds, his damage reports were appearing and disappearing, as though huge chunks of his suit were switching on and off every second.

Any second the seals were sure to be pulled apart just a little, and Tony would drown. And yet for all that, he couldn't move.

"Jarvis, do we still have the ability to charge the modular sections from the Arc Reactor?"

"Only a few segments sir, I cannot guarantee power flows to all of them."

"Overcharge the right hand, as much power as you can give it without frying the circuits."

"Right away sir."

Still wearing the Interface, Tony took a deep breath, held it, and disconnected his Gauntlet. He felt a sudden rush of coolness as his glove detached and the ocean came rushing in.

His glove turned in the water, and took hold of Iron Man by the neck. The glove put as much power as it had into it's micro-repulsors, and dragged Iron Man the precious few inches upward. Enough that Tony could get his other hand behind him, and push up, digging himself out from under the debris.

Iron Man was free, but Tony Stark was at the end of his rope.

"Jarvis!" Tony gasped as the water level reached his lips. He was trying to keep his head above water in a skintight suit that was filling to the brim. Air pressure was the only thing keeping it below his nose.

The tiny bubble of air that the ocean left him was quickly filling with CO2. There was only enough space inside the helmet for a few breaths. The air mix changed on him and the oxygen was running out... "Jarvis! Automatic #gasp# Flight #gasp# Control!"

The suit shifted, and started to fly. It stayed under the waves for almost three hundred feet, getting away from the helicopters that continued to circle the disaster. Tony passed out just as the suit exploded upward, out of the water, and turned to fly away from what was his house.

Nobody noticed him leave.

The helicopters turned and flew north.

The second they had cleared the no-fly zone drawn around Stark's Mansion, they had company.

"This is Iron Patriot, to Attack Helicopters. You have committed an act of aggression against United States Citizens. You will land your helicopters and surrender now. Understand that you blew up two people I cared about just now, and I will enjoy blowing you out of the sky. Do you wish to do this the hard way?"
Both helicopters had circled around in opposite directions, coming at him from two directions. They both opened fire with their 40mm cannons without answering him.

Iron Patriot twisted neatly out of the way, not even blinking. "Kinda hoped you'd say that." Rhodes grinned savagely, and attacked.

Two missiles came at him, and Iron Patriot evaded, launching flares to divert them. His shoulder cannon traced them and knocked them out of the sky, without Rhodes even looking.

The two helicopters were civilian, but had been retrofitted with armor that was military grade, and could stand up to small munitions. Grenade Launchers were ground to ground weapons and the Iron Patriot didn't have a Uni-Beam.

Fortunately, Rhodes was only too eager to get up close and personal. Far more nimble than a helicopter, Iron Patriot swooped around and hit the nearest one from the side. He climbed up the hull and ripped the side door off. There were three crew. Pilot, Gunner, Navigator.

He reached in, caught the navigator, and tossed him out the helicopter into the air. The man screamed as he fell. Without stepping inside, Iron Patriot fired about half a dozen grenades into the chopper, each of them on a three second timer.

Iron Patriot pushed off and swooped down, catching the Navigator by the leg as the chopper exploded above them.

Iron Patriot swooped lower and neatly dropped the Navigator into the ocean, unhurt. "This is Iron Patriot to US Coast Guard, I have a prisoner in the water. Consider him hostile and extremely dangerous. I want him taken into custody and transferred to a military penitentiary for questioning."

"This Coast Guard Rescue, we're on it, Colonel Rhodes." The answer came.

The second Helicopter had circled around and come to a hover. Iron Patriot rose vertically until it was at an even altitude. Armored Soldier and Helicopter Pilot faced off across thirty feet of open air like gunslingers.

The helicopter fired first, launching every missile they had.

Rhodes fired faster, his repulsors and mini guns controlled by Jarvis' targeting systems. Every missile was intercepted, knocked clean out of the sky. Iron Patriot hadn't even shifted.

Rhodes grinned and got back on the radio. "What else you got?"

The helicopter wavered back and forth for a second...

...and then promptly exploded on it's own.

Rhodes swore and got back on the radio. "US Coast Guard, break off. Prisoner may be carrying explosives on his person, let me handle him myself."

Tony regained consciousness when the cold hit him. His armor was literally falling off his body, at the end of it's power.

It was dark. _How long have we been flying? It was somewhere toward sundown when Maya arrived at the house._
The cold was excruciating. He felt like he was in the Arctic Circle, except he was in a forest. There was no sign of anyone...

Tony sat up with a gasp of shock as memory hit him. The house had fallen off the cliff... but he was fairly sure Pepper and Maya had gotten out.

_Maya Hansen..._ Tony thought. _Extremis... I have to war-coldcoldcoldcold!

Tony's brain had put half a dozen pieces together and come up with a shape that made sense. And it meant pepper was in horrible danger.

"Jarvis, where are we? I gotta call Pepper!" He groaned.

No answer. His armor was completely offline.

_Priorities, Tony._ He told himself. _You can't help Pepper if you freeze to death._

He had set his armor to fly him automatically, and then passed out. Jarvis would have been smart enough to keep him on his back until the suit could jettison all the seawater... but in a skin tight suit of armor, there was no chance Tony would dry out. He had been soaked through to the bone, and was now in the woods somewhere, in the middle of the night, half a foot deep in snow. From the looks of the damage around him, his armor had landed like a missile.

Tony chewed his lip. His Arc Reactor would give him his own personal headlight, as it had in the cave with Yinsen.

Then the snow started falling again, and Tony shuddered, looking for something he could use to warm up. He could probably start a fire...

No. That was ridiculous. He needed to get somewhere he could contact Pepper.

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Tony Stark had Five Nightmares. The first was the fear that he would go too far, and drive away everything good that his life had given him; until he hit rock bottom. The second was the fear that he wouldn't go far enough, and fail to protect the people he cared about most.

The Third Nightmare was from his recent past. The moment when he felt the most helpless; the most desperate, and completely at the mercy of evil people... And that his own mistakes would be the reason why.

Just like with Yinsen. Just like in Afghanistan. His Third Nightmare was that it would happen again.

Tony slogged through the snow, hauling his armor along after him.

It was Afghanistan all over again. He was walking alone, at the last of his strength... Faced with what his stupidity and his short-sightedness had brought.

Pepper was either weeping over his missing body, or cursing him for actually throwing down to The Mandarin. If the latter, he wouldn't have blamed her.

Happy was dead. His best friend had put up with him for too many years; plus having people laugh at him whenever he said he was Iron Man's Bodyguard... To say nothing of his feelings for Pepper. Tony had taken his life, piece by piece, and then died because he was investigating Tony's enemies.
The House was gone, the home he'd lived in since his parents died. He'd redone it a dozen times since then. In a lot of ways, it was as much a part of him as Iron Man... And it was Pepper's home; and now it was ashes.

He still had his armor. It was all he had left. Except it didn't work any more, he was dragging it along behind himself.

It was Afghanistan all over again. When he had dragged himself through the desert, expecting to fall down and die of thirst at every step; his life was laid out before him like a twisted metaphor for... something.

It started to snow heavier. Tony rested a moment, legs shaking; and looked up at the dark night sky.

The scientist in him knew the exact temperature of the air before precipitation became snow. He knew the exact altitude where it would happen. He knew how long a human could walk through snow in a ripped up t-shirt and jeans. He didn't even have shoes on.

The Iron Man in him remembered how he'd fixed the icing problem.

He remembered that he never made Snow Angels as a kid.

He'd tried it once with Miss December a few years before Iron Man. Pepper had made a joke about frostbite in awkward places.

The Tactician in him looked back the way he came and tried to calculate how long it would take to conceal the trail he'd dragged through the snow with his bundle of dismembered armor.

And there's the metaphor. Tony thought to himself bleakly. The only thing you have left: the greatest weapon and shield that you, the Great Weaponeer could build... And you're dragging its dismembered parts through the snow behind you, hoping the slower pace doesn't make you freeze to death.

If he wanted it all back... he'd have to fight for it.

That's what you told yourself in Afghanistan, when you were in the cave with Yinsen. You wanted out; and you had to fight for it.

But things had changed.

It hadn't been that long ago that he'd accepted his death as a natural part of his life. He'd accepted it long ago. His weapons had been shut down or destroyed; the Avengers had been set up; the Company was all in Pepper's name and no longer an engine creating death and destruction, the Expo was putting out new ideas like clockwork...

His Grand Crusade was done. Back then, he'd had everything he wanted... Except Pepper. And he had her too.

The only thing left now... was... what? The Avengers? He'd nearly died in that fight over New York... and he'd actually wanted to live at the time.

Almost killed by a nuclear blast. How's that for irony, dad?

Rhodey would be a better Iron Man for the Avengers.
Weapons don't win wars, soldiers do. And you're not a soldier.

Not like Captain America.

I told you, Rhody, I can't be that guy. Captain America doesn't have eleven home made dirty movies online... And Captain America wouldn't have been so stupid.

And he was stupid. He was one of the top ten geniuses of the world, but only a low grade moron would call out the world's most wanted terrorist on live television, and then give his home address.

And Pepper's home address with it.

I almost killed her.

Mandarin was something new. He didn't make a show of it like Loki and Whiplash. He didn't promise full support and then slip a knife in the back like Stane, he didn't pretend he was better than he was like Hammer...

Mandarin was the full court press. Mandarin didn't hold anything back. And Stark had almost died before he realized that he wasn't ready for the challenge he himself had extended.

He'd gone through fighting the demons of his past, he'd fought down the demons of the future, he'd lived through the crucible, and come out the other side a self-destructive screw-up, but then he'd overcome that too. He'd assured a legacy, and something better. He'd even been with the love of his life. He'd faced his own death with acceptance, and then chosen to live anyway...

And now, if he was still going to die, what was left but to take Mandarin down with him?

No... Tony thought to himself. That doesn't make sense. There's something... There's something you haven't done yet, something that you haven't finished. What is it?

There wasn't much left of the Stark Malibu Home. The majority of the house had fallen off the cliff. The front half of the house, part of the upstairs level, and most of the foundations were still there. The Garage had gone with the house. Iron Man's Vault was buried under the wreckage.

Pepper had stepped gingerly through the wreckage and found little that she recognized. A few photographs remained in shattered frames, but all of them hers. Tony's keepsakes were all digital.

The only thing she found of the lower levels were the trashed and twisted remains of Dummy. Despite herself, she felt an odd sense of mourning for the machine.

Clutched in it's three fingered grip, was an Iron Man Helmet. The MK-3, if she was right. The first red and gold suit. The first completed prototype. The first one she had ever seen Tony wear.

Pepper picked up the helmet, and clutched it's torn metal face to her chest, as she had done with Tony whenever he needed her.

This time she needed him. She needed him to fall out of the sky and land right in front of her and make some ridiculous suggestive remark.

Except there was no sign of him.

Eventually the woods had given way to a road. He'd followed the road, relieved to see something human-made.
Tony kept walking, until he saw a building in the distance. It was closed and empty, but there was a light on in one of the windows.

It was a church. In the distance beyond it, he could see more lights.

*A small town church... I could go into town, but I'm at the end of my strength, I can't feel any of my limbs, and it's just possible someone might take a shot at me.*

Tony dragged his bundle of armor to the Church steps, and tried the door. Locked.

"I can't believe the church is locked." Tony scowled. "What if I needed to do something Holy?" He cast around for a key, didn't find one, and picked up his Iron Man helmet.

"God? Me again. Sorry about this." Tony sighed. "But it's not like I wasn't already going to hell." Armed with his Helmet, Tony smashed out the windows, and climbed in, quickly unlocking the door from the inside, and lugging his suit inside.

Off the lobby, there were two common rooms. Tony looked around the rooms and figured they were for holding meetings, counselling sessions... In small towns, Churches hosted many functions.

Tony switched the lights on in one of the function rooms and hauled his disassembled armor onto a table. There was a space heater, and he turned it on full. He picked through the suit sections, until he found a power lead, and ran a line from his Arc Reactor, directly to the helmet. "All right. Jarvis, can you hear me now?"

Iron Man's helmet lit up with Jarvis' voice. "Yes sir." His voice came from Iron Man's mouth.

"Where are we?"

"Chattanooga, Tennessee." Jarvis said, as though this was the most obvious thing in the world.

"My god, that's a real place?!" Tony barked out, cold fire racing through his limbs as he started to warm up. "I thought that was a Glenn Miller song!"

"I had charted a flightpath there, as part of the ongoing investigation. When you set the flight controls to automatic, it was the programmed destination."

"What the hell went wrong with the suit?" Tony demanded. "Did you get a system check before we crashed?"

"I was running seven of them sir. They all came back to the same problem. Power flow. I could barely keep each section online long enough to test before the power failed."

"A freakin' Arc Reactor, and I can't keep the charge." Tony swore. "Damage?"

"I am reading significant wear to the connection points, loose contacts, salt damage, water damage..."

"I get the point." Tony sighed. "Can we recharge from the Arc Reactor?"

"Only if suitable power lines can be run to each segment."

Tony whined under his breath. The MK-45 was the first modular armor, the first suit that came in several distinct pieces. His other armors all had alternate power routes; which is why they could take damage, and open for him to step in and out. But this new armor was something different. In
this one, the power lines that ran through the suit had to line up exactly as they connected; and they connected by flying themselves at his body like a homing missile.

Each piece had it's own power source for flight, but really, only enough to get them to the Arc Reactor in Tony's torso. The power was spread by dozens of micro-filaments that ran through the underside of the armored skin...

"Incredibly delicate work. That's not something you can just improvise." Tony chewed his lip. "It'd probably be easier to rebuild the MK-1."

"True, but history would suggest that doing so would take three months."

Tony snorted. "And this place opens on Sunday morning. Probably sooner this close to Christmas. All right. I need tools." He turned to look, and paused. "No I don't, I need a phone."

There was a phone in the lobby.

SI had its own cleanup crew since the boss had become a superhero, and they had come forward. Pepper had ordered them to stay well away until they could make sure the stone cliff was still stable enough for earthmovers. The cleanup would be kept on hold until the search was over, and it looked like the search would continue for a good long while.

Iron Patriot exploded up from the surface of the water, and flew around to the edge of the cliff, coming in to land near Pepper Potts. "There's no sign of him."

Pepper didn't seem to hear him, arms folded tightly, still as a statue, staring down at the water. Bits of the house were floating in the water.

Maya Hansen had been hovering around behind Pepper since the attack, unwilling to go anywhere else, but equally unwilling to speak to Pepper with so many people around.

Iron Patriot's mask opened, and Rhodes looked at her. "Pepper..."

"He's not dead." Pepper cut him off. "Not until I see a body."

"This isn't like Afghanistan, Pepper." Rhodes tried to break it to her gently. "We saw the house go down. The Ten Rings plastered it all over the networks."

"We saw Iron Man go down with the house." Pepper countered. "Iron Man can work underwater for extended periods. I know, I've had conversations with the man when he was at the bottom of the Hudson."

"Then why no contact?" Maya asked. Rhodes and Pepper both looked at her, and she shrank a little under their gaze. She got the point instantly. A One Night Stand with the man over a decade before did not give her the right to be part of this conversation.

Pepper gave Rhodes a look. "Rhodey, please?"

"I've already been all over the wreckage." Rhodes told her. "If he's alive, he took off a long time ago."

"Then check it again." Potts growled. "The Suit can survive for up to twenty hours when sealed before it has to take in more air. It's not like the air's breathable above the stratosphere when he flies, he always has oxygen. Iron Man can handle the water. We have eighteen hours left, and if
he's pinned under the wreck, we're not giving up. Either get back down there, or get out of that suit and I'll do it for you."

Rhodes sighed. "Yes Ma'am."

Iron Patriot turned back to the water, and Pepper called after him. "Rhodey? Be careful. The wreckage shifts, I don't want you to be stuck down there too."

Iron Patriot glanced back. "If he's alive, you're in danger. Don't be here in the open for too much longer. The press is going nuts; and the tightest military blockade can only keep the press away for so long."

Pepper sighed, clutching at the helmet. "All right. But you keep looking."

"Eighteen hours." Rhodes promised, and dove off the cliff.

Pepper looked at Maya Hansen. "All right. You got a place to go?"

Maya shrugged. "I had booked a motel room, but-

"Anyone going to come looking for you?"

"I booked the room under a fake name." Maya promised. "I had hoped to tell this to Tony, but I think if you've got Rhodes on speed dial, you should hear this too."

Pepper held the shattered helmet close and gave her a nod. "All right. Let's move."

Tony had taken apart the church and found little. There was a jacket and a hat in the lost and found; and he took them both. There was a toolbox in the attic space; and it had needle-nose pliers.

The church also had a radio, and Tony heard that everyone was assuming him dead.

That was a stroke of luck. If everyone thought he was dead, then they wouldn't be looking, and he had some time. He'd cleaned up a bit in the men's room and gotten a look in the mirror. He looked like he'd gone ten rounds with Whiplash.

He'd made a phone call to Pepper. It was the most dangerous thing he could have done, because if Mandarin suspected he was alive, Pepper would be the target. But he couldn't not contact her. He'd made the call from the church phone, to a dedicated, private phone server. The number was a private, hack-proof line to his armor. Usually Jarvis could route his cell-phone calls; but Tony had a secret number, known only to himself and Pepper, just in case one of them had been kidnapped.

Tony worked fast and hard. He was in Chattanooga, the site of the one unreported explosion. He had a name and a face that connected this place to the death of his friend, and thus to the mandarin. If he could get his armor sorted out and follow the lead quietly, he could have Mandarin's head on a -late before The Ten Rings even knew he was alive.

But after four hours, he hadn't cracked the problem.

"Dammit, Jarvis; I did this in a cave with a box of scraps!" Tony almost screamed.

"The Mark-1 was nothing like this, sir." Jarvis responded with his typical unflappable calm. "There is no salt water in the desert. Also, as I recall, the Mark-1 was a single piece, not modular, and it didn't have me."
"Oh, I make one suit without you..." Tony scorned.

"I remind you sir, The MK-45 is a prototype."

"It was working fine until... well, until it got blown up. And shot by a helicopter sabot cannon." He kept going, realizing how stupid he sounded. "And then I drowned it in the ocean, strangled it with electrical cabling and dropped my mansion on it."

The point had been made however. The Mark-45 was a prototype, had taken an enormous amount of punishment, and it wasn't working properly as a result.

Tony slapped the Iron face in frustration. "45 suits to choose from, and I picked you?" He collapsed down next to the suit on the couch. "I miss Dummy and Butterfingers." He was exhausted. "Jarvis, make a note. Every suit we ever make after this? The modular design doesn't work."

"On the contrary sir, it works well... as long as it works perfectly."

Tony rubbed his jaw, thinking. "What about The House Party Protocol? I can..." He paused. "No. They'll be watching the house, until they find a body. And if they've got anyone in the area..."

"Which they have at some point, which is why we're here." Jarvis pointed out.

"God, what I wouldn't give for The Ten Rings to bring me tools right now..." He rubbed his aching neck. "All right. We need to rebuild the charge on the suit batteries. I'm assuming the salt water ruined them all?"

"Yes sir."

"Let's see if I can hook it up to the Mains."

Suddenly he heard the distant sound of doors scraping open across stone floors. Someone had opened the church. "What happened to the window?" A voice asked.

Tony moved quickly, grabbing all the bits of armor and bundling it back up again. He heard footsteps coming and he slid the window open, pushing the whole thing outside.

Too late to get away himself.

The door to the function room opened, and Tony froze, caught neatly.

A man with a priest's collar and a heavy overcoat looked at him, nonplussed, and scanned the room. His eyes focused on the table, which had obviously been used, and on the toolbox, still open. "I'm afraid you won't be able to get much for those."

Tony blinked, and suddenly realized. The Clergyman had no idea who he was. He thought that Tony Stark was a transient that had broken in to steal stuff.

And with his face bashed up and swollen enough to make him unrecognizable, his woefully inappropriate clothing which was torn and dirty, to say nothing of the state of his socks, it wasn't that much of a jump.

His host stepped over to the cabinets and unlocked them, hoisting out a large coffee urn. "Would you mind filling that up?" He called to Tony as he headed out of the room. "I have to get some things from my car."
Decision time. Tony told himself. *I can get away now, take the armor with me... except the armor isn't working yet, and... well, you've just broken into a church and stolen stuff. Filling a coffee urn because the man asks you to isn't much of an ask.*

*Oh sure, Maxim Maniac, you wanna get all ethical now?*

Tony made coffee. The smell of it hit him like the scent of Pepper's hair, and he downed two cups before the older man came back.

"I'm Father Barnes." He introduced himself.

"You call a cop while you were out there?" Tony asked him awkwardly.

Barnes shook his head. "Why? There's less than twenty dollars on the premises. Other than breaking a window and squatting for a few hours in one of my rooms, have you committed a crime?"

Tony was forced to admit that he had not, and found himself helping Barnes set up the room. Barnes went out to the street, and Tony went with him. Barnes had a van, and stacked within were half a dozen chairs, and a fold-up table. Barnes got the chairs, and Tony got the table... when he noticed the food.

Across the backseat was half a dozen Tupperware containers full of food, and a basket with bottles of wine, chocolate cakes, a turkey ready to be cooked...

*Christmas is coming. Tony realized. He's getting ready to have his family together for dinner...*

*It would have been my first Christmas with Pepper... and instead, I wanted to tap-dance with Mandarin.*

The thought hit him in full, and almost without thinking, he reached out and picked up the bottle of wine. He put it in his jacket and hoisted the table under his other arm.

People started arriving soon after. Mostly men, a few women. Tony tried to avoid them, and none of them forced anything. They weren't standoffish, they weren't judgmental...

Tony wasn't sure why they were all there so close to Christmas, but it seemed like something that happened regularly. Tony stayed close to the window, peeking out of it now and then to make sure the armor was still there.

"So, you planning on sticking around?" Barnes asked him. "We'll be having a meeting soon, and there's always room for one more."

Tony shook his head. "No, I don't think..."

"If you had anywhere else to go, I imagine you wouldn't be sleeping here." Barnes pointed out.

Tony felt awkward for some reason. "Why are you... I mean, you don't even know my name."

"Is the collar too subtle? Taking in lost souls is kind of what I do," The clergyman quipped. "We'll be serving coffee, a few finger foods..."

Tony's stomach growled loud enough to be audible in the next room, and he suddenly realized he hadn't eaten in over a day. "Where is it?"
"Here."

Tony glanced at the open window, where his bundle of armor was waiting on the other side. He had to keep that particular spot in view, and the window was big enough that someone would see him take it now.

"Sure." He said finally. "Sure, I'll stick around."

Barnes nodded and moved to the front of the room. "So. Who would like to begin?"

"I will." A man raised his hand and stood up. "Hi, I'm Cale; and I'm an alcoholic."

"Hi, Cale." The room chorused.

*I'm an AA Meeting.* Tony thought, suddenly awkward. The stolen bottle in his equally stolen jacket had been drained by a third during the last half hour, and he tucked his arms closer and his hat lower, trying to be invisible at the back of the room.

Cale smiled broadly. "I've been dry for twelve days now!"

Everyone applauded that, looking quietly thrilled. Tony started clapping too.

"I've tried to give up drinking before." Cale said. "And I usually gained ten pounds. Something I didn't realize was that you end up swapping one problem for another. For me, the substitute addiction was food. So, I came tonight; so close to the holidays, plenty of food, plenty of eggnog; know what I mean?"

There was a rumble of agreement. Tony didn't join in this time. Part of him felt cold, deep in his stomach. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been sober for two weeks; not counting Afghanistan, and not counting the times he'd been focused on other projects.

*One problem for another?* Tony asked himself, but he pushed that thought away.

He wanted Pepper. She made things better.

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Pepper had dozed. Adrenaline had worn out and merged with heartbreak, and sucked the energy straight out of her. When she woke up, it was fully dark, and Maya was still driving.

"News of the attack made the radio." Maya said as soon as Pepper stirred. "Tony's been declared 'presumed dead.' The Mandarin put the whole thing on the air and took full credit."

"Anything new?" Pepper groaned and rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

"If there is, it hasn't been reported on the news." Maya shook her head, eyes still on the road. "I flipped through a few stations. Half of them say Tony's faking it while he prepares a counterattack. The other half say his body was found and they're keeping his body hidden until the Avengers can summon a Norse God to resurrect him."

Pepper snorted. "These the same people who say that Captain America is an alien?"

"Pretty much. The only solid fact so far is the markets. The Stock Exchange dropped about a thousand points in the last three hours. Tony's a billionaire, *and* part of the national defense."

Pepper slapped her pockets. "Where's my..."
"I threw your phone out the window the second you fell asleep." Maya told her.

"Why?" Pepper demanded.

"Because it can be tracked, even if you leave it switched off." Maya told her harshly.

Pepper didn't have the energy to argue. "Well, it's probably for the best. I'll have a billion phone calls waiting for me, but if SHIELD isn't answering, then the only person I need to talk to is Tony. He'll find a way to contact me." Pepper said with certainty.

Maya peeked at her out of the corner of her eye. "It's the real thing, isn't it?" She asked. "You and him?"

Pepper twitched. "Yeah. Yeah it is."

Maya sighed. "Wow. There have been Jerry Springer marathons dedicated to that guy and his ex's; and you managed to tame the only guy considered extreme enough to get a restraining order from the entire Playboy Mansion. Seriously, I'm humbled."

Pepper hugged the torn helmet closer and glared at her lightly. "Why exactly are you here? Tony seemed to think it had something to do with Extremis."

"It does." Maya nodded. "Killian came to you, right? Asked you to have Stark Industries develop it?"

"Right." Pepper nodded.

"He lied." Maya sighed. "I developed it. I created Extremis."

Pepper blinked. "You?"

"I shall overlook the note of surprise in your voice. I assure you that I'm quite used to it." Maya commented. "You got the pitch from Killian, so you already know what it does."

"Tony said you came to him because of your work on tele-something."

"Telomeres." Maya said crisply. "When I last saw Tony, I was working with plant telomeres. I had trouble isolating them in a way stable enough to manipulate."

"Did he help?"

"In a manner of speaking." Maya commented. "But that was a long time ago."

"Why'd you look him up again?" Pepper asked.

Maya gripped the steering wheel tightly. "Because I think my boss is working for the Mandarin."

The AA Meeting wound down eventually, and everyone said their goodnights. Food was served, must most of them had better waiting at home.

Tony didn't, and ignored the looks people gave him as he ate three times as many cookies as others had. Eventually, he was the only one there, since he was the only one without a home to go to. While Barnes spoke with people he knew, Tony swept up the glass he'd broken and made a quick patch job to keep the cold out.
Tony made his way to the front door and helped pack up Barnes' van. His armor had been undisturbed all night. All he would have to do was collect it.

"So Mister 'Smith'." Father Barnes said lightly as he locked up. "What really brings you by? I know you weren't here because of booze."

"How do you know that?" Tony asked him lightly, not really listening.

Barnes reached out quickly and opened his jacket, revealing the wine bottle. "Some who favor strong drink would be willing to rip off a church, but not many would stick around for an AA meeting and have the gall to actually bring their wine with them afterwards."

Tony snorted. "I suppose not."

Barnes looked him over again. "You know, you look familiar... But I can't place where."

"I get that a lot." Tony tried to wave it off.

"I'm guessing it wasn't your idea to come tonight?" Barnes commented. "You seemed very... uncomfortable, the entire time you were there. I'm guessing what you heard hit a little too close to home?"

"More than a few people have told me I drink too much." Tony deflected.

"Hey, I run an AA meeting, and I probably drink too much myself," Barnes snorted. "But I think that someone who has a problem and isn't willing to face it, would try to avoid AA meetings. Add one to the other, and I'm guessing that your addiction of choice is not necessarily strong drink. Or at least, not the one that's worrying you."

Tony hesitated. "I... When I started, I was on top of the world, and I fell back to earth really fast. I kept going, because I was doing some good."

Barnes nodded. "I've heard the story before. Listen, you don't want to tell me what your problem is, I won't force you. But let me ask you this: Are you still on top of the world?"

"Not so much." Tony conceded.

"When you saw it starting to slide, did you ask for help?"

Tony thought back to Whiplash, and fighting with Rhodey... "No. In fact, I sort of went the other way."

"When you realized you were having trouble handling it, did you try and make a break, or did you dig yourself deeper into your addiction?"

Tony hesitated. "I rewrote the periodic table of elements making a new Arc Reactor. Having the old one removed before it killed me never even occurred. "Both actually, I made my way out of my problems by digging myself deeper."

Barnes nodded, not surprised. "Is your problem affecting your personal life? Your job?"

"Pepper. I made Pepper CEO so that I wouldn't have to be. "Yes." Tony admitted.

"Are people that care about you getting hurt? Getting pushed aside?"

"Where do I start? Pepper, Rhodey, Obadiah, Coulson, Happy... Aw, Happy, I'm so sorry. "Yeah."
He confessed finally. "Some of them hurt really bad. And now, here I am, miles from the people I care about."

Barnes leaned in closer, caring, protective. "This is the nature of addiction. You use it when you need to, and then you need to a little more, until you need to all the time. It takes up more and more of your life, until its all you have left." He gave Tony a clever look. "This is true of more than just alcohol. Any addiction is the same. Drugs, gambling..."

_Iron Man._ Tony hesitated again. He'd dodged, lied, diverted and deflected. He hadn't even told these people his name; but this man was right on the money. "There's only a few things left in my life that I love. I have to save them."

"Yes." Barnes said, not judging, not even accusing.

Tony finally met his gaze. "I didn't plan to come to the meeting. I didn't even know one was there. I just... came in to get out of the cold. I never planned to come here."

Barnes actually smiled at that. "Most people end up in a place they never planned to. I have dedicated my life to the idea that with help of higher powers, and a lot of support from the people you love, you can change your whole world into something you can be happy with. It starts by making a clean break."

Tony bit his lip. "How clean?"

"Complete." Barnes said without hesitation. "It has to be a total split from things that tempt you to fall back into your worst patterns."

Tony looked at the clergyman earnestly, and shook his head. "Can't do that, Padre. Not just yet."

And with that, Tony turned and stalked off into the cold, dark night.

**Chapter End Notes**

One of the opening scenes of the movie had Tony injecting himself with sensors so that his suit could find him, but the suits had no problem finding Pepper mid-explosion. That didn't make sense to me. Ditto for the power problems in the MK-45. This is my humble attempt to sort the plotholes.
Tony had dragged the Armor further into town, and found a Service Station that had been closed for the holidays. He broke in and assembled his armor on one of the worktables meant for heavy equipment.

The Service Station had lights, had tools, and was far enough away from the center of town, and the church.

The conversation at the church had unsettled him more than he would normally admit to. He'd admitted to Pepper that he was a little out of control; but he had no idea that it was so noticeable. Barnes hadn't even known who he was, but he'd put together a pretty scary picture that was perfectly correct.

Ever since he'd built the Arc Reactor he'd been at war with the use of it. A smart man would take that as a sign.

The strongest voices in opposition to nuclear armament were the ones that helped invent it. Oppenheimer, Stark, Teller... They had been the loudest voices against proliferation.

He'd been having nightmares about Afghanistan for a year after he got back. He went through a third of a bottle every night, and he didn't much care what was in it. And then he'd upgrade The Iron Man.

He didn't need a therapist, or a Priest to tell him what that meant. One made him numb, one made him bulletproof and he couldn't put down one without grabbing the other right away.

*If you hadn’t invented Iron Man, would Happy be alive? Mandarin would probably be active, but would Happy be investigating?*

"I have to keep going." Tony said to himself. "Just once. Just once more."

"Sir?" Jarvis asked, unsure of what that meant.

"Jarvis, how do I charge this damn suit?"

"At the moment sir, I would be surprised if the MK-45 could hold a charge from anything."

"What about the modular batteries?" Tony asked, seeking an alternative. "The segments all had power for flight; and it was enough to get Pepper and Maya out of the house... Plus fire a Uni-Beam. Can I get those batteries charged again?"

"Those batteries were meant to be charged by connection to the Arc Reactor." Jarvis reported. "And as I said, the damage and the salt-water has damaged those connection points."

Tony waved that off. "So we'll charge the modular batteries directly and let them carry the weight when the power from the Arc Reactor flickers, why the hell can't we do that?"

"There are no facilities to charge the modular batteries directly from the chest-piece."

Tony grinned. "Jarvis, Jarvis, Jarvis... who said anything about using the Arc Reactor?"
Fortunately, a Service Station had more than one set of jumper cables... and more than one car being kept on the premises. Tony was charging the parts of his armor three at a time.

Tony set the gauntlets to charge, and checked the clock on the wall. The jump cables could provide power, but not enough voltage to do this fast. Even at best, this would take several hours.

*Long enough to do what I came here to do.* Tony said to himself. *Now, what are the odds that Mandarin still has people in town?*

Tony grabbed some precision tools and started taking apart one of his gauntlets.

**Maya Hansen had pulled over for a Motel outside of LA. It was a secluded spot on a quiet road, and Pepper was glad for it.**

Maya went inside to collect the keys to the room she'd booked. Pepper stayed with the car, having a staring contest with the torn mask in her lap. She'd been staring at it off and on for hours, as though expecting it to say something.

And then she noticed a red light flicking on and off. She looked closer, inside the mask. There was a light flickering.

Pepper's head tilted. She knew the Helmet had a smaller backup power supply, to keep the HUD working a precious few seconds longer if power failed...

She tried to get a closer look; actually pressing her face into the helmet...

"Retinal Scan Confirmed." Said Jarvis' voice, and Pepper squeaked as the helmet closed snugly around her neck. "Welcome aboard, Miss Potts."

"Jarvis?" Pepper said into the dark.

The HUD did not light up, but there was a sudden scratchy, staticy sound... which faded into a familiar voice. "Pepper, I'm routing this call to a number I trust. It'll reach all the helmets that survived, and if you're still looking for me, that should do it. Not that I'm worried. I know you won't give up on me. You never have before."

"I never will." Pepper promised him softly, eyes tearing up with relief.

"I just wanted to say how sorry I was. I screwed up royally, with Happy, and Mandarin, and that stupid stuffed rabbit... but you of all people know that I'm at my best when I have to make the wrong things right. I have to play dead for a while; but I couldn't let you think that I was really gone. I'd never die without telling you first. Knowing you, you'll be busy holding it all together until I can do something heroic and noble... But whatever you do, don't trust Maya."

Pepper blinked, surprised.

"I wanted to do this right, but let's face it: That's not my strongest skill." Tony said softly. "Be safe, and I'll make it up to you. I love you. I love you so much."

"Love you." Pepper said softly. The message ended, and the neck-piece relaxed it's grip. Pepper took the helmet off...

...revealing Maya Hansen standing in the doorway to the bathroom, watching her. "He's alive, isn't he?"
Tony had left his suit's modular batteries charging in the service station. Now he needed answers. He'd come all the way to Tennessee looking for a lead.

All he had was a name. Chad Davis. The man that had blown himself up and taken Happy with him. Except that the world thought he'd died over a year earlier, in this small town outside Chattanooga.

The town was quiet, since everything was closed this late; and at this time of year. Tony was still limping from the pasting he'd taken at the house, and he'd long since lost feeling in his toes. There had been no shoes in the Church lost and found. The work clothes and overalls he had found in the lockers at the service station had boots, none of which were his size. He'd taken a pair that were two sizes too big and had been stumbling around in them for almost twenty minutes.

He didn't care.

The main street was like a billion other places in America. A diner, a bar, two service stations, a supermarket. The railways came up close, and from the looks of some rail-cars already set-up, the primary source of income was lumber.

Most of the buildings were dark, but there was a phone booth in sight. Tony went to it, and grabbed the phone book.

There were seven Davis' listed. The first two weren't home, the third didn't know what he was talking about...

The fourth was an older woman who shouted 'No Comment' harshly, and hung up on him.

"Jackpot."

Pepper had hesitated to use the shower. Maya hadn't seemed worried, but Tony's last message worried her.

"Whatever you do... don't trust Maya."

She scrubbed her face and hands clean, then came back into the room. Maya was hunched over the broken helmet, fiddling with the inner workings. "What are you doing?"

Maya looked up. "Trying to figure out the power requirements on this thing. If we can charge the helmet a bit, we can send a signal pulse back along whatever protected communications lines he used. Maybe we can find out where he is now."

Pepper reached out and took the helmet off her pointedly. "Listen, this is going to sound rude. Pepper said professionally. "But I don't know you. And what little I do know suggests that if we had met thirteen years ago; I would have been waiting outside your room in the morning with your freshly pressed clothes and a cup of coffee, before I politely kicked your ass out of the house."

Maya sighed. "No doubt. All right, what do you want to know?"

"Where do you fit in to this story?"

Maya shrugged. "Okay. What the hell. I left MIT looking to use telomere gene-hacking to make transhuman advances."

"Okay, now I need that again in non-genius talk."
"I figured out how to hack a human being's blueprint. If you want to change your appearance, make yourself younger, cure any disease, regrow a lost limb... I could do it. But I needed ten years, a few billion dollars and an investor smart enough to shut up and just let me work."

Pepper snorted. "Hard to find."

"So I discovered. I had funding from the military for a while." Maya explained. "Then Iron Man showed up, and suddenly the idea of a one man army became mechanical instead of bionic. The Joint Chiefs trust hardware over genetics." This was said with a tired sneer, and Pepper knew she was being presented with a long held frustration. "The supersoldier funding was taken off me and given to Justin Hammer, who in turn gave it to Whiplash. He promptly blew half the US Military Generals off the map, and suddenly I was completely unemployed since the government already had War Machine."

"So you went to work for Aldrich Killian?"

"Not exactly." Maya rubbed her face with her hands. "God. I went to work for Killian, but not on Extremis. I worked on other things for him. Then the New York Invasion happened, and Captain America came back from the dead, and... Well, a biological formula for a super soldier seemed like a good deal again, so I was reactivated. I had contracts, I had to leave AIM. But a week later, the Mandarin's people started putting the pinch on me, and they... knew things. Things that Killian and the US Government had both buried in the world's deepest hole."

Her tone was filled with numb regret, and Pepper reminded herself not to trust it. "What did they have?"

"Doesn't matter." Maya waved it off. "But if I gave Mandarin what he wanted, I'd be taken out and shot for treason. And if I denied him, I would be taken out and shot by bad guys. So I picked door number three."

"You came looking for Tony." Pepper nodded. "You went to work for a Think Tank, Maya. Everything else came after."

"I knew what they were. I knew why the Military would want my research." Maya sighed.

Pepper shook her head. "We made breakthroughs too. All of them came off military funding. I've made peace with that."

"Thank you for that." Maya sighed again. "What do we do now?"

Pepper looked to the phone. Can't contact Tony. Rhodey will be halfway to Eastern Asia by now... Call Fury.

Maya looked to the phone. "I tried. No dial-tone. You have to talk to the front desk, they unlock the phone. For a moderate fee, of course."

Pepper rolled her eyes. "My cash and credit cards are all underwater right now."

"Shouldn't use a credit card anyway." Maya shook her head.

"No?" Pepper tensed. "It seems to me that a credit check could help the good guys find us too."

Maya met her gaze. Pepper met her eyes head on. Something in her face must have tipped her hand...
Maya sighed. "What gave me away?"

Pepper stepped to the left, putting her back to the wall. "Well, let's see. Within a day of Tony vanishing off the face of the earth, you tossed my phone, drove me out of town, checked us into an isolated motel under a fake name, prevented any paper trail leading to me... And admitted that you worked for the Mandarin, even indirectly."

Maya smirked. "Well, you put it that way, I don't sound so clever, do I?"

She wasn't even nervous, and Pepper cast around. The motel was cheap. All the fixtures were bolted down. If this came to a fight, Pepper was down to her bare hands. She'd trained with Happy, and with Coulson once...

Maya held out a hand. "I told them that I could make this happen quietly. I was told that under no circumstances were you to be harmed." She almost laughed. "You should feel honored, Potts. Even I don't rate non-expendable status."

Pepper pressed her back against the wall; making sure that nobody could sneak up on her...

A red, glowing fist came through the wall at her back, and Pepper squeaked in shock as it reached around blindly, but fast enough to get her by the throat.

Pepper thrashed and kicked, but she couldn't break free of the hot, calloused fingers.

Maya hadn't flinched. She stepped to the door and unlocked it. A moment later, four men in dark clothing stepped into the room and came over to grasp Pepper by the arms. The hand at her throat released, and she turned her head to get a look. Someone had casually reached through the wall from the far side to keep her still.

Maya looked sick about it, but didn't hesitate to collect her things. "Inform Aldrich that Stark is alive. But now that we've got her, it's only good news for us, however this goes."

"The Director will be glad to hear that you're alive, sir."

Tony glanced over his shoulder. "Put me through to him, let me give him the good news."

"I'm afraid the Director is unavailable."

"Fine. Give me Agent Hill." Tony said without missing a beat. "I tried calling the Helicarrier directly, but-"

"I'm afraid Agent Hill and all Level Six agents are currently on communications blackout."

"All of them?" Tony was stunned. What the hell are they in the middle of?

"Yes sir." The very young voice on the other end of the line responded. "You were supposed to have been informed-"

"I was." Stark sighed. "Look, just... tell everyone what's going on, and make sure that they pick their moment to save my ass."

"I'm sure that they know that, sir."

Tony let out a snort of contempt and hung up. SHIELD had stonewalled him, Pepper was in the wind, and Mrs Davis had hung up on him.
Chad Davis was his only lead; and the only connection to him wasn't answering questions.

He should call Rhodes, but if Iron Patriot showed up in a small town in Tennessee, someone would inevitably ask why, and if Tony was revealed as alive, Pepper would be in greater danger.

Tony checked the phone book again. Mrs Davis was in town, but without Jarvis, or a phone, or a map, Tony had no idea where her house would be.

Tony ripped the page out of the phone book, and started walking again. He needed directions. There were only a few places open, and only one that he could see with a fair number of people in it. The bar.

Noticing the tavern had made Tony suddenly aware of how cold he was. He still couldn't feel his feet.

He had cleaned out the service station, and the billionaire now only had thirty five dollars to his name. He'd drained the wine bottle to nothing... and was seriously considering spending a good chunk of it on hard booze, just to keep warm.

The cold wind shifted, and Tony smelled barbecue. His stomach roared instantly. The handful of cookies and four cups of coffee at Barnes' meeting hadn't so much killed his appetite as woken it up.

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He stood out inside the Tavern. He looked like a homeless bum, and he was studying a menu carefully, counting out dollar bills on the bar, weighing his options. He was about to order when a tray was put in front of him. Toast, a bowl of soup and a plate of eggs; plus coffee.

Tony looked up at the woman behind the counter in surprise. "I... haven't ordered yet."

"On the house." The young woman said kindly. "And the table closest to the fireplace just opened up; I made sure of it."

"What?" Tony was surprised.

She pointed at the overalls he was wearing. "Those are my husband's overalls. This time of night, there's only one way you could have got them"

Tony ducked his head, caught out. Damn small towns. He raged at himself. Too many people who know each other.

The woman nodded, not pushing it. "Times are hard all over. This one's on me."

Tony smelled the bowl of soup and felt his stomach roar. "Thank you." He said quietly. Asking directions can wait the length of a meal.

She left him to himself and he practically inhaled his meal on the way to the fireplace.

He wanted to order something stronger than coffee; but couldn't bring himself to do it now.

Tony looked up as the bell above the door chimed... and quickly hunched his shoulders, tugging the cap low. Father Barnes had just walked in.

Barnes wandered up to the counter and ordered something. He spoke to the woman that had given Tony food for a few moments, and then made his way over to the fireplace. Tony twisted in his seat, trying hard to be subtle about it, and keep his back to the man at all times.
Barnes wasn't fooled. "I truly didn't recognize you." He said quietly. "But when I got home and turned on the television, I saw your face every ten seconds. They broke into the regular programming. Be glad that this place shut down the cable months ago, or the whole town would know."

Tony sighed. "What's the news saying?"

"The President closed the market half an hour ago. They say it won't reopen until after the holidays. People are freaking out about whether or not they'll have jobs in January." Barnes reported. "The President has cancelled his holiday stay at Camp David and is returning to the White House, given that a billionaire, an international celebrity, a major national defense asset, and a world hero like yourself has just been taken down. They keep showing that footage of your house going over the side of the cliff non-stop. You've been declared missing and presumed dead." He paused, glancing over his shoulder. "What you were doing in my Church, of all places, is anyone's guess; but nobody seems to know about it."

"Did they mention Pepper Potts?"

"Only that she's gone into hiding; though Fox News is reporting that she's dead." Barnes quickly calmed him. "They had footage of her standing near the wreck of the house, talking to War Machine after the attack, but it was done with a telephoto lens from at least half a mile away."

Tony sighed. "You know his name is Iron Patriot now."

"Please. I'm a clergyman, and even I can tell that War Machine was a much better name."

Tony found that hilarious. After a while he settled. "Look, I'm not particularly religious, but... Thank you?"

"You're welcome."

"And when I go, can you thank the woman behind the bar? She recognized the overalls I'm wearing, and before she called the cops, she gave me food and a spot by the fire."

Barnes leaned in. "What I said, about how people were freaking out about having jobs in the New Year? Last New Years Eve, that was what the people in this town were scared of. And they were right. This town is vanishing right off the map. The service station is only open four days a week now, and the people who work there are down to two shifts from five. So a guy walks in needing a little help? Not a new situation."

Tony took that in. "What went wrong?"

Barnes sighed. "Time was, this town had a pretty good source of income, mostly from lumber. We had a sawmill to handle the logs ourselves, and then we shipped the finished product into the city... About a year ago, the lumber yard blew up. The propane tanks, you see. Around the same time, someone placed a bid to have the logs turned into usable wood in the city, instead of locally, and the majority of the work in town just dried up before we could get the lumber mill fixed." Barnes waved that off. "But you didn't come to town to talk about our economic troubles."

Tony's face had turned to stone during all this. "The man that committed suicide. By any chance was his name Chad Davis?"

Barnes nodded. "Did the Eulogy myself."

"Then as it happens, Padre... That's exactly why I came to town."
Rhodes checked in with Colonel Allen at Edwards Air Force Base. Before becoming War Machine, Allen was his commanding officer. Now he was the military liaison between the Joint Chiefs and the Iron Patriot. "Any sign of Stark?" Allen asked as soon as Rhodes landed.

"No sir." Rhodes reported. "Has the prisoner given anything useful?"

Allen took a deep breath. "Rhodes, there's something you need to know. The prisoner escaped."

"Escaped?" Rhodes repeated. "How?"

"We're not quite sure." Allen reported. "We had him in detention under guard, when we got an order from the Pentagon to move him to a secret facility. We put him in a convoy, doped him up to his eyeballs, and put them on the road... We got word ten minutes later that the convoy had exploded in route."

"Exploded?" Rhodes repeated. "I checked him for weapons, I checked him for explosives... hell, I damn near checked him for colon cancer, how the hell did he blow up a convoy?"

"That's the part we can't figure out." Allen nodded. "The explosion was smaller, but it wiped out all the recording and tracking devices."

"Just like the other Mandarin blasts."

Allen nodded. "It happened well away from the city." He reported. "The cover story is that it was a propane truck. The Pentagon took over the whole scene. No survivors... But one of the drivers held out long enough to report that he saw your prisoner walk out of the blast."

Rhodes stared. "How is that even possible?"

Allen snorted. "The one man that might have an answer to that is Tony Stark."

"I'm afraid there's not much left." Barnes said.

He had led Tony away from the bar. It wasn't a long walk. The Lumber Mill had been fairly central to town. Two streets behind the Main road, out of sight of the houses, was a large blackened space. The railway came right up near it, and even the tracks were twisted up. The far side had the office buildings, which were more or less untouched, but still scorched.

The production lines, the storage areas, the equipment, all of it was unrecognizable.

Barnes had led him to the wall. Hidden away from the wind was a small shrine. Over a dozen candles, plenty of letters stacked neatly, one bouquet of fresh flowers...

And two blast shadows on the wall. Human silhouettes.

"The only bodies we recognized were here." Barnes said sadly, heavy with the burden. "Over a dozen lives taken, only two bodies still intact enough for burial." He waved at the rest of the complex. "There are more shadows in there. We set up the memorial here because it's too dangerous to go in too close."

Tony went to the shadows on the wall, eyes wide. He reached out for them automatically, and his hands were shaking. Oh no, not now...

"They closed the mill the same day we held the memorial. This town was buried with them."
Barnes sighed. "Another year, there won't be anything left of it. They'll all move into Chattanooga, and this will be all that's left."

Tony reeled away from the wall and threw up the only food he'd had for over a day.

"Mister Stark?" Barnes was alarmed.

Tony gagged, coughed, spluttered... He rolled over onto his back, gasping for air. It wasn't panic this time, it was full blown hysteria. It was doing more than hurting people, it was shutting down whole communities now. Shadows on the wall in the far east, shadows on the wall in New York, shadows on the wall in Tennessee, just people dead everywhere.

Barnes slapped him.

Stark snapped out of it instantly, the world getting clear again; and he suddenly realized he'd been speaking aloud.

Barnes held out a scoop full of snow and Stark took it, pressing the cold against his face. They were silent for a long moment, but it was clear Barnes knew exactly what he was seeing.

"How long?" Barnes asked quietly as Stark recovered.

"Since New York." Stark confessed. "Usually when someone brings it up, but sometimes..."

Barnes nodded. "Is that what happened at the house?" He asked. "When the helicopters came?"

"No." Stark shook his head. He looked up at Barnes. "I don't know if I can do this."

Barnes snorted. "You came here for a reason. If this has been happening since New York was invaded, you had to know that you weren't in top form when you began hunting Mandarin. But here you are."

Stark didn't look up at him. "I think it's my fault." He said quietly. "I think the bombings are based on me." He pulled the overalls aside and showed his Arc Reactor for the first time since he'd arrived in town. "On this."

Barnes nodded. "You blame yourself?"

"I invented it."

"Yeah?" Barnes challenged. "How many people in the world get shot every day? How many people get killed in car accidents? How many people get killed with an axe, or a kitchen knife... or for that matter, the corner of a big heavy book? Who invented these things?"

Stark let out a bitter bark of laughter at that.

Barnes leaned back. "I had a woman in my congregation once, she was trying to quit smoking. She demanded to know why God always put a cigarette machine in front of her when she had a craving. She blamed God for giving her lung cancer." Barnes snorted. "Don't blame the creator for the evils of the creation, much less the misuse of it."

"There it is!" Stark croaked. "Mark it on the calender. A man of the cloth actually compared me to God."

Barnes threw a handful of snow at him. Stark threw another handful back.
"What do I do now?" Stark asked him.

Barnes considered. "What did you come here to do?"

"Find Chad Davis." Tony said. "Or at least, something that might connect him to bad people."

"Did you try his mother?" Barnes asked.

"I found a number in the phone book. She hung up on me."

Barnes nodded. "Well, I'm not surprised. She hated the attention. Her son had just died, everyone said it was a suicide that took a dozen innocent people, most of whom were friends... And then the reporters got into it. 'No Comment' has been her mantra for over a year now."

Tony shrugged, as if to say 'well, that's that'.

Barnes rose, and held out a hand to Stark, pulling him up. "But she'll talk to me."

Rhodes was going over the files again at Edwards Air Force Base, looking for a clue. His phone rang, and he snatched it up. "Rhodes."

It was Allen. "Colonel, we have a large package for you at the front gate. It's labelled personal and confidential... And it took four guys with a hand crane to get it off the truck."

"Who brought it?" Rhodes asked, already on his feet.

"You ready for this? It was Fed-Ex." Allen told him. "And you'll never believe this... but the name on the return address is Tony Stark."

Rhodes quickly came to the front gate. There were sniffer dogs checking it over for explosives, there were soldiers clearing the area...

The crate was taller than Rhodes was, and had stickers all over it.

"Could be a trap." Allen told Rhodes quietly. "But it's addressed to you."

He was letting Rhodes make the call, and the colonel decided quickly. "I think... We should open it."

"You want to get 'in uniform' first?" Allen suggested.

"Ordinarily, yes." Rhodes said, already collecting the crowbar. "But I will bet you a steak dinner that I already know what's in here."

Intrigued, Allen stepped back. "Okay. I'll take that bet."

Rhodes used the crowbar to force the box open. Once one side fell away, the whole box opened in all directions, the walls laying flat...

And there, standing assembled before them, was a new Armor. It was clearly meant to follow the War Machine design. The shoulders were sleeker, the torso smoother, the weapons were more retractable...

The original War Machine was just the MK-II with a whole bunch of weapons welded onto it. This was something entirely new. This one was made with the end result in mind, instead of improvised.
Rhodes came closer to it, quietly thrilled.

Painted on the wrist, was the serial number. WM-2.

"I can't believe he would send this in the mail, without any kind of defenses..." Allen came over to join him. "Did you know-ACK!"

The instant Allen got within three feet of the suit, the mini-gun swiveled around and drew a laser guided bead on his heart.


Allen did so, and the gun retracted back into 'standby' mode.

Taking a breath, Rhodes moved a little closer... and the suit opened for him, the same way Iron Man did for Tony. Rhodes recognized the invitation for what it was and shrugged off his jacket and tie. He stepped into the armor, sliding his hands and feet into the open limbs, and the suit closed neatly around him.

Rhodes knew instantly that he was always going to be the pilot. It had been designed with him in mind. Justin Hammer had reworked the MK-II interior, but the original armor was nothing compared to this. it was more than tailored, it was comfortable.

"Retinal Scan confirmed." Jarvis' voice said smoothly. "Countermeasures offline, at pilot discretion."

"All Clear." Rhodes called to Allen. "I should probably get this thing into the Hangar with the other one."

Allen nodded, and led the way.

A video began to play in the corner of the HUD as Rhodes walked. It was a video of Tony, though when it was taken, he couldn't tell. "Hey, Rh odey." Tony said. "I set this up for you, and then I had the package held at the Stark Industries mailroom. And then I left an automated instruction to ship it to you, if the news started using a lot of specific keywords. Keywords like 'Tony' and 'Stark' and 'dead' and 'good looking corpse'. You know what I mean?"

Rhodes winced. "Yeah." He said quietly. "I know what you mean."

"I hope..." Tony rubbed his face. "I hope I did okay, and that a lot of beautiful women come to my funeral. And if they do, don't let Pepper talk with any of them for too long, right?" He licked his lips. "Odds are, Iron Man finally picked a fight with something he couldn't handle, and if that's so, then you've probably been handed a big fight to win. Consider the War Machine Two my apology for leaving you holding the bag... and my thanks for avenging me."

By this time they were in the hangar, where the Iron Patriot was stored, ready for assembly.

Tony's message wasn't finished. "So if you are watching this, then it probably means I'm dead. On the off chance I never saw it coming, I just wanted to let you know that... Look, I don't have a lot of people in my life that I keep. I've got a million people wanting five minutes of my time every day, but there's only five people in the world that I consider family. You were one of them, and I know I never made it easy for you. Not even a little bit. So I wanted to thank you, for not giving up on me, even when I gave up on myself a long time ago. Take care of Pepper and Happy for me. And now that you're in the deluxe edition of your armor... take care of the planet too. There's nobody else I'd trust to do it." Tony moved to switch off the video, then looked back. "Oh, and delete my browser
history before Pepper finds it."

The video switched off.

Allen was looking back at the other armor, standing by, though fully assembled. "Well..." He said finally. "At least we have a spare suit to examine now."

As if it had heard him, Rhodes' HUD lit up with a warning message. **Uploading Kill-Switch**

"What?" Rhodes asked nobody in particular.

An instant later there came an electronic whine from the original Iron Patriot, and the things started to shiver, then shake... until it fell apart into it's individual sections. Sparks started going off from within each component, as if someone had set off a set of fire crackers in each piece of the armor.

Finally, the fireworks show fizzled out with as cloud of smoke. Even the Arc Reactor had gone dark.

Rhodes snorted. "Not any more."

Rhodes' HUD opened another video, this one clearly recorded a few seconds after the first. "Oh, and one more thing, before I forget." Tony said to the camera. "I added a software upgrade to make sure nobody could fly either suit, except for you. Be careful who gets the obsolete machine, because it could blow up in their faces."

The video ended.

"Welcome aboard, Colonel Rhodes. The War Machine MK-II is at your disposal." Jarvis said smoothly. "Shall we begin your tutorial with the upgrades?"

"Oh, hell yes." Rhodes breathed.

Mrs Davis was spending the holidays with her family. None of them wanted her to go, and she didn't want any of them dragged into the matter, so she agreed to meet for ten minutes, at the bar. Barnes relayed the message to Stark, who was willing to meet anywhere that meant staying with the fireplace.

She looked a lot older than Father Barnes said she was. Life had thrown her troubles that had aged her terribly. She was wearing a parka, and carried a shoulder bag. Her hair was loose and went down to her shoulders. Tony got the impression she didn't put any effort into herself any more.

"Now, remember." Barnes told Stark quietly. "The woman hates to talk about this, and the fact is she's been somewhat isolated from a very tight knit community. So if you can try not to-"

"Not to act like myself." Tony nodded. "I understand."

Mrs Davis came up to the table with a sigh. "Father." She nodded to Barnes. "Who is this?"

"Someone who's trying to make things right." Barnes made introductions. "He's not a reporter. He's not police."

Mrs Davis looked Tony over, and wasn't impressed by what she saw. "You want to help, huh? You think there's anything that can be done at this point?"
Tony glanced at Barnes and spoke. "Probably not. I think if the victims need help, you should talk to him." He jerked a thumb at the clergyman. "But, for what it's worth, I do know what it's like to lose people you love, and not even get a moment to mourn." He paused, just a breath. "I'm sorry for your loss, by the way."

Mrs Davis sat down across from them. "It's like this." She sighed, exhausted. "In the space of a big bang, things changed. Suddenly I'm not the woman who raised a brave soldier, I'm the woman who raised the man who killed your brother, or your friend, or your boss. It's a small town, and I'm toxic."

Stark met her gaze evenly. "Not to me."

She considered him a moment, and took a manilla folder out of her bag. "I asked them to keep me updated. They don't have a whole lot. At least, not that they'll give me."

Tony looked through the file. Chad Davis' entire Unit was listed, along with photographs, and in the corner of each page was a watermark in capital letters. MIA

"Mrs Davis?" Tony said quietly. "What if I told you that your son wasn't responsible for those deaths? That he didn't kill anyone?"

Her face changed. It looked like a spark of hope was in her eyes, and she hated herself for feeling it.

"I believe someone used him. Used him as a weapon." Tony continued. "I believe that he had no idea what he was into... which is why he's dead. If I'm right, then those people were murdered just to cover it up."

Mrs Davis' hands were shaking. She turned to Barnes. "Is he on the level?"

Barnes was about to respond, when someone came up behind Stark, and a grip clapped on his shoulder hard. "Hello, Mister Stark."

Tony craned his neck back, to look up at the woman that had sidled up behind him. She was attractive, but seemed more powerful than anything else. Her skin was a dark olive color, her eyes deep and bright, and her teeth bared whenever she spoke. Tony's first impression was of a half-woman, half-Jaguar.

At the other end of the bar, a man in a leather jacket jumped up and came over casually. "Is there a problem here?"

Barnes was quickly on his feet. "Andy, this woman is trying to arrest a friend of mine. He's been coming to my meetings, and I brought him here for a hot meal. Ask Maggie, she'll tell you."

Andy looked over at the bar, and the woman there nodded. "I gave him some food an hour ago."

Andy slid his thumbs into his belt, pulling his jacket back enough to show a badge and a gun. "How about it, Miss? I know you're not one of my deputies."

The woman didn't release her grip on Stark's shoulder, and pulled a badge with her other hand. "Agent Brandt, Homeland Security. I'm making an arrest. You the Sheriff?"

"I am, as a matter of fact."

Stark gave Barnes a quick look, and gestured at Mrs Davis with his eyes. Barnes read his intention
and quickly collected the file, sliding it into his jacket.

"Well, Sheriff; I'm afraid this is a bit above your pay grade." Brandt said simply. "You don't want to get involved in this."

The Sheriff didn't even blink. "How about you call Nashville and have me promoted, then? Because you're not going to go hauling people away in my town. As far as I can see, this man's only crime is that he's in need of a little charity. We don't generally call in the Feds for that."

Mrs Davis didn't have a clue what was going on, but was smart enough to know there was trouble coming. She rose and blended into the other patrons, who were taking an interest in what was going on.

Brandt didn't even glance at them, and Stark knew with certainty that she was a fake. A real federal agent wouldn't have let them leave the table at all.

"Let her take me." Stark said suddenly. "I'm sure I can clear this up once we're out of your way." He willed Barnes to understand what he was really saying. There are innocent people in the room. Don't let anything go down here.

Barnes read his face and paled, turning to the Sheriff. "Andy, maybe we should sort this out som-

"Andy." Brandt said the name in a mocking tone. "I was actually going to be subtle about this. You know why it's going another way?" Her eyes changed from burning black to actual glowing red. "It's because I don't ever have to be subtle ever again!"

Barnes reared back in shock, crossing himself automatically. The Sheriff saw her skin change from deep olive to volcanic red and he cursed, reaching for his gun.

Brandt moved like a mousetrap, slamming her fist out to hit The Lawman in the face. Tony could hear the snap as the man's head was spun around, almost 180 degrees. The Sheriff dropped, dead before he saw the movement. Brandt had snatched the holster off his belt before his body even started to fall.

Then the screaming started.

The holster burst into flames against Brandt's hand, and burned away completely. The gun settled, holster first, into her grip, and Brandt started shooting. The Deputies first, anyone reaching for a phone second... And then eventually, anyone she could see moving.

Barnes ran in the opposite direction to the crowd and dove out the front window.

Tony grabbed the fork on the table and jerked it back at Brandt's face. She somehow titled her head out of the way, still shooting, and caught his wrist in her teeth. Tony yelled and released the fork automatically.

She was laughing, until the gun clicked dry. With a swift jerk, she had hauled Tony out of his seat and toward the front door. Her strength was enough that Tony felt his feet leave the floor.

The Main Street was filled with people that had heard over a dozen gunshots. People were screaming, scattered around...

Tony tried again to break free. And she laughed at him. "Good that you got that out of your system." She told him. "Now, before I muss up that pretty face of yours some more, I have to find that file. Where'd the Priest go?"
"FREEZE!" Someone up the street shouted.

"A town this size, having more than two deputies?" Brandt sighed. "What were the odds?" She shoved Stark hard enough that he went skidding across the snow.

The street had cleared enough as people scattered, and the two remaining lawmen in town opened fire.

Tony spared one glance back, daring to look. Brandt took two bullets in the chest... and didn't even flinch. Her skin glowed red hot for a moment, and she shrugged her jacket off.

Another gunshot came; and Brandt dodged. She was running instantly.

*She's so fast!* Tony thought in disbelief. *How can anything on two legs **move** that fast?*

There was the sound of dark screaming up the road as she reached them. Tony glanced around and smashed open the Diner's large storefront window. He clambered inside, and made his way through to the kitchen, staying off the street...

There was a small window in the kitchen. Tony barely looked at it; since it was only big enough for a nine year old.

And then the window exploded inward. Brandt came in through the window, moving at a full stretched dive that a circus gymnast would never had been able to equal.

Before Tony could register the movement, Brandt came down in a forward roll, and came out of the roll at a halt, on her feet, less than three inches from Stark, nose to nose.

Chivalry was one thing, but this woman was out of control, and by all accounts, stronger than human. He hauled off and hit her as hard as he could. She barely blinked, but didn't chase him as he spun away and tried to get out of the kitchen.

By the time he got through the swinging doors around the counter, she had rolled over it, and was waiting for him on the other side.

Tony swung again. By the time his fist got halfway to her, she wasn't there any more. Tony spun around to try and follow her, and found her sitting on the edge of the counter, looking like she'd been patiently waiting for him to catch up.

*She's toying with me.*

Then she struck back, and the world went sideways. She moved like something out of the Matrix, just a blur of motion, and suddenly Tony felt the air explode from his lungs.

He managed to get a forearm across her neck and put all his weight into flipping her over...

And she didn't budge. Her limbs blurred from the speed they moved at, and suddenly he was against the wall. She got right up in his face, her body flush against his.

Brandt was smiling lustfully. "God, this is a rush." She breathed against his lips. Her skin blazed red hot again, then white-hot, and Stark howled as the heat pressed against him.

"Now. Where's that file?" Brandt asked him brightly.

Tony said nothing.
She casually tossed him over her shoulder with one hand. It was a toss that put him back in the kitchen. He slammed into the stainless steel cabinets hard enough to dent them, and rolled onto his back with a groan. She was leaning over the counter, looking down at him.

"I can do this all day." She reminded him and pulled back from the counter. She was casually strolling into the kitchen through the doors this time.

Tony took advantage of the few seconds she was out of sight and pulled the hose out of the propane tank under the grill, and grabbed for the menus. He shoved a handful of menus into the toaster, and hit the button, before diving back over the counter.

He had a clear path to the front door and took it, sparing a glance over his shoulder, looking for her...

By the time he made it to the front door, she was outside, at the curb. How she got there, Stark couldn't guess, and didn't care...

...because she had a hostage.

Father Barnes was being held by the throat, his feet at least six inches off the ground.

Brandt grinned coldly, knowing she had them both.

"Let him go." Tony said quickly. "I'm the one you want, and you have to know that breaking a Priest is seven years bad luck. Or worse."

"Oh, like I'm not already going to hell." Brandt laughed.

Tony circled her carefully. She moved with him, circling them both around, until she had her back to the Diner.

"Please!" Barnes grit out past the hand around his throat. "...you don't have to..."

Brandt laughed. "There's nobody who can help you, Father. Without his armor, he's nothing."

"You know the great thing about armor?" Tony snarled. "It can be disassembled."

A replusor slid down Tony's sleeve from his wrist to the palm of his hand. It had been waiting there for half the night, hooked up to the Arc Reactor in his chest.

Tony's hand came up like a gunslinger, and a repulsor blast roared out in the dark. The blast hit her in the arm, and she dropped her hostage as the recoil spun Stark around 180 degrees. He turned with it, spinning around in place to take another shot. The recoil hit him again, and he tried to keep the spin going. He went down on one knee and fired a third time.

Brandt was hit square in the stomach by the next two shots and was picked up by the blast, thrown back into the Diner. She managed to get her feet under her before she hit the floor, when her nose picked up the scent of gas. She looked back at the kitchen and caught a glimpse of the menus... stuffed into the toaster oven. Her superhuman brain put two and two together just as the toaster oven dinged, and a small curl of flame flickered into view on the menus...

The Diner erupted into a massive fireball that knocked Barnes and Stark flat.

For a long moment, neither of them said anything.
"Well, that's... violent." Barnes commented dumbly.

Stark shrugged and got to his feet. "It's what I do."

Barnes started to say something else, when he looked past Tony and crossed himself again.

Tony spun, and found Brandt emerging from the ruined Diner. She had a hole clean through her midsection from the repulsor, big enough that Tony could see through her to the other side.

Brandt's face was black like cooling lava, fire blazing underneath. Her eyes were grim crimson death, glowing bright enough to light up the street. "I am becoming unamused." She growled demoniacally.

Tony was stunned. He had nothing left. That was the end of his bag of tricks.

Brandt closed in on them both. "Father, the file." She growled. "Give it to me now, so that I can kill you. I promise to make it quick. Deny me, and you'll know what hellfire is like."

And then, from up the street, came another burst of light and noise. Brandt turned to look, as did both men, and there was Mrs Davis, behind the wheel of a pickup truck, driving at full speed toward Brandt with her high beams on. Her intention was obvious.

By the time the truck reached her, Brandt had enough time to give Stark the finger, blow a kiss to the clergyman, and neatly do a double somersault from a standing start, taking her clear over the truck as it passed underneath her leap.

Brandt landed, catlike; and hadn't even worked up a sweat. Her blackened skin was repairing, the hole through her middle closing over.

Mrs Davis hit the brakes, and fishtailed on the icy streets, until she rammed into a power pole. Already damaged from the explosion, the pole collapsed, and brought the heavy powerlines down with it.

The powerlines laid over Brandt, who hadn't even looked to see where the truck went. The electricity took an instant liking to her. There was a snap, like lightning was striking something, and Brandt howled suddenly, as huge voltage ran through her.

"Move!" Stark hissed, and both men quickly ran to the crashed truck.

Mrs Davis was dead, face down against the steering wheel.

Tony winced, and Barnes started speaking quietly, giving her last rites as quickly as he could.

Brandt was rising again, looking woozy from the shock. It was the first time she seemed stunned or bothered by any of the damage she had taken.

"We need a car." Tony croaked.

Barnes quickly led the way over to the side of the road. "We can take mine."

Brandt saw them getting into the car, and started running after them. Barnes dropped the car into gear and floored it. The car picked up speed quickly on the abandoned street, and she gave chase.

Barnes was in the drivers seat. "She's gaining on us!"

_How fast is she?_ Tony shook his head in reluctant respect. "Damn, I don't know what's she's using,
but I want some."

They tore out of the town, heading for the long empty roads into the woods.

"When I say, hit the brake." Stark directed; and rolled down the passenger side window.

Brandt had almost caught up with them, doing at least fifty-five in bare feet, when Stark pointed his repulsor out the window at her, leaning out dangerously far to get a target.

Brandt saw the shot coming, and leaped, hurtling forward for the car.

"NOW!" Stark yelled, ducking back in.

Barnes hit the brakes, and skidded on the ice.

Brandt wasn't able to change her direction in mid-air, and overshot, coming down in front of them.

"Floor it!" Stark shouted, and Barnes pounced back on the accelerator, getting control back just in time to run Brandt over. The impact sent her rolling off the road, but neither man considered slowing down.

By the time she got back on her feet, they were out of sight.

"Kill the lights." Stark told him.

"Dangerous, this time of night, on icy roads." Barnes commented, but he turned them off anyway, making the car effectively invisible on the dark streets.

Both men paused to breathe.

"You still have the file?" Stark asked him.

"Yeah. I hid it back in town."

"You WHAT?!"

Barnes smirked. "I'm kidding; I've got it right here. Jeez, Stark, get a sense of humor."

Tony let out a breath explosively. Despite himself, he was starting to like this guy. "One more thing. I just stole this car, and you have no idea who I was, where I'm going, or why someone was after me."

"Right." Barnes was unsurprised. "I hope there's still a Deputy left alive in town to report the theft."

The pain in his voice was clear, and Stark felt guilt gnawing at him again. The fight hadn't been his fault, but still, it was Barnes' friends that had paid the price for it.

Chapter End Notes

I know the fight didn't go that way, but I wanted to amp up Extremis a bit. Anyone who can go hand to hand with four Iron Men and knock down three of them has to be pretty tough. Two of them getting taken out by un-armored Tony didn't sit right, given what we saw later.
To those who were fans of the cute little kid... meh. he was good, but he wasn't needed. The Tony Stark One-Man Show can create as much comic relief as it needs.
Before going into politics, Vice President Rodriguez worked in Industry. His company contributed to construction all over the planet, both civilian and military. Some of the contracts were confidential, some were very popular. This had the result of making him rich, at the cost of unusual work hours; and flights to all parts of the world.

When his wife told him that their young daughter was sick; he saw to it that she had the best doctors in the world, and he handled it over the phone; in the middle of a European deal. Sweet, angelic little Angie had been diagnosed with an especially vicious form of diabetes, unusual in someone that age. It had attacked her tiny body like a guided missile; and her own blood had turned on her with alarming speed.

Rodriguez had never forgiven himself for not going home right then.

One night he had been awoken by a tearful call from his wife. Little four year old Angie was crying in misery, more depressed about her life than any four year old should be; and she was screaming for her daddy to come back and save her; as little girls always thought their fathers could.

By the time he had flown back to the States; his wife was in a panic, and his daughter had been rushed into surgery. The diabetes had claimed a piece of his daughter. He ran into the hospital, where his wife was waiting to tell him that their child was in the next room, having her legs amputated.

Before the operation was over, Rodriguez had handed in his resignation. He had more money than he could spend, and less of his daughter than he'd realized.

The months passed; and Rodriguez continued to be an influential player in International business, though not for his own profit any more. Those that needed favors from the people he had cultivated relationships with had all come to him. Without taking his eyes off Angie, Rodriguez had quickly become a power-broker in International Markets.

When a think tank called AIM had offered him an experimental drug for his child, he took it. The drug had smashed the aggressive diabetes into remission, and his daughter was looking happy again, albeit from a wheelchair.

With his daughter no longer requiring constant supervision, Rodriguez found himself looking for something to do... and discovered he had plenty of deep pockets backing him if he wanted to try his hand at politics.

Two years later, he had suddenly found himself a Vice-Presidential nominee. The speed of the ascent had been unheard of, given that his nomination had come as a complete shock in the run-up to President Ellis' re-elect, but his financial support had been the decisive factor.

He and his family had been invited to Camp David to join the First Family for Christmas. He had politely refused; because his daughter had always loved watching the big Christmas tree on television, and he wanted to let her see it in person.

At least, that was the reason he gave.
The Vice President had become the go-between for a lot of the players involved in the Mandarin Hunt, and while the President was on his way back to Washington, Air Force One wouldn't take off for a few hours yet.

The Cabinet had been recalled; many of the Armed Forces had been recalled from leave in case they were needed; and the whole country was holding its breath, waiting to see what would break first.

At the time of the attack, the Stark home had a No-Fly Zone of almost five miles. In order to air footage of the million dollar house going over the cliff, the helicopters had to bring their own camera. It had been uploaded in real time to the Networks, and replayed endlessly once Stark was declared missing. The news kept playing the only footage they had of the whole battle, over and over.

Ironically, the next time The Ten Rings hacked the networks, the footage they interrupted was their own.

The signal went wider this time. Every television, but this time mobile devices too. Smartphones, tablets, Times Square...

The emblem of the Ten Rings appeared over a test pattern. There were the usual flashes of violence and senseless destruction, but they passed quickly this time, eager to get to the main event.

The man in the green robes was sitting on his bronze throne... with a scared looking man in a tattered suit hog-tied on the floor in front of him.

"Mister President." The Mandarin addressed his message grandly. "Only two lessons remain." He gestured to his prisoner, an ordinary 9mm appearing in his hand. "Meet Thomas Werner. Good strong name, from a good strong family. Thomas here is a senior legal counselor, for the Roxxon Oil Conglomeration. And I'm sure he's really a nice guy once you get to know him."

The prisoner rolled over, looking up at the camera. He looked terrified. "Please..."

"Mister President, in an effort to control the story, your government bailed out the Roxxon Corporation, despite the fact that they had raised their prices to the public already. Your bailout money was used to settle the class action; leaving the victims with enough to cover only a third of their medical needs. The Roxxon Directors took the surplus from the price hike, and voted themselves large bonuses. The prices have never come down again, and not one executive has faced charges of negligence."

The Mandarin paused, just long enough to let that sink in. "Today's lesson is justice." The calculating eyes turned to stone. "I'm going to shoot this man in the head; live on TV, in thirty
"seconds."

"No." Whimpered the defeated man.

The Mandarin wasn't finished, and the camera shifted to reveal a large, ornate, antique telephone. "Mister President, the number for this phone is in your cell phone's contact list. You will find it in your left jacket pocket. You can amuse yourself later, trying to figure out how I put it there. But if you call this phone in the next half minute... I will spare Tom's life."

Thomas looked up at the camera, a tiny bit of hope daring to show in his eyes.

The Mandarin's face suddenly filled the screen, eyes drilling outward. "Thirty seconds... Go."

The screen didn't blank, the Mandarin didn't shift. At Camp David, The President had his senior staff and his Generals surrounding him. Before his thirty seconds had started, President Ellis had already searched his pockets and checked his phone's contact list.

"How the hell did he get into my phone?" Ellis hissed. "Rodriguez, are you listening to this?"

The Vice President was on speakerphone from Washington. "Yes sir. I have no idea what he plans to talk about, but you can't negotiate."

"I won't." Ellis agreed, pushing buttons.

"You call that number, and you've admitted that Terrorists are calling the shots." His Chief of Staff warned. "It's practically a surrender."

"They've got the Networks, they've taken down Iron Man... It won't look like surrender, it will look like we noticed." The Vice President countered quickly.

President Ellis had already picked up the phone. "I don't care how it looks. If a damn phone call can save a life..."

His Political Adviser put a hand up. "Sir, it's worth noting that the Roxxon Bailout alone cost you three states during the re-elect. Most of the public would probably like to see this guy shot, if you..."

"If I what? If I save his life I'll lose votes?" Ellis scorned. "Tell me I didn't just hear you say that!"

He dialed, and the phone on the screen started to ring.

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The Phone Rang.

The Mandarin smiled at the camera.

The Phone Rang.

The Mandarin cocked the gun in his hand.

The Phone Rang.

The Mandarin pointed the gun down.

The Phone Rang.
Ellis set his jaw. "He had something no Terrorist ever had. He had The President of the United States on the phone and he didn't care." He looked to his Chief of Staff. "My God, who is this guy?"

"A walking dead man." The CIA Director was smiling. "We've already tracked the connection."

"He didn't pick up." The Vice President countered.

"He didn't have to pick it up. That call had to be routed internationally, and that gives us a path to follow."

"And that was the worst mistake he ever made." Ellis grinned coldly. "Tell Rhodes to find this lunatic and take him into the goddamn stratosphere."

The new Iron Patriot had been re-branded as had its predecessor. Rhodes had suited up the second he got the chance and had put the suit through its paces. The new suit flew higher than the original, and Rhodes quickly discovered he could go to the edge of the sky.

"Congratulations, sir." Jarvis' voice said smoothly. "You have just broken the Mark-21's record for altitude. Nothing short of an Apollo module has gone higher."

Rhodes believed it, looking down and seeing the International Space Station a few hundred feet below him. Jarvis had put air and pressure readings up on his HUD, and he could stay up for another twenty, maybe thirty minutes if he wanted to. He had no idea where the suit was keeping oxygen tanks, but he didn't much care.

On a whim, he pulsed his jets and came down to glide by the windows of the ISS. The astronauts within saw him and waved. Rhodes waved back, quietly feeling giddy.

*Man, no wonder he never came back down to earth.* Rhodes thought to himself, feeling a pang. *Ahh, Tony; where are you?*

Officially he was supposed to be giving his new suit a shakedown flight. Unofficially, he sat on the edge of a solar panel and looked up at the enormous earth from space for a few minutes.

Rhodes could feel himself being changed by what he saw. He'd been a soldier his whole life, but from this high up, humans and nations were invisible, insignificant. The maps had lines drawn on them; the earth did not.

The radio clicked in. "It is quite a view, da?" A heavily accented voice commented from the Space Station.

"It is." Rhodes commented.

"Mister Stark came up here all the time. He delivered pizza and Vodka to our airlocks." The transmission continued. "We were very sorry to hear of his loss."

"We all were." Rhodes answered, and gave himself a quick mental slap. *Tony's body hasn't been found. He's not dead until we find a body."

The voice became more formal suddenly. "Colonel Rhodes, we are receiving NASA transmission,
meant for you. You are above ground targeting satellites for too long, so they need us to tell you; you have a mission update." Rhodes could tell the astronaut was grinning. "You have a chance to take on the Mandarin, perhaps?"

"God, I hope so." Rhodes sighed. Part of him felt like he was being told to come in come in from recess. But he was far too eager to put a bullet through the man that had blown up Happy, and Pepper, and Tony, and hundreds of other people.

"Godspeed, War Machine." The ISS waved him off, and Rhodes waved back, not bothering to correct them.

It was dawn every forty five minutes for a space shuttle. Iron Patriot moved a lot faster.

A meteorite with a pilot, Rhodes had Jarvis calculate a re-entry path that would give him time to get his update and point him at the Middle East at the same time.

Father Barnes had put the headlights back on and was driving toward the city, while Tony rode shotgun, reading the file page by page.

"That's the third time you've read it." Barnes said finally; the first words spoken in almost half an hour. "Have you found anything useful?"

"I've got details on most of Chad Davis' Unit. Tony told him, still looking. "About a year before Chad left the military, the Unit was involved in a pretty serious op. There were fatalities. Afterward, some were rotated home, some were transferred to other units... Near as I can tell, all the ones that were shipped home again have gone missing." He lifted the pages to make his point, each picture bearing the MIA watermark. "What I don't get is why..." Tony trailed off. And then his eyes narrowed. He turned the page over slowly. On the other side of the page, the watermark was a lot darker and clearer.

"Son of a goddamn mother-!" Tony snarled, and swiftly stopped himself. "Sorry, Padre."

Barnes let a breath out between his teeth. "You seem... irked."

"A. I. M." Tony held up the page. "Three capital letters that look identical when read backwards. It's not a stamp marking these soldiers MIA, it's a military file marking which soldiers had been recruited."

"Recruited by who?"

"AIM. Advanced Idea Mechanics." Tony scowled. "God, they went from me to Justin Hammer, now Aldrich Killian..." He rubbed his face. "I need Pepper."

"I think I have some in the food basket..."

"What?" Tony blinked. "No, not Pepp... I meant- Phone, I need a phone."

Barnes produced a smartphone. "Local call?"

"Not even close."

Iron Patriot was drawing a line in fire across the world as he blazed through the upper atmosphere. His steady dive had taken him past a few forward bases, and allowed his superiors to send him
coordinates. The Presidents call had gone to Pakistan; narrowed to within thirty square kilometers. That was an area the size of a whole city. He had been doing loops at high altitude, looking for stray signals and heat signatures... When his phone started ringing.

"Jarvis, who's number is that?"

"It is not on any recognized list, sir. However it is coming directly to the confidential contact number. Shall I answer?"

Rhodes thought a moment. "Yes."

The line connected swiftly. "Listen, after Hammer proved what a jackass he was, the military went with AIM, right?"

"Who is this?" Rhodes was gobsmacked, recognizing the voice, but asking anyway.

"You know exactly who this is." Tony snorted, putting the smart phone on speaker so that he could handle the files with both hands. "AIM, yes or no?"

"How about, 'hey, by the way, I'm not dead.'" Rhodes scorned, but they could hear the smile in his voice. "After hammer, they didn't want a primary supplier, for obvious reasons. They broke up the orders into branches. Small Arms from one supplier, spare parts from another, AIM was the Special Weapons and Development."

"They got you." Tony summed up. "Your re-brand, that was AIM's idea, right?"

"Yeah. They have subsidiaries with military contracts."

"Right, it's a Think Tank, but that means your Friend/Foe systems, Most Wanted Lists, Deck of 52, everything that the military put in, and not me? That all came from a server, right?"

"Yeah."

"All right, I need your Login details."

"Are you nuts?"

"You should have an answer to that by now." Tony told him. "Rhodey, have you been in touch with Pepper since she left the house?"

"No. But then I didn't expect to be." Rhodes reported. "She went into hiding when-"

"If she went anywhere with Maya Hansen..." Tony breathed. "Rhodey, if you hadn't heard from her in the last six hours then I think the bad guys have her."

Rhodes skipped right past surprised and went to work. "I'm heading for the bad guys right now, if she's there, I'll get her out."

"Where are you?"

"Somewhere over Pakistan; that's as specific as I'll be over a phone line, I don't care how secure it is."

"Pepper's not there." Tony waved that off instantly. "I can prove it if I get your password."
"You believe that, or do you just want to be the one to rescue her?"

"Well, history would suggest that she rescues me, more often than not." Tony smirked. "And before you ask, I called SHIELD. If they're dodging calls from me, you can bet that Pepper didn't have any luck. I need the Login."

"You know the username..." Rhodes sighed hard. "Password is... WARMACHINEROX. All caps, 'rocks' is spent with an 'x' and one word."

Tony and Barnes both cracked up laughing.

"Who is that?" Rhodes asked sharply.

"Oh, this is Father Barnes." Tony said as though it was obvious. "He's been kind enough to help me out the last couple of days."

"Father Barnes?" Rhodes was stunned. "You're rolling around the country with a freakin' Priest riding shotgun?"

"Jealous?" Barnes asked the phone smugly.

"I'll be in touch." Tony told him. "And don't tell anyone you've heard from me."

"Good luck... Iron Man."

The call disconnected and Tony handed the phone back to his driver.

"All right." Tony let a breath out between his teeth. "Now I need a secure Internet connection."

Barnes held out his smartphone again, and Tony shook his head. "No. The kind of connection I need? Has to be some serious bandwidth. You wouldn't get that on a smartphone in the middle of Silicon Valley, let alone here. Computer Store?"

"In the city." "Barnes reported. "Nothing open this time of night."

"Same for the libraries or Internet cafe's..." Tony chewed his lip. "And they probably wouldn't allow restricted access sites anyway."

"What about a Satellite hookup?" Barnes asked. "Every Christmas the Nashville news comes out and gets some footage of our Nativity scene. By now they've heard about the fight back in town; they've probably sent out someone out early to cover it live."

Tony looked at him. "Barnes, just so you know, I have half the Maxim models on speed dial if that whole 'vow of chastity' thing ever gets too much for you."

Barnes grinned. "I like this superhero stuff. It's crazy."

"I have detected subsurface structures." Jarvis reported to Rhodes suddenly. "The small dwelling to the southeast has a large cavern dug out beneath it. I am detecting heat signatures that read off the charts."

"Bingo." Rhodes bared his teeth and pointed his jets that way.

From the sky, it was simply a matter of deciding which way to fall. The new suit was remarkably smooth as it dropped feet first toward the mud-brick house, one of dozens.
The closer he got, the more details his HUD threw up at him. There was a long range radio transmitter, currently offline; Jarvis put up an outline of a large cavern underneath the roads, deep enough that nobody on the surface would be able to tell... And a heat signature at the back of the cavern that read off the charts.

"Command, are you seeing this?"

"Confirmed Colonel Rhodes. Intel suggests that the antennae may just be a relay, since it's apparently the most advanced piece of tech in there. They weren't overtaking networks from under a hut in Pakistan."

Rhodes painted a target on a section of the roof. "All right. I'll get the Antennae, track it back to transmission source. 'I'm reading eight people in there... What about the heat reading?"

"It matches the signature we got from the LA Explosion. Use caution Colonel, looks like they have an explosive on site."

"Copy that; I'm going in."

Iron Patriot smashed down through the roof of the mud-brick dwelling, then the floor, bypassing the house completely, landing hard in the cavern underneath. He landed in a crouch and came up bristling with cannon and machine guns. Jarvis had the whole room painted with targets instantly. "All right, nobody..." His brain caught up with what his eyes were seeing. "...move."

The eight people were all women, wearing traditional robes and veils covering all but their eyes. Each one was sitting at a rickety table, with a pedal powered sewing machine. There were piles of cloth all over the place; and a large cast iron incinerator at the back of the room.

And each woman was chained together through a large iron ring, set into the stone floor.

Rhodes put up his weapons immediately. "Control, this is Iron Patriot. We got a false positive on that heat signature; it's an incinerator. Looks like this place is an illegal sweat shop; I have eight female civilian prisoners."

"Roger that, Colonel. The profile suggests Mandarin has all sorts of holdings; so putting a relay somewhere he already controls makes sense."

Rhodes looked around the room quickly, focusing on the transmitter at the back. The antennae followed the chimney from the incinerator up through the roof. "I have the relay. Stand by."

Iron Patriot marked the chains that held each woman captive.

**Target:** Restraints

**Micro-Missiles:** Active.

A dozen pin-missiles fired out and smashed apart the chains. The women all jumped up, nervous, but hopeful.

"You are free to go." Iron Patriot called to them, and Jarvis repeated his words aloud, translated for his audience.

The women all went quickly, as afraid of him as they were of their captors.
Rhodes didn't follow them, turning to the transmitter. "Jarvis, are you seeing this?"

"I am, Colonel. The device seems remarkably low power."

"Way low power." Rhodes agreed. "This thing couldn't reach America if it was transmitting Morse Code, let alone hack a network." He looked around. "And why aren't there any guards in here?"

"The frequency and timing of the signal intercepts were precise Colonel." Jarvis assured him. "It was transmitting on the right channel at the right time, and remains the only unexplained signal from the area indicated by the CIA trace."

Rhodes backed away from the incinerator swiftly. "The signal was bait!"

Iron Patriot spun around to escape, and found one of the prisoners hadn't left. His HUD scanned her quickly and found no weapons or explosives. He held out a hand to her. "Ma'am, we need to evacuate this area immediately..."

She nodded and took his hand. Her other hand flashed out quickly and pressed, palm-first, against his chest.

Rhodes had just enough time to be confused by the gesture, when her hand started to glow from within. An instant later, the heat hit him, and he tried to pull back with a shout. The grip on his arm was strong, and Rhodes could hear the suit begin to creak and groan. An instant later, he was paralyzed. "What's happening?!"

"Sir, it would appear that the metal segments of the suit are expanding due to the heat." Jarvis reported, and for a moment, Rhodes thought that even Jarvis sounded panicked.

The robes and veil burst into flame, dropping off the woman, revealing a woman Rhodes' didn't recognize, but she clearly wasn't middle eastern. Her eyes were bright red and her

The mini-gun mounted on Rhodes' shoulder swiveled to aim at her, point blank. She kicked high, somehow flexible enough to kick over his shoulder without breaking any of her handholds. It was a move that nobody with a human skeleton should have been able to make; and it tore the weapon clean in half.

"Coolant at 110% of capacity." Jarvis reported the damage. "Ventilation at zero. Control Surfaces are jammed due to heat expansion. Auxiliary power still active. Preparing pilot ejection."

"No!" Rhodes barked, gritting his teeth as the inside of his suit started branding him with blazing metal. "Shut it down! Lock down the suit!"

"Colonel, I cannot be certain of your safety."

"You let me out, they'll kill me. We can't give them the suit."

"Of course, Sir. Initiating lockdown. Understand that if the suit is breached, and remains at 300 degrees, automatic protocols will eject you."

The suit turned rigid around Rhodes, and he grit his teeth against the rising heat. The suit had suddenly become a skintight coffin, as the heat claimed all the air and Rhodes struggled to suck in a breath...

Finally, Rhodes passed out.
Air Force One was keeping a safe distance from land. It had twin F-14's keeping pace with it in the sky every second. The only possible source of attack was from the water, and the military had a careful view of the waves as well.

Going into hiding was an unpopular move for any President, but so far, nobody had gotten close to the Mandarin. Not since Bin Laden had any single figure been a source of such fear. And now the CIA believed they had tracked the signal to a source. A viable lead at last...

So when President Ellis was alerted to an urgent video conference with Colonel Allen at Edwards Air Force Base; he was hoping for good news.

"Mister President." Allen reported on the screen. "Fifteen minutes ago we lost contact with Colonel Rhodes."

"WHAT?!" Ellis was stunned. "What does that mean 'lost contact'?"

"Well, we're not quite sure at the moment sir." Allen reported.

"We don't like hearing that answer in the Situation Room, Colonel." The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs barked.

"Understood sir, but I imagine you dislike guessing even more. Our intel directed him to a place in Pakistan, likely a signal relay. Iron Patriot also detected at least one explosive device, similar to the one used in The Mandarin's attacks. Rhodes called in that he had reached the target, and that it was a civilian front. He reported that he had found the relay, and that the heat signature was a false positive. That was the last we heard of him."

"Has there been any explosion? Any sign of violence?" Ellis demanded.

"Nosir." Allen said promptly. "But Iron Patriot's transponder went offline, and there has been no response to our calls. I should also point out that that's happened before, just an hour ago, in fact. His flightpath now takes him above satellite tracking. Without the transponder, our satellite tracking is limited to line of sight... and frankly sir, we only got the intel in question a quarter hour before hitting the place."

"So, to sum up. Rhodes either left his phone off the hook and is at this moment hunting Mandarin; or has fallen victim to a sneak attack so stealthy that it took down an Armored Suit and left no trace."

"We couldn't rule out either, so we thought it best to call you." Allen explained. "Our experts here are analyzing the situation, and they feel the more likely scenario sir, is that his communications is off the air."

The Vice President was listening from the White House on speakerphone again. "Mister President we have no idea how The Mandarin can knock out our networks, and our electronic surveillance and tracking methods. If they've managed to defeat Rhodes, they'll shout it to the world any minute. If not, then The Colonel will continue his mission."

"Agreed." The Commander In Chief sighed. "But without hard news, or word from him, we have to prepare for the worst." He rubbed his eyes a moment. "Well. Merry Christmas everyone. General, alert every level of civic and military law enforcement, take us to the highest security measures. Activate National Guard units near likely targets... and shut down all ports and airports until Boxing Day."

"You want to shut down all air travel the day before Christmas?" Someone spluttered.
"Want to? No. But I don't see any other option, do you?"

Sure enough, there were a few news vans at the Main Street of the small town outside Chattanooga. After spending a few hours driving around in a big circle, Barnes even had his original parking spot back.

"Streets are crowded." Barnes observed. "Wait here, I'll get you a hat or something, cover up that face of yours."

"What's wrong with my face?" Tony asked as Barnes left the car.

Barnes moved through the crowd of strangers, and made his way toward the townsfolk. There were only a few people in the Main Street of town, but that crowd was growing as words spread that something had happened.

Barnes scanned the faces he recognized and picked a man in a cowboy hat. He marched straight up to the man. "Rory, I need you to give me that hat right now, and you shouldn't expect to get it back."

Rory blinked. "Um... why?"

"I'm not going to tell you that." Barnes held his hand out. "Come on."

"No offense, Padre; but I like my hat, and I want to know why." Rory said, not unreasonably.

Barnes leaned in a little. "Do you really want me to be in a 'tell everything' sort of mood... with your wife a few feet behind you?" He challenged.

"Take my hat." Rory said instantly. "Here, have my jacket too; it's cold out."

"Wise move." Barnes collected the hat and jacket, and returned to his car. Tony rolled down the window, and he passed them in. "Here. Keep your head down; there are still a few TV Cameras about."

Tony put them on and pulled the cowboy hat low.

Barnes quickly organized a few of his friends to invite in the news crews. They had just finished their reports and were getting ready to leave, when Barnes had invited them in for food, and drink. The news crews were all spending the holidays working, so the prospect of a free meal and a few drinks was nothing to be laughed at.

It gave Tony enough time to slip into a Channel 5 news van and help himself to the high speed satellite bandwidth.

He logged into AIM's Mainframe using Iron Patriot's login details, and another few minutes looking through files for a back door. The lock-chip that he'd used to hack SHIELD now came standard in his suit, and he'd been able to remove the microchip from the MK-45's module.

Once in the Mainframe, he got to work with the lockchip. Killian's people were using a hidden partition, much like Stane had used. He unlocked it, and found a lot of files labeled: 'Extremis'.

Bingo.

The formula came up on screen instantly, with Maya's name all over it. Tony scanned the formula,
calculating in his head... Before he remembered himself. Tony's mind was quick and hungry for challenges, and Extremis was the holy grail. The engineer and futurist in Tony was more than tempted to steal the whole thing, but the Iron man in him demanded he stay focused on the investigation.

He kept looking through the file directories till he found one labeled 'Test Subjects' and clicked it. Sure enough, it was full of pictures. Chad Davis was among them, except he was in a wheelchair. He had been walking around in Happy's pictures. Brandt was there too, and Tony felt a chill just seeing her predatory face again. He clicked her file.

The picture of her was different. She was... smaller, broken. Her face was the same, but she was slumped and defeated. A closeup of her torso revealed why. Brandt's file said that she had been shredded by a landmine. Her right arm was missing from halfway between her shoulder and her elbow.

Brandt had been disabled by injuries over a year before. And earlier tonight she had been leaping around Tony Stark like she was made of liquid steel.

He looked back to the Extremis formula, seeing the possibilities.

"Oh my god, you did it. Maya, you crazy, brilliant bitch; you actually did it!" Tony breathed.

The video shifted to show Brandt being strapped into a heavy duty upright harness. There were three other subjects in the room. They all received injections at the same time.

Tony picked up the slight sound of someone speaking and jacked up the volume. His face turned to stone as he recognized the voice. It was Aldrich Killian.

"You have all answered the call to serve." Killian was grandly declaring to his human lab rats. "Alas, you were all victims. Victims of poor fortune, bad timing... Well, now we have a cure for that too."

Tony couldn't take his eyes off Brandt. She was shifting against her restraints, trying to ignore whatever was happening to her.

Killian was still congratulating himself. "Thanks to me, the four of you are the first step. The new stage of human evolution was created in this room, and you're all at the forefront of it." He paced about, taking in his creations. "You'll find that we're doing more than simply repairing the damage. This isn't a remodel, it's a complete redesign. Every human frailty, every imperfection is being tempered away."

The man strapped in across from Brandt started to glow, then started to scream.

Killian saw it. "Maya?"

Maya Hansen suddenly came in view of the cameras as she ran to the screaming man's side, checking readouts and vitals.

"Maya, I thought you took care of this?" Killian sounded annoyed. "How does this affect our release date?"

Maya was looking at the readouts again. "The dose isn't taking."

Aldrich was already moving. "Clear the room!"
The glow from the screaming man grew brighter, to a frightening degree.

Brandt called after them. "Wait! Don't leave us in here!" She shouted after everyone as they ran out of the room. Nobody even looked back at them as the heavy security door swing shut with a resonant bang.

An instant later the glow from within the screaming man shone bright as the sun out of his eyes and mouth, like a supernova was going off inside his head...

And the cameras all went to static.

Tony swallowed. It was all to easy to picture what had happened to Happy Hogan.

"When is a bomb not a bomb?" Tony asked the screen as the picture stabilized. "When it misfires."

On the screen, the perspective had shifted to another camera. The room had been wrecked, obliterated. What hadn't been slammed into the walls was currently on fire. The concrete walls were bent outward, so was the floor. The image was skewed, like the camera was dangling.

"But you found a buyer anyway, didn't you Killian?"

And on the screen, a figure emerged from the flames. It was Brandt, looking as demonic as the last time Stark had seen her. She walked out of the flames and shook off the blast with a cocky grin. Her blackened skin glowed brightly, then returned to her normal skin tone. Her severed arm had regrown, five fingers and all. She was better than she'd been before the explosion.

"So." Tony thought aloud. "If Killian is supplying these people, as living weapons, to The Mandarin, he must have a shipping address... And we know Mandarin is active in the USA, because he keeps taking over all the networks... AIM is a think tank, so massively powerful satellite uploads would not be unusual... Let's see if we can find out where those uploads are coming from?"

Another five minutes gave him the list. Tony dialed Barnes' phone again. "Jarvis, I'm about to send you a list of locations that have been uploading huge amounts of data. In a few minutes I'm going to upload a list of all AIM's laboratories and office buildings. I want you to compare the two lists and find out which one has been uplinking powerful signals without a good reason."

"Very good sir."

Tony could hear voices outside, and knew he was running out of time. "$\text{"Kay... Jarvis, run the two lists, I'm on my way there. I can't stay here much longer.}"

Stark let himself back into the Service Station. His suit was still charging, right where he left it. "$\text{Jarvis, you have a target for me?}"

"I have triangulated the signal to Miami, Florida." Jarvis reported.

Stark snorted. "$\text{No, seriously.}"

"I have the GPS Co-ordinates. It leads to a private property in Malibu."

Stark was stunned. "$\text{He's here?}" Stark stammered. "$\text{In the United States?}"

"Yes sir."
"Jarvis, is my suit charged?"

"The flight units are charged sir, however I cannot guarantee they will hold the charge for long once assembled and seeking power from the Arc Reactor."

"And if I can't get it to feed off the Reactor, I can pretty much forget combat." Tony grit his teeth. "How much flight time are we talking about?"

"Sustained flight adds up to seven minutes, sir."

Tony froze, eyes bulging. "Seven Minutes isn't a flight. Seven minutes is barely enough time to..."

The telltale signs started again. The inability to breathe, the sudden spike of adrenaline...

_Oh no! Not now!_ He raged at himself.

"Flying isn't the problem, sir." Jarvis said unflappably. "The problem is the inevitable falling."

"Falling is always the problem." Tony croaked.

_Fire, flames, bright light, falling, everything is falling, exploding everywhere, giant monsters in the sky are falling, everything is falling..._

Tony's vision had gone dark by the time he felt hands on his shoulders, hauling him upright. Something rough and crumpled went against his face, and Tony's sight began to clear. A few moments later, he realized he was gasping into a paper bag. Barnes was holding it over his face.

Barnes didn't say it. He didn't have to.

"I need help." Tony admitted, as though it was a great confession.

"Who can you ask?" Barnes asked him practically.

Pepper woke up and saw six of everything. She took a breath and coughed, spluttered, then threw up a little.

She felt someone wiping her face, and suddenly realized she was upright. "...wha? Wha, happ..."

She heard someone speaking, and distantly realized it was Maya Hansen. "Brandt, go tell the boss that Pepper's awake. Sort of."

Pepper tried to make her eyes focus... and passed out again.

Tony was almost ready to throw the phone across the room. "I'm not getting an answer from anyone." He complained. "Rhodey, SHIELD, Pepper... Everyone in the world that I trust has fallen off the planet or died." He looked up with a smirk. "Present company exempted."

Barnes didn't even blink. "Then for now, it will have to be you."

Tony nodded. He had known it would be. Even before he'd spoken to anyone, even before he'd tracked it back to Killian, he'd known that something this big was going to...

He shied away from that thought. He didn't need to add pressure. He looked up at Barnes. "What the hell are you doing here, by the way?"
"Our little impromptu Christmas party wrapped up, and there was no sign of you," Barnes explained. "Maggie said that you were wearing her husband's overalls, so it stood to reason you were here. Once I knew you were Iron Man; it seemed like the logical place for you to keep your suit if it was damaged." He waved at the tools to make his point. "You find what you were looking for?"

Stark nodded. "Not sure how much I should tell you..."

"If you can't tell a Priest, who can you tell?" Barnes asked rhetorically. "But if we've got a location, let's go."

Tony shook his head. "You're not coming."

Barnes actually looked disappointed. "I want to help; and if you drive on your own the whole night, you'll never make it."

"Padre, Christmas Eve is tomorrow. If you vanish, it'll get noticed. I'm still trying to stay a little under the radar here. Plus, people have a habit of getting killed around me. Even a Priest only gets so many Get Out Of Jail Free Cards. I've pulled three day sessions before. Besides, I won't need the car." Tony shook his head. "I've got a fleet of private planes in assorted sizes. If I find a long flat road, I can get one to pick me up discreetly in less than an hour."

"No you can't." Barnes told him firmly. "I've been listening to the news people talking out there. The President just closed all the airports. America is a No Fly Zone until Boxing Day."

Tony let out a breath between his teeth. "Do they have any idea what's going on?"

"I don't know." Barnes shook his head. "But whatever it is, it'll happen tomorrow, and nobody knows where or how. They're scared out of their minds."

Tony sat silently for a while. "You don't..." He shook his head. "You don't put someone like me in the middle of that. There's no army on this planet that would put a soldier with heavy PTSD in an Iron Man suit and expect them to save the world."

Barnes took that in, rose to his full height. "But that's the world. That's not you." He said calmly. "The world doesn't need you to save it all at once; and if you tried, you'd fail. It's too big for a humble human."

"Nothing humble about me." Tony pointed out.

"Perhaps not, but even Iron Man has limits. You are not the last hope of humanity... but you can still be a hero. And even if they can't save everyone from everything, the world will always need heroes."

Tony looked down. "Forgive me father, but... I don't know if I can win this one."

"One of the twelve steps?" Barnes said softly. "Is to admit that you're powerless over your vices and that the help of a higher power can restore you to sanity." Barnes tapped his collar. "I know where to look for my higher power. But I've got atheists in my meetings. They need something stronger than they are. Something more... pure than they are. They look to their friends, or their kids. Something that matters more than even their addictions. And that makes them change."

Tony looked up, something new in his eyes.

Barnes saw it, and kept going. "When we first spoke? I knew you had a vice of your own, before I
knew who you were. Now that I know, I'm betting you have a hundred vices. Which one are you afraid will take over your life?"

Tony couldn't help the way his eyes flicked to the Iron Man suit. He didn't have to say it; Barnes saw.

"You say that you're not the man to call on when you need to save the world? You're right." Barnes nodded, uncompromising. "The world is too big for any mortal man to comprehend, let alone rescue. What do you want to save?"

"Pepper." Tony said softly. "Her name is Pepper."

Barnes nodded and handed him the keys. "Godspeed, Iron Man."

On Christmas Eve, events held their breath as all the pieces kept moving.

Tony was moving, driving from Tennessee to Miami.

Rhodes was trapped in his own suit, being shipped from Pakistan to the United States in a private plane.

Air Force One hadn't landed in two days, and had no plans on doing so for quite some time. The route was being kept a secret for the sake of security. The Mandarin had promised the Grand Finale for Christmas Day, and with only a day and a half to go, they kept the President moving, surrounded by fighter jets, aboard the worlds most secure airline.

Tony had trouble getting across State Borders, as many people in large cities tried to get away from what they perceived to be possible targets.

Rhodes was boxed up and tossed out of his private airplane as they reached the USA No-Fly Zone. Someone on the water collected him and hauled him ashore, without ever letting him out of the box.

Father Barnes went back to his small town, and stayed close to the people he considered family.

For a full day, the majority of the world was holding its breath. Those with their families in preparation for the holiday all stayed indoors. Those thousands that were trapped by the shut down of the airports mostly kept to themselves, but some organized as many others as they could to pull together and look after each other.

The News chewed on things that had already been reported, looking for something new, waiting with dread, certain that it was coming soon.

People would later admit that they had their celebrations a day early, gave each other presents, enjoyed their feasts. The unspoken worry was that a major hit was coming the very next day, and nobody knew where or how the lightning would strike.

Chapter End Notes

Read and Review
Jarvis had pinpointed the address of the Mandarin's Broadcasts. They were coming from Malibu California, not that far from where Stark's own home had used to be.

"I could have walked here!" Tony raged when he saw the Manor. It was a large turn of the century mansion. A European style courtyard with a fountain. Large ornate gates, a stone wall around the whole estate, and guards within. The guards were all in uniform, not concerned with staying hidden.

Tony drove straight past it, not daring a second pass. "Jarvis, talk to me."

"Eight minutes, thirty five seconds of charge, sir." Jarvis reported. "Did you expect more from a car battery? May I suggest The House Party Protocol?"

Tony chewed his lip. "No. Pepper might not be in there. If they're keeping her alive for some reason after I've been declared dead, then..." He squeezed his eyes shut against that image. "No. Can't think like that. And there may be nothing in there. Can you access the property deeds?"

"Yes sir, I still have a functional uplink. However, the deeds of ownership are signed over to a private trust, after the death of the previous owner eleven years ago."

"So is this place an evil fortress or not?" Tony mused. "Satellite uploads say yes, the name on the door says no. Jarvis, this place could be a relay post. They may not even know the signal is coming from here... and I have only eight minutes to find out, if I want to go in there as Iron Man and get away with it. Less, if Pepper's in there. Even less if there's an Extremis-Enhancement around."

His suit had enough charge for eight minutes. If Pepper was there, he didn't dare waste those precious minutes getting in and searching every room.

Frustrated, Tony slammed his fist into the dashboard.

The glove-box popped open.

There was a flash-light, a drivers manual... and a wallet.

Tony saw the wallet, and froze. After a moment he pulled it out and checked. It belonged to Barnes.

*Three months in a cave to make the Mark One.* He told himself. *How long to do it with a credit card and a supermarket?*

Some of the big chain stores were open on Christmas Day. In response to the Mandarin situation, there had been a rush of panic buying. Generators, canned goods, bottled water, first aid kits... Nobody knew what was coming, so they covered the basics. Tony had two trolleys full by the time he was done. There were people beating each other over the last can of tinned pineapple chunks, but Tony didn't care. He was after less obvious items.

Rubber gloves. Lots of them. The kid behind the cash register had given him a weird look. A man
in clothes that didn't fit, looking like he'd been through a Fight Club, buying four pairs of rubber gloves in assorted sizes. He also took the opportunity to collect a set of clothes that fit, some sneakers, and a hoodie that was close enough to his size.

The Supermarket had a hardware section, including tools, fuses, electrical wiring for all voltages, bolt cutters, detergent, binoculars... The kitchen supply section had turkey basters, egg timers, hot pepper grounds... The home and lifestyle section had swimming goggles, bubble bath, cigar cutters, glass Christmas baubles, zip-ties, mousetraps, string...

*Why couldn't I have one of these places in Afghanistan?* Tony browsed the shelves. *Duct Tape! I love Duct Tape!*

The often-overlooked miracle of convenience also had a drug store, and an aisle for personal defense. *Thank god for the decay of society. Pepper Spray in all the colors of the rainbow!*

A distant part of him wondered how high Barnes credit rating was. "Can I get a credit check?" He asked the young woman behind the sales counter.

She ran the card through her computer and checked the limit, and the name. "Well, Mister Barnes, it looks like you've still got eleven dollars left. Is there anything else you need?"

Tony ran the checklist in his head. "Know where I can get an eleven dollar watch? Something with a timer?"

The young woman cast about the inventory for a moment on her screen, and led him to the tray of impulse items. "There's a Dora the Explorer watch here that's in your price range."

Tony stared at it. "It's pink." He observed.

"It's limited edition." The salesgirl ventured bravely.

Tony calculated the price again and took the watch. "Ring it up."

In Afghanistan, they had given him a cave with a stone shelf. In Miami, he settled for a closed school. He'd taken apart the alarm and let himself into shop class. He'd needed the soldering irons, grips, welding tools, glass drills...

The gloves took the most work. He'd threaded the fuses over the fingers of a pair of solid work gloves, and then patch-worked the rubber gloves three different ways to keep the charge on the outside. A taser didn't have the range of a repulsor, but the voltage stayed high enough through fuse wires that at close range it would do.

Keeping the pepper spray under pressure while transferred it into the glass Christmas globes was another good trick, but there were ways to create carbonation in glass bottles that would increase the internal psi without shattering the container. Such things were available commercially, to keep fizz in opened soda bottles.

By the time Tony was done, he looked ridiculous. He had Christmas decorations strung across his chest like a bandoleer, turkey basters full of detergent stuck into his belt, an air pistol in one hand, and a single work glove that looked like Freddy Kruger without the claws.

With the hoodie pulled tight around his face and the scuba goggles at the ready, he was faintly ridiculous, like a ten year old kid's Halloween version of what Rambo would look like.
But with the Mark-45 parked up the street as backup, he was willing to risk going into the Manor of the Mandarin.

Tony hoisted himself over the fence once he'd cut the feed to the cameras on the wall, and rigged the water pipes leading to the Manor. He'd been given the grand tour of enough forward areas and hot-zones to spot concealed cameras, and stepped quickly to avoid them.

The manor was laid out to be more impressive than secure. It was opulence, instead of an armed camp. The primary security was the guards.


Tony drew the jar of ground hot peppers and shook it out in front of him, not breaking stride. The flakes settled into the gravel paths invisibly, and Tony withdrew back to the bushes.

It only took a few minutes for the first guard and his K-9 to arrive on the scene. The dog noticed his scent immediately and quickly alerted his master. The dog put his nose down and started tracking, following the path precisely... until he hit the hot pepper flakes. A deep whiff of hot peppers made the poor dog start to whimper and whine, pawing at his pained muzzle.

The guard bent down to take a closer look at what was bothering his friend... And Tony took that opportunity to walk up behind him and lay a gloved hand against his neck. The shock came from the taser battery at his wrist, along the fuse wires over the glove, and gave a much higher jolt. The guard was flat on the ground before he heard Stark coming.

The dog almost had time to bark before he got zapped too. "Sorry!" Tony hissed to the animal. "I swear, I didn't want to do that! Fate of the planet! Pepper loves dogs, I'll adopt you later, you'll like it!"

He took off running quickly.


In the water pipes outside, beneath the street, the Egg Timer buzzed, and the mousetrap snapped the cigar cutter shut on the nozzle of the bottle of bubble bath. The liquid poured into the fountain's feed quickly, washing into the pumps that sprayed water up ornately into the air within the Manor grounds.

Within a few seconds, the water feature was covered in a layer of suds. The froth grew thick enough to spill over the fountain into the courtyard.

It wasn't an attack, so the guards didn't go on alert, but it got their attention. Tony quickly scanned upward, and saw the guards on the balcony were looking too.

He pulled the binoculars and looked closer. The guards at the fountain were smiling, and the ones on the balcony were yapping into their wrist mikes... before going into the house.

Tony watched carefully. The guards in the courtyard didn't have wrist mikes. They were tossing suds around like kids would in the bath.

The guards in the house were the real deal. The ones in the courtyard were rent-a-goons; like any security firm would employ. They were camouflage.
With the balcony guards inside, Stark started moving. The fountain was the centerpiece of the courtyard, on the path between the front gate and the front door. The courtyard guards were all keeping to their posts, but trying to get close enough to get a good look at the spectacle.

When they were all fairly close by, Tony struck. The Christmas ornaments came in like grenades and shattered when they hit the pave stones. Within them, the pepper spray exploded out and struck the guards all at once.

Tony grinned. *Pepper spray at work.*

"Happy, what kept you? I pushed the little button like three minutes ago."

"Sorry, boss."

"I'm not a threat, Mister Stark. I'm telling you that you made a mistake on these invoices-""

"I don't make mistakes with numbers."

"Come with me, Miss."

"Don't you touch me! I have Pepper Spray!"

"HAHAHA! That's the funniest thing I've heard all day. All right, tell you what. I'll double check the numbers, and if you're right, you get a promotion. Happy, take Pepper here somewhere and get her a decaf."

"Um... actually, Mister Stark, my name is 'Virginia', not 'Pepper'."

"Yeah. Pepper is better. Shoo, I have proofreading to do."

"Nice to meet you, Pepper. I'm Happy."

"Nice to meet you. And my name is 'Virginia', not 'Pepper'."

"I heard. Don't worry, you'll be used to it before you know it."

*God, Potts... where are you?* Stark shook it off bleakly. He had enough flashbacks fighting for control in his head.

Tony moved forward as they all yelled in shock, clutching at their eyes. Tony pulled the scuba goggles down and struck again. His shock glove smacked left and right. Within seconds, he had gathered up a 9mm, and an earwig for himself.

*Third line.* Tony told himself, bypassing the door and heading for the windows. *The Manor.*

The cameras were harder to spot, but easier to evade once he got inside. There were endless corridors and rooms to dart in and out of, and the stolen earwig gave him an inside scoop on where the guards were, and what path they were taking.

Tony was fighting nostalgia again. Armed with kitchen supplies, knickknacks and garden tools, he was storming a fortress. It was like Afghanistan again, rigging his own cell door.

All the effort he'd put into rebranding himself as a superhero, and he was still a weaponeer, making
tools of destruction at a whim.

*It's what I do.*

Tony saw a set of guards standing by the stairwell, looking bored. As Tony crept towards them, one of them pressed a hand to his ear, and suddenly jumped to attention. Tony heard the warning too. "Breach! Breach at the Auxiliary hallway!"

Tony cursed silently. They knew they were under attack.

The guards came running down the hallway, and Tony drew the vials of detergent, squirting them on the floor behind him as he cat-walked away. On the dark paneled hardwood, the liquid became less obvious.

The guards came around the corner and saw him, rushing to catch up... when they hit the detergent and went skidding into each other, the walls and the floor, out of control. Tony tossed a Pepper Spray Grenade over his shoulder to keep them down.

His earwig warned him that another team was coming and he took position in a doorway. The second they saw him, he ducked into the room, squirting the doorknob and the floor with detergent from his second vial. Weapons drawn, they tried to follow him in, but couldn't get a grip on the doorknob. The second they broke the door open forcibly, he was waiting with his shock glove and knocked them down as they slipped and skidded all over each other. The zip-ties came out and bound them quickly. These guards were armed with .45 pistols, stronger than the 9mm, and he traded up.

The earpiece in his ear was squawking. "We've lost him on camera. Can't tell who it is from this angle, Level Two Guards, on alert. Level One guards are searching."

A voice that Stark recognized but couldn't place was coming from around the corner. "This is Level One, I'll track the Intruder. Send someone up here to cover the Studio."

His earpiece responded. "Level Two-Baker on the way."

Tony heard footsteps and drew back, ready to ambush the next set of guards...

But the next one to come around the corner wasn't a team of armed men.

It was Brandt.

She hadn't seen him, moving at a quicksilver run for the last group he'd knocked down. Tony felt a thrill of horror go through him, and he ducked back in the doorway, looking for another path. "Not that way."

He wasn't sure where he was going, but figured out the layout of the building. The guards around the outside of the Manor had no idea what was going on. The ones inside had two way communication and stronger weapons... And the upper level had Brandt. If the Extremis powered guard was standing at that door, then it meant *this* was the Castle Keep.

For a moment, he hesitated, and checked his pink cartoon watch. He had another twenty five minutes. He'd set the time, expecting to be captured and taken alive... but if Brandt was here, he might not have that kind of luck.

Another voice broke in through the earpiece. "Level One guards who are searching, stay on point. The rest of you to the loading bay. The Package is arriving soon; and we'll need you there." It said
with authority. "Switch to next Channel."

The earpiece went dead, and Tony swore. He was suddenly blind to the movements of the guards.

He was more than halfway to the heart of the fortress now, and that meant that backing out would be as difficult as going further in. He looked back to the door where Brandt had been when he'd heard her speak. *If that's the heart of the place, then that's probably where they're transmitting from.*

The appearance of Brandt had shaken him. It meant he had the right place, but it also meant he was out of his depth. If The Mandarin himself was in that room...

*You shouldn't be doing this. Back out now, go find a cop, tell them who you are, and get everyone from the Boy Scouts to the National Guard to surround this place. Brandt is here; you don't need a shock glove, you need an artillery strike. He told himself. But on the other hand... nah.*

He had expected a bedroom, and he supposed that was what it was. It was the size of three rooms. Over to one side was a full TV Studio set up. Three cameras, post-production computers, proper lighting for the set. The center of the set was the Throne, and the Banner of the Ten Rings behind it. Large television screens showed over a dozen channels at once. CNN, BBC...

Beside the TV set, was the cache. Guns, gold bars, silks, grenade launchers...

And at the opposite end of the room, furthest from the door, was the Harem. A four poster bed, surrounded by huge soft pillows and tapestries. The huge pillows were big enough to use as chairs. Trails of incense were gently wafting all over the place, and Tony could smell opium. It was exactly the sort of place that an Oriental Warlord would have his women.

But no sign of The Man Himself.

Long limbs stuck out from under quilts and pillows, and Tony drew the covers back quickly, aiming a gun.

Three naked women. A blonde, a brunette and a redhead. All stoned or mostly asleep. He nudged the redheads' side. "Wake up." He hissed softly.

The woman groaned at being woken up and rolled over to see him. "What?"

"Where's The Mandarin?" Tony hissed. "Tell me now."

"I don't... Tony?"

Tony blinked and looked closer. "Kelli?"

Kelli sat up and stretched. "Tony-y-y!" She slurred happily. "It's great to see you again! Like old times, yes?"

Tony grit his teeth. "Not exactly like old times."

She saw the gun, and was more interested than worried. "I didn't know you were into that." The opium cleared from her eyes a second and she suddenly seemed aware of the situation, looking very scared. "Oh."

"Where is he?" Tony demanded.
Kelli pointed to the Throne at the other end of the room.

Tony went over to look at it, and noticed a hidden door behind the big ornate chair, hidden completely from view.

"He... he goes in there when he's done." Kelly called. "He stays a few hours, comes back out and joins the party again."

"What's in there?" Tony demanded.

She shrugged and pulled the blankets back over her and her companions. "Don't know. I think he gets high in there. Don't know why he can't just use the same stuff we do..."

Tony gripped his gun tightly and gestured at her. "You got clothes?"

"Haven't seen them in days." She confessed.

"You and your friends get in the bathroom right now." Tony warned her. "There's going to be some hostilities."

Kelli gulped and shook the other two women awake.

As they made their way into the bathroom beside the bed, Tony returned to the Throne and pulled the banner aside, looking for a latch, a keyhole...

Tony had hidden enough secret passages in enough places to find the hidden latch. It was set into the Throne. When he hit it, the Throne and the floor, including the doorway, suddenly rotated twenty degrees. Tony crept to the passage and looked within.

There was a ceremonial feeling to the place. Something between a Meditation Chamber and a Holy Altar.

There was a prayer mat on the floor and a velvet cushion for the Master of this place. The small chamber was lit by candles, and the walls and ceiling were all carved with ancient writings of some kind.

Thick, hard-backed books and scrolls writing in languages Tony couldn't guess at surrounded him, all within reach of the man himself.

The centerpiece of the whole set up was some kind of jewel box made of gold and ivory, with Ten large ornate Rings, set with various jewels and materials displayed.

And lo behold, sitting cross-legged on the velvet pillow, facing away from him with head bowed with thick green robes spread out around him... Was The Mandarin.

Tony took a step forward, gripping his gun.

He didn't hear his footsteps, but The Mandarin clearly did, he turned around instantly without rising from his crouch.

"Freeze." Tony said reflexively.

Mandarin stared at him, more surprised than scared. His eyes flicked to the big elaborate Rings on the altar; then back to Stark, pointing a gun at him.

"Get up!" Tony growled at him.
The Mandarin's eyes went wide, and he nodded quickly. "Sure! Whatever you say, mate!"

Tony hesitated. The voice was all wrong. The Mandarin's voice had sent shivers through the whole western world. This voice was British. Somewhere between Jude Law and Eliza Doolittle.

The man tried to get up and overbalanced, dropping to the mat. "Ow." He struggled for a minute to uncross his legs, tangled in his robes.

Tony didn't understand what he was looking at, but kept the gun trained. It wouldn't be hard to expect a little subterfuge from a man like The Mandarin.

Eventually, the guy got to his feet, and quickly put his hands up again. "Right. Um..." His eyes were still wide and terrified. "Well, if this is a hold up, you can take anything. The gold is fake, and so are the guns. They won't let me have real ones. The coke is real though. Primo stuff, too. So if this is a hold up you can have anything you want." He blinked. "Did I say that already?"

Tony hauled him out of the small chamber, into the Throne Room. "Who are you?" Stark demanded. "A body double, right? How many are there? Where's the real one?"

"Here!" The man said. "Trevor Slattery, at your service."

Tony pulled the hammer back on the gun.

Slattery dropped to his knees, petrified. "Really! I am The Mandarin. Look, see? My face is really here!"

BANG! Tony fired into the floor, six inches to the left. Trevor jumped like a scared cat. The harem women hiding in the bathroom let out a screech.

"You have sixty seconds to live." Tony snarled. "Don't waste them on not making sense."

"Right. Well. I was playing some Indie thing off Broadway." Trevor explained. "California, see." He shrugged helplessly. "California is off-Broadway." He yawned, despite the gun in his face. "And... I was there anyway, in a nice place with barred windows for 28 days. I had... a problem with... substances, shall we say. My family insisted that I take care of that matter first."

"Skip to the good parts." Tony warned, mindful of the guards somewhere in the building.

"Right, well... that would be Day 18. That was when I met Killian." Trevor said with a big smile. "He hired me. Said he was doing a big reality web show, or something like that."

"The drugs didn't bother him?"

"Are you kidding? He had some of the best stuff I've ever used. It was how we started the conversation." Trevor's eyes glazed for a second. "Funny thing though, he never seemed to get high."

"I'm sure." Tony growled. "None of this bothered you?!"

Trevor shrugged. "Hey, I've done weirder stuff than plastic surgery for a job... or a hit. Killian said that the grand finale would be the highest rated, most talked about broadcast anywhere. Emmys only get given for work on TV, Oscars only get given for work on movies, Grammy's only get handed out for music. Killian said the last Mandarin broadcast had a viewership of 800 Million people! It's the most talked about public statement since Moses came down the mountain!" Trevor found his joke to be so funny he rocked back on his knees enough that he almost over again.
"OOF!" He righted himself. "An actor dreams of an audience like that. Once the show's over, I bet I could get my own sitcom out of it!"

Long silence. Tony took in the room again. Television cameras, bed, drugs, bathroom, food tray. There was no reason for a stoned actor to ever leave this room, and Tony suddenly realized why.

"...You're a fake." Tony breathed, realization sinking in. "It's all faked. It's all part of Killian's plan. He's created a custom made international terror threat. He's got the whole western world holding their breath."

Trevor Slattery processed this, not comprehending. "No, it's a web series. Killian said so. He said the finale would end with him saving the day, or something. He's setting up the set right now."

"Setting up?" Tony heard the only two words that mattered, and he grabbed Slattery by the throat, hauling him upright. "Listen to me, pothead! I went to the Morgue personally and checked my best friend!"

Slattery took this in. "...Oh." He said finally, more confused than anything else.

Stark pressed his gun into the fool's throat. "Where is Pepper?"

"I think... the kitchen, probably?"

Stark growled. "Where's Aldrich Killian?"

"Oh. Um... He went to get the last broadcast ready. He's doing it at the... the..." He searched for the word. "You know those yards, where they handle ships?"

"Shipyards?" Tony guessed.

"That's it! The Oil place!"

Tony thought quickly. The last Mandarin Broadcast was about..." Roxxon!" Tony said quickly. "The Roxxon oil refinery had it's own Shipyard. Pepper wanted to know if we were gonna buy it when they shut it down." He shut his eyes a moment. "Which means its abandoned and everything."

Slattery was looking at the TV, which was showing a soccer game. "Come on, Manchester!" He howled.

Tony grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and shoved him back toward the Throne, in front of the cameras. "All right." He growled. "We're going on the air right now. Live to the whole world. You're going to tell them what's really going on."

Slattery gestured back at the chamber. "I need the rest of my costume."

"The Rings?" Tony stopped him, tapping at the computers. "Screw it. This isn't about the costume, this is actual reality. You're going on the air, you're gonna tell the truth!"

Tony saw his prisoner's eyes flick to the left, and spun around, trying to bring the gun up.

Brandt was behind him with a demented grin. Tony had the gun pointed before his brain processed who it was. By the time he realized, she leaned forward and took the barrel of his gun between her teeth, grinning around it. Tony squeezed the trigger instantly.

There was a loud bang, and a cloud of red, messy vapor sprayed out behind her neck, and the three
Harem women screamed in the bathroom again.

But the half-panther-woman didn't fall. Tony saw the wound close over through her mouth, and Brandt didn't even seem in pain.

She yanked her head back, the strength of her jaw enough to pull the gun from his grip and throw it away. She reached out and clasped his shoulders before he could scramble out of reach. Stark brought up his Repulsor and gave her a blast to the stomach. He knew it wouldn't hurt her, but he was hoping to break her grip.

Except her grip didn't break and the blast sent him flying across the room with her. By the time they stopped skidding, she had flipped them over so that she was on top, and Stark was leaning back against the pillows that covered the Harem floor.

Tony tried to get clear and Brandt planted her knees on his arms, keeping him pinned, right in his face, noses brushing. "Relax, Stark." She almost purred against his lips. "This is what you're into, right? Sex and Death. You're famous for them."

"I'm not generally into both at the same time." Stark retorted. "And to be blunt... I've been with women a lot hotter than you, Lava-Girl."

"Truthfully, I'm disappointed." She taunted, right in his face. "All the things I've heard about you? And all you've got is a cheap trick and a cheesy one-liner."

"Sweetheart, that could be the title of my autobiography." Stark groaned as he brought up the repulsor again.

She just laughed, hauled him to his feet, and gave him a hyper-fast punch that sent him into the wall. He didn't get up again.

'Trevor Slattery' grew two feet taller without hesitation. "Idiot!" He barked at her, razor sharp again.

Brandt's face went from smug to terrified, and she dropped to her knees before him, forehead scraping floor. "Forgive me, Master. I was..."

"You were Elsewhere." The Mandarin boomed. "Killian gave you to me as a guard after the last time this man evaded you, and I took it on faith that you had learned your lesson."

"Yes, Master." Brandt groveled completely. "I'm so sorry!"

The Mandarin went to the table and slid on one of his ornate Rings. He made a fist, and the Ring sang with a crackle of power. Brandt was trembling, waiting for her punishment.

It did not come.

Mandarin reached down with one hand and lifted her chin. "You were... impressive, my dear." He granted. "Once you bothered to show up." He gestured to Stark. "Remove that. If he's alive, put him in the dungeon." He put a hand out. "And make sure that only the tertiary guards are responsible for him."

Brandt paused. The Tertiary guards were the weakest and least trained. None of them were Extremis-Enhanced. "Master, it was my mistake. Let me make up for it?"

He shushed her. "This is not an insult, or a punishment. This is... part of a plan. Is Killian still
"Yes Master." Brandt said submissively, still bowing before him.

Mandarin rose and went to collect his Rings. "Then see to the Prisoner. You will go with Killian when he leaves."

The garage doors to the Manor opened. Other stately Manors would have a dozen expensive luxury cars in the garage. This one had only moving trucks. What was a private garage was now a loading dock.

The unmarked vans drove in, and eight men came forward to wrestle a large heavy crate onto a hand crane.

Killian was observing the whole thing, with a few guards alongside him. He tolerated their presence, more interested in what was happening. He didn't need guards any more.

But one of them looked to the door into the Manor and froze, dropping quickly to his knees. The others saw it and followed his gaze, quickly doing the same.

Killian knew what he would see as all activity in the chamber dropped to nothing. The Mandarin had entered. "Master?"

The Warlord gestured to Killian. "Walk with me."

Killian did so; and they both left the room. The hallways were clear of people; everyone eager to give The Master his space.

The Mandarin spoke, strong and precise. "The bow and arrow, was the pinnacle of weapons technology, nine centuries ago. It allowed Genghis Khan to rule an Empire four times that of Alexander the Great. More than twice the size of Rome." He glanced to Killian. "A few years ago, I shared these thoughts with a man I trusted to carry This Ring." He pointed to a large red ruby on his left hand. "His name was Raza. You recognize the name?"

Killian nodded. "I do, Master. He was in command of several operations in Afghanistan."

"He carried My Banner, and was rewarded for his efforts." Mandarin nodded. "Then one day, Raza turned his back on me. Do you know why?"

"No Master. His connection to you was never discovered."

"As it should be." Mandarin told him. "Raza could not command the Ring as I do, and turned away from me, in the hopes of currying his own favor with Obadiah Stane. Stane wanted Stark's power for his own, and arranged to have Stark taken and killed. Raza got greedy, and tried to hold the American to Ransom. The result was Iron Man."

Killian had never met Raza, but couldn't help the smirk. He didn't say anything. He didn't need to.

"The Mongolian Archers of Genghis Khan were able to strike a target with their arrows hundreds of yards away, on horseback, at full gallop. Raza turned away from elegant weapons, in favor of something more... tactile. He wanted a weapon he could control without effort." Mandarin held up his hands. "What the world did not know, was that the Great Khan had other weapons at his disposal."
"Such as?"

The Mandarin leveled his gaze at Killian, who quickly looked down, aware that he'd spoken out of turn. "The warfare of Genghis Khan was known to be without mercy. Where his armies struck, nothing bigger than a cockroach would dare to live for years. His armies were a force, not of conquest, but of total devastation." He held out his hands. "And he searched all of Asia, to find more than the three Rings he possessed. It took decades to find them all."

"The Rings." Killian breathed.

"Six months ago, the world became aware of other powers in the Galaxy." The cultured voice boomed. "During the time of the Vikings, The Allfather left Earth to itself, because he knew we were not ready for what they represented, and what was history passed into legend, until finally forgotten as myth. One of their weapons was hidden here for a thousand years by Loki, until he reclaimed it. Thanks to the misuse of The Tesseract; The Realms were alerted to the fact that Earth was ready for a higher form of War. " He grinned at Killian. "Have you worked it out?"

"Six months ago." Killian thought aloud. "Just after the Alien invasion... when you ordered me to announce your presence to the world."

The Mandarin nodded.

Killian never took his eyes off the Rings. "Are they... like the Tesseract?"

The Mandarin clasped his fists. "There are Empires unknown to the Golden Halls of the Asgardians, and beyond the Dark Cities of the Chitauri. The Makluans had powers that even Stark would not understand. The slightest use of that power gave the Great Khan his Throne. But he could not understand what he had, literally, in the palm of his hand. His time passed, as all the Conquerors did. And the Ten Rings passed to one of his sons."

"What did he do with them?" Killian asked, curious now.

"He studied them. He learned what they truly were, what they could truly do. Where others would be eager for the sharp rush of battle... I played a longer game." Mandarin turned to meet Killian's gaze. "I was the youngest survivor of that generation. The Great Khan was my father."

Killian's face changed, as he looked The Mandarin in the eye for the first time.

"You would have thought it impossible a year ago." The Mandarin gave him a single nod.

"I would have." Killian nodded.

"And now?"

"Now I am also... Eternal."

"Centuries ago, when I was young, Alchemists and Soothsayers sought to claim power of the natural laws. They called it Magic. Centuries passed, and those that could not understand Magic looked to themselves and created tools to achieve the results they wanted. They called it Science, and Technology. Now, men and women like your Maya Hansen have discovered that control over natural things like organics, and scientific things like atomic powers, are not quite so separate as once believed. Asgard has long since known that the line between Science and Magic is not only blurred, but never existed. And now that Sly Loki was greedy and foolish enough to make all The Realms aware of our existence..."
Killian rose to his full height, and finished that thought. "They will be coming."

"Almost certainly." Mandarin smirked. "After nine centuries of study, preparation, contemplation, and care... my thousand year plan to take control was revised into a three year stratagem." He looked to Killian. "Aldrich, you and Maya are the first humans to find a way. A way to bridge the gap between Science and Magic, and grant yourselves power over your own design. And when I knew that... I knew it was time for me to emerge once again. For the first time in Centuries, I have found someone that may be equal to the task I have before me. To make this world ready, under one united, immortal rule. And from Earth... The possibilities are endless."

Aldrich was drooling at the 'possibilities'.

The Mandarin smirked. "When Stark defeated Raza, he proved Raza unworthy to carry my Ring. When he worked with the Avengers, he proved himself a worthy challenger. Right now, The Avengers are the only ones that have proven a decent response for Threats beyond this world." He threw down the challenge to Killian. "Prove yourself and your forces are a match for Stark, and I will know that you are ready to step up and take your place."

"Name the challenge." Killian was eager for it.

"I have convinced Stark that The Mandarin is your invention. He will soon see the way this will benefit you. You will play up that angle. I have given Stark the location of your next mission, and given Stark an appropriately incompetent guard. Have your Extremis Warriors present. Stark will escape and be there soon, to challenge you. Defeat him, and I will lay the world at your feet."

He held out his right hand, and Killian bent forward to kiss The Mandarin's Ring. "Thank you, my Master."

"These Rings have power of their own. Power enough perhaps to stabilize the reaction. Win this challenge, and I will deem your formula worth the cost of my Ring. You could command Extremis by will, rather than trust to random chance." The Mandarin dismissed him, and returned to his Harem. "Let us see if the Gods are with you, Aldrich."

Killian returned to the Dungeons, where Brandt was levering the huge wooden crate open. The box fell open, revealing Iron Patriot within.

Rhodes had been sealed in for the better part of a day. The suit was pressurized, airtight and he was breathing fine. He had no idea what they'd bound him with, because he couldn't physically make his neck bend to look. The armor had cooled enough that the control surfaces could shift again... but he was bound tight.

The HUD told him he was moving, the way the axis were shifting... But he couldn't call out. His transponder was offline, so was his radio, and he couldn't for the life of him figure out how they were doing it.

Finally, he was put upright and the box opened around him. Rhodes blinked as his vision cleared. He was indoors, in a room made of stone walls. He could see a cell set up, waiting, obviously for him.

There were two people in the room with him. One guard with a silenced 9mm, and the other... Rhodes didn't know what to make of him. He wasn't wearing any kind of protective gear, he carried no weapons. He was wearing cargo pants, a T-shirt... and was barefoot?

"Well, there's only one reason I can see why you wouldn't be wearing shoes." Iron Patriot said
digitally. "You want to put the suit on... and I guess you don't wear my size."

"Harker got the job when you blew up our other pilot." The guard with the gun said helpfully.

'Harker' slugged his partner across the back of the head. "No names, moron." Without letting the conversation linger at all, Harker reached out a hand and pressed his palm against the Iron Patriots' chest. An instant later, his skin started to glow bright red from within.

Rhodes felt the heat rising. He could hear whatever was tying him up snap from the growing temperatures, but as the metal in his suit expanded again, he was having trouble moving. His cannon was still gone, his shoulder mounted weapons weren't targeting from the electrical overload...

Rhodes' HUD put up the temperature readouts. **140, 160.**

Rhodes painted targets over all of them, and tried to fire. His arms were immobilized by the expanding metal; his heavier weapons were gone...

**200, 215.**

The flares and chaff fired out, filling the room with pyrotechnics. Sparks and fire bounced off the floor, off the walls, an overwhelming display...

The man with the gun let out a shout and dove for cover.

**245, 260.**

Harker didn't move, didn't even flinch. Rhodes could see the flares and chaff bouncing straight off him, burning his clothes. Rhodes felt the same way, feeling his skin sizzle against the inside of his suit like he was pressed against a grill.

**285. Approaching Failsafe Point.**

"Ahh, screw it." Rhodes growled, backed into a corner. "Eject me now!"

The armor opened swiftly like a mousetrap in reverse, and Rhodes felt a kick in his back send him forward to get clear of the suit.

Rhodes sprang out of the armor and didn't even pause before he lashed out, slugging Harker across the jaw.

Harker barely blinked from the blow. The other guard raised his pistol and fired half a dozen shots. Rhodes ducked behind Harker, using him as a human shield. The bullets struck him, and he didn't even blink.

For an instant, Harker looked annoyed, when his eyes flashed bright red.

Rhodes cast about, looking for a weapon he could use, when Harker turned to him... And let out a breath forcefully. A burst of flame came from his lips as he exhaled.

The soldier threw himself backwards in shock so fast he fell, still scrambling backward. "Breathing fire! Breathing fire! That man is breathing fire!" Rhodes blurted in open shock.

He scrambled backwards into the cage, and the armed guard slammed the cell door shut.
Harker grinned, and turned back to The Iron Patriot suit. He stepped towards it, and the suits' shoulder cannon spun around to point at him automatically. But the weapon had been disabled during his capture, and nothing happened.

Harker laughed and came close enough to touch it...

A second cannon, this one armed with missile interceptors, suddenly detached from its standby position and rotated to fire over the other shoulder. It was a barrage that would chop a tank in half.

Harker was cut down instantly, the bullets shredding his torso apart.

The cannon spun to aim at the other guard, and cut him down too. The cannon retracted again, back in standby mode.

"Now, how do I get you to break me out of here?" Rhodes asked himself...

...When Harker sat back up again.

Rhodes was stunned. He'd seen the fire-touch trick in Pakistan, but bullet-proof?

Harker groaned and spat out a smoking bullet. "Right in the mouth, now nothing is gonna taste right." He glared at Rhodes. "Bet you thought that was pretty funny, huh?"

"Less so than you'd think." Rhodes mumbled, wondering how far out of his depth he was.

Pepper woke up. Her head was clear but her mouth tasted like someone had stuffed it full of cotton. She groaned before memory caught up. It took several minutes for her vision to focus. When her surroundings became clear, she wished she was unconscious again.

The room she was in was below ground, but not entirely. She could see a stained glass window that had grass in sight. A basement then. The walls and floor were stone, and she was secured to a frame of some kind, standing upright. Her wrists, legs and chest ached from where the straps held her steady.

There was only one more piece of furniture in the room, and that was a long table, which was covered, end to end with computer equipment, and a few items of laboratory gear that she recognized from Tony's workshop.

Maya Hansen was at the equipment, staring at the screen with the same look Tony got when designing a new Iron Man. It was a crazed, hungry, eager look. A Zealot with the Holy Grail.

There was one door, at ground level, and a set of stone stairs leading to it. The door was thick and heavy oak... with two guards armed with machine guns. The guards noticed she was awake, and one of them reached for a radio.

Pepper knew who he was signaling, and decided to try and take advantage of the moment. "Maya."

Maya Hansen didn't turn to face her. "Werner VonBraun invented the first rocket of any power and accuracy. You know what he wanted? Space travel. His dream was to go to other planets. He had the misfortune of being in Germany when he did it, and the rise of the Third Reich meant that his work became the V2 rocket." She turned to face Pepper. "When the first V2 rocket hit London, he said: 'The Rocket worked perfectly. It just landed on the wrong planet.'" She smirked. "When the war ended, the KGB and the CIA snapped up every German engineer they could find as fast as they could; and when the Gestapo agents came to the USA, everyone looked the other way
because they needed help beating the Russians to the moon."

Pepper groaned and tried to make her voice work around her cotton-mouth. "I know all that." She rasped out. "I live with the best engineer on the planet, so of course I know the story. What's your point?"

"My point, Miss Potts, is that VonBraun's dream got there. The V2 rocket was the precursor to the Saturn V, which gave the world Apollo 11. The Space Program gave us GPS, Satellite tech, communications, enough new materials to build everything from a racing bike, to a ceramic plate, to Iron Man himself." Maya turned back to her workstation and picked up a cup of water. "Every advance that ever helped the world was paid for in blood."

Pepper licked her lips again, and Maya brought over the cup, letting her get a mouthful of water. Grateful, Pepper nodded. "You don't have to tell me the numbers, Maya. My boyfriend was nicknamed 'The Merchant of Death' by Time Magazine."

"And a year later, they called him the Man of the Year. Beat that." A voice commanded.

Maya and Pepper both looked up to the door, and in strolled Aldrich Killian, in a flawless pinstripe suit, looking in perfect control. He was so calm and confident, it felt like he could command the stars to move at his whim.

Pepper just wanted him to come close enough to spit at him.

"So, Pepper. By now you figured it out, I'm sure." Killian invited her to speak.

"I think I have the nuances." Pepper nodded. "You and Maya make Extremis for Mandarin. Except it's not working and people start blowing up." Pepper thought it out. "He's a monster, and sees a way to use it anyway, and uses your lab rats as suicide bombers who don't even know it, and tells you to make it work. But you can't do it fast enough to save your necks. So you come to me at SI, only I turn you down. So you send Maya to Tony. Only he's already thrown down the challenge, so Mandarin strikes first." Pepper glared. "Your Master doesn't know you haven't fixed it."

Killian grinned. "That's my girl." He gestured at Maya. "I had hoped that my partner over here would figure it out. She's been chasing it since forever. Her brains and my cash, we went from my Storage Space to Park Avenue." He cupped Maya's face with one hand, and the dark haired woman nuzzled into his touch automatically, in a way that made Pepper shudder. "Not enough people are patient. Patience was all it took to get this far." He wasn't talking to Pepper any more. He was talking to Maya as his other hand came up to caress her other cheek. "Remember, Maya? Ten years, a few billion dollars and an investor smart enough to shut up and just let you work."

Maya nodded, licking her lips. "You were the only one that would."

Killian spun away from her, dropping her instantly. "But you screwed it up."

Maya rocked back and forth a little on her heels, and Pepper knew instantly that Killian's control over Maya was more than financial.

"Fortunately, we have another way now." Killian was back to Pepper. "You. See, Extremis works, as I told you, by rewiring the brain to use all the leftover stuff."

Maya came forward, explaining the problem. "Some people don't make the change in the intended order. The power they produce in their new brains is ready before their bodily functions can regulate..."
"That's not important." Killian interrupted. He reached into his pocket, and pulled out a syringe. "Pepper, I need a blood sample. Do I have to get it the hard way?"

"Why?"

"So that Maya can engineer you a dose of Extremis, of course." He said smoothly. "If Tony wants to save you, then he'll need to fix Maya's beta version."

Pepper shivered as he got the sample. Fighting would have been a waste of energy, and she knew to keep still when a needle was coming at her. "What are the odds?"

"So far, only one in four survive. The others... explode. I believe your friend Happy found that out." Killian grinned. "So then, Pepper. Let's see if the Gods are with you."

He turned to leave the room, and pepper sagged against her restraints. Maya took the sample from Pepper and fed it into a centrifuge.

Pepper kept her eyes on the machine, as Maya hurried up the stairs and followed Killian out. "What if it does take?" She hissed to him once they hit the hallway. "What if she... Makes it? There are safer ways to control Stark through his girlfriend."

"I have my reasons." Killian said simply. "Get her ready to travel. She's coming with me."

Rhodes was still in his cell. More people had come into the room, but these were not soldiers. They were technicians. They had brought in tablet computers and diagnostic tools, and had gone right to work on the suit. Somehow, they had managed to shut down the automatic defenses within a few minutes.

After ten minutes, they had levered the mask open, and were working on the HUD.

Rhodes gave them nothing, but he knew what they were trying to do. After Rhodes had stolen the MK-II, Stark had put in a lot of extra security to make sure nobody could fly any suit anywhere, without being on the approved list.

So far, there were only three names on the list. Stark, Rhodes... and Pepper, though she probably didn't know about it. Rhodes had found it funny that Pepper had been approved to take a suit, when none of them would fit her.

There were three levels of protection. Facial recognition, retinal scans, and biometrics. Each of them was as individual as a fingerprint, even more so.

So how were they able to get past the defenses already?

Harker turned to Rhodes, and headed over. "The Master wants this to work." He said quietly. "It's worth my life to give him what he wants." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "The techies say that the thing has a retinal scanner built in, so that only you can fly it." Harker grinned toothily. "So, I need an eyeball."

Rharker went cold all over, but didn't let any of it show on his face.

Harker reached through the bars for Rhodes, who darted back against the wall. "You want it? Come in and get it."

Harker reached a little further, and somehow his arm stretched. Rhodes could hear bones
dislocating, the whole shape of Harker's torso shifting, but the man didn't seem to be in pain as he squeezed through the bars...

"Got it!" A voice called over from the suit.

Harker forgot about Rhodes instantly, and headed over to the suit. Rhodes was quickly on his feet, rushing over to the bars.

"Congratulations, Harker." One of the Techies said. "You are now on the approved pilot list."

Harker grinned, and stepped over to the suit. And... it opened for him. With a cunning grin, Harker stepped into the suit, and it closed neatly around him.

Rhodes would have wondered how he could fit into such a custom fit, but he had just scene Harker dislocate his entire torso to reach through the cage door. he didn't know what Harker was, but he hoped there weren't more of him.

The Iron Patriot came to life, moving around as the new pilot tested his limbs.

The technician grinned. "All right folks, fix the damage, and lets get him on his way."

Rhodes went cold inside. They had a bruiser like Harker on the payroll, and they needed his suit for something. There was no scenario that would end well.

Okay, Rhodes... He told himself. What now?

Chapter End Notes

This is the most serious diversion from canon I've made. I swear, right up until the last frame, I was expecting this to be how the movie turned out. I won't say I was disappointed by the movie, I'm just saying if I had written it, this would have been how the scene between Tony and 'Mandarin' turned out. The fans off the comic will recognize the significance of the changes.
Tony woke up and the first thing he wondered about was the time. Jarvis had a timer. If he hadn't summoned or deactivated his armor within thirty minutes of storming the fortress, the suit would activate anyway.

Tony shook his head a little and immediately regretted it, eyes rolling around a bit from Brandt's punch.

Once his vision cleared, he got the picture. Maya was at a computer, facing away from him. He was tied to a bed-frame, hands tied over his head to the crossbar with zip-ties. Difficult to break, impossible to pull apart or slip through.

Maya spun her chair around. "So. Here we are again."

"One of us tied to a bed, the other thinking about work." Tony snorted. "Just like old times."

Maya spun back to her computer. "You and I remember that night differently."

"Apparently. You and Killian hit it off, huh?"

"I took his money." Maya dismissed. "The rest is none of your business."

"You made it my business when your formula blew up my best friend." Tony shot back. "And my house. And very nearly me. To say nothing of Pepper and where the hell is she now?"

"She..." Maya shook her head and evaded the question. "Extremis works. I can give it to the whole world, Tony. And if AIM try to keep it for themselves, if they try to charge outrageous prices for it, or patent it beyond..." She shook her head. "I know that someone, somewhere will try to control it for their private use, but you can't bury information any more. I just needed it finished."

Tony's face changed as realization hit him. "You were going to Open Source it." He said suddenly. "You were going to take Killian's money, get it beta tested, and then release the formula to the whole world."

Maya nodded. "That was the plan. My plan. Even when I worked for the Pentagon. They would have put me in jail for that, but it would have been worth it. You've seen what Extremis can do. If I could raise the whole human race to that level, it would have been worth it. When the Pentagon shut me down and the Mandarin took me on, the plan didn't change. They would have killed me for it, but I would have ended all disease, all injury, maybe even the aging process. That would have been worth anything. Worth the bombs, worth the fear, worth the treason..."

"The Rocket worked perfectly, it just landed on the wrong planet." Tony quoted with a bite.

Maya froze. "You remember that."

Tony snorted. "My father went on for hours about that story."

"So did Sal. Remember Sal?"

Tony almost smiled. "I was his best customer."

"I went and saw Sal a few months ago." Maya said softly. "He... He's changed."
"I know. I went and saw him after Iron Man." Tony nodded.

"I wanted so badly to tell him about this." Maya sighed. "He would have been proud of me."

"Proud?" Tony repeated in disbelief.

"Well no, not of this." Maya conceded. "But it works. Even after having The Mandarin pay the bills, they would put a statue of me in every city on the planet. I just need... I just need to make it safe. If I can work the bugs out, I can release it to the whole human race."

"Maya, Sal left MIT because..." He looked down. "Because people like VonBraun never had a chance. People like Einstein and VonBraun and you dream of a world with limitless energy, space travel, perfect health, superhuman ability for all... People like my father, people like Killian, they have other plans. Look at the history books: Which dream wins out?"

Maya said nothing.

Tony leaned as far forward as his bonds would allow. "People like you, me and my dad... we remember what VonBraun wanted. The rest of the world only remembers their legacy. This is your legacy, Maya. People blowing up in theaters."

Maya's face turned to stone as she snatched up a small page from her desk. She pushed the page up to his face. "How do we fix it?" She demanded. "How do we stabilize the reaction?"

"I don't know." Tony told her.

"You got me closer than I've ever been!" She turned the slip over. The other side was a name-tag, which read 'You know who I am'. It was his handwriting, and the name-tag was from the conference in Switzerland when they had met.

Tony blinked. "Did I write that?"

Her face froze. "Yes."

Tony squinted at the equations, looked again. "Is... is this why you've been chasing me all this time?" His eyes flicked back up to her face. "Is this why you came to the house?"

Maya was stricken. "You don't remember." She breathed. She took it harder than she had when she thought he didn't remember spending the night with her. "You're lying. You have to be. You remember that night."

Tony sighed, looking old. "Maya, I remember you, because we go back further than one night. Sal's little group of Futurists? I followed all of them, even if we weren't in the same classes. I wanted people who had the Future in them too. We didn't meet that night, we met in MIT. Of course I knew who you were." He managed to shrug while tied to a frame. "But the fact is, if you had been that loaded, you wouldn't remember me either."

Maya was perturbed. "You were that bad? You didn't seem that bad."

"What can I say? I'm a pretty functional drunk. That night I gave a talk about Integrated Systems, and I can't remember any of that either."

Maya sagged. "You don't remember." The note in her hand dropped helplessly to the floor. "You don't even remember."
Tony broke it to her gently. "Maya, I got a look at the formula. I don't think it can be stabilized."

"It works. You've seen it work." Maya raged. "One in four, Tony. It works on one in four. I don't need to make it work, I need to make it stable."

"Maya, you're a scientist, do you even know why? What's the common factor in that one in four?"

"I don't know."

"What's the common weakness in the other three?" Tony demanded.

"I don't know!"

"Is there any common factors in any of your control groups?"

"I DON'T KNOW!" Maya almost screamed, finally losing it. "I don't know, okay? I've tracked every angle, coded every gene, found every point of reference. Age, gender, health, family history, lifestyle, medical records, diet, even eye color, and none of them are a match!" She had tears streaming down her face. "I'm right there, and I can't get it over the line. I've run a marathon with this formula, and I can't get it the last six inches. You were my last hope." She wiped the tears away furiously. "Why is that one in four so goddam special? Why can't everyone have what they have?"

She broke off suddenly, breathing hard.

Tony looked at her evenly. He was the one in chains, and she was the one that fell apart.

"There's one thing I don't get." He spoke after she got herself under control. "You had Chad Davis over a year ago. But he didn't explode Mann's Chinese Theater until a few days ago. Why?"

Maya waved a hand back and forth. "Extremis is unpredictable. The first dose spreads it through the whole nervous system. Sometimes it takes right away, sometimes it needs a few doses, sometimes it doesn't take at all and you blow up." She looked genuinely saddened by it. "Davis wasn't going to make it. That was clear after his third dose. So he got put out into the world and told to enjoy the sights, collect his final dose out in public. Poor moron thought it would save his life." Maya reined herself in with difficulty. "Will you help me fix it?"

Tony grit his teeth. "How long do we have?"

"A day. Maybe less."

Tony shook his head. "I found this place by hacking the AIM mainframe. I got a look at the formula, and I've been working on it the entire way here. I don't think it can be fixed. On the way here I couldn't even figure out how to dissolve it once it goes systemic. It just... bends too many of the rules, and breaks a couple that shouldn't be broken. It pushes the human creature too far past its blueprints."

Maya's face turned to stone. "Well. I'm dead then. Because once Killian has to admit to Mandarin that he lied about how far along we were... He'll be able to talk his way out of it because Mandarin was willing to buy human weapons already, whether they held together or not."

Tony snorted. "Yeah. Well, Mandarin isn't as scary as you might think."

"Yes. He is," Maya said in a voice that spoke of absolute doom. "And Killian will give him your head on a silver platter, so that's... But they'll both put me to a slow death."
"You made this bed." Tony was unforgiving. "It'd be easier to feel pity for you if you hadn't picked the team that blew u-"

Maya put a hand up. "Let me just stop you right there. I know I'm the bad guy. I didn't care because I thought..." She looked sick. "You think I was in the room when they cooked this up? Terror is not what I signed up for, Tony. AIM takes things like my research and uses production capital to make it available on a large scale. I gave them Extremis because that was exactly what I wanted. If I can give Extremis to the world safely, it could save more lives than penicillin." She shook her head. "I guess it doesn't matter any more."

"Where's Killian now?"

"He went out to buy a silver platter." Maya quipped darkly.

"Maya." Tony wasn't kidding around any more.

Maya actually looked ashamed. "I gave Pepper a dose of Extremis. She's already systemic by now."

Tony was gutted. It was worse than his Panic Attacks. The life was sucked out of his body, to the point where he almost felt his Arc Reactor go dark for a moment. ".you... you did that?"

Maya wouldn't look at him. "Killian talked me into it."

Tony was crying, tears on his face for the first time since... ever. "Can I see her?" He begged.

"She's not here." Maya was crying too, tears of shame on her face. "Aldrich took her with him. I don't know where. It was supposed to be the final attempt at forcing your cooperation... but he took her with him as soon as I gave her the shot. He never intended her as bait. He had his own plans. The Grand Finale, whatever it is... He wants her there."

"Why?"

Maya let out a bark of bitter laughter. "His overriding certainty that everything he wants is automatically his God-given property, including the world on a plate... and the famous Pepper Potts chained to his bed, until she's happy to be there." She shrugged. "He thinks she'll make it. She does have a chance Tony. One in four."

Tony bit back the first response that came to mind. "Well... She's beaten those odds before."

Maya nodded. She didn't buy it either.

"Maya, get me out of here." Tony said finally. "There's nothing left for you here now. I can get you a deal if you help me stop him. Do the right thing, especially if its the last thing you ever do."

Maya shook her head. "I can't." She whispered. "You can't protect me. Not from Killian. He'll take that suit off you like a banana peel."

Tony reacted. "Killian took the dose?"

Maya nodded, an unsurprised expression on her face. "Yup. He was the first human test. And he survived." She shook her head. "God forgive me, but... when he came out of it better than new, I thought that meant it worked. I honestly thought we were set."

"So you went and found more people." Tony nodded. "How many survived?"
"Fifteen made it through to the other side." Maya sighed. "I'm Godmother to a race of fifteen Titans among mortals."

Long silence.

She glanced up at the cameras and leaned closer to him. "I picked up the signal from the subdermal locators you've got implanted all up and down your body. They're going to your suit, which is less than a half mile away. I know what you're planning. You don't need my help to escape... But if I don't tell anyone? My chances of getting out of here are much better, once you distract the guards."

Tony snorted. "Cold blooded, Maya. I don't get to say that to a lot of people, but you're not good people."

"I know." Maya seemed genuinely regretful. "This won't mean much, but... I hope she makes it." She stepped closer and pressed a soft, unsettling kiss goodbye on his lips, totally devoid of any emotion. "I have to go."

She didn't look back as she went up the stairs to the dungeon door, and knocked. The door opened, and the four guards stepped in. "Killian left strict instructions." She told them. "He's not useful. Leave his head and face intact for identification. Make sure there's nothing else left."

The guards nodded and came into the room. She stood in the doorway for a second, and glanced back at him. She looked from him, to the stained glass window, to her watch, then back to him. And then she as out the door, moving at a quick march.

*I hope I have as much faith in the MK-45 as Maya does.* Tony thought with a shiver. The odds were fifty-fifty that this was going to work as planned. He'd created modular armor for exactly this reason, and so far it had been a disaster.

The guards closed in on him, and Tony craned his neck up, trying to get a look at his watch. His wrist was tied the other way, and he couldn't see it.

His guards got closer, and Tony calculated the odds. "You guys know what time it is?"

The guards said nothing. Tony looked at them carefully. They had 9mm guns instead of the .45’s, they didn't have radios or earwigs. They were from the outer ring of guards. These weren't the hardcore guards.

*Why?* Tony asked himself. *Do I really seem that useless without my armor?*

*Why wouldn't you?* A traitorous little voice responded. *Your backup plan involves your own suit flying through the window to come and rescue you.*

The nearest guard drew his gun. Tony struggled against his bonds for a moment. They were too strong to pull free. He twisted his wrist as hard as he could and got a look at his watch. His armor was on a timer, with four minutes left on the clock.

"Don't I get a few last words?" Tony vamped quickly.

One of the guards snorted and aimed his gun.

"Hold on." The second said with a dirty grin. "This is Tony Stark, after all. Don't you want to know what his famous last words are?"
Tony licked his lips. "Well, first of all... I want my remains cremated and sent to the Playboy Mansion. Hef knows what to do with them. Second, my little black book is hidden in a shock proof safe. It's possibly at the bottom of the ocean right now, but if you manage to find it, it has details, histories... and photographs of most of the women I've been with over the years. The combination to the safe is..."

Even as he made things up; the guards seemed fascinated, despite themselves.

*Work the opening Tony, work the room.*

The Tony Stark One-Man-Show shilled desperately, trying to pass the fatal few minutes and survive.

Rhodes wasn't sure if they were just rubbing his face in it, but he was getting frustrated. The suit was right there, five feet out of reach. Someone else was wearing it. A fire-breathing, inhuman contortionist that worked for The Mandarin.

The Technicians were replacing the broken weapons, reloading all his ordinance, even polishing the chrome. And Rhodes was forced to sit in a cage and watch the whole thing.

"Harker, can you tell me about the HUD?" One of the technicians asked, still looking down at his tablet.

"The Suit AI is not being helpful, but it can't lock me out since you've added me to the approved list." Harker's voice said digitally. "The flight system is pretty intuitive. So's weapon control."

The Technician nodded. "I'm uploading the frequency for the tra-"

Iron Patriot lifted a hand and a pair of wrist mounted guns fired swiftly, shredding the technician's stomach open. He was dead before he hit the floor.

The other Techies ducked back, terrified.

Harker pointed to Rhodes, servos whirring as he moved. "Does anyone else feel the need to discuss the plan in front of company?"

Loud silence.

"Good." Harker beamed. "Now, I have a mission. Hold onto the prisoner until I'm done, just in case."

"In case of what?" Someone squeaked.

"I don't know." Harker said patiently. "If I knew that, I wouldn't have to keep him alive."

Iron Patriot's weapons shifted back into standby position, and Harker went upstairs, stalking out of the room without another word.

The technicians looked quietly terrified, not looking at the dead body on the floor as they collected their equipment. "We're all going to die here." One of them hissed.

"Shut up." Another hissed back.

The sound of jet turbines came through the walls, and Rhodes twitched. Harker was already in the air.
The door to the corridor opened again, and four women came in. Three of them looked slightly stoned, and wore practically nothing. The fourth was dressed in a white business shirt and black suit pants, with short hair and dark olive skin. Rhodes didn't know why, but when he saw her, he shivered hard.

The half-Panther woman shoved the three women down the stairs. "The Master says he's done with these three. I've got to go; I've been summoned to the Grand Finale."

"You want us to do it?" The Techies screeched. "We don't do the... nasty stuff."

"No, I do." Brandt said without blinking. "But when we're done with Rhodes, I won't be here, and you idiots don't want to have to hide bodies too often. We keep the three here, we can take care of all four of them at once, after the mission is over. Neater that way."

Brandt was already on her way out of the room when the Techies gathered the three women. They struggled, but were still feeling the effects of the drugs, and were trying to balance in high heeled slippers.

Rhodes couldn't believe his dumb luck. It was the perfect timing between Harker leaving with the suit, and Brandt being in a hurry to go elsewhere. He eased into position, as the few people in the room kept their eyes glued to the harem women and not their prisoner of war.

The nearest man opened the cell door, as they tried to wrestle the three inside.

Rhodes lunged, throwing himself out the cell door, fist first. He knocked the closest man down, and kept moving, lunging for the next man wearing a lab coat.

They were armed, but were clearly more comfortable with their electronic tools than with guns, and they fumbled, trying to draw a bead on him. before one of them was even able to get a weapon clear, Rhodes had snatched up a weapon and had it aimed.

Everyone put their hands up. Even the women.

Rhodes gestured at the cell door. "Everyone in." He held up a hand to the women. "Not you. You three find a place to hide and don't let anyone see you for at least five minutes. Then try and get out of here. I'd take you with me, but I have to save the world first."

They hurried to obey, and the Techies hurried into their cell. Rhodes made a quick scan of the room. Thick walls, heavy doors. Nobody would hear them calling for help, and if Iron Patriot couldn't get a signal out of this room, neither could they.

A few moments later, Colonel Rhodes was making his way through the corridors, looking for a way out.

Tony had dished out details on his sordid past, made up some revelations about his family, delivered a somewhat brilliant rendition of the St Crispin Day's speech, and was now reciting the periodic table of elements. His guards were getting bored, but had forgotten somewhere along the way that they were supposed to be there to kill him.

Just as Tony was getting bored enough to blow his own brains out, his watch started beeping.

"Oh thank god." Tony breathed.

"What's that?" One of the guards came forward and yanked the watch of his wrist. "It's pink." He
observed. "It's a pink little-girl watch."

"It's limited edition." Tony told him with dignity.

The guard threw it down and crushed it under his heel.

"Hey!" Tony was very offended. "That watch cost me my last eleven dollars! Just for that, I'm gonna kill you first!"

The guards snorted, amused by that.

"Seriously. I'm not kidding you here," Tony warned. "You've all read at least one comic book in your life, and you know that this is the moment the hero makes his brilliant turnaround." He let out a breath, being generous. "But Iron Man is not without mercy. Surrender now and I will allow you to leave without incident."

"Think he's serious?" One of them asked, sounding nervous despite himself.

"Yup. We'd better kill him fast." The one closest to Tony said brightly. "Too bad we can't tell anyone about this. I bet I'd get a reward: The guy that offed Iron Man."

"A reward. Sure. Who do you think would deliver it? Captain America, or the Hulk?" Tony challenged him.

That gave the three of them pause for a moment, as though the idea had never occurred to them.

"We're dead." The third guard said with a squeak.

"No we're not." The first guard said, annoyed with the man. "We're going to get away with it, by not telling anyone." He spelled it out, as though to a very stupid child. "That's sort of the point."

Tony would have felt superior if he hadn't felt so stupid himself. It had been at least a minute since the watch beeped. Where the hell was his armor?

Maya was at the foyer, when someone came over. "Hey doc."

She turned to face him, keeping her face from showing nerves. "Banks."

Banks licked his lips. "You here looking for me?"

Hansen shook her head, keeping it casual. "I was actually hoping to catch Brandt before she left."

"You just missed them," Banks reported. "The Master has sent everyone from the A-Team with Killian. I don't really know why they told me to stay."

"Because your treatments aren't done yet." Maya told him. "You still need another dose to make the reaction stick."

Banks took her at her word. "Oh. Okay. I feel great though. Better than I ever have." He looked at her earnestly. "Look, Doc... I know you're not a hundred percent behind the project... Neither am I. I mean, who would be? But... Six months ago, I was paralyzed so completely that I needed someone to run my food through a blender and then squeeze-bottle the result into my mouth. I could barely swallow it on my own. Now I think I can wrestle a rhino and win if I wanted. And that's all because of you. No matter what else... Six months ago, I would have done anything just to have the use of one hand. Thanks to you, I'm Superman." Banks glanced around, looking
embarrassed for a second, and leaned forward swiftly, giving her a kiss on the cheek. "I'm not sure I ever said thank you."

Maya plastered a smile on her face. "Oh, don't thank me." She looked out the door. "Listen, I was planning on slipping out for a few minutes..."

Banks' face hardened. "You can't do that."

Maya looked down at her shoes, then peeked up at him, halfway between flirting and sharing a naughty secret. "Banks... do you smoke?"

Banks snorted. "I used to."

"So did I." Maya lied. "But I gave it up because it was bad for me."

"Me too." Banks confirmed.

Maya licked her lips. "You know, thanks to me, you could breathe nerve gas and not even cough. If I was willing to split a pack of Menthol's with you..."

Banks looked around, smiling a little at her. "Go on. I won't tell. Boss is out of town by now anyway."

Maya smiled. "Thank you."

"Look, Cole..." Tony's third guard said weakly. "It's not like we're part of the group. I mean, you know they don't tell us a tenth of what goes on in this place."

"No names!" Cole, the closest guard, roared; as he cocked his gun. "I'll settle this right now!"

"COME ON!" Tony almost screamed at the window.

The window smashed, and a red and gold glove came in, shooting toward Tony's right hand. The glove slammed into place so hard and fast that the zip-ties snapped.

Tony couldn't help the sigh of relief as the gauntlet closed around his hand and wrist. He'd never attempted to use the modular armor when his hands were bound.

"Kill-him! Kill-him! Kill-him!" Cole shouted quickly, bringing his gun up in a panic.

Tony fired first. The repulsor blast struck Cole in the face and flipped the man double. The recoil had enough force to spin the entire frame around, scraping metal on stone floor.

He heard gunfire ricochet off the frame behind him and shifted his palm closer to center, aiming at the wall. He fired again, and the recoil sent the whole frame skidding backwards across the room. While his last two guards dove in opposite directions to avoid it, Tony reached over with his gauntlet and ripped apart the ties that held him.

As he got his feet under him, his guards had regrouped. Tony's red right hand came up like a gunslinger. The wave of concussive force threw off every aim in the room and spun Tony around again. He'd fired his repulsors enough times without the suit to know how to move with it, and actually left the ground as he spun. He half-flew half-jumped to Cole's motionless body and landed beside him.

The last two guards were gathering for another exchange. The one that had been nervous and
terrified the whole time was cursing and shaking as he tried to work his weapon. The one that hadn't said a word yet was holding together a lot better as he took aim. Tony brought the Repulsor up...

Nothing.

Tony swore. The modular battery had enough juice for a few shots, and he'd just pushed the battery too far.

His two guards saw it and tasted blood, stepping out of their cover.

Tony looked down at Cole's unconscious form and crouched, snatching up the gun. He came up shooting. It was a strange feeling. He'd been a weapons dealer, a superhero, taken on super-villains, self proclaimed demigods and armies of other worlds, to say nothing of the Ten Rings, but he'd never actually used a gun in combat before.

The second guard took the hit in the chest, three shots, fairly well grouped. Tony couldn't tell if he was wearing a vest... and didn't much care, once he didn't get up again.

That left the nervous one. Tony aimed both hands, one gun, one gauntlet squarely at him. He wasn't sure if he had firepower left in either.

It hardly mattered. The guy threw away his guns like he'd just been waiting for permission to do it, yapping compulsively. "Look man, I don't like it here. I don't really like these people. They're bat-crazy, all of them. You should hear some of the noises that come out of the Manor in the middle of the night, I don't know what they do up there, but-"

"Stop talking now." Tony directed.

The man's mouth shut with an audible click.

Tony went to Cole again and drew zip-ties out of his vest. The last guard standing was tied up in a few seconds.

Seconds after that, Tony had run a feed from his Arc Reactor to the gauntlet, and was making his way through the Manor.

Rhodes had carried out enough missions in forward areas to keep his angles covered. Every door he opened was treated with caution, every corner he turned, he checked first. What guards he couldn't evade he took down as silently as possible, taking a second gun.

As far as he could tell, he'd been able to get away without anyone finding out he was missing.

He came around the corner to the next hallway silently. He could see the front door, and daylight beyond. And standing guard at the door was an unarmed man. Unlike the guards, he wasn't in a uniform or combat gear. He was in civilian clothes, like the half-panther woman that had brought the Harem Women to his cell. As before, Rhodes felt a chill, and couldn't get a read on why.

The civilian wasn't facing his direction. He was at the door, looking outside. Rhodes crept up behind him, when he picked up the hall phone to his left. he didn't bother to dial. "This is Banks. We got the bastard, is anyone going to fix the fountain?" He listened for a moment, and hung up, not taking his eyes away from the view outside.

Rhodes crept closer.
Banks raised his voice. "Why don't you make your move already? I'm getting bored."

Rhodes froze.

Banks turned to face him with a cold grin. "Yes, I can hear you. I can smell you. It's really quite obvious. How long were you locked in that tin can anyway?"

Rhodes lifted his guns.

Banks charged, moving faster than Rhodes' eyes could follow. He fired anyway, cowboy style, feet planted, two guns going off as fast as he could pull the triggers.

Rhodes had a split second of focus where he could actually see the low caliber bullet flatten against his face, and then Rhodes was flying. It felt like someone had hit him in the chest with a helicopter blade. The air exploded from his lungs as he skidded down the hallway, folded in half.

Banks closed in on him...

There was a sudden half-second whine of power, and a sonic boom.

Rhodes had heard that sound before. He spun around to see Tony Stark, alive and well, braced against a wall as the repulsor glowed again. "Get down!"

Rhodes threw himself down as another wave of force passed over his head and slammed into Banks. The blast threw him into the wall hard enough to cave in the plaster and stone.

The fight had made a lot of noise, and Rhodes cast about, looking for other enemies.

"I'm the only one here." Banks told him. "I asked for plenty of room, and they were only too happy to give it to me. The rest like me have all been called away."

"That's why they didn't mind giving you space." Tony called. "Because they know you won't make it, and they don't want you around for the Grand Finale. I've seen your file, Banks. It's not taking. They left you behind because they know you're not going to make it."

Banks got a real ugly look on his face, and his eyes started to glow bright red.

Rhodes swore. He'd seen that once before. He grabbed for his guns and started shooting. He aimed for the eyes.

Tony was firing too, a gun in his left hand, a Repulsor in his right. They both poured it on. Rhodes could see the man plant his feet, as though leaning into the wind. The small caliber bullets did nothing. The repulsor blasts hit him like sledgehammers, before actually punching a hole through him...

And Banks kept coming.

Finally, Stark came up with another idea and charged closer, away from the wall. "Rhodey! Brace me!"

Rhodes scrambled over to his friend and braced the man's arm. Stark fired down at the floor, under Banks' feet. The Extremis-Enhanced man dropped knee deep into the floorboards and growled, pulling himself free...

The recoil almost threw Stark off his feet, but Rhodes held him down, and Stark swung his gauntlet to fire up at the ceiling. The blast was powerful enough to rip a hole through the ceiling...
and a room full of debris came raining down on Banks, crushing him. It got them away from Banks... but it cut them off from the door as the entire hallway caved in.

"Book it!" Rhodes yelled, not believing that would finish him.

The two men ran in the opposite direction, taking the first turn they came to. "Come on. We gotta get out of here."

"Waitwait!" Rhodes hissed. "If this is where they took us, then there might be some usable intel here. We need to secure this place!"

"Ohh, we got something better than Intel. This is where the Mandarin transmissions were coming from." Tony grated. "I'll explain on the way."

Edwards Air Force Base had been monitoring around the clock, working with the Intelligence Agencies of four different countries, looking for clues as to the whereabouts of their secret weapon. Every workshop in the eastern hemisphere that could repair something like Iron Patriot was being watched. It was a slim hope to cling to, but there wasn't much else they could do.

There had been a response unit on the scene within twenty minutes of Rhodes going off the grid. They had found exactly what he had reported. A sweatshop that had been cleared of prisoners, and an incinerator running hot enough to give them a false positive. There was no sign of anybody else around. The transmitter had gone off-line at the same moment Iron Patriot had vanished, which shut down their search.

There was no sign of battle or debris, so the best they could do was wait for a clue, or a signal.

Allen was content with that. The Pentagon was demanding a magic wand that could make Mandarin go away within a few hours, but Allen had nothing to go on but his faith in Colonel Rhodes.

A faith that he believed to be rewarded when a familiar transponder suddenly appeared on their world map.

The whole Operations Center at Edwards had burst into spontaneous applause as Iron Patriot suddenly reappeared on the radar screen somewhere just outside Miami.

Allen hit the transmitter. "Eagle, this is Nest, come back?"

No answer.

Allen tried again. "Repeat: Iron Patriot, this is Edwards, come back?"

No answer.

Allen let out a breath. "Better get the Joint Chiefs on the phone."

"Is he responding?" President Ellis demanded from Air Force One.

"No sir. And there are no carrier signals on the transmission frequency. But his transponder is set to 7700."

"7700 is an emergency signal?" Ellis asked.
"It means his radio is off-line." Allen translated the code aloud. "So he couldn't respond even if he wanted to."

"What's the procedure after communications being knocked off-line?" President Ellis asked.

"Procedurally, he's to return to a Stark Facility, or Edwards for repairs, and for a check-in confirmation with us. Or in the case of emergency, he's to go to the nearest military or intelligence asset to brief the Pentagon."

"We lost him in Pakistan. If he made it back to the States and went to Miami for repairs from Stark Industries, why isn't his radio working?"

"We don't know. The logical conclusion is that he didn't get repairs there."

"So where is he headed?" Ellis demanded.

"That's what has us a little worried." Allen reported. "He's heading on an intercept course for Air Force One."

There was dead silence as they all turned that over in their minds.

"Is it possible that his navigation was knocked out with his communications?" The Vice-President responded over the phone. "They both require a satellite uplink."

"If he ran into something that knocked out his radio; he'd still be able to navigate to base." Allen answered him. "There are redundancies, for exactly that reason."

"Where else could he navigate to with his radio off-line?"

"He has the transponder codes for Air Force One; as well as a classified guidance code to Edwards, the Pentagon, The White House, and some of our carrier groups. The idea behind it is that even in a state of open war he'd be able to find his way to high profile targets as a fast response unit."

"And he's coming to me?" Ellis finished.

"And breaking the sound barrier to do it." Allen confirmed. "The only reason he would do that is if you were in great danger, and he found out about it somehow."

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs spoke up instantly. "Mister President, I strongly recommend that the plane change course immediately. Rhodes has the transponder, he can still find us. If there's a threat coming from outside the plane, let's try and evade them."

"What if the threat is inside the plane?"

"Get a man onto Air Force One? It can't be done." The answer came swiftly from the Vice President over the phone. "But I suggest we lockdown the President until we get an answer from Rhodes. The only people in that room should be secret service until we know what's happening."

Everyone looked to Ellis, waiting for a decision.

"General, Lock Down the plane." President Ellis said finally. "And have the pilot change course, take us away from people and shipping routes. Just in case."

The Generals snapped up the phone. "Colonel, increase our fighter escort, right now. And have them check for ocean traffic. If there are sonar buoys anywhere in the area, have them search for submersible craft too."
"Already done sir. And support and rescue vehicles are on the way also, just in case they're needed."

"Allen, there'd be a much better chance of sneaking someone onto a support naval vessel than Air Force One."

"A support and rescue boat would never have a chance of keeping up if you didn't want them to," Allen responded. "But if Rhodes doesn't get there in time, it may be wise to have our bases covered. Secret Service can get the President off the plane, but you need someone to pick him up if he's over water."

"Agreed."

"It was all a fake?" Rhodes was perturbed.

"It's perfect, if you think about it." Tony was seething. "Killian had access, but no power. With The Mandarin making us jump through his hoops, he had run of the table."

"With a bad guy in one hand, and a super soldier in the other." Rhodes agreed. "I've gotta get someone here to lock this place down before anyone escapes." He gestured at the gauntlet. "Where's the rest of the suit?" Rhodes demanded.

"In the car, parked outside." Stark said, as thought it were obvious.

They came around the corner and saw the front door. They had managed to work themselves around the collapsed hallway.

They both ran for the foyer, when the wall in front of them exploded, and Banks came through at a charge. But something was different now. His skin was still glowing, but much brighter. The man was almost bent double, breathing hard, unable to straighten up. He looked like he was in serious pain. The hole through his middle from the Repulsor was glowing brightly, but not closing over, looking like he was bleeding lava. His eyes were glowing white-hot, and Tony could see a similar glow building inside his mouth.

Banks saw them and tried to move toward them... but he dropped to his knees, arms wrapped around his midsection like he was trying to hold something in.

Tony had seen that before. Extremis wasn't taking any prisoners with Banks. "Run for it!" He almost screamed.

Rhodes had no idea what was happening to Banks, but didn't waste any time asking. They both ran in the opposite direction, when a wall of impossible heat struck them both from behind, and Rhodes yanked his friend into the nearest room, out of the corridor.

A blast that shook the whole Manor and caved in the walls erupted behind them. A blast of flame and heat flashed down the hallway they'd just escaped, the thick walls directing the blast enough to spare them both.

For a long moment, there was only the rumble of burning air. Then the creaking and groaning started, as the old Manor shifted on strong stone foundations. The walls splintered and cracked and spider-webbed, the windows exploding from the sudden weight as the walls squeezed down. Rhodes was expecting the manor to fall on him any second, as the light fittings all burst, the ceiling cracked, the floors warped...
But the building held together, long enough for them both to get back to their feet and look back out the corridor.

The blast had obliterated the front half of the manor, the entire front wall was scattered across the courtyard. They could see chunks of wood and plaster raining down around the front gate.

"The whole Manor courtyard is going to be on full alert after that." Tony gated.

"There's no sneaking out, we have to make a break for it." Rhodes agreed. They both hurried to the door, and peeked outside, waiting for their moment to make a break for the wall. "You've seen the formula they're using and you've fought more of them than I have. What's the weakness?"

"The successful cases? I'm not sure they have one." Tony growled. "But you just saw what happens to the Lab Rats that don't make it that far. Banks' body overheated from the changes the formula was putting him through. Maya admitted she had no idea who was going to make it and who wasn't."

"So... what?" Rhodes guessed. "We keep hitting them with firepower until they run too hot?"

Tony thought for a minute. "I don't think we can do that. I've fought a woman named Brandt who was Extremis-Enhanced, and she took a lot more punishment than was sensible; and she still walked away without a scratch. That's the problem. It's too... unpredictable."

"Well, however we fight them, let's get out of here."

They both looked out the door again and glanced at each other. "On the count of three?"

"Right." Rhodes agreed.

Beat.

"THREE!" They both shouted and bolted, running out the missing wall, heading for the fence.

"Freeze!" Someone shouted.

They both started firing, three guns, one repulsor, covering their escape, firing in every direction.

Rhodes scrambled up the stone wall and perched on it, covering Tony as he aimed the repulsor down and bounced himself three feet off the ground from the recoil. Rhodes caught him and they both went over the wall to the other side.

Rhodes followed Tony to the vehicle, and dove into the passenger seat. Tony landed in the driver seat and gunned the engine, putting some distance between them and the Manor.

"All right, listen... You've got the destination from this actor guy, but we have no idea what's going to happen there."

"Well, lets apply a little intelligence to this." Tony thought out loud. "We know that the Mandarin broadcasts were all theater. We know that the Grand Finale is tonight, and we know where. All we need now is what. What is the Grand Finale?"

"Whatever it is, he needed Iron Patriot." Rhodes agreed. "Now, based on what I've seen, he didn't need my suit for the firepower, because he's already got something that strong. So what does Iron Patriot give him that he didn't already have?"

"Killian's the head of AIM, which gives him military access to all the secrets and codes that you
have." Stark added. "So what does he need? What doors can Iron Patriot open that he can't open on
his own?"

Rhodes started listing on his fingers. "He can walk into the Pentagon, fly into White House
Airspace, he has better Secret Service Clearance than the First Lady..."

It hit them both at the same time. Tony slammed on the brakes and the car fishtailed to a stop.

"The President?" Tony breathed. "Is he that... bold?"

"You get that suit on, I'll get the White House on the phone." Rhodes said instantly. "Do you have
a phone?"

"Glove box." Tony directed him, not moving.

Rhodes went to the glove box, and looked back at him. "Why aren't you moving? Come on, let's
go!"

"What about Pepper?" Stark demanded finally. "Killian's got her. I have to get Pepper away from
Killian."

"No, you have to get to Air Force One first." Rhodes told him.

"I'm going to get Pepper." Tony repeated.

They stared at each other blankly for several seconds.

"He won't hurt her yet." Rhodes said finally.

"He already has. She got the dose. She's got a one in four chance of survival!"

"Which is more than Air Force One has against Iron Patriot, and you know it." Rhodes told him.
"Tony. Priorities."


"The world is too big." Rhodes agreed. "But a plane is not. And you're the only one with a flying
suit."

Tony hesitated for an agonized beat and nodded. "Okay, fine." He tossed the Gauntlet and the
Helmet back into the back of the car and glared at the pieces strewn across the backseat. "All right,
45. You don't like me, and I don't like you. But we've got eight minutes to save Pepper, and we're
spending them on saving the world. Don't screw it up."

"Your confidence is truly inspiring, sir." Jarvis commented. "May I recommend the flight time be
done by remote, for pilot safety?"

"Good idea." Tony went to his suit and picked up the helmet. He worked the faceplate open and
retrieved his Interface units, fitting them against his temples. "And assemble before flight, share
the burden through all the modular batteries. We might get another half minute or so."

"Yes Sir."

Tony got out of the car and came around to the passenger seat. "Rhodey, you have to drive."

"Right. I'll head for the airport." Rhodes got behind the wheel.
"We can't." Tony told him. "The whole country has been grounded because of the threat. Head for the Marina."

In the backseat they heard metal sliding on metal as the MK-45 assembled itself.

"And another thing Jarvis." Tony called through his Interface. "Now that we've quite clearly demonstrated to the Ten Rings that I'm a lot closer to the truth and a lot less dead than they thought I was, I think it's safe to say we should pull out all the stops, yes?"

"Yes sir."

"Activate the Iron Legion."

After the fight with Iron Monger had trashed a significant part of Stark Industries in Los Angeles, Pepper had organized a private contractor firm, drawn from experienced experts in all forms of demolition and construction. They had been extensively checked and rechecked, and once they had all been cleared, Tony had outfitted them with all the very best equipment.

One they were organized, they had been put to work repairing the Factory, the large Arc Reactor, as well as several sections of the LA highway.

Not long after, they had been put to work building the Stark Expo. A job that would take them months, even with a lot of generous help from other hired hands. Once Whiplash was done demolishing it, Stark's Private builders were recalled to duty to fix it.

The simple truth was that nobody else could be trusted. Picking up the pieces after a fight with Iron man tech was dangerous work. SHIELD was quick to pick up the pieces of alien tech following the New York Invasion, but they weren't in the construction business. They hired people for that, and Stark had a private team on call.

So when the Stark home was blown off a cliff, nobody else was allowed close. The police kept people away, and the helicopters were bored with the footage of a wreck. There had been no sign of Stark, or even Pepper Potts, and with the Mandarin still making speeches, their focus quickly went elsewhere.

Once the reporters had left, the repair teams moved in. There was much left of the house. The wreckage was all in the ocean. The repair teams had no instructions. Did they salvage what they could? Was there something in particular that they had to get? Should they rent diving equipment and start hauling things out of the water?

Finally, the foreman settled on clearing away the debris still on the cliff and storing it until someone told him what to keep.

Without anyone giving orders, the work was slow. They were still trying to test the strength of the ground. Huge chunks had been blown out of the cliff face, and nobody wanted to bring in the heavy earth-movers until they were sure about the risk of landslides.

The Foreman was checking out the manifest, trying to figure out what to call the few things they had salvaged, when he heard a rumble that vibrated the ground.

The workers all noticed it too and ran away from the edge.

"Well, that proves it." The Foreman called to them. "The ground here is still unstable. I want you guys to stay well clear. The foundations are still intact, but they're buried under so much crap we'll
never dig it up without heavy machinery."

"They look like some pretty serious foundations boss." Someone offered.

"I'm sure they are. But no matter ow deep they go into the side of this cliff-"

Another rumble interrupted him. This one kept going, getting louder and louder...

...until the foundations exploded.

What would have taken months of combined work to dig up suddenly erupted straight up as something incredibly powerful blasted up from underneath.

Each and every one of them had been personally selected by Iron Man, and they'd all seen the footage of him in action, if they hadn't seen it personally. They knew what a Uni-Beam could do. What they saw emerging from the earth, was over a dozen Uni-Beams at once.

An instant later, Iron Man shot up into the sky like a rocket.

Everyone cheered. The official word was that Iron Man was presumed dead. The entire work crew were half expecting to find his mangled body somewhere in the wreck. Seeing him fight his way out of the debris and go flying away was an outcome they wouldn't have dared to dream.

They all had big smiles on their faces, when it became clear that the shaky ground had more to give.

An instant later, another Iron Man shot up into the sky.

The cheering stopped instantly. Where did that one come from?

An instant after that, another two Iron Men launched for the sky. Then three. Then five. Then dozens. Every suit that Tony Stark had ever built, taking off so thick and fast it was impossible to count them, or to tell where one began and the other ended. Iron Men, in all shapes and colors, all charging vengefully into the sky, vanishing against the stars.
Air Force One was in the thirty-seventh hour of continuous flight. It had an escort of four fighter jets, two naval support craft, and a mid-air tanker that came by every sixteen hours.

Iron Patriot came to the small fleet at Mach One, and took a long slow lap around the entire assembly.

"There's still no radio signal." Colonel Jansen, the pilot of Air Force One, was reporting back to the sealed situation room through the Plane's comm system. The Secret Service had sealed the President inside one of several airtight compartments, and made sure that nobody else was in the room with him. The fighter jets had been using hand signals to contact Iron Patriot, and had received no response.

It was making them edgy.

And then they got their answer.

The President was watching out the window of his suite. Iron Patriot had made a sweep around the plane, and was now moving toward his Fighter Escort...

And then Iron Patriot did a quick flip over and came down on the nose of the nearest fighter jet. President Ellis felt his jaw drop open at the hinges as he watched his most powerful weapon punch straight through the canopy and fire a repulsor blast. The blast was powerful enough to punch a hole clean through the cockpit, and out the other side. The plane's nose snapped off and went down in flames.

The Secret Service was watching too. "Iron Patriot is compromised! Repeat! Iron Patriot is compromised!"

In the cockpit of the the plane, Colonel Jansen heard it too and responded. "Fighter escort! Break and engage! Repeat, break and engage!" He didn't even look at his copilot as he gave orders. "Activate all countermeasures. Everything, now!"

His Copilot did so and then activated the radio. "This is Air Force One, declaring an emergency! We are turning back to US Airspace. Code Red! Code Red!"

The world's most secure plane lit up with everything from missile jammers to heat flares, to interceptor missiles. The plane could defend itself from everything a skilled fighter jet pilot could throw at it.

But three of the more skilled fighter jet pilots in the world were throwing everything they had at Iron Patriot, and they were losing.

The combat suit was too small and nimble for 40mm cannons, and even at jet speeds the Iron Patriot could turn on a pin.

Three fighter jets were in a pitched dogfight with a single armored man, trying madly to get a decent angle to take a shot. Every missile they fired he could intercept. Every heavy bullet they
sent at him, he could dodge.

And then Iron Patriot landed neatly on the tail fin of Air Force One, and the shooting came to a sudden halt.

"This is impossible!" Colonel Jansen heard over the radio. "We've got no angle!"

"Climb!" Jansen ordered. "We've gotta shake him off!"

They both pulled back hard on the controls, sending Air Force One into a steep climb, trying to shed their passenger.

Vice President Rodriguez was watching a kid's Christmas movie with his daughter when the doors to the Roosevelt Room burst open and his Secret Service Detail rushed in, almost picking him up off the floor. "What's going on?!" He demanded.

"Angel has called in a code red." The head of his detail reported urgently. "AF-1 is under attack. We have to secure you, sir."

"The Situation Room," Rodriguez told him. "It's secure enough and I'm needed there. And someone sure as hell better be protecting my family while this is happening!"

President Ellis held on tight to his seatbelt. His Secret Service detail held on to everything they possibly could as the room went back and forth around them.

They heard the whole fight play out over the radio, which had been piped to the secure room.

"He's off! He's off! Engage! Shoot now!"

"Negative Impact, he's got interceptors!"

"Fire Two!"

"Bogey deployed flares! Husker Two, he's on your ass! Watch out!"

"Where is he? Where is he?!"

"Roll! Get out of there!"

"I'm painted! He's got a lock!"

"Husker Two! Eject! Eject now!"

"I'm-AGH!"

"He's gone! Where the hell is the bogey?!"

"I got him! He's heading for the Naval Unit!"

"How the hell did he... Command One/Husker Three, stay with the Package, Husker Four, with me!"

Ellis gripped his seat tighter as the scream of fighter jet engines roared past his windows close enough to shake the plane again.
"He's hitting their engines! Repeat, support craft are being disabled! I've got tone! Husker Four, Fox Two!"

"You missed! You missed!"

"Oh god. I hit the... I hit the ship!"

"Bogey is re-engaging! Evasive maneuvers! Husker Four, evasive maneuvers!"

"Too late! He's on me! He's-ohgod! He's on the Canopy, I can't eject! I can't-"

There was the sound of something shattering briefly over the radio.

"Husker Four is down! Husker Four is down! Switching to sidewinders; moving in!"

There was a sudden nanosecond of silence.

"He's past me! He got past me! Husker Three; you've got incoming! He's shooting! He's fir-AGH!"

"Husker Squadron is down! Air Force One, get the hell outta here!"

There was a loud clang right next to Ellis, and he turned to look at the window. Iron Patriot was right outside his window, waving. His metal face had no expression, but Ellis could tell he was smiling. An instant later he was gone.

The Secret Service all drew their weapons, in every room of the plane; though what they planned to do from inside the plane was anyone's guess.

"My wife!" Ellis shouted. "Get my wife to the Escape Pod!"

"Pod only seats one, sir." His detail didn't even look at him, too busy watching outward in every direction for their sudden enemy.

"Our escort is gone." Jansen's copilot reported, fear obvious in his voice.

"Get the POTUS Escape Pod ready." Jansen ordered. "And sound a Mayday."

The Secret Service was loaded for war, wearing all the body armor and carrying all the hardware they could find on board... which was a lot.

The flight crew were the only ones on the plane other than the President's staff. The press corp was not on board, nor were any other civilians.

The plane was huge, with enough room for several corridors of people, roving up and down the windows, waiting for an attack.

They didn't have to wait long.

A metal glove slammed through a shatterproof window like it wasn't there, and suddenly the whole plane interior was tossed around by a sudden tornado of wind, sucking everything out into the atmosphere.

The Agents within range of the window grabbed onto anything that wasn't flying around.
An instant later, the windstorm only intensified as the front door of the plane was ripped away from the outside. The entire jet shuddered at the air pressure within trying to rip the plane in half on its way out.

"BREACH! BREACH! The plane is breached!" The secret service was screaming over their radios.

Jansen reacted. "Dive! Get us to a decent air pressure level before we lose everyone on the plane!"

His Copilot obeyed and the engines roared as the plane went into a steep dive toward the thicker, breathable air.

Iron Patriot strolled in the doorway, and started picking targets. As the air levels stabilized, the plane leveled off and the Secret Service got to their feet and started shooting.

Sparks glanced off Iron Patriot's face and chest. If he noticed, it didn't show. He didn't bother to chase them down.

The flight crew was Air Force, and they were armed too. First five, then ten, then fifteen of them, fighting back from solid cover in many directions. Iron Patriot was methodical. If they ran, he didn't care. He was moving toward the rear of the plane, room by room.

The best trained marksmen in the world were completely outclassed. They barricaded the doors, and it did nothing. They fired hundreds of bullets, chewing up furniture, walls, doors... And it did nothing. People died. And it did nothing.

"All right." Jansen hissed, and got on the secure radio line. "All points. The Secure Room isn't going to hold. All agents, distract him, any way you can. Distract him long enough for POTUS to get to the Pod."

He wasn't the head of any Secret Service detail, he wasn't even part of the hierarchy, but everyone with a decent rank was already dead, and it was the only plan left.

Half a dozen agents waited outside the door to the President's secure room. As Iron Patriot approached, they all released smoke grenades.

Thick clouds of heavy smoke spread across the room. The Agents all started shooting. Iron Patriot had heat vision, and saw through the smoke to see his targets. They all threw themselves away from him, to the opposite side of the plane. Following the heat signatures, Iron Patriot followed.

Behind him, the door to the secure room opened, and a dozen Secret Service Agents rushed The President down the corridor, behind the back of the armored attacker.

Iron Patriot's cannons swiveled 180 degrees, without him having to so much as turn his head. Micro-missiles went too.

President Ellis felt the hands grabbing him go slack and fall away. In the thick smoke, he could see nothing.

There was a half-second whine of power, and a sudden repulsor blast. In the same instant, there was another howl of wind as the smoke was sucked out another shattered window.
Ellis felt his heart stop as the room cleared and he was presented with the sight of over a dozen dead bodyguards... And Iron Patriot stalking to him.

Iron Patriot's faceplate opened, revealing Harker within. He was smiling.

Ellis was not. "Who the hell are you?" He demanded, sounding more surprised than anything else.

Harker grinned, and the suit opened around him as he stepped out. "An honor to meet you, Mister President."

Janssen's copilot was looking at the radar in horror. "I've got a signature leaving the plane. The radar profile is small. Human sized."

"The pod never deployed." Colonel Jansen's voice was low with horror. "Which means he's finished. He's leaving the plane. Get back there and see how bad the... damage is."

"You mean 'see who is left alive'."

"No, I mean, get back there and see how many breaches the cabin has, given how far we are from land." Jansen grit out. "If the hull integrity is too damaged, we're going to break in half!" He was about to say something else when he noticed the radar. "I've got another bogey, coming in fast!"

The few survivors came out of their hiding places. There were big holes in the side of the plane, and a terrible creaking sound coming from the walls and floors and ceilings.

The wind had stabilized, though it was still hard to breathe. They were low enough that air pressure wasn't going to kill them, but there was still a 20,000 foot drop just in front of them...

Iron Man flew in through the torn hull like a missile, his repulsors flaring hard enough to bend the interiors inward as he killed his speed instantly.

Iron Man took quick stock of the situation. On the way there he'd seen bodies falling out of the plane, and knew he was too late, but he went anyway. He'd seen Iron Patriot flying away, but had less than three minutes of flight time left. His HUD put up sections of the plane's blueprints. It was the sturdiest plane ever built, but nothing was meant to fly at that altitude, at those speeds, with so many holes in it.

A few Secret Service were hauling themselves upright.

"What's the situation?" Iron Man demanded.

"He just..." A woman was shaking so bad he had to hold her up. "He just came through the wall and started shooting everyone!"

Iron Man scanned around, his HUD painting everyone with vital signs. The results were not encouraging. "Alright, everyone who can still walk, come with me! The ones who can't walk? Help them. Move!" Tony turned forward. "Where's the Flight Crew?"

"The navigator is dead." Someone in an Air Force Uniform shouted. "I'm the Copilot. Colonel Jansen is trying to get us back to somewhere we can land."

"He won't make it." Iron Man said simply. As if to make his point, the fuselage groaned loudly above them. "Jarvis, how many survivors?"
"Sixteen that I can detect, sir."

"And I can carry how many?"

"Two at a time."

"And I would have to carry them down to the Pacific Ocean." Tony finished. "Okay. We need a Plan B."

"There are parachutes." The copilot offered. "Enough for five times this number."

Tony studied the Blueprints carefully and turned to the survivors who were coming out of hiding across seven different rooms. "Follow me!"

The terrified people responded to the ring of authority and got moving. The plane had been locked down in several sections, as was procedure when the cabin was breached. Tony tore the doors loose, and led everyone below decks to the loading dock. The supplies were all under lock and key, but Iron Man ripped that away too, quickly passing out parachutes. "Don't open the hatch until you're all ready to jump; the less drag on the hull, the better." He directed. "There's a rescue boat close enough to make a pick up." He looked around. "Where is the President?"

"I don't know." The Flight Crew admitted. "The Service had him locked down in his Stateroom."

Iron Man started moving as the copilot started dressing people in their parachute harnesses.

As he approached the stateroom, Iron Man keyed the private frequency to the cockpit. "Colonel? This is Iron Man."

"Thank God someone answered." Jansen reported. "I'm getting a lot of cross from the controls. She's fighting me!"

"I did a hull scan on my way in. The thing's coming apart. Set the autopilot, and get down to the loading dock. We're getting the survivors out of here."

"Autopilot will handle a transatlantic flight, but the plane is barely holding together as it is. The computer can't fly it like this, we'll never make it."

Tony sighed and checked his HUD. (8% Power) "All right, I have to check for the President, but I'll come to the cockpit as quick as I can, take over the controls, then you bail out."

"All right." Jansen agreed.

Iron Man reached doors to the stateroom. The whole area was packed with corpses. None of them were recognizable.

He stepped into the stateroom. More bodies. These were ones he recognized. It was a who's-who of the powerful in Washington. Tony felt himself go cold. Even if they managed to take Killian down, the country would take an enormous blow.

But there was no sign of the President. Even if he was dead, his body would be here, surely...

"Wondering where he is?"

Iron Man spun around to see Harker lounging comfortably at the table.
Harker rose to his feet. "Well, he's not here."

Iron Man looked around. "So. How do you plan to get off the plane?"

Harker shrugged. "I don't."

Iron Man opened and closed his fists. (7% Power) "Maya made you sturdy, but you ain't indestructible."

"Oh yes I am."

Iron Man shook his head a little. "You poor dumb bastard. They don't care about you. They told you that you were invincible so that you'd go along with this plan."

Harker said nothing.

"The guys who attacked my house. They were Extremis? The last guy to fly that suit took them on and they blew up their own choppers. You ever see that pilot again?" Tony dared him. "Even if you survive the impact, what's Extremis going to fix when you spend a few hours at the bottom of the ocean? Three minutes without air and your brain starves; you lose everything. You can live forever as a brain-dead vegetable on the bottom of the ocean, unable to die."

Harker's eyes glowed. "Pardon me a moment." He said darkly. "I have a parachute to collect."

He lunged for the door, and Tony got in his way. The movement turned into a tackle, and sent them both through the wall behind them. There were no sign of people any more, and Tony hoped that meant they were all off the plane.

Iron Man hauled off and hit Harker right in the nose with an Iron fist. Harker spun with the punch and promptly backhanded Iron Man straight through the wall behind him. Before the armor could right itself, Harker was on top of him. The man's eyes glowed white-hot, as he drew back a fist and slammed it straight through Iron Man's chest. He was feeling for where the Arc Reactor should be, and found only an empty armor shell.

Harker was surprised, but Tony was gaping, unable to believe what his Interface HUD was telling him. The man had put a fist straight through where his heart would be, and done it so easily. Whiplash couldn't do that. Thor couldn't do that.

Tony realized with a sudden burst of horror that Extremis wasn't just stronger than Iron Man. Extremis had Iron Man completely outclassed.

Vice-President Rodriguez rushed into the situation room.

"Ten-hut." Someone in a uniform said, and every soldier in the room came to attention. It was a reaction reserved for the Commander in Chief, who was now MIA. In an instant, the room dropped to dead silence, and the radio feed from the Naval Rescue craft became audible.

"I see twelve, now thirteen chutes... Fourteen... No more." The radio reported. "Our rescue choppers are still active, we can fish them out of the water... Oh man, Air Force One is listing. It's tipping!"

The rooms around them were starting to tilt on their axis as they bashed their way through rooms. Harker was in too close to get a decent shot off, and his power was too low to try a Uni-Beam. It
wasn't a punch-up, it was a wrestling match.

As the room spun, they both left the floor. Iron Man could hover, and Harker could not. As the room tilted, Iron Man hovered in place, letting the room shift around him. Harker fell to the wall, and pushed off with enough force to put him back on the floor.

(3% Power)

Harker dug his hands into the floor and tore it up, as the plane righted itself. Harker dove through the hole he'd just torn up in the floor, heading for the loading dock.

Iron Man dove in the opposite direction, out the hole in the hull. He gunned his jets and headed for the back of the plane. The loading dock was open, and Harker was arriving, searching for a parachute.

Iron Man got there first and landed neatly on the loading ramp. Harker was still looking for a parachute, though if any of them had survived the plane being tossed around, there was no sign of them.

Iron Man hit the controls, and the ramp started to close. He closed his gauntlet fist and ripped out the switch.

Harker was suddenly aware of him and attacked.

Iron Man was already moving, flying out the closing ramp. It was open enough to let a manned missile out, closed enough to keep Harker inside a second later.

"NOOOOOO!" Harker screamed uselessly as the air started to whine louder against the engines.

There was a sudden crack, as though the universe was breaking in half, and the room went spinning like a tumble dryer.

"Bad! Very Bad!" Tony yelled. Air Force One had broken in half and both sides were tumbling out of the air. Iron Man was trying to catch up to the front half of the plane, threading itself in between the spiraling debris to home in on the cockpit. (2% Power)

Jansen was holding onto his seat as best he could, watching the ocean jump up at him. Iron Man managed to smack into his windshield, and just barely hold on. He couldn't keep a grip and tear away the windshield at the same time, so he had to take the chance. *For all the marbles!*

There was a half-second whine of power, and the grip he had exploded under his fingers as his Repulsor fired, taking the windshield away with it.

"HELP! HELP!" Jansen was screaming over the howling wind.

Iron Man was now reaching into the cockpit, trying to reach the pilot in time to pull him free and control his drop to the ocean. He reached out a hand. Under other circumstances he would have detached the arm-piece and have it fly the magic two feet closer to haul him up, but the battery was too low to try it. (1% Power)

Jansen strained as hard as he could, and his fingers brushed against Iron Man's glove...

(Power Depleted)
"No!" Tony howled, as the suit fell apart...

...and the Interface between them dropped out instantly. Released from the Interface, Tony was left kneeling in the storage closet of a boat that he and Rhodes had 'acquired'.

The closet door opened and Rhodes pounced on him urgently. "What happened?"

Tony swore. "I got there too late, and the power didn't hold out."

"I can relate." Rhodes held up the phone. "I called in a team to secure the Manor before anyone could escape, but the battery gave out before I could call the White House." He looked sick about it.

So did Tony. "I managed to save maybe a dozen of them... And they were all the ones that he left alive. He was on his way out before I got there."

Rhodes was stunned. "My god... The President. The First Lady. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs..."

"All of them." Tony mourned. "But Ellis is alive."

"Are you sure?"

"I saw Iron Patriot leave, and the guy who flew it there was still on board. I couldn't find Ellis, alive or dead. That leaves only one option."

"Do we have a fix on where Iron Patriot went?"

"No sir. He killed his transponder as soon as he left the plane and anything that might have been able to keep up with him was already destroyed. He was last seen heading for the States."

"Has The Mandarin made a statement?" Rodriguez demanded.

"No sir. In fact, we don't know for sure that he's responsible."

"Iron Patriot goes offline for thirty hours while hunting The Mandarin, and comes back on the grid long enough to carry out an attack? It was him." Someone else scorned.

"The First Family?" Rodriguez asked.

"The First Lady was on the plane, both the kids have been secured. They're on their way here."

"Vice-President Rodriguez." An Aide said as he came in, with a suitcase handcuffed to his wrist. "All Launch Codes have been changed, mobile control has been suspended. new codes have been activated. You have the Ball now, sir."

Rodriguez nodded and turned back to the Room. "Who do we have on that plane? The President, The First Lady, The CIA Director, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Chief of Staff, National Security Adviser, Secretary of State, Communications Director..."

"SIR!" An Air Force officer called suddenly. "Angel never made it back to the coast... And the support craft said that Iron Man only got fourteen people off the plane, all of them Flight Crew."

Horrified silence.
"The plane has crashed." The officer continued. "Rescue divers are going after it now... but it's still in an area too deep for... The only survivors would be the ones who parachuted free."

Horrified silence.

"How long until the world finds out about this?" Rodriguez demanded.

"A few minutes, at most. Jansen put out a Mayday before Iron Man got there. It was out of sight of land, but that only means the first guesses will be wilder and less factual."

"Get the Deputy Communications Director back to the White House, and tell him he's just been promoted." The VP ordered. "Do it tactfully as you can; but tell him I have to make a statement and it has to be a damn good one. Tell the Networks that we'll be breaking in soon. Get the Commanders, and notify all our allies, all our Embassies. Take us to Defcon Three, recall all our troops who are still on leave for the Holidays." He looked to his Generals. "What do we know about Iron Man? He's the only one that can take on Iron Patriot."

"We know that he went onto the plane. Witness testimony says that he didn't get off it. Our Airspace blockade reports that almost forty suits took off from the ruins of Stark's home in Malibu, but they were apparently running silent too, there's no sign of them." The Deputy CIA Director reported. "We've already taken Rhodes' family into custody, they say they don't have a clue why he's doing this. Same with Colonel Allen at Edwards."

"What about the Chief Justice?" Someone asked.

Everyone froze.

"With Angel down and POTUS presumed dead... it's your duty, sir."

Rodriguez nodded slowly. "Get the Chief Justice over here. Bring him to the Oval Office, and have a photographer there. I'll need witnesses when..." He let out a breath. "...when I'm sworn in as President."

"I'm going to ask this again?" Tony growled. "Where the hell is Fury during all this?"

"I don't know." Rhodes sighed. "I don't get it. After what happened, there were safeguards put into the suit, right? So that nobody but us could fly them?"

Tony nodded. "That was the War Machine MK-2, right? They rebranded your upgrade?"

"Yeah."

"Which means they had access to the source code for the suit AI. My guess is they added someone to the approved Pilot list."

Rhodes' chin lifted. "It's all on us now." He said simply. "We've gotta make this right. We've gotta go save Ellis, save Pepper, and feed Kilian his own eyeballs." He looked pointedly at Tony. "In that order."

"No promises."

Extremis burned.

Pepper grit her teeth against it. Painkillers would do nothing, or so Killian had told her. Maya had
explained part of the process. Her brain had been rewired, sending her into hallucinations and nightmares of all kinds. She'd spent much of that time unconscious, and she was glad for it. If Maya's schedule was right, at this point her new brainstem was redesigning her body.

When her head had cleared, she found herself strapped upright to another frame. This one was much stronger, and so were her bonds. She had the terrifying suspicion that it was designed to hold her still as she thrashed her way through the... upgrade.

She felt hot, even though she had been stripped to her underwear. Underwear that was not hers. The thought that it might have been Killian who changed her outfit made her want to gag.

Killian had been there every moment that she had been awake. Others too, mostly mercenaries. Pepper had been around weapons development long enough to recognize most of the weapons they were carrying. No two guards had the same weapons. This was not a militia group with uniforms and standard issue weapons.

The ones that unsettled her... were the ones not in uniform. She had only seen a few of them. They wore comfortable or stylish civilian clothes, which seemed somehow otherworldly when surrounded by all the guns and body armor. They moved with liquid inhuman grace, and when they looked at the guards, they were amused. But when they looked at her... they seemed somehow welcoming.

Extremis. She realized suddenly. They want to know if I'm like them!

Every few minutes, it felt like lava was spreading through her veins. Not her limbs, through her veins. She could feel every drop of blood moving in her body, suddenly blazing white hot. The agonizing heat lasted for five or so minutes, and then dropped away to nothing almost instantly. She didn't feel exhausted or weakened. In fact, she'd never felt so strong in her life.

Killian looked over as she hissed in pain. "Hang in there gorgeous. It won't be much longer. You're almost at the Tip Point."

"You mean the point where we find out if I explode?" Pepper groaned as the pain passed.

"Oh, you'll be fine. I know you." Killian waved it off like it wasn't a problem.

"Why am I here?" Pepper asked quietly. "If I'm bait for Tony, that's a stupid move. Baiting your one opponent to the scene of your master plan? And if Extremis doesn't take... Then that's a worse move. You said one in four survive and the rest blow up. You don't want to be in a room with me right now. Why?"

Killian looked over at her. "Potts, it's a question of... optics. Think of it this way: I plan to be ruling the country soon. One of the great things about the Zero to Hero story is that you get everything you ever wanted... At any point in your life."

Pepper was perturbed. "This is because I turned you down for a date... thirteen years ago?"

Killian snorted. "I know. Sounds crazy, right? Even vaguely stalker-ish? Well, don't sell yourself short; things have changed now. You're CEO of a massive Fortune 500 Company, you're smart, you're sexier than all get-out, and of all the supermodels, porn stars, and movie starlets following him around, you alone had the great Tony Stark eating out of your hand." He grinned like the devil himself. "Your left hand, if my surveillance was right."

Pepper flushed bright red, even with the liquid fire running through her veins.
"I can buy and sell a million women, Potts; and you've always been one above a million." Killian grinned. "But you're right. It was a long time ago; and I'm long over it. Keeping you was actually Mandarin's idea."

"Why?" Pepper asked with concern.

"He's very generous with his rewards." Killian explained. "And he's very Old School about it. The Ancient Warlords? Whenever they conquered a hated rival, they took everything he had as their own. Mandarin liked that tradition. Stark is a Rival to me, and an enemy to Mandarin. I already took Stark's influence in the military, the government... I've already surpassed his inventions and soon enough I'll be able to buy SI; lock, stock and barrel. The Master blew his house clean off the cliff and if he's even alive, he won't be for long."

Pepper shivered. "The only thing left to take is..."

"His woman." Aldrich confirmed.

Pepper shuddered again. "So I'm not so much your prisoner as I am your... trophy."

Killian shrugged. "Yeah, pretty much." He looked over his shoulder. "Want to hear a secret? Extremis doesn't just heal the damage. It can actually continue cell regeneration. In perpetuity."

Pepper translated in her head. "It keeps you young?"

Killian nodded. "Cells replace themselves. Your body gets remade by new cells as old cells die off. Every two years, its a whole new you. The regeneration process breaks down as time goes by, which is why we get weaker in old age. No two scientists have been able to agree on why, but Maya was pretty clear that Extremis fixes that too."

Pepper felt her jaw drop. "So your soldiers aren't just superhuman, they're actually... Immortal?"

Killian shrugged like it wasn't a big deal. "Why do you think I'm smiling?" He brushed her hair back from her face, studying her features. "If you're this good to start with, I can't wait to see how you look in a few hours."

Pepper studied his face in return. "Back when we met at Stark Industries, I was stunned how great you looked. It wasn't plastic surgery, was it?"

"No." Killian grinned.

"One in four, and you raise your hand? That's ballsy." Pepper observed.

"Pepper, we didn't get where we are by being like three out of four other people, did we?" Killian grinned, that maddening, unflappable grin. "It won't be so bad, Pepper. Being my trophy? Once Extremis is done with you, you'll be immortal with me. We'll live forever, with the whole world at our feet. Gotta be better than babysitting the world's most expensive Toddler, right?"

Pepper felt her face harden. "Never."

Killian stroked her face. "It'll take time, Pepper. But time is something we'll have plenty of. Eventually, I'll be the only person in the universe you can relate to."

"Never." Pepper promised again, nothing but defiance in her eyes.

"'Never' is a very long time. After years, even centuries of living in luxury, with perfect health, and
people bowing before us... you won't be able to help being a little bit grateful to me for keeping you, out of all the women who'd give anything to have my favor." He stepped back, spreading his arms wide. "One thing you know about me, Potts: I'm patient."

And just for a second, Pepper felt her certainty shift. If Aldrich was right, then Maya had broken the death barrier. And if that were possible...

*If he has you for that long, it means he's killed Tony.* Pepper told herself, and felt her resolve strengthen.

The fire grew in her blood again, and Pepper grit her teeth against it. *Do your worst. You won't break me!*

---

Military Police had the Manor of the Mandarin surrounded. As the SWAT team arrived to cover the exits, some of the better armed ones went inside. The front half of the stately Manor had been completely obliterated. There was no sign of any resistance. Everything in the front half of the building that was flammable was still smoldering.

The basement and lower levels, including the prison cells, the loading dock, and the laboratories were all filled with dead bodies.

The computers were all destroyed, and what few had survived had been wiped clean.

In fact, the only room left with a survivor in it, was the Mandarin's Private Chambers.

The MP's came in, rifles leading the way. "FREEZE!"

'Trevor Slattery' rolled his head back to look at them, and held up his hands, eyes going big as dinner plates. "Okay... I know this totally looks like meth? Totally not!"

---

Stark and Rhodes were quiet for most of the boat ride. They were on their way to the Roxxon Shipyards as fast as the motor could make them go.

Rhodes was in mourning. He had been labeled the new champion of the American Military Machine. The Ultimate Warrior. He was a 21st Century answer to Captain America, and he'd not only failed to protect his Leader, but the weapon the Bad Guys had used was his own Suit.

Tony wasn't feeling much better.

Tony Stark Had Five Nightmares. The first was that he would go too far. The second was that he wouldn't go far enough. The third was that his worst day would happen all over again, and that it would be his fault.

The Fourth Nightmare was that there was someone out there like him. Someone that could create a whole new Age for Humanity. Someone that could reach out and bring a distant, science-fiction future into the present, and turn the world on its head. Someone that would use this New Age for violence and domination.

Killian and Maya were Tony Stark's fourth nightmare fulfilled.

Someone had turned Iron Man into an antique, found a way to make the most advanced warrior on the planet into a dinosaur... and they were killing people.
Sal had said that he and Maya had the future in them. Tony's contribution to the future of humanity was Iron Man. Maya's contribution... was better than his, and it was killing people. A handful of Futurists were taking apart all of Western Civilization.

Extremis was Stark's darkest nightmare image of the world come to life.

"Rhodey?" Tony asked finally. "What would you do if you couldn't be War Machine any more?"

"Iron Patriot." Rhodes corrected him absently. "Well, I guess I'd... WHY? Who have you been talking to?"

Tony snorted. "Nobody. Just something I've been thinking about."

Rhodes looked over. "Okay. Tell me."

"When I was hiding, I heard some things that... Look, when I came back from Afghanistan, I shut down the business, I stopped sleeping around, I stopped... Most of the things that filled up my time. Then I killed Stane. And around the same time I finally pulled my head out of my ass and realized I was in love with Pepper... About 90% of my life went out the window that week, and it didn't bother me because I filled up all that time building one suit after another... Now I'm wondering if that was a smart move."

"Where would the world be right now if you hadn't?"

Stark quite suddenly lost his nerve and changed the subject. "We'll settle that after we're done with this."

"What exactly does Extremis do?"

"If Maya cracked it, then it turns all the unused stuff in a human body into something useful."

"Explain that."

"70% of a human metabolism is used up doing things like breathing and digesting food, and keeping the heart pumping. The human skeleton has many honeycombs in the bone marrow, which is essentially empty space. More than 70% of your genome is considered Junk DNA, which has no clear or necessary purpose. The average American has several pounds of fat tissue that isn't needed... Extremis takes all this surplus stuff and makes it useful."

"Useful how?"

"Well... You could make a person bulletproof, make them never need sleep, make them immune to everything short of a nuke, give them their own storage spaces... Hell, you could make a human wi-fi capable, you could..."

"I get the picture." Rhodes said quietly. "Apparently, it was... not that successful."

"Of course it wasn't, I wasn't working on it." Tony quipped.

"How do you know so much about it?"

Tony bit his lip. "Ah. Okay, um... About thirteen years ago, Maya Hansen came to me and asked for help getting the telomeres to align properly with the viral formula..."

Rhodes didn't bother pretending he understood. "Did you help?"
"Not exactly."

Rhodes looked at him, expressionless. "Maya Hansen's hot, isn't she?"

"Yes." Tony confessed. "If you were at the house after it went over the edge, you probably met her. In my defense, I scribbled down a few thoughts on a napkin for her to find when she... woke up."

"You're telling me you gave her a bit of the formula thirteen years ago, and left her to it?"

"Apparently. I honestly don't remember it." Tony looked miserable. "I seem to have a knack for creating demons that get people killed."

"The Demon is out of the bottle, Tony." Rhodes said sharply.

"I know." Tony sighed. "And I helped it happen. Just like Iron Man. Pepper's been hit with Extremis... and I've been pushing Iron Man into her life every day since I got back from Afghanistan."

"Pepper was proud of you for it."

"She hated it." Stark scorned instantly. "Pepper hates Iron Man. She calls the suit 'The Other Woman'." He shook his head. "It's not fair. It's not fair to her. All the gossip about me with women? Turns out it was the damn mask that came between us. She hated what I was doing all that time. Running out and getting shot at? Spending weeks at a time in the Workshop?"

"Sounds to me like her problem wasn't with Iron Man." Rhodes commented. "Sounds like she was more worried about what it was doing to you."

Tony didn't say anything for a while. "You use it when you need to, and then you need to all the time."

Rhodes didn't catch that. "Hm?"

"Nothing." Tony waved it off.

And that was the end of it, as they pushed the boat up to full speed. The last two soldiers, marching off to the War.
Apologies, everyone, for taking so long getting this one up. Real Life is inconvenient in the worst way.

Next chapter will be the finale, most of it my own invention. Many thanks to everyone who's been reading thus far.

Pepper finally understood the room she was in. It wasn't a laboratory, it was a Control Room.

Even the white hot Extremis pouring through her veins couldn't get her free of the bindings that held her to the frame. Killian was her only guard now and as the sun set outside, he opened all the shutters on the windows.

They were almost thirty stories in the air. It looked like an outline of a large building, drawn in steel pylons. The Control Room hung above all of it, and Pepper could swear they were hanging over open air, on a mobile pulley.

The whole complex was a maze of Platforms and steel gantries. And far below, an immense Oil-Tanker, actually lifted out of the water. And written along it's hull was a logo that Pepper recognized.

"The Roxxon Shipyards." She said, as though Killian didn't already know. "The place got shut down after the spill, right?"

Aldrich smiled at her. "Under New Management." He turned the screens on for the first time. They were obviously meant for monitoring the day to day operations of a huge workforce in several different rooms, workshops, heavy machines and tanker ships; but now they had something very different displayed.

Pepper looked across the bank of screens at over a dozen different news stations. She watched for a while, and her jaw dropped open. Every screen was filled with nightmare images. Rioting, marches, police trying madly to hold them back. There were scenes of burning buildings and dead bodies...

And on every English speaking channel, was the headline in huge block letters: PRESIDENT ELLIS: MISSING OR DEAD?

"Fighting has broken out across three continents." Killian narrated. "At least three peace and economic treaties have been torn up. The EU is drafting a resolution for an economic embargo as soon as the market reopens. The US has no idea where the Mandarin is, or who's backing him, so they'll pick people they don't like. All our military is on full alert, and there have already been half a dozen incidents. Iran, North Korea, China... An Oriental Warlord based out of Pakistan... Such a good, all purpose enemy for people needing a reason to blow countries off the map, wouldn't you agree?"

Pepper kept looking. "But... why?"
Killian wasn’t finished. "Demonstrations that have broken out in New York, Washington, Detroit... I'm afraid that tear gas just wasn't enough to stop the riots. They say over a hundred have already been killed by National Guard units. All the highways and bridges have been shut down by gridlock. So many people are expecting a war to break out so they're fleeing the cities. China has put its forces on full alert, and begun taking potshots at Taiwan. US Forces have begun hitting sites in the Middle East, as well as Eastern Europe. North Korea has begun doing fighter jet passes over the DMZ. The UN has been called into an emergency session to try and stop WWIII from breaking out. They won't succeed."

"Why?" Pepper demanded again.

"The whole country runs on deficit spending. With the EU locking them out, they won't have the funds to meet their commitments in the Far East and the US will have to commit troops, with Government in Crisis, there'll be a run on the international markets after the holiday. China will call in their debts, which the US won't be able to pay, and then the whole damn system comes crashing down. ATM's will stop putting money out, supermarkets won't get their shipments... Thank god everybody in the country has a gun."

"WHY?" Pepper almost screamed at him. "What do you want?"

Killain turned away from the screens and smirked. "Potts, ask any landscaper. If you want to make a garden grow, you need to clear out the brush first. Before there can be construction... there must be destruction."

"We'll stop you." Pepper promised, with a touch of courage that she didn't really feel. "Whatever you're planning? Me, Tony, Rhodey, SHIELD... we'll take you down."

Killian grinned and checked his watch. "Funny you should mention that."

Pepper felt herself tense again, just for a second, when the familiar sounds of jet turbines came into the control room.

Killian opened the only door, as Iron Patriot landed on the metal walkway outside the Control Room and walked inside.

Pepper stared, unable to process this. "Rhodey?"

Killian knocked on the Iron Patriot’s forehead, as if standing at a front door. The suit opened obligingly from the torso up, and Pepper felt her jaw drop.

"Welcome aboard, Mister President." Killian said with an unholy smirk, and Pepper was starting to think it was the only facial expression he had.

"Aldrich Killian?" Locked within the suit, Ellis was stunned. "You're behind this?"

"I don't get it Aldrich." Pepper whispered. "He ran on a defence platform, and you rebranded his entire military; including that suit. You funded half his campaign. Why get him into office just to kill him?"

"Get him into office?" Killian seemed very amused by that.

"The VP." President Ellis groaned painfully. "The Vice President. That's what you were after."

"Everyone has their price." Killian explained, as though surrounded by morons. "Some want money, some want power... Vice President Rodriguez wanted his daughter to walk again. Maya
wanted to ensure Stark's help, because she knew she could make Extremis a stable compound if she had his assistance. Maya Hansen's price was nothing less than to cure the whole world of every injury or illness."

"She wanted the whole human race; but you were willing to settle for 25%?" Pepper needled.

Killian was about to give a smug answer when he put a hand to his ear, listening to something. "Pardon me a moment. Something has come up."

He stepped out of the room, leaving his two prisoners alone. Pepper wasn't sure if it was thoughtlessness, or a deliberate insult, so confident in his power over them that he was willing to leave a woman dosed with Extremis and a man wearing the Iron Patriot suit.

"Don't suppose you can work that thing?" Pepper guessed.

"I've tried everything from begging to an Executive Order." Ellis snorted. "The suit is very polite about it, but apparently Stark was very serious about never letting a politician get control of these suits. Ever. It's in some kind of lockdown."

"What happened, exactly?" Pepper demanded.

"Iron Patriot came aboard Air Force One, and started killing everyone. The suit opened, and it wasn't Rhodes... Next thing I know, I'm here."

"The VP?" Pepper asked him.

"Back in Washington. The story will have broken by now, so he'll have taken over. At least until they find the wreckage. It all happened so fast, they won't be sure... There's an Escape Pod on Air Force One. In the event the plane is in danger, Secret Service is supposed to eject me. They never even got close."

She looked at him carefully. "Your wife?"

Ellis looked miserable. "Whatever else happens, we kill that man." He growled around a broken heart.

"This is a disaster, this is." Tony hissed. "This is a Greek tragedy."

In tactical terms, Rhodes knew Tony was right. The whole complex was thirty stories high, and made of metal, except for the four main foundations which were concrete pylons, over thirty feet wide each. The shipyard had been abandoned, but there was one tanker still left in dock, just to the left of the main structure.

Far above them, looking like a cargo container painted black, was the control room. There was only one narrow metal stairwell that lead up to it, and it hung on the superstructure, with nothing between it and the base platform at ground level except thirty stories of open air.

There were a few dozen other levels going around the sides of the structure with patrolling guards on each. The whole place was sharp angles and hard surfaces, but a most of the platforms were grillwork, and the pathways between them narrow steel stairwells, there was no guarantee of cover anywhere at all.

Stark and Rhodes had left the motorboat two coves away and had rowed the last few hundred meters in a lifeboat, which they had carefully covered over to be invisible in the dark. They had
made it all the way to the concrete pylons without being noticed.

"Smart money says Killian's in the control room." Rhodes whispered. "I don't see any way to get there, do you?"

Stark reached out and pulled Rhodes' watch close enough to check the time. "Give it a few minutes."

Pepper chewed her lip. "I have no right to ask..."

The older man shook his head wearily. "Go ahead. If ever the phrase 'all in this together' applied..."

"Two weeks before election day, you dismissed your VP and took on Rodriguez. Why?"

Ellis looked sick. "After New York, the world became aware of aliens. The Government has been making a laughing stock of anyone who claimed to have seen UFO's ever since the 30's. My political career could have ended with that little revelation; there would have been hearing, upon hearing, upon hearing. So... There are some cutthroat deals that get made in this job."

Pepper nodded, understanding. "You tied all the dirty secrets involving space aliens to the vice-president's office, instead of yours."

"It wasn't that hard. The VP's office has all our space priorities; NASA, Mars..."

"So... what? You got him to resign, before your second term?"

"Aliens invaded New York." Ellis almost roared. "All the people demanding to know what happened at Roswell were suddenly very important. Even if I won re-election; my entire term would be wrapped up in who said what and who knew what... The country will spend the next twenty years trying to unravel who's cattle were snatched by UFO's, and does the government owe them money? Or did Eisenhower order a cover-up and if so, how much did every President since him know? So sue me if I wanted to actually govern the country."

"Yup. Govern the country." Killian commented with a shark grin as he suddenly reappeared at the door, with Brandt at his side. "How do you think you're doing? You know, after The Mandarin executed that Roxxon lawyer? About a million people went on Twitter to comment. You know what the overwhelming response was? That he got what he deserved."

Ellis said nothing.

Killian smirked. "Well, for what its worth, after tonight, you'll be the most revered President in history." He gestured at the Iron Patriot. "Brandt, would you collect our star attraction? Make sure he's in place for The Grand Finale."

The suit closed on Ellis again, and Brandt picked him up with one hand, putting him over her shoulder. She had no problem at all with the weight as she headed out of the room.

Killian, meanwhile, turned to Pepper. "So, shall we switch to more local news?"

The bank of screen switched from the news, and now showed security footage from a dozen or more cameras, every screen cycling between different points of view.

More and more, they followed a pair of small human figures that were climbing up from the waterline, creeping along.
Pepper's heart gave a solid thump, pushing the liquid fire through her veins a little harder. *Tony!*

"He thought he could sneak up on us? We're planning the most televised event in history, and he thought we couldn't see him coming?" Killian found it hilarious, hitting his radio. "Brandt, dangle the bait."

Rhodes and Stark were still crouched in the shadows, when there was the sound of metal sliding on metal, and a sudden shout of fear.

They both looked up as something was lowered between the four main pillars of the superstructure on chains.

And there in the middle of the open space between the control room and the base platform... was Iron Patriot, suspended by the arms, and hanging from twenty foot chains that left him hanging in mid-air above the platform. His mask was left open, and both men could clearly see President Ellis within.

On the platform, guards started rolling out Barrel after Barrel of crude oils, stacking them neatly and tightly beneath their hostage. The plan was fairly obvious.

"Where the hell is SHIELD, Tony?" Rhodes hissed. "Thought you were the Golden Boy. Why the hell isn't the Helicarrier decloaking in midair right now? And for the record, I can't believe that sentence just became normal."

"I hear ya." Tony groused. "Rhodey, I've had the suit for a whole seven minutes when not in your company; and I was a little busy at the time. They've been blocking my calls for three days."

"Fine, but we're not going to live very long without backup."

"I thought backup was your department." Tony shot back. "Mister, 'it helps having the whole armed forces on your side'."

Gunfire rang out, and sparks bounced off the cargo drums beside them.

Both men reacted instantly, throwing themselves over the side to the next gantry down, taking cover behind one of the main support struts.

"You wanna check?" Rhodes asked him.

"You first." Tony responded, already breathing hard.

Rhodes glanced out. "Two on the right, I can't see on the left."

Tony peeked quickly around the other side of the pylon. "I have no idea. I didn't count just then."

"You just figured you'd stick your neck out to impress me?" Rhodes scorned.

"Hey, Pepper *might* be watching!"

"Tony, what are you doing?" Pepper hissed at the screens. *Where's his suit? Where's his backup? What the hell is he thinking?*

Killian was watching with a dangerous, excited energy. "You said he'd come, and here he is. You said he'd be here. You were right." He hissed to himself. When he turned to Pepper, he looked
more excited than he'd ever been. "This is gonna be good."

Pepper gave him nothing.

"I know what you're thinking." Killian nodded. "You're thinking that if I had any sense at all, I'd put a bullet through them both before they got within a thousand feet." He shrugged. "I have a dozen snipers among my Extremis Guards. I could do it. I could have tossed Ellis out the window the second my guy got onto his plane too."

"You want the spectacle." Pepper thought aloud.

"Consider it a demonstration." Killian told her with a smile.

"A demonstration of what?"

Killian's teeth bared as returned to the screens. "Me."

Stark and Rhodes had only the weapons they had taken from the Manor of the Mandarin, and they were being forced back by the defenders. Stark dared another look and swallowed. The guards all had glowing red eyes, and he had less than five bullets left. "This is not going to work." He said shortly to Rhodes.

"I think you're right." Rhodes nodded. "We've got maybe eight shots between us, and the bad guys are bulletproof." He peeked out. "Maybe if we split up?"

Stark was still looking straight up at the Control Room. "Whatever happens, you get Ellis. I have to get to Pepper. She's been systemic for at least four hours. Ellis is wearing Iron Patriot. You get to the suit, and you're golden."

More gunfire rang out, and the two of them crouched lower. "And how exactly would you like me to do that?" Rhodes asked dryly.

There was a distant rumble in the distance. Stark grinned.

Rhodes had been a pilot long enough to tell the difference between distant thunder and a sonic boom. He looked to the horizon. "Is that what I hope it is?"

"And then some." Stark grinned.

Pepper was watching the disaster on the monitors with Killian.

Killian wasn't smiling any more. "Come on." He growled. "Come on, you have to make it hard for me. This is too easy, damn it..."

"Who are you trying to impress?" Pepper demanded, fed up. "The Mandarin? You gave him Ellis! You gave him Extremis! Is Tony Stark really that important to him?"

"To him?" Killian grinned. "Not as much as you'd think. But to me he's the Key to the Kingdom..."

The radio crackled. "Boss, I've got something coming in from the west. Lots of them."

Killian punched the desk hard enough to dent it. "Finally!" He ran to the window.

Pepper looked too, and her jaw dropped open.
The night sky exploded with Iron Men. Dozens of them. They came like shooting stars. First one, then three, then dozens. They flew fast enough that nobody could follow them until they came to a hover in two broad rows.


Suits meant to be undetectable. Suits that could combat an Asgardian God, or The Incredible Hulk. Suits that could go to the moon or the bottom of the ocean. Suits that could blend into a jungle or a desert or an Arctic wasteland.

It was an Iron Legion, locked and loaded.

Across the Shipyard, over a dozen Extremis warriors saw them hovering out over the ocean and moved for position, heading high and low, just waiting for the moment violence would ensue. They weren't worried, they were excited; eager for it to start.

And then the lead suit, the MK-41, swooped down to the base of the pylon, to Tony Stark, who promptly stepped forward, as it opened neatly for him to climb inside.

Rhodes couldn't help the eager grin. "Where's mine?"

Iron Man pointed upwards. "Only one of them is keyed to have you as a pilot."

Rhodes' face fell. "Oh, come on."

"Sorry man, but you've proven to be a pretty good Armor thief in the past."

"Will you ever let that go?"

Iron Man lifted off and came to a hover, in the lead of the entire aerial attack force. "Jarvis, mark anything over 1000 degrees as a hostile. Armors MK-4 through MK-12: Perimeter control. Keep the fight at the shipyards. MK-13 through MK-22: Cover Colonel Rhodes until he can get to the Iron Patriot. Golden Avenger and Silver Level armors, provide escort for Hulk-Buster level and Assault Class suits. Stealth and Stunt class suits, remain airborne and provide aerial cover. Excessive violence is approved, and will most likely be needed. Take them out any way that you can!" Iron Man gunned his jets and lead the charge. "Break formation and attack!"

The suits exploded into movement, firing and flying and evading as lines formed and aligned. The Extremis warriors all moved too, some wasting their effort by shooting, most looking for ways to meet their enemies hand to hand.

Battle was joined almost instantly, and the two lines blew through each other. Extremis warriors were send flying as they were picked up by Repulsor blasts, and Armors were shattered apart under the combined wrath of Extremis, both armies circling around for another pass.

Jarvis was commanding the whole squadron like a master strategist, seeing the battlefield from every point of view.

The most nimble flyers of the Legion were formed into two formations. Seven suits flying in a V-Formation through the superstructure, firing their repulsors at anything that was moving. The Extremis guards leaped out to combat the airborne attackers, only to be knocked out of the air by well timed blasts from the second squadron, following along behind.
The larger, heavier suits bounded over obstacles as they came along the ground. They fought like linebackers, brawling their targets out of the way.

Every armor went on the offensive, firing in all directions. Their battle formation was flawless as Jarvis guided them. Forty warriors with a single mind, and a single goal.

But the Extremis warriors had one terrifying advantage. They just would not die.

Killian watched the whole thing on the monitors, amused.

Pepper watched too. Every Iron Man that Tony had ever built was at war in front of her, and she couldn't begin to guess which one was wrapped around the man she loved.

Her attention was drawn to the far left screen, where four Extremis warriors were tag-teaming the Hulk-Buster. It was the biggest, sturdiest combat mech ever built, designed to go hand to hand with the Incredible Hulk and win...

And the Extremis warriors were shredding it apart.

Hulk-Buster caught two of them in its huge fists and smashed their bodies together over and over again. It was a brutal display. The other two Extremis warriors got around behind it and gave it a combined judo throw that put the heavy assault mech through one of the support pylons.

Pepper felt the control room shudder as the foundations of the entire shipyard suddenly lurched far beneath them.

Pepper felt her heart drop, when on the screen, Hulk-Buster responded by rolling to its feet and catching the broken pylon, sliding under it. The huge Hulk-sized combat machine was now neutralized, stuck as a way to balance the world's biggest wobbly table.

Killian watched it unfold on screen and smirked. "Well, I'd better get out there. Greatness awaits."

WHAM!

The room shuddered as an Iron Man suit smashed into the reinforced rebar set into the glass. Pepper smiled as the MK-18 started ripping into the room, trying to get to her.

Killian moved quickly, palm-smashing the metal face hard. Pepper could hear the strike ring through the room like a baseball bat on a steel drum, and the Iron Man suit fell away from the window. Killian had the faceplate in his hand.

Pepper tensed, until she caught a glimpse of the suit, with an empty helmet, climbing back up into the room.

Killian grinned as the Iron Man suit climbed back in. It aimed a repulsor at him, and there was a half-second whine of power...

Long enough for Killian to move out of the way, grab the glove, turn it around to point at the empty helmet, and blow the head clean off. Even with the head missing, it still took a swing at Killian.

Killian sighed, reached into the suit at the neck with both hands, and tore it clean down the middle like a sheet of newspaper.

Pepper stared in open disbelief. The early Iron Man suits could get shot by a tank, then a fighter
jet, and still fly across the world with no problem. What the hell was Extremis?

"Still, you gotta admire that spirit." Killian observed, as though reading her mind. "Back later, Potts."

"Aldrich, if you hurt him; I'll kill you!" Pepper shouted after him. "I'll find a way! You'll never have me!"

Aldrich opened the door. "Yes, I will." He said with quiet certainty. "But this particular demonstration isn't for you, Potts."

Killian shrugged off his jacket, stepped out the door, and calmly hoisted himself over the railing on the gantry. Pepper saw him drop over the side, and was able to follow his drop on three different monitors before he vanished completely.

Still in the control room, Pepper went a little berserk, kicking and pulling at her bonds as hard as she could, almost screaming against her imprisonment. She wasn't sure if Extremis was short circuiting her brain, or if the frustrations of the whole damn year were finally boiling over, but she was suddenly filled with nothing but hatred.

_Nothing but hatred in my heart._ Pepper thought to herself, almost intoxicated by it. _Man, is this what the Hulk feels? No wonder everyone's so scared of him._

She looked out at the screens, remembering the scenes of violence as they played out, over and over.

_Anger._

She remembered fighting with Tony, very possibly the last conversation she'd ever have with him, when the helicopters had sent his home... their home straight over a cliff.

_Rage._

She thought about how Tony looked when he'd stepped off the Plane back from Afghanistan. He looked smaller somehow, colder. She'd spent three months imagining him being tortured and God only knew what else. And all of it under the banner of those damnable Ten Rings.

_Livid._

She thought about Happy.

_Nothing but hatred in my heart!_

She thought about Killian's smug certainty that she'd be his willing slave, no matter how long it took.

_Nothing but hatred in my heart!_

She kicked and screamed and pulled on her restraints. She'd never once _hated_ anybody in her life. Not even Stane. Not even Hammer. She disliked them, even despised them, but she'd never actively wanted to hurt them. This was different. She could feel the fire boiling through her flesh and blood... and she wanted to to burn hotter. She wanted to burn Killian to nothing.

Because if Tony died today, without her there... She'd be the only one left that could. And if Killian had his way, she might be the only one left that wanted to.
Rhodes was a soldier. He had a mission. Protect the Commander In Chief. At first, he had hitched a ride with one of the suits. Even if it couldn't accept him as a pilot, he could still be carried up thirty levels.

At least one of the guards knew that too, and had taken a leap from one of the gantries to intercept him. It was a tactic that most of them were trying with one suit or another, and it seemed to be working for them. Every time an Extemis warrior landed on a suit, it would be ripped apart soon after.

Jarvis couldn't save the suit, and Rhodes at the same time, so Rhodes found himself landing hard on a metal pathway.

Iron Patriot wasn't hard to see, lifted up and mounted for all the world to watch, but getting to him had proved to be far more difficult. Rhodes had both guns and was running like a rat through a steel maze, taking shots to distract his immortal opponents as he tried to brush past them.

Iron Man took a few shots while moving, but kept his focus on the Control Room above. It was where Killian would most likely be... and he'd have Pepper with him.

Tony wanted to go straight to Pepper, but apparently Killian's guards had read that play and were all scrambling to get there first. He didn't know what shape she was in, and he had to buy some time, so Iron Man did another lap of the Shipyards, calling out tactical advice.

It was working. Extremis warriors were being pulled from the stairwells and dropped instantly, hit at least four different ways on the way down. Many of them abandoned the climb and focused on the counter-attack, trying to destroy the Iron Legion on their own terms.

But it was all a stalemate. Every hit they dealt against the Extremis warriors was something they could easily shake off.

The closest Iron Man got to one of the gantries was twenty feet. He thought it was enough distance to keep him undisturbed.

He was wrong.

A vaguely human blur flew out at him from the structure, fast enough that even Jarvis couldn't evade, and slammed into his side. Iron Man was knocked into a spin, and Tony fought to stabilize, as his attacker got in his face. A pair of white-hot hands clapped into shoulders and Tony's HUD went berserk as his control surfaces started warping and melting from the heat.

His display lit up with warning as pieces of his armor got ripped away, and he suddenly had all the airborne control of a brick with butterfly wings.

Iron Man went into another spin. A corkscrew move that tossed his attacker clean off instantly. Within two seconds, another suit had swooped high and fired twin blasts at him as he fell. The Extremis warrior was fired down like an artillery strike...

Straight into the oil barrels below.

The whole Shipyard was lit up by a sudden explosion that sent a fireball up far enough to blaze against even the control room above.

Still out of control, Iron Man spun into the Control Room and glanced off the metal. The combined
impact of both him and the fireball from far below sent the Control Room into a hard rocking motion that ripped it free of its anchors to the structure, and the whole room suddenly tore free, one half of it dangling. Metal couldn't bend, and so the Control Room tore apart at the base.

Tony had managed to land on one of the higher gantries, with pieces of his armor jabbing into him from all sides. With a hiss of pain, he signaled the suit to eject him, and he went skidding along the metal walkway... But he couldn't take his eyes off the Control Room fifteen feet above him as everything within came tumbling out through the breach.

Tony didn't have time to summon another suit. He climbed the staircase to the control room door, but it was too far from where the dangling container was now. He came down a few stairs to try and get a look at the breach, and found Pepper was sliding toward the drop in some kind of frame. "Tony!"

The metal frame that Pepper was restrained to was too wide for the breach, but it was broken too. Pepper was trying madly to get free of her bonds when the control room lurched again, and the frame she was tied to suddenly lurched half out of the breach.

Tony let out a shout and swiftly held his breath, as if afraid to disturb the moment.

Pepper's legs were freed by the damage, and she had managed to work her hands loose... leaving her suspended halfway out over a thirty level drop above a blazing oil fire. "Agh!"

Tony got as close as he could, and stepped over the railing, reaching out for her.

Pepper saw him and reached an arm out as far as she could towards him. They were about a foot short. Tony leaned out further than was safe, and strained for it. Pepper changed her grip on the only thing keeping her from falling and hung out to a dangerous degree, completely unbalanced.

And above them, the anchors groaned with the shifting weight.

Tony did the math. The break in the tilting Control Room was going to drop her, and the suits were all engaged. Getting one back to him was going to be way too slow.

"I can't reach." Stark grit out. "Pepper, you're going to have to jump it."

"Are you crazy?" Pepper was half leaning, half hanging out of the control room.

"There's no way I can reach! You have to get out far enough that I can reach you!" Tony shouted desperately.

Up above them both, the anchors on the control room lurched again, coming apart.

"You have to trust me, baby!" Tony cried out to her. "I'll catch you! Just six more inches!"

Pepper looked down awkwardly. "Gawd, Tony. Don't let me fall!"

"I won't!" He swore to her. *God? Hate to sound too presumptuous here but... Don't make a liar out of me?*

Pepper squeezed her eyes shut, and pushed off what was left of her harness. She pushed out across the open space...

...and Tony grabbed her wrist...

...and then she slipped right through his fingers.
Tony lunged, trying to get her back, and missed.

Pepper didn't scream, but her jaw dropped open, staring up at him in mortal terror as she fell.

"NOOOOOOO!" Stark howled, having an out of body experience. *Cant be real, have to be fake, not Pepper, can't be her, wake up, Tony; just wake up now, just waaaaaake up, Tony...*

But he didn't wake up. And far below, the fires burned hot and clear, so that Pepper couldn't even be seen, thrown into hell because Tony Stark couldn't save her.

Tony Stark had Five Nightmares. The Fifth and Worst of the lot, was that he would lose Pepper Potts.

Guilt was strong. Grief was stronger. Rage was... Gone. He had no rage. He had no Rage. He had no strength for it. His breath was gone. It wasn't like the panic attacks. He wasn't struggling for air, he just didn't breathe. He didn't need air. Only the living needed to breathe.


Rhodes was running for all he was worth, scaling ladders and stairwells. Every thirty feet or so, something with glowing red eyes leaped out at him, and in the same movement it was snatched out of the way by a humanoid rocket-ship. Where Extremis warriors ripped away the gantries beneath his feet, a suit caught him and pulled him into the air. "Welcome aboard the MK-13, Colonel."

"Head for Ellis!" Rhodes shouted at the suit. "We can't keep taking the slow route on this!"

The Stealth Armor flew nimbly and whisper-silently toward the suspended Iron Patriot, when someone leaped out at them and tackled them again. Jarvis was constantly recalculating how far the Extremis warriors could leap, but they were guided by some impossible reflexes that let them catch missiles in flight.

The MK-13 did it's job right to the last and flipped Rhodes off, so that he'd land on a gantry, then gunned its jets and flew in the opposite direction as fast as it could.

Rhodes couldn't believe his luck. He'd landed right by the end of one of the chains that suspended Ellis over the fire. It was hard to tell if he was even conscious, caught in the middle of the smoke and heat. Rhodes quickly climbed over the side and climbed down the chain, hand over hand.

The air was thick with the smell of fire and smoke, and inhuman roars and repulsor blasts. A kaleidoscope of death and destruction was spinning around him; but Rhodes kept moving, even as armors kept roaring around his ears. The closer he got to the President, the more the air became like an oven, with the thick stench of burning oil making it impossible to breathe.

Eventually, he climbed down low enough to reach Ellis. "Sir?"

The President's eyes fluttered a little, and he coughed against the smoke.

"Good enough." Rhodes slid down enough to straddle Iron Patriot's shoulder, when he felt the chain he was on move. He looked up the chain to see the woman Tony had named 'Brandt' was at the end of the chain, waving at him with a big smile.

And then she was climbing down the chain, just as he had, only moving a lot faster.

"Sir, if you can hear me, hold on!" Rhodes shouted, and put his gun to the chain link around the
left wrist. BLAM!

The Iron Patriot swung on the other chain, gaining speed as it swung toward the other side of the structure. Rhodes picked his moment and shot out the other chain. The two of them fell another eight feet, and landed on a gantry, unhurt.

Away from the smoke, Ellis started coming around. "...what happened?"

"Mister President, I'm afraid I'm going to need your suit." Rhodes said shortly. "Jarvis, if you can hear me..."

"I can, sir." Jarvis' voice responded smoothly. "Registering approved Iron Patriot Pilot. Lockdown Mode deactivated."

The Iron Patriot opened smoothly around Ellis, and the older man half dropped without the suit to hold him up. Rhodes set the Commander in Chief on his feet, and quickly stepped into the suit, which closed snugly around him. "Stand on my feet, sir."

Ellis did so, and held on as Iron Patriot took off. "Jarvis, inform Tony that I have The President, and will return as soon as I get him somewhere secure."


Tony just kept staring blankly into the flames. It wasn't just the worst nightmare, it was all of them put together. The fear that Pepper would be driven away because of his obsession with Iron Man. The fear that he wouldn't be equal to saving her. The fear that it would happen again, just like it had to Yinsen in Afghanistan. The fear that something like Extremis would come along.

The Battle of the Shipyard was nothing but his each and every nightmare distilled into pure cold reality, playing out before his eyes.


It looked like Iron Patriot was flying away. Tony didn't care. There was still a war going on around him, but he didn't notice it. He felt his heart stop, and his Arc Reactor go dark in his chest, and he didn't care about that either. *They can't hurt me. I'm already dead.*

"Well, you screwed that royal." A voice called smugly.

Stark looked up.

"It's a shame." Killian was at the other edge of the gantry, shrugging like it didn't matter. "Now if it was me? I would have saved her."

Stark's out-of-body experience ended instantly. The years vanished around him. Just like that, it was years ago. Before Afghanistan. Before Iron Man...

"And what do you say to your other nickname: 'The Merchant of Death'?"

It was years later, but he finally had an answer for her. *I say... You ain't seen nothing yet.*

Killian was calmly walking towards him, skin glowing.

Stark rose to his feet, with anti-life in his eyes, and strode to meet him halfway. He was almost halfway there before he realized he didn't have a suit on. Jarvis had noticed, thankfully, and sent
the MK-40 to him at once. With ten feet left, the suit slammed down on the gantry between them and opened it's back. Stark stepped into the suit and threw a punch without breaking stride. Battle was joined before the suit had even closed up behind him.

Stark had been in many battles, but this was something new. He deliberately wanted to kill this man. He was going to remove the bastards internal organs in alphabetical order, wait for Extremis to bring him back, and then kill him again, over and over.

Guilt was nothing. Grief was nothing. Rage was Pure Iron.

The fight was beyond vicious. Stark was letting Killian have it. Iron Man was more firepower than an army, and he opened up with all of it. It was an obscene dance. Every step was another attack, a repulsor, a Uni-Beam, a Micro-Missile, a Wrist-Rocket...

Killian moved like quicksilver. Even Brandt wasn't this fast. He was twisting into impossible angles, like he had no skeleton at all. The half-second whine of power before a blast came was a five alarm warning to the Extremis Enhanced. By the time Iron Man fired, he wasn't there any more.

Stark wasn't frustrated. He was too eager to keep dealing punishment, too happy about inflicting pain on this demonic thing from a nightmarish hell.

Iron Man wasn't powered by the Arc Reactor any more; it was charged with the vengeful wrath of Tony Stark. Every strike was an expression of the raw pathological hatred that Stark felt for the man that had taken Pepper away from him.

And yet, even with his conscious mind switched off and limited to nothing but a need to wipe Killian's smug face right off his head... he wasn't even getting close.

Stark had keyed up to a level he'd never fought on before, moving more savagely than he'd ever moved. He was an Iron Dragon, breathing hellfire.

But it was still too slow. Stark wasn't fast enough to get near Brandt or Killian without the suit, let alone with a mechanical proxy in the way.

Killian was bored with dodging and redirecting the blows and the weapons fire, and decided to quit toying with him. Next time he pushed a gauntlet aside he tightened his grip and ripped the whole arm straight off Iron Man, leaving flesh and blood exposed. Another blow, quick as a rattlesnake, and Tony felt cold night air on his torso.

The Fury of the Iron Man was not equal to the task.

Killian threw a punch and Iron Man met it with a punch of his own. Knuckle hit knuckle, and both of them pulled back in pain. Stark recovered first and kicked out at Killian.

Killian caught Iron Man's leg mid-kick, and got a face full of a repulsor jet for it. Killian reared back furiously, but kept his grip. Impossibly, he wasn't letting go, and Stark was hopping on one foot, trying to get out of his grip.

Killian brought down a karate chop...

"Eject me!" Tony yelled quickly.

Jarvis did so, the suit almost spitting him out the back, just in time to keep him from losing a leg as Killian ripped it clean off the suit. Jarvis kept the pressure up with the one armed, one legged suit,
firing Repulsors, Micro-Missiles...

Killian dodged and endured each blow, finally gathering himself enough to smash the MK-40 to bits with its own severed leg.

Time enough for Tony to make it to the gantry's edge and jump over the side. He fell over the rail, and dropped toward the fire, almost eager to meet it...

The MK-39 swooped down and wrapped around him in midflight, pulling him out of the dive and sending him back up toward Killian. Iron Man was firing all the way up.

The repulsor blasts were swift and powerful enough to rip through the metal, and Killian suddenly had to run as the floor beneath his feet came apart in seconds. A leap took him to the next platform down.

Iron Man was cold and methodical in his hatred, circling him and shooting, like the fighter planes on King Kong. Killian was almost indestructible, but his reach was limited. It was the same tactic that Jarvis was trying on the rest of Killian's team.

Except it wasn't working. Extremis could take the punishment. Extremis could repair the damage, and the Iron Legion could not. Killian's forces led the Iron Legion on a merry chase through the metal and concrete, and whenever one of the suits got a little too close, a monster would jump out of the shadows and rip it from the sky.

It was a war of attrition, and Iron Man couldn't handle the endurance battle as well as the near immortals.

Killian ran for it, and Iron Man gave chase from thirty feet above, firing steadily. The man was faster and more nimble than a gazelle, weaving in and out of narrow passages with impossible ease. Iron Man was airborne and not limited to any path or stairwell, but he was still having trouble keeping up and aiming a shot.

Around him, the tide of battle was turning in favor of the Extremis warriors. As the Iron Legion took damage, the enemy had a chance to gang up on them one by one. Holes were appearing in Jarvis' lines.

Tony barely noticed. He didn't care about Extremis. He didn't care about anything. He just needed to kill Aldrich Killian.

Killian was still ahead, but heading straight for a solid concrete wall. The pylon was at least fifteen feet wide and had no hand-holds. The sheer surface meant he had nowhere to go, and Iron Man was already warming up his Uni-Beam.

And then Killian took him completely by surprise, yet again. Killian put on a burst of speed and ran straight up the wall. When his momentum couldn't carry him any further vertically, he drew back a fist and punched it straight into the concrete, giving him a perfect grip.

Iron Man checked his speed and came to a hover before he flew into the wall himself. He was almost at eye-height with his target.

Then Killian smiled that maddening grin again, and Tony let out a muffled curse.

Killian leaped from the wall and hit Tony with a flying kick strong enough to send him reeling, and strip away a chunk of his chestplate at the same time.
Iron Man tumbled down to the gantry, and Killian was on him instantly, peeling what was left of the armor away like a banana skin.

Tony was feeling the punishment his body had been taking, and realized he was losing. For all the effort he'd put into exterminating the meta-human monster... Killian was toying with him.

"Eject me!" Tony shouted again.

The armor sprang open... And this time, Tony felt a hand close around his throat as he was ejected forcibly from the suit. The sudden halt was wrenching, and Stark found himself face to glowing face with Aldrich Killian again.

"Well, this has been fun." Killian said matter of factly. "But I've got a busy day tomorrow, so I have to hurry this up." He lifted Tony over the handrail with one hand, and dropped him.

Tony fell about nine feet to the base platform, with the fire at his back and the ocean in front. Nowhere else to go. The fall had knocked the air out of his lungs and almost broken his legs. He could barely move, let alone fight.

Killian landed on the edge of the platform easily, and grinned down at Tony, who turned away and crawled, dragging himself away from Killian, toward the fire...

He dragged himself another eight inches, and wondered why Killian hadn't finished him yet; when he reached out again, and touched smooth skin.

Tony looked up and there, standing before him, eyes glowing, teeth bared demoniacally, hair shining amazingly by the firelight... Was Pepper Potts. Alive and Lethal.

Killian saw her too. "...Potts."

Tony squeezed his eyes shut hard, counted to three, and looked again. There she was, exactly as he remembered her... only somehow more so. Extremis had raised her already beautiful face and body to mythic perfection. Even her meagre clothes had been scorched to ashes by flames that still licked around her untouched limbs. Naked, beautiful, with long red hair and unblemished creamy skin, she was lit by firelight from without and within... and filled with a dangerous Amazonian wrath.

Pepper turned her hellfire gaze on Killian. "So then, Aldrich." She hissed. "Let's see if the Gods are with you."

Tony sort of forgot there was a battle going on. His jaw dropped open at the hinges and hit the floor as the woman he loved more than anything calmly brushed away the ashes that clung to her... and charged.

She moved faster than any human could. She took the distance between her and her target in three strides, if that... And hit Killian like a missile.

Killian rolled with the blow and grappled with her. Eventually, he rolled them until he was on top, pinning her down. "Well, I knew this would be exciting, Pepper; but I had no-"

Pepper opened her mouth and blew a fireball into his face. Killian was knocked back with a shout of shock; and Pepper reached out for something to hit him with. When she didn't find anything; her fingers dug into the steel deck beneath them both, and ripped it free of it's welds and rivets with one hand. Suddenly armed with a piece of rendered steel that was two feet thick and long as a spear, she went berserk; smashing and stabbing at him with it.
Killian reared back as the ridiculous blows rained down on him; before smashing a fist up and shattering the steel into jagged pieces. "All right Potts, you want to do it this way?"

Pepper lunged again, slashing out like a woman possessed. Her fingers clawed chunks of Killian's flesh out, ripping them straight off his body. The madman didn't shed blood, only flame, as the Extremis quickly moved to repair everything she tore away. She jumped into a spin-kick that would have made The Black Widow jealous, and Killian was sent sailing over the edge of the platform.

And through the whole thing... Tony hadn't moved a muscle. He never even blinked. His brain was refusing to believe what his eyes were screaming at him; and he stared at her in total brainlock. "I... I got nothing." He confessed finally.

Pepper was about to say something when a glowing red hand slammed up through the metal platform from underneath, and clasped around her ankle. Pepper almost had time to look down before she was yanked through the steel grate floor.

Tony lurched to his feet, about to give chase, when Pepper was thrown up through the jagged metal hole like a rag doll. Killian had emerged after her before her body hit the ground.

She managed to land in a crouch, and Killian was on her instantly, dealing a blow to the jaw that made her neck snap. Pepper head spun around till it almost faced backwards as she crumpled to the floor, and Tony let out a yell of shock...

...when Pepper calmly sat back up again, put her head and neck back on straight with a sickening crunch, and lunged for another flurry of attacks. "That the best you can do?"

"Not even close, hot stuff." Killian had the maddening smirk back on his face. "So. How do you think this is going to go?"

"Long and messy." Pepper said without blinking, and dug her fingernails into his skin.

Tony was still just standing there, eyes as big as dinner plates, watching the whole thing unfold with his jaw on the ground.

Someone casually strolled up beside him. "So. I got twenty bucks on my guy. I'll give you odds, if you like?"

Tony looked over to stammer out a reply, and froze.

It was Brandt.

She gave him a Cheshire smile, and lunged.

Tony was already running.

She had him outpaced instantly, and batted him over the side of the platform. He gave a yell as he heard a rib snap from the casual swat. He went pinwheeling through the air for a moment, before landing in the water, face first.

A split second later, the water around him lurched, and a suit came up from below the surface, wrapping him tightly in itself. Tony knew instantly which one it was. The Aqua-Armor. Good to 80,000 ft deep. Enough steel padding to take a punch from the Hulk.

But it had very few weapons. It was built to be durable, not for combat.
Brandt was able to dodge the heavy limbs all too easily. "Come ON, Stark!" She raged, apparently annoyed. "I was hoping for something to make this interesting at least."

"What? You getting bored?" Tony asked her in disbelief, and settled into a crouch. He dug his huge iron fingers into the platform beneath them, and pulled it up, sending both of them through the floor, into the water.

The Aqua-Armor was at home in the water, more at ease than a naval submarine. Tony's vision lit up with Sonar, passive listening, and he saw that a few Extremis warriors were being knocked into the waves too, but they were all interested in going back up to the surface.

Tony fired a few shaped charges, setting off undersea blasts that would explode the eardrums of anyone normal, but his focus was elsewhere.

His Sonar pinged to tell him that he had a passenger. Brandt was perched on top of his heavy skin. Tony grinned cruelly and ran an Arc Powered charge over the hull. His echolocation imagers could show the moment she howled in pain, sending up precious air bubbles.

Brandt kicked away from him and headed for the surface. Tony suddenly had a flash of insight, wondering if he could simply drown the Extremis warriors, and he raised an arm as fast as he could, able to get hold of her ankle.

Brandt looked down, her glowing eyes blazing in the dark water. She was holding her breath, but didn't seem in any distress as she stopped her attempt to swim away, and instead coiled herself around the arm that held her leg. Tony ran the current again, but this time Brandt fought through it, gritting her teeth as she dug her hands into the Iron skin.

Breach! Surface Layer 01 is breached. His HUD alerted him, showing him a schematic of every system the water was getting into.

Brandt kept going, ripping her way through the big black gauntlet, looking for the soft Stark center.

Tony swore under his breath. Extremis' ability to rip through his armor like a knife was becoming less and less amusing with each passing fight. He'd already escaped drowning in his armor once, and was in no hurry to do it again, and he fired his fins, sending himself back up to the surface, with her along for the ride.

As Stark clambered back up onto the Shipyard's superstructure, Brandt kept ripping his armor apart. She grinned as she ripped off enough of the armored arm to expose his skin.

Iron Man shrugged its huge size, trying to throw her off. Brandt danced nimbly over his shape, not even off balance as she came down on his other shoulder. She cackled as she brought both her fists down in a smash that snapped off the other arm at the shoulder.

Tony groaned, wondering how much damage she'd done to him with that shot, even through all the layers of protection.

Brandt danced around to stand on his back, and raise her fists to send another blow at his head.

"Eject me!" Tony shouted quickly, and was kicked out the back of the suit, passing under Brandt.

By now, Jarvis had learned the rules and adapted his tactics. Almost the second he ejected, he was caught by the MK-32 as it swooped in to catch him. Brandt tore the huge Aqua-Armor clean in half, like she was tearing through a paper bag, and found a Repulsor blast waiting to meet her.
She shook it off quickly, her face stripped away but growing back fast. When her eyes cleared, she had a millisecond to see Iron Man coming at her in full flight-mode, before he hit her square in the stomach.

"How do you like it when I've got some juice, hell-thing?" Tony taunted her, and fired a Uni-Beam, straight into her chest, right were her heart should have been.

Brandt actually seemed to feel it, and her eyelids drooped for a second, the grip on his throat slackening.

Tony didn't let up, knowing she wouldn't be down for long. Still holding her under the arms he tilted his jets and took off straight up. He left the shipyard instantly.

Brandt was recovering from the blow and came alive in his grip, the g-forces making her slower, but no less ferocious as she tried to get a grip on Iron Man as the wind whipped past them.

"What the hell are you doing?!" She screamed at him.

"Running a little experiment." Iron Man growled back. "For example, at this altitude, icing is a problem. Can you handle the cold?"

Brandt's eyes flared white hot, and she spat a fireball in his face. The cold extinguished it instantly.

"Apparently you can." Iron Man was unfazed, only getting faster. "At this height, the air pressure shrinks to almost nothing. Mountain climbers have to take high altitude in stages to survive. We're currently higher than Everest. Can you handle the pressure change?"

Her skin was glowing, the lights moving under her face and body, back and forth, as Extremis rushed to repair the damage the vacuum was doing to her. What air was left in her lungs, and her bloodstream, was trying to boil and expand. Her body should have literally burst by now, but Extremis was holding her together.

Brandt wrapped her fingers around his throat and tried to squeeze. Ice crystals had formed in her hair and clothes. She was screaming obscenities at him, but in the vacuum, her voice made no sound.

Iron Man stopped the climb, and drifted, weightless. Brandt's body was coated with a layer of frost, but she was still alive, clawing for his throat. Iron Man fired his repulsors, and managed to break free. Brandt was pushed away from him, her deathly touch reaching uselessly for him. Her face cracked like an ice cube as her expression changed, and Tony could see something as her eyeballs froze over that he'd never seen from her before.

Fear.

Brandt went still, though Tony couldn't tell for sure if she was actually dead.

"So. If you can handle cold, and you can handle vacuum..." Iron Man called after her, though she'd never hear it. "Let's see how you can handle re-entry."

Iron Man kept pace with her for several thousand feet. Brandt spun as the air thickened around her, her body turning into a small comet that burned away to atoms within seconds.

"Jarvis, did you get that?"

"Yessir." Jarvis reported. "Adjusting attack patterns now."
"How are we doing, by the numbers?"

"Forty Three suits have been reduced to nineteen. Only two Enemies defeated, leaving eleven."

"Well, now we've got the trick of it." Tony wasn't concerned. "Don't be cool, just make it happen."

As Iron Man flew down to ground level again, he looked around and saw almost twenty suits going straight past him, heading up. Tony let out a breath as they came close enough for his HUD to put up the enhanced view of them. What was left of his Iron Legion was flying straight up past the edge of the sky, and they were taking passengers. No matter how strong they were, Extremis warriors were having trouble gathering for an attack when moving faster than sound. The ones that did manage to smash their way free were quickly caught by other armors keeping pace behind them.

As he got low enough for there to be atmosphere again, Tony heard the sky ringing out with sonic booms as one suit after another rocketed skyward. The War of the Futurists had turned swiftly in favor of the Iron Legion.

Tony left Jarvis to it. He was running out of suits and he was bound to lose a lot more to this tactic. He just needed them to hold out long enough to reach the edge of space.

And he needed to get back down to ground level and help Pepper.

As the duel continued, Killian's insufferable smirk had started to fade. She had taken great pleasure in smashing it off his face over and over. He had spared her face, apparently liking what he saw. He had gone for her limbs, trying to break her. Both of them were missing more than a few chunks of their bodies, Extremis repairing the damage, even as they kept fighting.

Killian had managed to gain the upper-hand enough to send her sprawling. He was going to press the moment, when he looked up and suddenly realized what was happening. "NO!"

Pepper realized it too. "Tony's done it. Your warriors are finished." She grinned savagely. "You're finished."

Killian didn't even blink. "I can get it back."

"No you can't."

They both turned. Iron Man was at the edge of the platform, aiming everything he had at Killian. "Maya deserted. Ellis is already gone from you, and he knows what you did. You'll never get your formula back. You'll never go unnoticed again. The VP is useless to you. You're done, Killian."

Silence.

Killian's leap was faster than a cheetah at full speed. Iron Man wasn't fast enough to even take the shot.

Pepper was faster still. As Killian hit Tony in a tackle, she hit Killian. The impact sent them all spinning around. Iron Man spun out of control, trying to stay upright, when something grabbed him and held him still.

Killian was on the edge of the platform, water below. He held Iron Man from behind, his strength pinning the armored man in place as a human shield. Pepper was in a crouch, looking for an opening.
"If it's over..." Killian snarled in Stark's ear. "...then it's over for both of us."

Tony grunted, then howled as Killian's choke-hold got tighter and tighter, squeezing the suit into his skin.

Pepper lunged, not for Killian, but for Tony. She dug her fingers into the suit and ripped it open, right down the middle like she was peeling a fruit. The sudden opening let her yank Tony out of the doomed armor by his legs and she tossed out of the way.

Killian tossed the useless chunks of metal aside and met Pepper halfway, both of them trying to wrestle the other over the side. Killian gave up on the wrestling match after a few moments and used the leverage to throw her. She flew across the platform into one of the supports, and smashed through it. It was a steel pole about three feet wide, and it snapped like a twig.

Immediately, the Control Room snapped free of its final supports and fell, the whole top of the Shipyards breaking free and falling toward the platform. Tony and Killian scrambled in opposite directions, as the whole Control Room, and all it's superstructure slammed down into the platform they were on. The impact was enough to crunch through the platform and send water upward all over the place. But the framework of the shipyard held, and the building was stuck halfway through the platform.

The shaking stopped after a few minutes, and Tony sat himself up to see the top half of the Shipyard was now on the ground floor. The walls had held together enough that it couldn't pass through the platform completely

Killian was on the far side of the crumpled walls, trying to find a way over or around to get to his target.

Pepper picked herself up, and looked around for Killian. She picked up the support pole that she'd been put through. What was left of it after it shattered was twelve feet long, a foot thick, and sheared into sharp metal points.

Killian came around the side of the wreckage with a cold grin. "Now. Where were we?" He snarled.

Pepper snatched up the pole and threw it like a javelin. The whole thing had to weigh over a hundred pounds, and she tossed it like a dart. The move was grand and unexpected, and it skewered Killian straight into the wall behind him.

Killian groaned and slumped... before he shook it off, and tried to work himself free. He couldn't get enough of a grip on the thing to un-pin himself... so he walked along the length of it, immune to pain as he dragged himself along the pole that pinned him.

Tony looked around for his next armor, and found it was almost thirty feet over their heads... homing in on Pepper. "JARVIS!" He screamed up at the armor. "DON'T HIT PEPPER! SHE'S A FRIENDLY! FRIENDLY! SO JUST... BE FRIENDLY TO PEPPER!"

But there was no sign that the attacking suit had heard him.

Pepper charged and leaped. She put a foot on the support steel, almost eleven feet high, and pushed off it, going higher still. High enough to snatch the MK-9 out of the air and yank it back down.

Tony swallowed as he saw her. She was tearing into the Iron Man suit with violent glee. He was certain that he heard her growl the words 'other woman' more than once. He knew she'd always been less enamoured with the suits than she let on, but she was relishing the chance to rip one apart
with her bare hands... until she was left with just one final piece.

The Arc Reactor glowed brightly in her hand, and she turned to face Killian as he worked his way free of the pole she'd speared him with. He managed to snap the rest of it off, and slid off the end, picking up the section he'd snapped free.

Pepper threw the Arc Reactor straight up into the air, a glowing star rising high enough that Tony couldn't see it.

Killian swung the pole at her, big and heavy. Pepper bent backwards impossibly to let it pass over her. He swung it back again, and she jumped, letting it pass under her. This time she caught it as it passed, and she turned it into her elbow. Killian yelled as she used it to lever him off the platform, and toss him away. He came down hard on his back, across the concrete pylon itself, the only intact section of the structure left.

She was on him before he could rise, bringing the pole down, jagged end first, nailing him to the pylon through the chest.

Pinned again, Killian grasped the pole to snap it off as he did before, but she kicked his hands away, straddling his pinned body; as the Arc Reactor came back down again... and she caught it neatly.

"Free tip, you son of a bitch." Pepper snarled in his ear. "If you're going to use a secret weapon? Don't tell your victim how it works." She squeezed the Arc Reactor slightly, feeling it crack. "You taught me Extremis. Tony taught me Arc Reactors. Specifically... exactly how to take one apart safely... or unsafely."

She pushed the reactor against his lips. Killian grit his teeth together; and she slugged him again across the face, quick as a whip-crack.

Killian was stunned by the blow just enough that she rammed the Reactor in his mouth, as electricity snaked around its sides...

Pepper turned and ran for Tony as fast as she could, which was pretty damn fast. Tony scrambled to get to his feet when Pepper caught him around the middle with one arm and threw them both over the side, into the water.

The night lit up with a burst of pure white light. The wave of energy crackled over the ocean, across what was left of the shipyard, and straight up into the night sky, making it daylight for a few moments.

Tony saw the whole thing from below the water, flashing back to the night he'd fought the Iron Monger. Pepper had saved his life and defeated his enemies by detonating the Arc Reactor, once again.

A wall of explosive light rolled over them, shining down through the cool water, and for the first time since their reunion, there wasn't a war on.

They didn't come up for air right away.

If he thought she looked incredible above the surface, underwater she was downright supernatural.

With her long red hair floating around her, Pepper came forward like a water nymph and took his battered, bleeding face between her hands, giving him a long soulful kiss.
With the battle over, and the shockwave fading, Pepper and Tony came up for air eventually, and stepped onto the platform. The shipyard had been obliterated. They looked over the destroyed tanker, the surrounding area, what few bits of Killian were left, hunks of shredded Iron Men, and shooting stars above as enemies and allies burned up on re-entry, far above.

Pepper shivered suddenly. Tony shrugged off his torn shirt and put it around her bare shoulders automatically, though he knew she couldn't be cold.

"Wow." Pepper whispered, as though looking at something she didn't recognize. "That was... violent." She was looking up and down the Platform, as well as the ship, following all the paths her own duel had taken. "Did I dream all that?"

"Gotta say, Potts: I've never found you more attractive." Tony admitted.

Pepper's skin had grown pale at the sight. "...wow." She licked her perfect lips and looked at Tony. "I'm pretty bad-ass now, huh?"

Tony came forward and wrapped his arms around her tightly. She was more than willing to do the same. "I missed you." He whispered.

"Missed you." Pepper sighed into his neck.

They stood there for a long time, until Pepper pulled back. "Is it over?"

Tony looked around. "Jarvis?" He called. "Is it over?"

No response.

"I'll take that as a yes." Tony offered. "How do you feel?"

Pepper licked her lips again. Her skin was still pale. "I feel... Hot."

At any other time, Tony would have made a quip, but after watching enough people overheat and explode, this thought filled him with terror. "Really? Okay, we need to get you to a hospital."

Another sonic boom filled the air and they both looked up. An Iron Man was coming down, with a few holes punched clean through it. "Good evening, Miss Potts."

"Hey, Jarvis." Pepper looked over the suit. "You look like I feel."

The suit gestured at her, eerily human. "Ditto, Ma'am."

Pepper looked down at herself, and found she was still a mess. She had ribs sticking out everywhere, huge chunks of her body was being filled in by what looked a lot like blackened cooling lava... "Right." She breathed. "Doesn't even hurt."

Iron Man turned to Tony. "Sir, the Extremis Warriors have been dispatched, but regrettably, we are down to only three suits."

"Who made it?"

"The MK-9, The MK-5, and the MK-23." The armor gestured at itself. "And I do not believe the
MK-9 will be good for anything more than scrap metal."

"What about Rhodey?" Pepper asked, more to distract Tony from the sound of her ribs snapping back into place than anything else.

"Colonel Rhodes has successfully taken President Ellis to the nearest Military Post. They were... surprised."

"I'll bet. With the whole country on Red Alert, we're lucky they weren't shot down on the way in." Tony laughed, and turned back to Pepper. As her blackened skin faded back to healthy peaches-and-cream, she smiled at him, a little more pale. "Pepper? You okay?"

She looked at him and tried to keep up her smile, but he could practically see her getting more and more pale as she spoke. "I'm okay. I think that I'm just coming off the adrenaline high. I mean, I never get to do this sort of thing myself." She was weaving on her feet a little, pointing a shaky hand at some of the damage. "Hey. I did that."

"Pepper?" Tony's voice was rising in alarm.

"I tor-r-re it apart." Pepper was weaving further, voice starting to slur.

She dropped suddenly, and Tony lunged to catch her.

She seemed to be caving in on herself, her skin was drawing tighter across her bones, her eyes sinking in deep, and her hair falling out.

"Jarvis get me a suit, any of them, I don't care! And call Rhodey! RIGHT NOW!"

Maya closed the door to her private booth and let out a breath. The train was finally moving as the sun rose, and the room she had was private. With a bit of luck, she'd be in Canada before anyone could pick up the pieces.

The news reported that Iron Man and Iron Patriot had rescued President Ellis. The news also reported that Vice president Rodriguez had been taken into custody and that the Mandarin had been exposed as a fake.

"A fake?" Maya breathed. "That's how they're reporting it?"

Clinically, she saw the appeal. If they could vanish The Mandarin and pin the whole thing on Killian and the VP, then they could pretty much do whatever they wanted with the loose ends... including her.

"The train is clear." She told herself. "You've already checked, and the train is clear."

Maya looked around awkwardly. She was trying not to look over her shoulder every second, but she knew she didn't have long. Airports were still closed, and too dangerous anyway. With the airports shut down the trains had stayed on, even over the holiday. Even taking a train seemed risky. But she needed distance and she needed speed.

Once the train pulled out of the city, she felt safer. There wasn't much anyone could do to get on the train once it was rolling.

There was the faint sound of jet turbines. She looked up out her window. No sign of a jet plane.
"Getting paranoid, sister." She chastised herself.

There was a knock at her door.

Maya grasped the canister of pepper-spray... or at least, that was what she called it. "Come in?"

The door opened, and Iron Patriot strolled in. "Good morning, Dr Hansen."

Maya slumped. The chase was over, and it hadn't really begun.

"Doctor, your presence is urgently required at the Abraham Erskine Memorial Hospital." Rhodes continued formally. "We have a patient that you are... uniquely qualified to treat."

SHIELD was still not telling him where the A-Team was at the moment, but they had enough operatives left in contact that Tony could get a Hospital Ward cleared out and isolated. He wasn't sure if Pepper was on the verge of exploding or not, but he refused to leave her side.

President Ellis had promised to clean house, and Tony didn't care. Rhodes had been connected to Pepper's medical machines the entire time he'd been tracking Maya down. He had up to the second information across all her vitals. Maya had been working on it since the second he collared her.

Rhodes had contacted him when they landed on the roof of the hospital, and Maya strode into the ward with a tablet in one hand, and a white lab coat. Aside from her hair being all over the place, nobody would have guessed that she'd been dragged through the sky at near Mach Speed.

"Was she involved in the fight at all?" Maya asked immediately, looking at the readings. "Was she caught in any of the fighting? Because it looks like her Extremis levels are pretty low right now. Something used it up. Repairs to her body?"

Tony snorted. "Yeah. She was involved."

"Well, that's probably the only reason she isn't dead yet." Maya nodded clinically. "The Extremis in her system was pulled away before it could overload and blow up. She used up the formula doing whatever it was she was doing, and it's not refilling the way it should because the dose isn't taking."

"What's the next move?"

"There isn't one, Tony. And you knew that before I got here." Maya shrugged, and looked up at them for the first time. "Well." She looked over his battle scars. "You look..."

"As do you." Tony said shortly, not taking his eyes off Pepper. "Fix her, or I'll show you how I took out Brandt."

Maya came to the head of Pepper's bed and pulled the woman's eyelids back. "The dose isn't taking. The Extremis won't stay in her system properly. But she's systemic, so she can't live without it any more. It's like the way an alcoholic can't feel normal until he has a drink in the morning. Her system has built a chemical need for the formula, and the formula has decided it won't work for her any more."

Tony shook off the comparison. "Maya, if her system became dependent on Extremis, won't it recover on its own once Extremis is gone?"

"Not fast enough." Maya shook her head as Rhodes came in himself, his suit left on the roof. "She's
not overloading, so she won't explode. She's having the opposite reaction. I'd say you've got maybe four hours left to organ failure."

"What if we put her on Life Support?" Rhodes suggested. "Put her on total life support now, and give her system time to get functional again on its own?"

Maya considered. "I tried that with my second batch, but the machines involved... Frankly, you don't have a clue how deep the need for Extremis runs once the formula takes hold. It practically replaces your blood supply. There's no machine that can force that much artificial life into an organic body without doing damage of its own."

Silence.

"Yes there is." Tony said finally, and laid a hand over the Arc Reactor in his chest. "It's right here. The first Arc Reactor was designed to power an electromagnet, but it gave me chemical radiation poisoning. The second one is a better match for organics. It's actually taken over some of my vitals. My reflexes, IQ, blood pressure, immune system, oxygen saturation, all of it is better than human, thanks to this thing."

Rhodes jumped up. "We can use the one in my suit."

"No." Stark shook his head. "I... I made it part of the chestpiece. I didn't want anyone removing the Arc Reactor from the suit I gave you. It's a fully integrated piece."

"One of your suits?" Maya ran the checklist.

"My suits all use the older design, since they weren't needed in my chest. I don't know what early palladium poisoning would do to Pepper in her condition, but it wouldn't be good." Tony shook his head. "I don't have a suit left that doesn't have some damage. Killian's people knew where the weak spots were."

Maya got there first. "Stark, if you're thinking what I think you're thinking..."

"You stop talking now." Stark told her darkly. "Rhodes, tell the surgical team to prep for an emergency transplant. They'll need to have an interior wall for Pepper to hold the Reactor in place properly, and I'll have to get the shrapnel removed at the same time."

"Tony, that's some pretty invasive procedures to do on a moment's notice." Maya pointed out. "This might not work."

"Maya, give me a better idea, or shut up." Stark said simply.

Rhodes headed out to alert the surgical team.

"I'll need to be there." Maya put in. "If Extremis does something unpredictable, the doctors here probably won't recognize it."

"If you plan to do something... unpredictable yourself..." Tony warned.

"Believe it or not, Tony; I'm really hoping she pulls through." Maya said shortly. "If you've found a way for a Negative to survive getting the dose..."

"A 'Negative'." Tony scorned "Is that what you call the ones that blew up?"

Maya was silent a moment. "You saw it, Tony. It works. I could save the world." She was getting
that dangerous certainty in her eyes again. "I can still do it! I can still fix this!"

It was the strangest feeling. Tony suddenly felt nothing but pity for her. She was desperate to keep going, even after she'd almost collapsed human civilization. "Under no circumstances will you ever work on this again." He told her.

Maya looked at him disdainfully. "If you won't give me a computer? I'll work it out on a pad. If you don't give me paper? I'll write on the walls. If you don't give me a pen, I will chew through my own fingers and write in blood." Her gaze was fierce. "I fix this? I can fix everyone. I can raise the level of what it means to be human and conquer death forever. There's nothing too extreme for that prize. A statue of me in every city in the world, Tony."

Tony turned away from her to Pepper; another victim of Maya's unhinged, zealous obsession to remake humanity in her image. He leaned down to kiss Pepper's forehead, right on the edge of her hairline. It was the only patch of skin not covered by some medical device. "I love you. I'm sorry you have to go through this, but I'll fix you, I promise. I'll fix you."

"It'll work." Maya swore, though he wasn't sure if she was reassuring him, or promising herself. "We'll make it work."

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The next day passed without Tony or Pepper being aware of it. The surgery was a marathon double session. Maya stayed the whole time. SHIELD kept that wing of the hospital sealed, and as good as they were, the word got out who the patients were quickly enough.

Iron Man being in emergency surgery was global news after he'd saved the world again. Rhodes was required to show up for a few interviews, but the questions were all cleared before hand and Iron Patriot knew the official story.

Rhodes was the hero of the moment, and though he was quick to share the credit, Stark was still in surgery, and couldn't answer questions or pose for pictures. When Rhodes returned to hospital, they were still in surgery.

Extremis had been kept a secret, even more so than the Arc Reactor. It was a weapon that was equally as dangerous when it didn't work at all.

Killian had been labelled the heart of the conspiracy, and the Vice-President the mastermind. His willingness to give the investigators everything had been all that saved him from the death penalty.

For the next day or two, the world cooled off. Armies pulled back from the inevitable World War; markets stabilized as everything went back to the way it was, and the press went mad, getting one revelation after another, unraveling the Vice President's conspiracy almost faster than the Secret Service could.

Once the Manor of the Mandarin was locked down and local law enforcement had collected everyone involved, the airports reopened quickly, and America had a Merry Christmas after all, having dodged the ultimate bullet.

The one bit of bad news was Stark and Potts, still in the middle of marathon, life-saving surgery. Without mentioning Extremis, the official story was that Potts had been taken hostage, and was injured terribly in the final battle. The official story was that she was beyond the help of traditional medicine, and Stark was almost literally giving her his heart in a last ditch effort to save the woman he loved. It was all true, except for the parts it left out.

If they survived, it would be the perfect end to a love story that had saved the whole world.
Tony opened his eyes slowly, not comprehending anything.

Rhodes was sitting beside him, dozing. "...hey."

Rhodes opened his eyes quickly. "Hey."

"...'epp'r."

Rhodes pointed across the bed, and Tony struggled to turn his head to look the other way. Pepper was in the opposite bed. Her face and body was covered with so many tubes and cables that Tony almost couldn't see her. But her long red hair was visible... and lit by a pure white glow coming from her breastbone. Tony squeezed his eyes shut a moment, trying to focus his vision, and he got a look at the readouts on her heart and lung monitors.

"It worked. Her readings are stable, and they're getting better" Rhodes told him warmly. "You did it, Tony. You saved her."

Pepper's recovery was slow; her whole body was relearning how to live on its own.

Stark's recovery was much faster. He'd set the Arc Reactor in his chest to be removable. The housing was still there, and the shrapnel had been removed.

Stark was up and moving, though very slowly. He was surprised at how much he had to get used to himself. The constant glow was gone, and the world seemed dim. The weight of it was gone, and he felt like he was tipping over when he stood without the frame. The Arc Reactor was semi-based on electromagnetic technology, and Stark discovered it had a rhythm of it's own, so that he could feel it moving gently. He'd had it so long he didn't notice it any more, and now he felt off balance all the time.

"Hey."

Stark turned away from the window slowly. Rhodes had come in. He and the medical staff were the only ones allowed into the ward. Tony and Pepper shared a private room. "How you feeling?"

"Okay." Stark murmured, hand to his chest. A bandage covered over the housing.

"You gonna get another one?" Rhodes asked. "You've made a lot of them, what's one more?"

"The production line at the house is at the bottom of the ocean." Tony sighed. "If I do this at the factory in LA then I have more recovering to do; because I sure as hell won't be sending the plans on for someone else to do it."

Rhodes nodded. "Well, the shrapnel is gone. Finally."

Tony shook his head. "I should have gotten rid of it ages ago."

"You were busy."

"I was addicted." Tony shook his head. "I was addicted to Iron Man. I forgot that I didn't invent this idea. Yinsen did. He invented a way to keep me alive, and I upgraded it a dozen times... But the point of this wasn't to be a superhero, it was to keep me alive. Yinsen invented the solution. I invented the damn shrapnel."

Rhodes went quiet, surprised by this.
Tony shook his head. "But I was having too much fun to stop, and I ignored the shrapnel because... As long as I still had it in me, I could keep going." He rubbed his eyes. "And then Stane, and Whiplash, and SHIELD, and New York... I always found a reason."

Rhodes listened to all this, and leaned forward a bit when Stark ran out of words. "You never told me about New York."

Stark winced.

"Or about Afghanistan." Rhodes added. "Or about the Palladium poisoning."

Stark winced harder. "I know. I didn't tell Pepper either." He sighed. "What can I say? Some things you don't want to admit. At least... not to the people you rely on."

Rhodes nodded. "I get that. Remember, I was part of that convoy too. I woke up and got told that you were taken."

Stark looked over. "How'd you handle it?"

"I got some help."

There was a light tapping at the doorway, and both men turned. Father Barnes was standing in the doorway.

"I understand I'm needed?" Barnes said lightly.

Tony's jaw was hanging open as Rhodes stood up and gave the clergyman his seat. The soldier left them and Barnes sat down.

"It took your friend Rhodes to get me past the rope line." Barnes explained. "There's a huge crowd out there."

"I've dodged crowds before." Tony waved that off.

Barnes leaned back in his seat. "So. It's Boxing Day and we're all still here." He observed. "You must have done good."

Stark glanced over at Potts. "I did okay. Not good, but okay."

"Which is better than you thought you'd do." Barnes pointed out. "The flashbacks?"

"Haven't had one since The Shipyard." Tony admitted. "You'd think that the battle, Pepper falling, this hospital... You'd think something would hit me the wrong way."

"Why do you think it hasn't?" Barnes asked him.

Tony was silent a long moment, considering his response. "I think that the Shipyard was all my worst nightmares come to life. I have a pretty good knack form predicting what comes next. I made a fortune off it... The Shipyard was the worst case scenario. And then I wiped them all out."

"And what are a few flashbacks compared to that?" Barnes smiled. "It's a slightly more... militant version of overcoming personal demons than I'm used to, but still."

Tony laughed. The laugh died quickly as he looked over at Pepper. "She hates Iron Man." He confessed. "Rhodey says that it's not the suit so much as what that lifestyle put me through. I love her for it, but... She calls the suit 'The Other Woman'." He looked at Barnes. "I looked it up. Half
the indicators of an addiction? Spread across all my vices, I'm guilty of more than half of them, one way or another."

"Your situation is... unique." Barnes admitted. "Before the blast at the Lumber Yard? Chad Davis spoke to me for a while. He said that he was having trouble adjusting to life as a civilian again. I think that's why he signed on with AIM. But he didn't miss the fear, or the adrenaline. He missed..."

"Relevance." Tony finished for him. "The feeling of making a difference. Being a hero is a rush."

Barnes nodded. "When you're a junkie, the life you put at risk is your own. If you're driving a car or flying a plane, you risk others. But in your case..."

Tony gave a bitter smirk. "In my case, I put more lives in danger if I stop. Going into that fight was reckless to the point of suicidal. If I had a lick of common sense about it; Killian would be ruling the world right now."

Barnes almost laughed. "I know. I don't know what to say to you right now. The smartest choice you can make is to take care of yourself, but the best choice you can make is to keep going." He looked sick about it. "So where does that leave us?"

Tony tapped his chest, where the Reactor used to be, and seemed surprised for a moment that it wasn't there. He gestured over at Pepper. "That Reactor is new. The last one wasn't doing the job, and as a result, it was going to kill me. I ran the entire table of elements, and got nowhere. The right choice didn't exist, so I had to create a new one. I took three elements and forged something new and better."

Barnes smiled. "I like the analogy. So, what's the right choice this time?"

"When I had to create something new, it wasn't a question of the ingredients. It was a matter of calculating the proportions. As long as something is more one thing than the other, the balance is always in favor of the larger element." Tony said, as though reading it out of a textbook. "In my case? I think I have to make sure that the world needs Iron Man more than I need Iron Man."

"I agree. Think you can handle that?"

Tony snorted. "I week ago, I would have said no. Now? I know I can. Because I poured three years of my life into this invention, and even when it drove people away I kept going, and even when it nearly killed me I kept going... And then it still wasn't equal to the task." He almost looked like he was going to laugh, as he put a hand to his chest, where his Reactor used to be. "All the work I put into it, and when the chips were down, the only person this invention could save was Pepper."

"Just as you said you would." Barnes reminded him.

Long silence.

"There's something worse coming, Barnes." Tony said quietly. "Ever since New York... I never told anyone what I saw on the other side of that Portal, but it's never left me."

"What did you see?"

Tony shivered. "New York was just the first round, Barnes. I've never, not once, believed that it was over. They will be coming for us. You can bet on that. And I'm terrified that I'll go too far for The Avengers, and not far enough to be ready when They get here for Round Two." Tony looked at Pepper. "I lost her the other day. I saw her fall 200 feet and land in an inferno. Remember when I
said I didn't know how to save the world, but I had to save her?"

"I remember."

"I failed. *She saved me.*" Tony said simply. "But when I realized that the Arc Reactor could keep her alive? I didn't even blink. I would have ripped it out of my chest with my bare hands if I could. I didn't even give it a second thought."

"Sounds like you've got your priorities straight then." Barnes smiled a little, but he wasn't looking at Stark. He was looking at Potts. Tony glanced over, and jumped up so fast he almost fell over.

Pepper was awake.

Tony was at her side in an instant. "Hey."

Pepper slowly lifted a hand to touch his face. "...n'ed a's've."

Somehow he understood. "Yeah. I need a shave."

Pepper's hand dropped from his face to her chest. "...c'ld."

"Yeah. It'll warm up once you get used to it, I promise."

Pepper was crying. "...s'it a bom'?"

"No. It's not a bomb." Tony promised.

"Rhod' thou' it was." Pepper sniffed, and lifted her hand up to his chest. "Wha'bout you?"

Tony blinked back tears. "I'm okay."

"'kay." Pepper was fading out again. "Love you."

"I love you too."

"T'ny?" Pepper slurried. "Wh'rs Happy?"

Tony felt punched in the gut. "He... He's..."

She was already asleep.

Tony let out a breath like he'd been holding it a hundred years.

Barnes rested a hand on his shoulder. "She's conscious now."

"It means the worst is behind her." Tony nodded. "She's going to be okay."

They stayed that way for a while, letting the unspoken fear fade, and let relief take over.

"What did she mean?" Barnes asked. "About thinking it was a bomb?"

"Rhodey thought the first Arc Reactor was a bomb." Tony explained. "I'd been hiking the desert for a day or so. He had to carry me onto the chopper, and thought I was wired." He shivered. "When I told Pepper all about it, she thought it was too dangerous to have it inside me as an implant. She heard me describe it, and she almost jumped back."

"That moment stayed with you." Barnes discerned. "It still bothers you, even now."
Stark nodded. "It bothers me that Pepper sees me as a living bomb. I don't think she still thinks that way now, but still... If the Arc Reactor made me an explosion waiting to happen, then now Pepper is."

"From what I saw back home, she was already." Barnes pointed out lightly.

Stark couldn't help the grin. "She was incredible."

They both sat, letting the tension drain away.

"So. What now?" Barnes asked finally.

"Well, Pepper won't want to stay here longer than she needs to." Tony sighed. "Neither do I. Our house is... well, gone."

"Where will you go?"

"New York." Tony declared. "We have a place there. She was living here for a while, and... I think I can face it now. I think I have to."

The Penthouse in Stark Tower was fully repaired after the New York Invasion, though some parts of the city were still being cleaned up.

Tony had refurbished one of the rooms to be a private intensive care unit, and once Pepper was stable, they moved her there. Tony went with her, unwilling to leave her side, but he had recovered enough to get back to work.

He had finally bitten the bullet and spoken about his experiences. He wasn't particularly religious, but he trusted Barnes, and figured telling a Priest was as confidential as telling a Doctor.

In the end, Stark had decided not to replace his own Arc Reactor. He had a second procedure to close over the big hole in his chest, but the housing had prevented any bleeding or organ disruption, so he was up and around while the skin healed.

Pepper was sleeping a lot, but was coherent again.

"Is there any chance I can keep Extremis?" Pepper asked. "You're a smart guy."

"Pepper." Tony breathed, not believing it was coming from her.

"Okay, I don't mean that." Pepper sighed. "Mostly."

"What was it like?" Tony couldn't help but ask.

"I've never felt anything like it. It was electric. Like I could take on the whole galaxy." Pepper admitted. "As focused as I was on tearing Killian into little pieces, part of me wanted to run up walls, leap tall buildings... I could have run forever. I could have outrun Iron Man." She pushed her hair back and laughed, despite herself. "I bet I could have flown if I put any effort into it."

Tony smiled. "You miss it."

"I do. Even knowing where it came from, part of me would have given anything to be the one in four." Pepper admitted. "Is that very terrible?"
"No. I don't think so." Tony admitted.

Tony threaded his fingers tightly through hers, and they sat together a while like that.

Pepper pulled his hands to her chestpiece. "Feels strange." She hummed. "I think it's moving, but I can't tell for sure."

"That's the electromagnet." Tony nodded. "You get used to it."

She gave him a long slow look, up and down. "Weird, not seeing your 'heartlight'." She gave him a sad little smile. "You gave it up for me?"

"I've got two suits left... and until we had this conversation, I was seriously considering putting them both in mothballs, for good."

"I think I understand now." Pepper pulled him in for a kiss. "You had to know I wasn't wild about... well-"

"The Other Woman?" Tony said it with her. "I had a hunch."

"I think I know why you don't want to give it up." Pepper admitted. "And... after having tasted it myself, I'm not sure I could either."

Father Barnes came home a few days before the New Year.

The small community outside Chattanooga had a lot of clean up to do of its own. The entire police force had been ripped limb from limb by Brandt. Her rampage had taken out another half dozen souls in a town still reeling from the last time they had lost so many.

Barnes couldn't believe it when he returned to the town and found an enormous team of strangers, hard at work. The small, isolated town was buzzing with activity.

Barnes went to the Tavern; still the main social hub of the area, and found Maggie speeding around the tables, with a pot of regular coffee in one hand, and a pot of decaf in the other. She had a big smile on her face when she saw him come in. "Welcome to the party!"

Barnes shrugged off his coat and kept pace with her. "Maggie, what in the world is going on?"

"A Miracle, Padre. A genuine Christmas Miracle." Maggie was beaming. "It started two days ago. Dozens of trucks came rolling in; hundreds of workers. They had the town fixed up in a day, and then they went to work on the Lumber Mill. None of us can figure out where they came from, but they're all coming here for lunch; and they say they're not stopping until they've finished making the Yard better than new! Word is the Yard already has a buyer waiting for lumber, and the employees are all being rehired!"

Barnes gave a secret smile. "How about that?" He deflected. "By the way, Maggie? That guy who was in here last week?"

"The guy wearing my Mister's overalls?" Maggie nodded. "I remember."

Barnes put a few notes on the counter. "He wanted to pay you back for that little act of generosity."

Maggie scooped up the cash and dumped it all in the tip jar, which was already full. "Huh. That was nice of him."
Barnes had a secret little smile on his face. "Mm."

Rhodes came to visit them at the tower. "How is she?"

"Walking again." Tony reported. "Not far, and not fast, but she's doing great." He smiled a little. "She says she wants to be dancing by New Years."

Rhodes held up a folder in one hand, and a bottle of scotch in the other. "News from the front. You got glasses?"

"Um." Tony hesitated, eyes fixed on the bottle. "Not for me. Help yourself, but I'm gonna lay off the jet fuel for a while."

Rhodes blinked, not displeased to hear it, and he put the bottle away. "Fair enough. Have you heard from Fury?"

"No, and it's starting to worry me a bit." Tony admitted as they sat down, looking over the city. "What's the latest?"

"The President has decided to tell the world about the fake Mandarin."

"Seriously?"

Rhodes shrugged. "You can't give the Vice President a secret trial, and sooner or later, someone's gonna want to see The Mandarin taken apart. We can pin the blame on Killian, but nobody's heard of him; all they know is what they keep seeing on television."

"Right." Tony sighed. "There's one thing that I still don't get."

Rhodes looked over. "What's that?"

"Well, Maya needed me to finish Extremis, so that the majority of her clients didn't... you know, explode. And Extremis was sort of Killian's whole power base for his plans, right?"

"Right." Rhodes nodded.

"So, he'd want me to make it work too, right?" Tony said logically.

"Probably."

"So, why the hell did he send attack helicopters to my house, while both I and Maya were there? It's sheer dumb luck that we all got out alive. Why would he attack the house if he cared about Maya and I surviving?"

"I don't know. From what I saw, Maya wasn't that thrilled with Killian. Maybe she was going off-book when she came to you. I mean, Killian was after Pepper, more than you. Did he even know who was in the house when the helicopters came?" Rhodes shrugged. "If Killian were alive, we could ask him."

Tony nodded, but still seemed troubled by it. "Hm." He shook it off when he noticed movement. "Pepper?"

Shuffling into the room on a walking frame, with a light sheen of sweat on her face, Pepper Potts gave them both a big smile. "Hey. Look what I can do!"
Rhodes was smiling. "Looking good, Speed Racer."

Pepper was recovering faster every day. Her vitals were better than human. She was still on bed rest, and covered in bandages, but she was eating a bit, and free of the machines.

She sat up in bed, tapping swiftly on two different tablets, following four different news feeds. "This is fun." She admitted to Tony, not even slowing down. "My head feels so clear."

Tony nodded. "Yup. Your brain is getting a little more blood flow, your lungs are filling up faster and putting more oxygen into your blood..."

Pepper tapped her fingernails absently on her Arc Reactor. "You think I'm up to a field trip?"

Tony smirked. "The Doctors say you need to use the walker for long walks. You'd be surprised how much the magnet throws off your balance."

Pepper chewed her lip. "What about a wheelchair?"

Tony was surprised. "Where do you plan to go?"

"I can't believe we got stuck with babysitting duty for this guy."

"The President wants him on air to say that he was an actor hired to do a job."

"Fine, but... I mean, it's not like he needs a full bodyguard detail."

"Have you heard half the stories? The Vice President just got arrested over this guy."

"Hey, listen." The prisoner called from his cell. "If you want me to go on TV and make it clear what happened, it might be an idea to have me in the proper costume. I've been an actor thirty years, played everything from a Supervillain to Gandhi. I can tell you, having a different outfit on would be enough to make people think I'm a fake Mandarin. I mean, a fake fake Mandarin."

The guards looked to each other and shrugged; heading to the case that held his Mandarin clothing. Including the Ten Rings.

**HERE LIES HAPPY HOGAN**

Tony stood behind Pepper's Wheelchair. She bent forward awkwardly to lay down flowers at the headstone. "I'm sorry we couldn't get here sooner." She whispered. "And I'm sorry we missed the funeral."

Tony could see her peeking back at him, expecting him to go into convulsions. Tony pressed a quick kiss against the side of her head. The flashbacks weren't bothering him any more.

"I..." Tony faltered as he spoke. "Happy, I don't want to be morbid, but just so you know, I made a promise that I wouldn't come out to see you until I took down the Bad Guy. But I just couldn't do it." He tapped the wheelchair. "She did. Meet the one that avenged you."

Pepper blinked. "Ohh. Yeah, I guess I did, didn't I?"

Tony smiled. "He would have loved to see that."
Pepper smiled a little, eyes red. "Is it bad that I haven't... Grieved?"

"We were both a little busy. I never got the chance either. But we're here now." Tony forgave, and put an arm around her. "I'm really gonna miss him."

"Me too." Tony admitted.

Edwards Air Force Base was burning. The survivors tried to flee and panicked as monsters conjured themselves out of thin air and tore them apart. Fire sprang up without source. Ice formed, thick enough to crush helicopters and warplanes on the runway... Soldiers tried to run on foot and found themselves at war with the ground beneath their feet. Those that tied to fight back went mad, attacking each other in delirium, or being swallowed by pure unnatural darkness.

Regal, immortal, unstoppable; the warlord lifted one hand and the only survivor was yanked to his feet by some unseen force.

"It is... a tragic twist of fate." Boomed that cultured, unflappable voice. "To have the world catch up at last; at this pivotal last moment. It turned my thousand year plan into a ten year strategy. There are powers in the multiverse that your pitiful world of science could never explain. Perhaps the gods of the Norsemen could... But your... 'Heroes', if there is such a thing, failed to learn the lessons of Sly Loki. But I learned them, centuries before you knew they existed."

The last guard standing was gasping for air, clawing at his throat to free bonds that weren't there.

"It was a relatively simple matter, to turn suspicion on another. It made Stark go running into what should have been his death." The Mandarin commented. "Playing the fool to avoid detection is an old tactic. One that fooled better minds than Stark. It worked better than I could have hoped; since Aldrich died without ever mentioning my name."

The Oriental Master looked out over the burning wreckage of the base. Mandarin slipped something from a hidden pocket in his robes, as though conjuring it from thin air.

It was an Extremis vial.

The guard saw it, and his eyes bulged, still held in the invisible hand that now lifted him gently off the ground.

"For the first time, the Machines of the world have proven a match for more Ancient and elegant powers." The Mandarin told him, letting the power of his voice roll over the helpless man. "But cunning and guile have never been in short supply. And Stark will apparently require a more subtle touch."

Mandarin lifted the vial to his prisoner' lips, and forced him to take it in.

"But the great tragedy of the matter... is that the one witness to the Truth of The Mandarin will die in an Extremis blast. The last ditch effort of those who still have the formula, to cover their tracks... by killing the only surviving inside man, Trevor Slattery."

The guard gurgled pathetically against the phenomenal heat already growing in his body, and the Mandarin cast him aside, moving away from the scene, in no particular hurry.

The fire erupted, and consumed everything... And nobody lived to witness a single survivor walk straight out of the flames, untouched by any of it, with a satisfied smirk on his face.
"Stark..." The Mandarin drawled powerfully, though nobody would hear it. "You'll never see me coming."

The blast at Edwards Air Force Base was news for a while, but Maya was willing to cooperate enough that she confirmed the numbers. There had been a very small number of successful Extremis warriors, and Tony confirmed they were all dead. An Extremis blast meant that an unsuccessful case had finally run too hot. The official ruling was that an Extremis Warrior that hadn't quite made it was trying to break out Trevor Slattery before he could talk, and had overheated when in combat with Air Force personnel.

Maya wasn't quite sure if they were going to tell the world that The Mandarin was dead, or if they were going to pin the whole thing on Killian, and she didn't much care. She had met The Master, but most of her interactions with him were second-hand through Killian, so she couldn't offer much intel.

Maya Hansen was locked in a cell with stone walls. The room was narrow enough that she could put a pen in each hand and write on opposite walls at the same time, which she frequently did.

She had not been granted visitors, or a laboratory, or facilities of any kind, save for a stone bench that was integrated into the wall, a pillow, and two felt tip pens; useless as weapons.

Maya was under strict supervision. When she behaved herself, she was given paper too. Most days, she had only her plastic chamberpot for company.

She didn't care. She had been obsessed with the formula long enough to have it committed to memory. When her paper was taken away, she tore her jumpsuit into strips and wrote on that. And when that ran out she wrote on the walls. The ceiling was low enough that she could write over that too.

Within two days, she hadn't eaten or slept, but she'd recreated the formula as best she could. Her cell was covered, floor to ceiling, in equations.

"I'll make it work." She whispered to herself, over and over. "I can fix it. I can fix everyone. I'll make it work."

"You know what the worst part is?" Pepper said quietly. "Part of me wishes she succeeded."

"Me too." Tony admitted. "The human race becomes immortal? I could see that as a good thing."

She was walking normally at last, but still using Tony's arm for balance from time to time, as they made their way around their Penthouse.

"I half expected to see you hard at work on the formula yourself." Pepper observed.

"I don't know." Tony sighed. "I'm getting less and less impressed with the future these days."

"That doesn't sound like you."

"Maya and I had a teacher, back at MIT. His name was Sal. Great guy. He was raising people up to create a new age. And every one of his students, myself included, took their dreams of a new utopia, and got into weapons tech. He got sick of the future and went off the grid."

Pepper gave a jaded smirk. "Maya told me this story about VonBraun wanting to make rockets to
outer space. We went to the moon. She considers it a great victory for science; so the London Blitz was justified."

"A year ago, I might have seen the logic. I had to, since my dad worked the Manhattan Project. But trade war stories with Captain America some time. He was there on the receiving end when modern rocketry was invented." Tony shot back. "Pepper, I don't know if I'd be doing more good than harm if I just ended the Arc Reactor Age completely. If The Age of the Iron Men ended..."

"Tony, you do a vital job. And what about The Avengers?" Pepper reasoned. "I'm thrilled to bits that you're toning back some of your... mania. But the fact is, a world without Iron Man isn't so rosy a picture just because it got away from you." She glanced over. "And you still think there's worse on the way. I know, because you talk about it in your sleep. We need Iron Man."

Tony considered that for a moment. "Hm." He looked around the Penthouse. "My workshop is under the waves too. Only two suits left, plus War Machine."

"Iron Patriot." Pepper corrected him absently.

Tony just looked at her.

"War Machine." Pepper conceded. "It is a cooler name." She eased down into a chair, and curled up next to him. "What would my superhero name be?"

Tony laughed.

"I'm serious. For a few minutes there, I was a pretty good superwoman."

"You still are." Tony said honestly.

The day before New Years Eve, Tony rebuilt his workshop. There were still only two Iron Man suits left, and he found he was in less of a hurry to build more.

He checked to make sure Pepper wasn't watching... and brought up a new screen. Written on the screen was the only remaining copy of the Extremis Formula.

What Maya Hansen and Aldrich Killian had unleashed was his darkest nightmare vision of the future. Even if Extremis worked, he didn't believe for a second that it would be freely available to all mankind. Someone would take it and use it for their own agenda.

*Every advancement humanity has ever made, was paid for with blood.* Tony thought to himself. *Including Iron Man.*

It was all too easy to see the disasters that Extremis could bring... but the futurist in him could see the benefits too.

*If nobody ever had to die anywhere, would we suddenly value our lives more?*

Tony was one of the smartest men on the planet, and he couldn't begin to guess.

Even so, he started seeing the potential. Extremis was programmable. If it could make Pepper spit fireballs, it could bind Iron Man together tightly. He'd been outclassed at the shipyards, not by the strength, but by the speed. Iron Man had to respond to Tony's movement. Repulsors took half a second to charge. Missiles had to paint targets with Jarvis' software...

Extremis was the speed of thought.
Extremis could make him Iron Man inside and out. It could make him the first wi-fi capable human. It could make him heal any injury, grow an organic Arc Reactor all through his body, plug him into satellite feeds...

He desperately wanted to hit the delete key. To make the clean break...

But the world needed an Iron Man.

Tony opened a new file. "Jarvis, you see the new file?"

"I do, sir."

"Encrypt this one tighter than you ever have before." He directed. "And name the file 'Iron Man: Extremis Armor'."

New Years was always a big party in Times Square. That year, even more so. Pepper wasn't quite up to making the trip or going to a party.

But she wore the lavender dress, and he wore a tux, and standing on the heliport of Stark Tower gave them a fantastic view of the city, and the fireworks above.

They danced softly as the sky exploded into beautiful lights.

Pepper opened the box. It was a jeweled necklace, with a nice big ruby carved into the shape of a heart, lined with gold.

And in the lid of the box, written in flowing gold-leaf script, was a message: *'Proof that Pepper Potts has Tony Stark's Heart.'*

Pepper smiled and leaned back into him as she pulled her hair up. He slid the necklace around her neck and pressed a kiss below her ear. It was a perfect moment. She turned to face him and slid her arms up around his neck. "Let's go inside." She murmured. *We're both healed enough.*

The disgraced Vice President had been summoned from his cell to meet his wife. She had been tempted to leave him, until he told her why he did it. To give their daughter her legs back, she might have been tempted herself.

But when he came into the meeting room, and saw his wife and daughter sitting at the table, they both looked... so happy.

"Hi." His wife said.

"What happened?"

"We were able to go home today." His wife said with a smile. "The FBI, and the Secret Service and the police all turned it inside out, but we were allowed to go home at last."

"The Press?"

"Camped out on our front lawn." She confirmed. "But Angie had a surprise in her room."

Angie was bouncing up and down in her seat. "Santa came!"

He smiled, a little sadly, wishing he could have been there to open her presents with her. "What did
Santa give you, sweetie?"

Angie looked eagerly at her mother. "Mommy?"

Her mother gestured grandly. "Go ahead. Show him."

And Angie stood up.

He felt his jaw drop open at the hinges as his daughter came around the table to give him an eager hug. Her legs were prosthetic, but like nothing he'd ever seen. Angie wasn't even limping. She was moving so smoothly. Her legs were sleek chrome, moving as easily as flesh and blood limbs, maybe more so.

When his daughter broke the hug, he noticed her new headband, with blue LED lights glowing faintly on her forehead.

He looked at his wife. "Stark?"

She was nodding. "The note said that he wanted to rub your nose in something. I swear, she just put the headband on, and they started moving." She laughed. "She got out of the car and ran alongside. She was almost faster than I was in third gear."

"Mister Stark said that when I get bigger he'll have better ones waiting." Angie said innocently. "And that when I turn eighteen, he'll make them a lot warmer."

"Warmer?"

His wife winced a little. "Actually, the word he used was 'hotter'."

Angie nodded guilelessly. "That was it. He also said that I can call him for free main-tense."

"Maintenance?"

"That's it." Angie looked down at her new limbs. "Do you think I'll be able to fly like him?"

"Maybe."

"Oh, watch this!" Angie reached up and pushed one of the lights on her headband. Soft classical music began to play from somewhere, and Angie's new legs started to move automatically in response.

Rodriguez felt tears gathering in his eyes. His wheelchair bound daughter was on her feet, ballet dancing.

Pepper woke up the next morning, and realized she was alone. She looked around, and got used to the silence. Jarvis had been integrated into the household servers, but not the rest of the Penthouse. No intercom, no smar...
Pepper realized suddenly that Tony hadn't had a drink the night before. In fact the wetbar had been cleaned out.

Pepper took her plate out of the warming oven, and found a note enclosed.

*I wish I could be there, but I have to make a quick stop in LA. I left something for you in the Workshop.*

Pepper went down a level. The level below the Penthouse had originally been part of the Stark Tower Offices.

The Workshop was half formed. One workstation, with only one computer. Three screens, each running something different, and several half-arranged industrial machines. It was now Tony's new Iron Man Production Line...

Except he hadn't produced an Iron Man.

Pepper's jaw dropped. It looked like Iron Man, done in red and silver instead of red and gold. It's proportions were more shapely; and she recognized the curves as her own instantly.

Tony had designed her a suit. With only two suits left from almost fifty, Tony had given her a suit of her own first.

There was another post-it note on the smooth metal skin, and Pepper read it quickly.

*I named her 'Rescue'. For the woman who's always been there to Rescue me.*

Pepper circled the armor for a few minutes, feeling giddy. The suit opened for her, panels sliding aside to reveal the space within, designed for her.

*Don't do it, Pepper. She told herself. You're still recovering. It was this side of a week ago you were clinically dead. An Iron Man Armor isn't the easiest thing in the world to use, and you've never been on the inside of a suit before. It'll be here tomorrow. Be smart. That's what you do...*

Pepper grinned. *But on the other hand...*

Pepper stepped into the suit eagerly, and found that it fit her perfectly. It was made for her, inside and out.

"Hello, you gorgeous thing." Pepper drawled as the HUD lit up. It wasn't quite Extremis-level awesome, but it was damned close.

"Welcome aboard, Miss Potts." Jarvis said smoothly. "Shall we begin with some preflight checklists and tutorials?"

"Oh, hell yeah!"

Tony had returned to the LA House. His private army of contractors had cleared off the foundations and categorized the wreckage.

Armed with the Interface, Tony had directed his two remaining armors to search the ocean. He had pulled the hardened computer drives, all of which were waterproof. He collected Dummy and Butterfingers. They were trashed, but he was good at fixing things.
But eventually, the found what he was looking for.

The case was a transparent molecular alloy, harder than diamond, and pretty much everything proof. After Rhodes had stolen it, Tony got it back and upgraded the War Machine. He then sealed it in a seamless diamond, making sure nobody else could ever get to it again. Not even him.

The first Arc Reactor.

He had never been sentimental, but in a lot of ways, it was the first thing that Pepper had ever given him. She'd given him things before that day. But that was the first thing since Afghanistan. The first time she held his heart. Iron Man's Heart.

Tony smiled as he thought of it that way. With the Avengers, he'd learned that all heroes went through a crucible, one way or another. Captain America had his training, and the formula. Banner had the accident. Thor had his Exile. God only knew what Barton and Romanov had gone through to come out the other side as they were.

Tony Stark had thought himself separate from them, because of all the Avengers, he was the one that went from ordinary human to superhero with a change of clothes.

But he was wrong. Mandarin had taken his house, his friends, his armors, and he had come out the other side. It was like Afghanistan in reverse. The first crucible meant he had to be superhuman. The second crucible needed everything he had that a suit couldn't give him.

He'd even given away the Reactor in his chest.

When the realization hit him, he burst out laughing. His life had come full circle at last.

He hitched what salvaged bits he'd collected to the back of his car. The first Ferrari with a trailer. He left the cliff-side behind him, washed clean of the wreckage.

He looked at the Reactor. Not so very long ago, this device, made from a box of scraps, had made him Iron Man. Now he didn't need it any more. He was just fine as Tony Stark.

*And Tony Stark is Iron Man.* He thought smugly to himself as he got in his car and drove away.

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