

Table of Contents

Iron Man #1 by Russ Anderson	2
Iron Man #2 by Russ Anderson	8
Iron Man #3 by Russ Anderson	14
Iron Man #4 by Russ Anderson	21
Iron Man #5 by Russ Anderson	32
Iron Man #6 by Russ Anderson	42
Iron Man Annual 2000 by Russ Anderson	52

Inventor, businessman, ladies' man, super hero. Gravely injured by an act of industrial sabotage, billionaire genius Tony Stark saved his own life by designing a life-sustaining shell--the hi-tech armor that transformed him into Iron Man! Today, the world thinks Iron Man is an employee--Stark's personal bodyguard--and in this dual role, he faces corporate intrigue and super-powered menaces. He's a modern-day knight in armor, fighting injustice wherever it rears its head. With the company he built from the ground up in other hands, Stark has recently begun working on Stark Solutions, a high-priced consulting firm that funnels its profits into charity, construction, and other projects that benefit the world.



#1

“MORNING CALM – PART ONE”

Written by Russ Anderson

Land of the Morning Calm, my foot, Iron Man thought. Nearly a hundred feet below him, motorists screamed in terror as the suspension bridge they were trapped on swayed violently. Perched atop a stanchion at the bridge's center, Iron Man had a snapped support cable twisted in both of his scarlet gauntlets. Inside the red-and-gold Iron Man armor, an automated puff of cool air dried the bead of sweat threatening to roll into Tony Stark's eye. A laser beam inside the helmet fired a system status report onto his retina, and the news contained therein wasn't good. At the moment, he was the only thing holding this bridge spanning South Korea's Han River together, and the cars down there didn't seem to understand that he couldn't do it forever. Or maybe they were frozen in fear. In any case, they weren't moving fast enough. He estimated he could hold it together for another three and a half minutes before his servos called it quits, took their toys, and went home.

He blinked four times in rapid succession and the laser beam projected a list of options. The major systems in the armor were controlled cybernetically--he thought a command and the armor did it--but he had found it beneficial over the years to save CPU space by shunting the lesser used systems to the manual and voice command databases. In any event, he'd been wearing the armor for so long, knew the commands so well, that having to blink his way through a menu didn't slow him down at all.

Iron Man keyed the volume on his voice transmitters, and when he spoke, his digitally altered voice boomed up and down the length of the bridge: "Please move your vehicles off the bridge! Please move your vehicles off the bridge! I cannot hold it for long! Please move your vehicles!"

The words were barely out of his mouth before he realized his mistake. If he'd had a hand free he would have smacked himself in the forehead. He was in South Korea, and no matter that English was taught in the schools here, there were going to be plenty of people who couldn't understand him. He wracked his brains for any Korean he may have picked up over his years of industrial globe-trotting, and came up with one word that would probably do the trick.

"Kahrah!" he shouted. Go!

The curious and the stunned took notice of that. Slowly-painfully slow in Iron Man's estimation-they started to move. Most of them abandoned their vehicles, since traffic was backed up solid all up and down the length of the bridge. Iron Man watched them go, studying the new fault line that ran across the bridge's roadway and trying to figure out exactly what was going to happen to the structure when he let go. Tony Stark was one of the most brilliant men alive and engineering was his field. It didn't take him long to imagine a scenario. He saw everything: the way the roadway would cant downriver just before splitting in two like the pieces of a child's Hot Wheels track. Fully a quarter of this bridge was going into the river then, and Iron Man, for all his power and technology, could do nothing about it. He could only delay the inevitable.

Tony strained. The armor did what he did, so he had to pull with all of his might to get it to do the same. Tony was in good physical condition-twelve years running on Cosmopolitan's Top Ten Most Eligible Bachelors list had made that clear-but he wasn't sure he could sustain the effort for even the two minutes his servos had left.

He looked down. The sections of roadway he'd estimated were going into the drink were, remarkably, almost clear of civilians. There were still a lot of empty cars on the roadway, but frankly he didn't care much about that at the moment.

The *whup-whup-whup* of helicopter blades drew his attention to the sky. A fire fighter chopper hovered overhead. He'd been so absorbed in the effort of holding the bridge together that he hadn't even heard it approach. A firefighter was hanging out the side of the chopper, shouting something through a megaphone at him.

"Back off!" Iron Man shouted. "I can't guarantee your safety! Kahr-"

The sound of a whip cracking filtered through his aural receptors, and the cable in his hands-which had snapped at the bottom where it held the bridge together-rocketed up at the speed of sound. As Iron Man, Tony could move faster than that, but his reaction speed was still no more than that of a strong man in his early thirties. The snapped end of the cable struck him in the chestplate with the force of a crashing airplane, knocking him straight up into the air.

The world flipped for Tony Stark. The readout on his retina informed him that the impact had knocked the wind out of him, as if he couldn't have figured it out. The helicopter buzzed by on his left as he soared past it, and he was coherent enough to be grateful he hadn't knocked it out of the air in his uncontrolled ascent.

The blow had caught him off-guard, but Tony Stark was master of the machine he wore, and it took him only a second to roll into an upright position. He fired the jets in his boots and, in one graceful arc, swooped down toward the bridge. People were screaming again. Terror sounded the same in any language.

He had been right about the way the bridge would take itself apart. By the time he got under it, it had begun its tilt downriver, and the fault down its middle had started to grow. He angled under

the roadway and positioned himself directly under the most extreme edge of the split. Placing a hand on either side of the crack, he routed all power to his boot jets and fired them straight upward. Every system he had complained at this rude treatment. The Iron Man armor was the most sophisticated machine on the planet, and its wearer became one of the most powerful beings in a world that boasted superheroes and demigods, but its jets were being asked to provide thousands of tons of lift, and as Tony watched, system upon system blinked out under the demands he was putting on them.

Surely the people had to be evacuated by now.

The firefighter chopper appeared. Maybe they couldn't communicate orally, but the Korean man hanging out of the aircraft's side knew the universal sign for "just a minute more". He stuck one finger out, keeping his eyes on the bridge above Iron Man's head.

"Come on, damn it," Tony said. Now sweat was getting in his eyes-he had routed the power for the air conditioner to his jets.

Above him, the bridge groaned. He thought he could hear his armor doing the same.

A final light flashed out in his helmet, and suddenly Tony Stark was plummeting with his armor several hundred feet to the river below. He heard the bridge crack asunder above him, but barely registered it as he blinked and thought his way through a series of commands to spread the little remaining power throughout his systems again. His jets flared to life fifty feet above the water, and he just managed to arrow out from under the chunk of roadway that was following him down. The tidal wave generated by its impact with the water was sufficient to knock him for a loop again, but he got enough of a glimpse before it hit to feel confident no one had been left on the collapsed roadway.

Then he heard the scream.

He looked up at the severed edge of the bridge and saw a single car teetering at the brink of the chasm. There were people still inside, people who, for some insane reason, had not escaped. In the moment it took him to digest this, the car toppled and plunged over the side.

Tony had no idea whether his systems could handle any additional strain-he was getting condition reds across the board just keeping his own weight aloft-but he shot off at an intercept trajectory. His gyros were off, and he had to keep compensating for the way his armor was tilting in its flight path. In the window of the plummeting car, he could see the freeze-frame terror on the occupants' faces.

He wasn't sure he was going to make it.

The gyros knocked him off course again and he corrected with a growl of frustration. The car was still falling, unsurprisingly. If he made it at all, he was only going to get one pass.

He put nearly every erg of power the armor had left into one final blast of afterburner.

And reached out...

"Tony!"

Tony Stark turned, grinning at the young man running up to join him. Johnny Ko was two or three years younger than Tony, and nearly half a head shorter. As he reached Tony's side at the top of the viewing stand, he took a moment to catch his breath, then returned Tony's luminous grin watt for watt.

"This is it."

"Sure is. You nervous?"

Johnny Ko scoffed, "Not at all. I have the utmost faith in our designs."

Tony stroked his goatee thoughtfully and peered across the mile or so of land separating the viewing stand from the launch pad. From here he could easily make out the Ju Che rocket, thrusting proudly into the sky. The tests they had run should have been more than sufficient to detect any bugs, but Johnny's nervousness must have been rubbing off on him: he was fidgety, almost expecting something to go wrong with the launch.

That wouldn't be so bad for Tony--as president of the Stark Solutions consulting firm, he was fairly certain his skill and expertise would always be in demand--but it might be crippling for South Korea, which had poured billions into the development of the Ju Che Satellite perched atop the rocket. Aboard the satellite was stowed some of the most sophisticated telescopic and sensory equipment ever put into orbit, most of it designed by the young Korean man at Tony's side, and the project had paid off in lots of media exposure for the economically ailing country. Experts had drawn direct relationships between the success of the Ju Che launch and the health and prosperity of South Korea's economy. It was a heavy burden to have to carry, and Tony knew that Johnny felt the pressure even more than he did.

"By the way," Johnny muttered at his side, "I heard your bodyguard had an exciting morning."

"You could say that," Tony replied. As far as the world was concerned, Iron Man was Tony Stark's bodyguard and nothing more. Few people knew the truth--that Tony was actually the one wearing the armor--and he wasn't about to disabuse Johnny of his belief.

"No telling how many people would have died if he hadn't been there," Johnny went on. "From what I hear, he managed to save everybody, even a car full of people that toppled over the edge when the bridge collapsed."

"From what he told me, that one was close," Tony elaborated. In the distance, a loudspeaker began to blast the countdown across the field. Tony looked away from the rocket and glanced

around the platform. There were maybe two dozen people up here with them. The press and other interested parties had been kept off of the field until the launch was over.

"Is your father here?" Tony asked.

"No, but he sends his regards and his prayers of success."

Tony grunted. Johnny's father, Ko Yung Kil, had provided the startup money for the Ju Che project through his company, Morning Calm Inc., and had managed to coerce the strapped South Korean government into coughing up nearly a billion of its own money. Tony had been in-country for two weeks, modifying the rocket design and building radiation shielding for the delicate telescopic equipment aboard the satellite, and he had yet to meet the man.

There was a bustle behind them, and Tony and Johnny turned to see a Korean woman trying to mount the platform and being restricted by the guards posted at the top of the stairs, who she was dressing down violently in her own language.

"Who is that?" Tony asked. Whoever she was, she was beautiful--a shapely figure in an emerald gown, one side of her face covered by her velvety black hair. She glanced in Tony's direction as he watched her, looked him up and down, then turned dismissively back toward the guard blocking her path.

"My sister," Johnny laughed. "Pardon me a moment." He shouted something in Korean at the guards keeping the woman at bay. They looked around at him, then nodded and stood aside to let her pass. The woman finished mounting the stairs and stormed across the platform. When she reached Johnny, she threw her arms around him and kissed him on the cheek.

"Tony, you haven't met my sister, Meiko, have you? She works for my father at Morning Calm's corporate headquarters. She's a shameless vixen who never has time to call her baby brother."

"Well, maybe if you came out of the lab once in a while and let the sun shine on your face," Meiko said, not unkindly. She extended a hand to Tony, looking him up and down immodestly. "Mr. Stark, it's a pleasure."

"The pleasure's mine," Tony replied, taking her hand and kissing it. Over the years, he'd found the old lines and mannerisms were sometimes the best way to go.

"Well," Johnny said, severing the flowering romantic tension. "Here we go."

The countdown had reached its climax, and as Tony turned, a flare of orange fire ignited beneath the rocket. Slowly at first, then increasing in speed as it climbed, the Ju Che Rocket flew into the sky, arcing off to the west as it went. A short climb into the ionosphere, and the rocket would drop the satellite off in geostationary orbit. They had done it!

Cheers rocked the crowded platform. Johnny was embracing him and Meiko was showering kisses on her brother. Across the field in the opposite direction from the launch pad, Tony could

see vehicles roaring toward them, probably full of reporters from two dozen different countries. Bring them on, he thought. Tony Stark was the media's darling, and right now, he felt ready to take on the world.

He spared one more glance for the disappearing rocket and its trail, then turned to face the approaching representatives of the fourth estate.

"The launch went as planned?"

"Yes, sir. The rocket performed beautifully. No unforeseen variations in its trajectory or flight speed."

"Excellent. The designs will serve us nicely then. Continue to monitor its flight until it detaches from the satellite module. Then I want a full analysis of its performance."

"Yes sir."

"And then... then we'll see if Tony Stark's technology can truly help us change the world."

Next Issue: *"Morning Calm," Part 2*

Inventor, businessman, ladies' man, super hero. Gravely injured by an act of industrial sabotage, billionaire genius Tony Stark saved his own life by designing a life-sustaining shell--the hi-tech armor that transformed him into Iron Man! Today, the world thinks Iron Man is an employee--Stark's personal bodyguard--and in this dual role, he faces corporate intrigue and super-powered menaces. He's a modern-day knight in armor, fighting injustice wherever it rears its head. With the company he built from the ground up in other hands, Stark has recently begun working on Stark Solutions, a high-priced consulting firm that funnels its profits into charity, construction, and other projects that benefit the world.



#2

“MORNING CALM – PART TWO”

Written by Russ Anderson

Encased in the distinctive red and gold armor of Iron Man, Tony Stark sliced a path through the sky over the Korean peninsula. Though the technology he wore made him one of the most physically powerful people on the planet, he found that it could do nothing to ease the turmoil in his heart.

It's starting again, he thought.

But that was paranoid talk. He didn't know anything for sure. Not yet, anyway.

He would find out, though. There wasn't a doubt in his mind.

Unbidden, memories of the last eight hours clawed their way up into his consciousness....

"Friends," the aged Korean man said from the stage, "We were given an opportunity to make our homeland a power in the global market once again, while furthering the goals of research science beyond our humble biosphere, and we seized it! At this time, the Ju Che Satellite is an unparalleled success, having separated from its rocket and activated its sensory systems. We owe this success to many people, not the least of which is our esteemed president for personally sponsoring the grants that made the process possible."

Two tables down from where Tony Stark sat with his friend Johnny Ko, the president of South Korea stood briefly to accept his applause.

"Second of all, we must thank Mr. Tony Stark, of Stark Solutions, for aiding us with the rocket design and radiation shielding."

Tony stood and accepted his own applause. Next to him, Johnny Ko and his sister Meiko sent up a couple of cheers as well. He smiled for the audience and resumed his seat.

"And last, but most importantly, my son, Ko Jon-Ni, who came to me eighteen months ago with the initial designs for the revolutionary sensory equipment sent up with the satellite; the equipment that will aid him in his efforts to plumb the secrets of the stars! Johnny."

Johnny Ko stood up, and the crowd went wild. Tony smiled at his friend's popularity. Johnny Ko was kind of a Korean amalgam of Prince William and Stephen Hawking, painfully brilliant and stunningly handsome. Several years younger than Tony himself, Johnny was the son of Ko Yung-Kil, the man on the stage and behind the podium, and heir apparent to the fortunes of Morning Calm, Inc.

Johnny mounted the stage and began his short speech. Tony had sat through a few of the oration's practice runs earlier that afternoon, so he tuned his young friend out and looked around the ballroom. There were actors, politicians, and heads of state present at this celebratory dinner. The Ju Che project had been a coup for the economically ailing South Korea. He was happy to have had a hand in it... even without the hefty fee he'd charged for his services.

"We're not boring you, are we Mr. Stark?"

Tony glanced at the woman sitting next to him and offered her a reassuring smile. "Not at all, Meiko. Just looking around."

Meiko Ko, Johnny's sister, *hmped* playfully. "I was hoping you would have all you needed to see right here."

"--hope you all will accept my undying thanks, and that you will stay for the festivities that follow. Thank you." Johnny stepped down from the podium to be embraced by his father. The elder Ko was shorter than his son, but radiated power and authority despite his advanced years. Tony rose and joined the throng giving the father/son duo a standing ovation.

"Come on," Meiko was saying, tugging at Tony's sleeve. "Let's go meet them at the foot of the stage."

"Just a moment," Tony replied, and leaned over to grab Johnny's coat from the back of his friend's chair. He folded the jacket over his arm, admiring the tailoring. Tony Stark knew the trappings of the rich very well, and he could appreciate a well-tailored suit when he saw one.

Tony's eyes froze on the sleeve of the jacket over his arm. The cufflinks of Johnny Ko's coat were a distinctive, eye-catching red. On closer inspection, one could make out a black design in the center that at first appeared to be a stylized silhouette of an octopus. But Tony Stark knew better.

That wasn't an octopus. It was a hydra.

"Mr. Stark," Meiko said at his side, "are you okay? My father is waiting."

"Yes, yes." Tony replied, dropping the sleeve back over his friend's coat and following the beautiful Korean woman through the crowd. "Mustn't keep father waiting."

Alarms went off inside his helmet, drawing his attention back to the present. He called up the cause of the alarm and found he'd been locked by unfriendly radar. With a sigh of frustration at his own absent-mindedness, he called up a GPS display and saw that he had wandered across the border into North Korea, the reclusive Communist state that had separated from its democratic southern counterpart at the end of World War II.

It didn't take the North Koreans long to attack once they had him in their crosshairs. A stream of anti-aircraft artillery flashed into the sky in his path, tracer rounds painting orange lines against the featureless night. Tony avoided them easily, then circled around and fired himself back the way he'd come. The gunfire followed him for a while, then tapered off as it became clear he was leaving. The North Koreans were extremely jealous of their borders, and he should have been more careful about wandering into their airspace.

He sighed. He would read about this in the paper in the morning. Hopefully his carelessness hadn't caused an international incident. He needed to take care of this matter, for his own sake and for the sake of those who depended on him both as Iron Man and as Tony Stark. He didn't want to think Johnny Ko was involved with an international terrorist group like Hydra-that had been their insignia on his cufflinks-but all of the evidence pointed to that as the only possibility, especially in light of what Meiko Ko had told Tony on the way home from the banquet earlier that evening.

"Is it something I said?"

Tony glanced around in surprise at his passenger. She was pressed back against the opposite seat of the Mercedes while outside her window, Tony could see the nightlife on the streets of Seoul whisking by.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"You've been very quiet most of the night, Mr. Stark," Meiko Ko observed. "I might be obliged to think you were shy if I didn't know of your reputation."

Tony chuckled and returned his attention to the street he was driving on. "Sorry. Sometimes I find it hard to leave work back at the lab."

"But your work here is done. You can rest now."

"True, my work here is done, but I have lots of other work waiting on my desk back in Seattle." He was quiet for a moment, then said, "Tell me a little about you and Johnny. What was it like growing up with him?"

"Johnny? Well, he's always been smart, and he's always been loved. We were very close as children after our mother died."

"Did he ever... run with a bad crowd?"

Tony kept his eyes on the road outside his windshield, but he could sense Meiko's brow furrowing. "Yes. Yes, in... high school he began neglecting his studies, staying out to all hours of the night. He was even kicked out of a private school for beating another boy up at one point, but father's money bought him back into the school and had the incident erased from his records. I... I was worried about him for some time, tried to make him see what he was doing with his life, wasting all that potential. He said I was father's parrot and that he never wanted to see me again. It was... a bad time. I'm glad it's over now."

Tony glanced across the seat at the woman beside him again. Since he had met her the day prior, she had come across as a lively, unabashed harridan, who always spoke her mind and had nothing but sexual innuendo for her new acquaintance, Mr. Tony Stark. Now she was just a loving sister recounting a painful bit of family history. For a moment, he was ashamed for having brought the subject up, then he thought about what would happen if (or, in this case, when) some of his technology fell into Hydra's hands, and his heart hardened again.

"Well, here we are." Tony pulled up beside Meiko's apartment building and parked on the street. He climbed out and hurried around to the passenger side to let her out.

"Thank you for the ride home," Meiko said. She gave him a long, meaningful look, then continued with, "Would you like to come up for a drink?"

For possibly the first time in his life, it was not hard for Tony Stark to turn down the advances of a beautiful woman. "I'm sorry, no. I have some business to take care of early tomorrow, then I'm on a plane tomorrow afternoon."

"I see..." the woman replied. She shuffled her feet and cleared her throat. It was obvious she wasn't used to being turned down. "Well, thank you again, Mr. Stark."

"Thank you... Ms. Ko."

Without another word, she turned and strode up the steps and into her building. Tony watched her go until the door had closed behind her, then he turned and got back into his car.

Now, hours later, Iron Man landed on the roof of Morning Calm, Inc., seventy stories above the streets of Seoul. With a thought, the Iron Man armor peeled back off of him and folded in on

itself impossibly until it formed a hovering module, two feet by three feet, resembling nothing so much as a giant's electric razor.

Still wearing the slightly rumpled pants and shirt of the tux he'd worn to the banquet that evening, Tony Stark left the module there and took the stairs down two floors, soon finding himself in the spacious office of Johnny Ko. Johnny was sitting at his desk when Tony walked in, and he looked up at the intrusion with surprise.

"Tony! What are you doing here? The night watchman didn't say you were on your way up."

"I remembered you said you were going to run by the office after the banquet to finish some paperwork up."

"And you thought you'd come share in my misery?" Johnny laughed. He got up and crossed to the small bar near the window looking out over the night-shadowed Seoul skyline. "Would you like a drink?"

"No. I won't be here long."

Johnny poured himself a drink and returned to his desk, peering thoughtfully at Tony over the top of his glass as he sipped from it. "Tony, is something wrong? Is it something to do with Meiko? I know you were taking her home...."

"How long have you been a terrorist, Johnny?"

Johnny Ko blinked and set his glass down. "Excuse me?"

"How long have you been an agent of Hydra? Since high school maybe? Was I brought on to this project just so they could have some of my inventions?"

"Tony," Johnny smiled uncertainly, "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I will not let that happen, Johnny. I've already been down that road, and a good man died in the Iron Man armor trying to prevent evil men from using my technology.* I'm giving you this chance to be truthful with me. Tell me everything or I swear by God I'll bring Iron Man and the rest of the Avengers down on you and this company until I get the truth. I'll give Nick Fury a call and let him know who to call to get intel on a far eastern Hydra nest. Tell me what you know Johnny. I'm not going to promise any kind of immunity, but it will be a lot easier on you this way."

(* Or so it seemed at the end of the classic "Armor Wars" storyline - Russ)

"I swear to you, Tony, I have no idea what you're talking about," Johnny insisted.

Tony glared at him a while longer, his rage palpable. Johnny sat down and raised a hand toward the chair in front of his desk. "Tony, if you'll just sit down and explain why you think this of me, I'm sure there's a logical explanation. Please."

"I'm not going to play that game, Johnny. I'm not going to play the diplomat. You've made your choice. Now I'm going to make a few phone calls." He turned back toward the door.

"And what should I do in the meantime?" Johnny asked.

"You can go to hell." Tony replied, and slammed the door behind him.

Johnny Ko sat alone at his desk, his appetite for the drink he'd just poured gone. He briefly considered chasing after his friend, but he had felt Tony's anger as a physical blow from halfway across the room. He was sure any further provocation on his part would result in their argument dissolving into a fistfight.

After a while he grabbed his glass and downed the contents in two gulps. He got up, poured himself another, and was returning to his seat with every intention of treating this new drink the same way he'd treated the last, when the phone rang.

He set the glass down and picked the receiver up, expecting it to be the police, or Colonel Nick Fury of SHIELD, or maybe even Iron Man's partner in the American Avengers, Captain America. Instead, the caller's voice was a familiar one.

"Johnny," it said without preamble, "I think it's time we talked."

Next Issue: *"Morning Calm" Part 3*

Inventor, businessman, ladies' man, super hero. Gravely injured by an act of industrial sabotage, billionaire genius Tony Stark saved his own life by designing a life-sustaining shell--the hi-tech armor that transformed him into Iron Man! Today, the world thinks Iron Man is an employee--Stark's personal bodyguard--and in this dual role, he faces corporate intrigue and super-powered menaces. He's a modern-day knight in armor, fighting injustice wherever it rears its head. With the company he built from the ground up in other hands, Stark has recently begun working on Stark Solutions, a high-priced consulting firm that funnels its profits into charity, construction, and other projects that benefit the world.



#3

“MORNING CALM – PART Three”

Written by Russ Anderson

The People's Republic of China is home to one and a quarter billion human beings. That's only on the surface, though. If one could look beneath the most densely populated nation on the planet, that number would have to be increased by ninety-eight. For ninety-eight is the number of operatives the international terrorist group Hydra has stationed in its bunker beneath the streets of Beijing.

A normal day in the bunker consists of training rituals -- loyalty tests, really, as agents prove just how much damage they're willing to do to themselves to serve Hydra -- followed by meals and uneventful monitoring of the city nearly half a mile above them. Reports are written and forwarded throughout the network of Hydra bases the world over, eventually falling into the lap of Hydra's mysterious new Supreme Leader. Whether these reports are ever read, not even the commandant of China Base is certain. It hardly matters to the agents stationed there, in any case. In the showers, and in the barracks late at night, you might hear the younger agents whispering about how good they have it; posted in a deep-cover base in a country with almost no Hydra-related activity. China Base is considered a milk run by these operatives, compared to what they might be asked to go through in America or the Middle East. And a milk run it is.

But nothing lasts forever.

The day the sky fell in seemed nothing special at first. Agents rose, proved their loyalty, ate, monitored, ate again, and were possibly getting ready to monitor again, when the cavern containing the main control center began to shudder. Hardened soldiers raised their eyes to the earth above them, wondering if an earthquake was about to bury them beneath the thousands of tons of rock over their heads.

But it was no earthquake.

The ceiling exploded, and a red-and-gold missile shot into the chamber. A squad of guards tried to raise their guns at the intruder and some actually managed to get off wild shots before a blast of energy slammed them all back against the wall. By the time the alarm was sounding

throughout the complex, the rocket-now slowing enough to be seen as a man in a futuristic suit of armor--had collapsed the tunnel leading from the control room into the rest of the bunker. Those few at their stations when the armored man entered were stuck with him now. One more swoop around the chamber, and he dropped down to the floor. The eyes behind the featureless gold faceplate swept briefly around the room and locked on one man.

"Hail Hydra!" the man--obviously the ranking officer present--cried as the Avenger known as Iron Man flew across the room at him. "Cut off one head and two will--"

"Enough of that," Iron Man said, slapping the gun the officer was going for out of his hand. It clattered across the floor to join the heap of unconscious men along the far wall. "I'm here to talk, and I'm afraid I don't have time for the standard fisticuffs."

"I will tell you nothing!" the zealot cried. He glanced around the Avenger's broad shoulders and saw three technicians cowering behind their stations. They would die terrible deaths for not fighting along with the rest of their brethren, they--

"I'm afraid that's not an option." Iron Man's gauntlet closed around the officer's throat and slammed him bodily up against the wall. "I want to know everything about Hydra's operations in South Korea. Now."

"Hail Hydra!" the officer sputtered, clawing at the hand at his throat. "Cut off one head and two will take its place! Hail Hydra!"

"You really believe that?" Iron Man used his free hand to pin the officer's own back against the wall, covering the palm. "Do you know what it feels like to have your flesh burned off? It doesn't feel like anything at first, your mind can't handle the pain. Then it feels cold, and then the cold turns to fire as your brain catches up with your dying nerve endings. Do you really want to test your regeneration abilities?"

"Hail Hydra! Cut off-AAAIIEEEEE!!! I know nothing! Nothing! No bunker has knowledge of the operations of another! Please, you're burning off my hand!"

The officer fainted from the "pain". Iron Man dropped him to the ground and considered the palm of his gauntlet. He'd pumped a jet of super-cooled air out of it across the Hydra officer's hand. The man's terrified imagination had done the rest.

Turning, he strode to the bank of computers, completely vacant of the technicians who had been manning them when he'd burst in. He could hear gunfire from the other side of the wall of rubble he'd dropped across the entrance to the chamber. The other agents posted here probably wouldn't be stupid enough to use heavy explosives to break through, considering their location. That gave him a little time.

Removing a jack from the side of his helmet, Iron Man popped it into a port in the center terminal. A few silent moments of hacking later, he found that the officer had been right: communication with Hydra high command was decidedly one-way, and there was no contact

whatsoever with other field sites. He might have been able to find a path back to the big guys, given ample time, but every moment he wasted here was another moment the nest in South Korea had to use the technology he was sure they'd stolen from him. Col. Nick Fury had tipped him off about this base in China, and he had volunteered to do SHIELD's* dirty work for the chance to be the first to talk to the commanding officer here, but it hadn't paid out. Time to cut and run.

(* Strategic Hazards Intervention Espionage and Logistics Directorate -- Jess)

As he was pulling back through Hydra's systems, he came across a recent order that caught his eye. He backed up and took a moment to read it. It was an evacuation order for Hydra operatives in Japan--all of them. Eyes narrowing, Tony Stark, the man inside the armor, downloaded the file into his on-board CPU and removed the jack.

"Fury," he said into his helmet's transmitter as he fired his boot jets and blasted off for the hole he'd left in the ceiling, "the snakes are all back in their pen. Come and round 'em up."

Johnny Ko stepped through the side of the mountain into another world. Though he trusted the man who had told him of this place implicitly, he hadn't quite believed until now that it would actually be here. His car had been left in a small, concealed lot at the mountain's foot, and a stern guard in a strange green uniform had nodded him through the entry. Now he found himself in a plain metal corridor, branching off in different directions from the entrance. Other men in the same ridiculous regalia as the guard milled past, all on their way somewhere, and none of them sparing a moment to even glance in the young Korean man's direction.

Abnormality seemed to be the theme of his day-or night rather, since dawn was still more than an hour off. His friend Tony Stark had burst into his office barely two hours ago, making ridiculous accusations of Johnny being in league with the international terrorist cartel, Hydra. Johnny might have thought Tony was drunk, except he'd watched the man down nothing stronger than ginger ale at the banquet they'd been attending that evening. Immediately after Tony had stormed out with threats of retribution, Johnny had received a call from the one man who could possibly convince him to drop everything and drive out to the middle of nowhere in the last hours of night.

"Father!" Johnny Ko said, turning at the unmistakable tap-tap of his father's cane. Ko Yung-Kil was nearly sixty years old, a proud Korean and a patriot. He walked with his head held high despite the childhood injury that had left him partially crippled in one leg. "Father, what is this place? Why did you call me out here at this hour?"

"Too many questions, my boy," the old man chuckled, patting him on the shoulder. "This... well, this isn't something I can tell you about. I have to show you. Come."

Johnny Ko had spent more than twenty years obeying his father unconditionally. He was not going to alter that habit now. Without another word, he followed the older man deeper into the mountain.

Tony Stark flew the Iron Man armor across the Yellow Sea at the highest speed he dared. In his helmet was a wonderful piece of unpatented technology he'd created with the help of Reed Richards of the Fantastic Four. It was called a subspace transmitter and it allowed instantaneous communication with just about any spot in the solar system that had a compatible receiver. Tony activated it.

"Pepper, what have you got for me?"

Half a world away, Pepper Potts, Tony's longtime friend and secretary, sidled up to her own transmitter in the headquarters of Stark Solutions. "Not much, Tony. Johnny Ko is pure as the driven snow, from what I can tell. The background check I ran on him didn't even say anything about trouble in school."

"But that would jive with what his sister told me. She said her father bought him out of the trouble and had his records erased."

"True, but... Tony, he got a C on a history test once, and that's about as ominous as his records get. He's active in his community, very outspoken on things like environmentalism and homelessness. As far as I can tell, he's never been anything but a straight arrow."

Tony considered that. He'd said some harsh things to Johnny Ko the night before, in his fear and anger. If he was somehow wrong... but no, he couldn't think about that right now. There were other things to worry about, and that order he'd downloaded from the Hydra nest's computer was at the top of the list.

"Alright Pep, drop the search on Johnny Ko. I need you to bring in some professional help. Maybe Hank Pym, or, if you can get him, Reed Richards. I have to compare some ideas with somebody who knows something about aeronautics."

"Why boss? What's going on?"

"I think Hydra intends to shoot one of my rockets at Japan."

"It's the Japanese, Johnny. Always the Japanese. We will always be in their collective shadow. Only they no longer have to conquer us, destroy our heritage and rape our women. All they must do is outperform us in the global market, and we will never be able to rise to their level. We will never be anything but 'third-world' in anyone's eyes."

"What do you suggest we do, father?" Johnny asked sarcastically, "Wipe them off the map?"

His father met his eyes as they walked, and held them until Johnny felt obliged to drop his own. A moment later, the steel corridor opened into what looked like some kind of control room. Huge video screens lined the walls, displaying aerial photographs and diagrams of the entire Eastern Hemisphere, several of these screens focusing in on the Korean peninsula and neighboring Japan. Green-uniformed technicians manned computer consoles around the room, and at Johnny's and his father's entrance, the lot of them turned, stuck a hand into the air palm-down, just as Johnny had seen Nazis do in the old wartime movies, and shouted out a salute that made his blood go cold.

"Hail Hydra! Cut off one limb and two will grow in its place! Hail Hydra!"

Johnny spun to look at his father, and saw that his nightmare was getting worse and worse. The old man stood facing the green throng before him, his hand up in a salute similar to their own. "Hail Hydra!" he agreed.

"Father," Johnny began, "What is this? What have you done?"

"I have purchased freedom for my people at the cost of my soul, my son. We are going to-how did you say it?-wipe Japan from the map."

"But how did you-why, father? My God, Tony accused me of being in bed with Hydra earlier this evening! Is this why?"

"Possibly," the older man agreed, returning his attention to the bustle of activity in the control center. "I've gone to great lengths to plant evidence of your involvement in this scheme--copies of project plans hidden in your apartment, phone calls placed to known international arms dealers, Hydra insignia on some of your clothes. You see, I know you, my boy, and I know you're far too good and kind and sympathetic toward those monsters across the sea to involve yourself in all of this unless you had some incentive."

Johnny stared at his father silently in numb horror.

"Help me with this, stand beside me, and I'll see to it you aren't implicated."

"You're insane," Johnny whispered. "Father, don't you see how wrong this is? The Japanese are people, not monsters! I'll stop you if I have to-"

Without looking at his son, the old man reached into his jacket, drew out a pistol, and shot him in the chest. The impact threw Johnny back against the wall. Still staring in uncomprehending horror at the man who'd raised him, he slid down the metal surface and thumped to the floor in a sitting position.

"My son," the old man was saying as he approached him, "I spoke of dreams at the banquet last night, but I'm afraid I've never exactly shared yours, as I claimed--all that nonsense about delving

the secrets of the stars and that. You see, my dream has always been to live to see the day when the accursed Japanese and all of their ways and tradition-even their memory-was wiped from the face of this planet like a disease. The designs you and Mr. Stark provided gave me the way, and the men in this room have, for their own reasons, given me the means."

Johnny barely heard what his father was saying through the pain and the disbelief that this could be happening. The bullet had passed through the right side of his chest, and he guessed it had punctured a lung on its way. Johnny Ko realized with sudden fear that, if he didn't get medical attention soon, he was going to die on this cold metal floor, drowned in his own blood.

"Father, help me...."

"Oh no, Johnny, not yet anyway, not until my story is done. I've been funding this Hydra base for nearly two years now with part of the government money you've pulled in on the Ju Che project. That's why it was so dreadfully over-budget. But you never cared to check that out, did you? You were too lost in your armchair physics and conceptual analyses. Well, give me your analysis of this. I intend to saturate the Japanese archipelago with radiation; radiation that will kill ninety-nine percent of the population and turn the remaining one- percent into such repulsive monsters that the very thought of Japan will be enough to give strong men nightmares for decades to come. I regret that you won't live to see that world now, my boy, but you've made your choice, haven't you?"

"The Japanese... why...?"

"Because I can never be free of them! My mother, your grandmother, was taken into sexual slavery by the Japanese during the second World War. She was often raped dozens of times in a day. I am the product of one of those rapes, Johnny, as are you and your sister, by extension. We are all the bastard offspring of some faceless Japanese soldier. I will never let them or their kind harm my people again. And if that means I have to give you up... well, son, you can see I've already made my choice."

"He's gone, father."

Ko Yung Kil turned from his barely conscious son and faced the new arrival. "Not yet, I'm afraid, but soon."

Meiko Ko sneered. The evening gown she'd been wearing when Tony Stark dropped her off at her apartment hours earlier that night had been replaced by a sleeveless green unitard and matching six-inch stiletto heels. "Don't wax regretful now, father. You're as heartless as the people you've vilified all your life."

Her father shook his head wearily. "Come, my daughter. Order the launch. Let's be done with this. I will have my dream, and you will have yours, and we will both be the poorer for it. Order the launch... Madame Hydra."

A smile split Meiko's lips and she strode forward, heedless of the old man or the boy dying on the floor. Making sure she had the attention of everyone in the room, she said in a voice just loud enough to be heard, "Begin the countdown."

It had taken them some time, but Iron Man felt certain, as he circled the kilometer or so of South Korean coastline below him, that they'd picked the right spot. It was a good spot for a launch across the Sea of Japan, and there were some strange emissions coming from the mountain below him.

"Anything, boss?"

"Hold on, Pepper, I'm-oh my god."

Iron Man came up short, as the side of the mountain he was monitoring seemed to fall away, leaving an enormous cavity in its face. Before he could digest this, the mount belched fire, and a dozen missiles were thrown into the sky.

Iron Man shot into a ballistic climb after them. One look was enough to tell him they weren't ordinary ICBM's. The unique tapering of the fuselage told the tale. Whatever their purpose, these rockets had been built from the designs he'd made on the Ju Che rocket. Desperately, he increased his speed, aiming every passive and active sensor he had at the flock of missiles. Were they nuclear? That was the obvious answer, but he needed to be sure before he tried to stop them. One thing was certain: judging by the shallow arc of their ascent and their general direction, they were definitely headed for the big island of Japan. And they would be there within minutes.

As he approached the trailing missile, the laser beam feeding data straight onto his retina flashed in warning. He could hardly credit what it told him, but experience had taught him to trust his own equipment, and a second scan confirmed the first.

"Tony!" Pepper cried. "What's going on out there?"

"Hydra just fired half a dozen rockets at Japan, Pepper."

"Nukes?"

"No."

"They're Gamma bombs."

Next Issue: *BOOM!*

Inventor, businessman, ladies' man, super hero. Gravely injured by an act of industrial sabotage, billionaire genius Tony Stark saved his own life by designing a life-sustaining shell--the hi-tech armor that transformed him into Iron Man! Today, the world thinks Iron Man is an employee--Stark's personal bodyguard--and in this dual role, he faces corporate intrigue and super-powered menaces. He's a modern-day knight in armor, fighting injustice wherever it rears its head. With the company he built from the ground up in other hands, Stark has recently begun working on Stark Solutions, a high-priced consulting firm that funnels its profits into charity, construction, and other projects that benefit the world.



#4

“MORNING CALM – PART FOUR (Conclusion)”

Written by Russ Anderson

Pepper Potts was not one to worry. As an employee and close friend of Tony Stark, she was well acquainted with the anxiety of being able to do nothing while a loved one was in mortal danger. Tony Stark, after all, moonlighted as the invincible Iron Man, a modern day knight in red and gold armor that always stayed two steps ahead of the state-of-the-art. As Iron Man, Tony had faced down death hundreds of times, and as an associate of his, Pepper had lived her share of danger as well. She didn't let it worry her anymore.

But Pepper Potts was worried now.

Somewhere over the Sea of Japan, Iron Man was racing a dozen ICBMs for the Japanese shoreline. The entire breadth of the Sea would be barely a handful of steps to an intercontinental ballistic missile. Iron Man had, understandably, cut off communication with Pepper in his race to catch them. She was currently trying to get in touch with someone, anyone, in Japan in a position of power, someone who might believe an American secretary's warning of impending doom. She wasn't having any luck.

She kept trying. And told herself in the meantime that her friend would know what to do. Tony always knew what to do.

What the hell am I going to do?

On the other side of the world, a lone armored man clung to the side of a gamma bomb as it hurtled across the sea. The man in the armor, Tony Stark, had helped design the rocket he was currently riding, and he now found himself in the unenviable position of trying to find a weakness in a design he had thought perfect. He had been trying for minutes to break into the guidance system of the rocket he was riding, but he'd designed it to only allow incoming transmissions on a very specific, narrow bandwidth, and he was having no luck finding the correct setting. He'd managed to scramble the guidance systems of a flock of ICBMs a few years

back,* but he'd had a lot more time to prepare and more specialized equipment handy then. Now he only had what the armor normally carried, and while that made for a fairly extensive toolbox, he was beginning to fear it wouldn't be enough.

(* In Marvel's *Iron Man* vol. 1 #277 - Russ)

On the horizon, he could see the big island of Japan. The other eleven missiles he was accompanying were lined up to either side of him, ready to rain radioactive death on an unsuspecting and undeserving populace. Years ago, a scientist named Bruce Banner had been caught in the blast of a prototype gamma bomb, and the peculiar radiation had turned him into the single most destructive force on this planet: the Incredible Hulk. Gamma radiation had created other monsters over the years-the hyper-intelligent Leader, the brutish Abomination-and there was no reason for Tony to believe that it wouldn't do the same to a portion of Japan's population. The bombs were spread out sufficiently that there would probably be no part of Japan's island chain left unaffected by the blasts. If only he could--

Tony paused, turning his helmet to the left and the right. The rockets were lined up at set intervals in the sky on either side of him, never varying their distance in relation to each other.

Of course! The rockets had to have a way of communicating with each other so they wouldn't collide in mid-air. That meant they all had transmitters in addition to the receivers he'd designed, and that meant...

Tony punched a hand through the hull of the rocket and rooted around until he found the source of a subtle radio signal he hadn't bothered to look for before. He ripped the transmitter out of the shell, wires and connectors trailing behind it into the guts of the missile, and considered it for a moment.

"This'll do it," he muttered. He might be able to control the other rockets with this. 'Might' was the operative word, of course, but he'd performed a miracle or two in his day. What was one more?

That left one thing to do before he abandoned his steed. He opened a passive sensor array and searched for a specific high-band radiation. Once he'd located it, closer to the cone of the rocket's head, he crawled up the length of the missile and, with his free hand, used his mechanical muscle to rip another hole in the missile's shell. Without half of its radio set, the missile was beginning to waver off-course and he had to waste half a second steadying himself on top of it.

Tony Stark, billionaire boy inventor, knew a thing or two about bombs. It took him only a moment to find the detonator charge next to the gamma core. He removed it carefully and chucked it over the side of the missile. Then, being very careful not to accidentally detonate it himself, he placed a hand on the lead containment cell for the gamma core, and used a low power repulsor blast to melt it. Working quickly but carefully, he shaped the containment cell into a seamless egg of lead from which no radiation could escape.

He looked up. Japan's shoreline was noticeably closer. Not much time left. Kicking off of the rocket, he fired his boot jets. The Iron Man armor was capable of keeping up with and even outpacing a flock of ICBMs, so he no longer needed to cleave to the rocket now that he had a plan. Turning, he tucked the transmitter under one arm and fired a two-handed repulsor blast into the end of the missile he'd been riding. The missile lurched wildly. A second repulsor blast detonated the fuel tanks in the bottom of the rocket. The explosion ripped the bottom half of the missile apart and sent the remainder corkscrewing into the sea below, no longer a danger to anyone with its detonator removed and its gamma core properly shielded. Iron Man wasted no time watching it fall. Instead, he rolled in the air and fired himself at full speed toward the Japanese coast.

"How strong do you think you are?" the little girl asked.

Johnny Ko had no answer, and indeed, he knew he needn't give one. As real as the girl looked facing him where he sat slumped against the metal wall, he knew he could wave a hand through the space her small form was occupying and encounter no resistance. She was an hallucination, caused by the enormous pool of blood he was sitting in and the twin holes in his chest that blood had escaped through. Johnny Ko was dying, and the little girl-she couldn't have been more than eight-was just a construct of his blood-starved brain.

Over the girl's head, Johnny could make out the Hydra control center that had just fired a dozen ICBMs at Japan. Standing in the center of the room were the orchestrators of this atrocity, two people Johnny loved more than anyone in the world. One was his father, Ko Yung Kil, the elderly Korean/Japanese man who had put a bullet through Johnny's chest and left him for dead. The other was his sister, Meiko Ko, decked out in a startlingly tight, green sleeveless unitard and tall heels. On one of his trips into and out of unconsciousness, Johnny had heard his father refer to Meiko as "Madame Hydra". The significance of this escaped him, along with another spurt of blood from the exit wound in his back.

"Do you think you've got it in you to hang on a little while longer?" the little girl asked.

"As long as you need," Johnny muttered-or tried to mutter. No one turned in his direction, so he must have just imagined he'd said it. That was fine. The little girl had heard, and she acknowledged it with a nod.

"As long as you need."

"Not long now, father."

Ko Yung Kil considered his daughter, standing to his right in the garb of the station she coveted. For not the first time that day he wondered if he would have any of his soul left to call his own

when this was over. He shook that off. The time for doubts was long past, after all. If he thought otherwise, a look behind him at his dying son would make it clear for him again.

But he didn't want to look back at Johnny now. Instead he eyed Johnny's sister. "When this is over, you gain the rank of Madame Hydra, correct?"

Meiko glanced down at him with something he recognized as disdain. "Yes, father, we've been through this countless times: you help Hydra annihilate Japan, exacting your revenge on the Japanese people, then returning to your life as it was before. Hydra takes credit for this ultimate act of terrorism, and-as the architect of the entire scheme-I earn the rank of Madame Hydra." She returned her gaze to the screens. "I'm curious as to why you felt it necessary to shoot Johnny, though. We've gone to considerable lengths to connect him to Hydra and frame him for this once it's all over. I knew he would have to be silenced, but I wouldn't have thought you would take that matter into your own hands."

"Yes, well, as you said, it needed to be done." Ko Yung Kil resisted the temptation to look behind him at his son. Was Johnny dead yet? He had no idea, and he couldn't bring himself to check.

"Madame Hydra!" a Hydra technician called from his post on one of the control center's catwalks. Though she hadn't officially earned the rank yet, she had commanded this post for its entire existence, and those Hydra agents stationed here treated her with the proper respect. "Milady, one of the missiles has dropped off the screen!"

On the large monitor in the center of the room, where twelve red lines had previously tracked the progress of the missiles from the coast of South Korea, there were now eleven. Meiko glanced at her father. "How is that possible?"

On the screen, a smaller red line appeared, outdistancing the remaining rockets, but following their projected path to Japan. "What is that?" Meiko Ko growled, knowing the answer to her question even as she voiced it.

"Whatever it is, it's smaller and faster than the other rockets, ma'am... uh, aren't Tony Stark and his bodyguard in South Korea, Madame?"

"Damn him!" Meiko cried. She stormed over to the console. "It's Iron Man, isn't it?"

"Yes, ma'am, I believe so."

Meiko Ko sent up a primal cry of rage, the likes of which her father wouldn't have believed could issue from human lips, much less his own daughter's. "He will not tamper with those missiles! I want every flying unit we have scrambled. Blast him out of the sky, do whatever it takes-"

"Madame, with all due respect, we have nothing that could possibly catch up to those rockets, and Iron Man is flying even faster."

The technician cowered beneath Meiko's glare. For a moment, it seemed she would kill the messenger, which seemed to be a favored method of dealing with bad news in the commanding ranks of Hydra, Ko Yung-Kil thought, but then her father's calm voice cut through the danger hanging in the air around the woman.

"Meiko. What will this Iron Man do? From what I know of him, he may have the power to knock the missiles off course, but does he have the time? I think not."

"He could somehow take control of them...."

"I doubt it. We are, after all, dealing with the bodyguard here and not Tony Stark himself. I'm sure, whoever he is, he hasn't the technical expertise to discover the proper bandwidth or to crack our codes. Now calm yourself. Eleven gamma bombs will destroy Japan as surely as twelve, and there's nothing to be gained from a temper tantrum."

Meiko considered this logic for a moment, then turned and strode back to where her father was standing. "Never talk to me that way in front of my men, father!" she hissed as she turned to face the screens again.

"I'll do as I please, young woman. I'm far too old to do otherwise. Now stand here with me and watch. It's all we can do, now."

Iron Man touched down on a heavily populated beach on the Japanese coast and ignored the surprised swimmers and lifeguards as he turned to face the western sky.

"Pepper," he said, "I need a direct patch into the house's Crays. I'm going to need more processing speed than the armor's got.

"You got it, Tony." There was no peevishness in Pepper's voice from the way Tony had turned her off minutes earlier. She was a professional, was Miss Potts. As her employer, Tony never had reason to doubt that.

He jacked into the transmitter he was still carrying while the line of missiles continued to grow in the sky, and beachcombers -- possibly more sensitive to the possibility of objects falling from the sky after the armored Avenger's arrival -- began to take notice. Slowly at first, then gaining a speed just below that of panic, the crowds began to vacate the beach. Iron Man worked on without noticing.

"Do you have that patch ready yet, Pep? We're running out of time here."

"It's ready, boss. Tony... where are you?"

"On the beach." He laughed at the tranquil images that phrase brought to mind.

"In Japan??"

"Yes, it's the perfect vantage point."

"But if you fail-"

"Then I'm toast too, but don't worry Pep. I do my best work under pressure. Thanks for the patch."

He turned off his voice receiver again and returned his attention to the radio bundle in his hands. The bandwidth he needed was right there in the simple chip that controlled the unit. He could talk to the missiles now, but he had no idea how to say it in a language they would understand. That's what the patch to the supercomputers in his Seattle home was for. They were currently the only chance he had of breaking those codes.

As the man stood under the threat of radioactive death, the machine began running code at twelve million variations per second. Iron Man hoped it would be enough.

"Cowards!"

"Be quiet, Johnny! Oh please be quiet, don't let them know you're still-"

"You heard me," Johnny coughed and a wet, wheezing sound came from the hole in his chest. "Cowards, you're all-"

"Really, father, couldn't you have finished the job?" Meiko asked.

"I did my part, girl. If you want him dead, do it yourself."

"You would do well to speak to me in a more respectful tone, father."

And you would do well to call me 'father' without that sneer on your lips."

"You-you're the biggest coward of all, Ko Yung Kil!" Johnny shouted. Beside him, the phantom girl stopped pleading with him to remain silent, but kept the same fretful look on her phantom face. "You haven't the heart to finish me, because you know you're finished then too. What's left of the man I called father? What's-?" Johnny coughed again, and a machete of pain buried itself in his side. "You've hidden from your convictions all your life. You're a fraud, and I'm glad I'm dying! I could never be proud as the son of such a base liar! That's what you are, old man! A liar and a bastard!"

Turning, the older man stomped back to where Johnny sat against the wall, leaning on his cane as he went. Johnny heard Meiko laugh, but his attention was already divided between the pain and

his approaching father, so he tuned her out. His father was standing over him a moment later, the gun he'd had inside his jacket back in his hand and pointed at his son's head.

"You're as bad as the Japanese ever were, 'father,'" Johnny coughed, putting the same sneer into the word as Meiko had. "Obliterating a defenseless enemy. Is that what you want your legacy to be, old man?"

"You -- you and your sister are petulant children, who will never understand or appreciate the blessing you received when you were born in this generation. Do you hear me? Children!"

"Bastard!" Johnny returned weakly.

"Oh Johnny, no..." the little girl implored him.

The older man ratcheted the chamber on his pistol back, and leaned closer to his son.

"You'll never understand why I do this, Johnny. You'll never--"

With nearly every bit of strength and speed he had left, Johnny Ko lifted his foot and kicked out violently against his father's left knee. There was a wet pop, and the knee, severely weakened from a childhood injury, twisted into a new shape and dropped the old man practically in Johnny's lap. The gun clattered to the floor on Johnny's left and, finding just a little more strength in his body, he plucked it up in trembling fingers as his father began to howl in agony.

"Johnny-!" the little girl cried.

"Come on..." Tony Stark urged. The missiles were little more than five miles off the beach now. If they had been coming from anywhere else besides the Korean peninsula, there would have been time for Japan's anti-air artillery to blast them out of the sky. But Korea was too close. There was no time. It was up to him.

Inside the helmet, he watched the numbers representing the cryptologic sequence his supercomputers were running flash by. He had seconds at best.

Johnny swung the gun around. People were starting to take notice of him: Hydra agents first turning toward his father's howling, then beginning to level their own weapons in his direction. He didn't care. He couldn't do anything for the Japanese and he was a dead man, but he was going to take one person with him. Just one.

He saw the eyes of the little girl-the phantom who had been pleading with him since he'd awakened on this floor with a bullet hole in his chest-grow huge in fear as he pointed the gun at her temple.

"No, Johnny! Please, I love-"

Johnny Ko pulled the trigger.

"I'm not going to make it," Iron Man whispered, staring vainly at the numbers flashing by as the missiles closed in.

The gun in Johnny's hand exploded, firing a bullet through the forehead of the phantom girl... and across the room into Meiko Ko's very tangible skull. Her brother didn't see the spray of blood from her head, as the recoil slammed him back against the wall on his wounded side. The world went gray for a long moment, but Johnny heard the explosions of other weapons just before a rain of metal tore through him, ripping what was left of his life away.

"Yeah! Go, go!" Iron Man cried as the line of missiles suddenly peeled out of their descent and formed up in a line again, this time headed straight up. He watched them for several moments until they were lost in the sun, then slumped back into a sitting position on the beach, blowing up a drift of sand on all four sides with the impact.

"Tony?"

"Yeah Pep, I'm here."

"Everything's all right then?"

"Oh yeah, peachy."

"How'd you stop them?"

Iron Man considered the transceiver in his hand, then pulled the jack out and tossed the radio nonchalantly into the sand. "Convinced the rest of the missiles that the entire Japanese island chain was actually the missile I took the transceiver from. Their guidance systems keep them from colliding, so they veered off at the last second..." he sighed expansively, "... and I do mean the *last* second. Then I told them Japan was really located in the Sea of Tranquility."

"The moon?"

"Yep, they'll run out of fuel before they get out of earth's orbit, though. I can gather them up later." With a groan, he pushed himself to his feet again. "Right now I intend to do everything in my power to make sure Hydra doesn't get away with this."

"I've contacted the South Korean military. It took some time to cross the language barrier, but they should have a special ops unit out to that mountain you said the missiles came from within the hour."

"I'll beat them there."

And with that, the golden Avenger fired himself into the sky again, retracing the route he'd just taken across the sea.

"Maaaadaaaaammme Hyyyydraaaa..."

Meiko Ko opened bleary eyes and looked into the face of a Hydra operative. She should have known his name, she thought, but the ringing in her skull made it hard to focus, made the noise of the alarm klaxons and fleeing footfalls stretch out as if the world's soundtrack was a tape playing at the wrong speed.

The operative was telling her she had to go, had to leave to fight another day. He was ushering her across the floor, though she couldn't remember standing up from where he'd found her. The left side of her face felt... floppy, as if it wasn't strapped onto her skull as tightly as it should have been. Something sticky and salty coated that side of her face too, and when she put up a hand to wipe at it, her guide gently restrained her from doing so. She nearly tripped over a body as she stumbled past, and was mildly surprised to see it was her own father's bullet-riddled corpse, laying alongside her brother's.

She looked at her guide. He was young, barely old enough to drink in this country. In his eyes, though, was the hardened determination of a soldier not about to leave his commander to die in the field.

"Help me...," Meiko said.

Then her world went black.

When the South Korean military did arrive at Hydra's mountain stronghold, their reconnaissance revealed a facility strangely resembling a ghost town. Tentatively, scouts crept through the deserted, steel corridors, ever attentive to danger but consistently finding none. Finally, one two-man team located some bodies scattered about one hall, all clad in Hydra's trademark green regalia. There were scorch marks on the walls, as if from blaster fire. All of the agents were alive, and some were even beginning to revive when they were discovered, but all would be looking at hospital stays before they were brought in front of any court for their crimes.

More probing into the complex revealed the control center, which was populated by literal piles of unconscious Hydra agents, many looking as if they'd simply been tossed in there after being

rendered insensate. There were three people in this room not clad in the standard Hydra fair. One was an elderly man that one of the soldiers recognized as the famous industrialist Ko Yung Kil. Beside him was a younger man. Both had apparently been torn apart by the same hail of gunfire. Standing in the center of the room was 7 feet of gold and scarlet metal that everyone present knew immediately as the American Avenger known as Iron Man.

"Gentlemen," he said to the soldiers as they lowered their weapons, "they're all yours."

And with that, fire spewed from his boots and he rocketed up through the gaping hole in the rock ceiling of the chamber.

"So Johnny Ko wasn't responsible for what happened?"

"No. I got one of the Hydra agents to talk before the Korean army arrived. Johnny was going to take the fall for his father and sister. Meiko--who got away, by the way; I couldn't find her anywhere in the complex--had ambitions of advancing in Hydra. Put her on the list of romantic interests turned evil. Apparently her and Johnny's father, Ko Yung Kil, had some reason to hate the Japanese, but I doubt we'll ever know what that reason was now."

Pepper paused. Her friend's voice came in loud and clear on the receiver. She could see him in her mind's eye soaring across the Korean sky. Power and grace all in one iron bundle.

"What about you? Are you all right?"

"I liked Johnny a lot, Pep... and now I'm going to have to live with the fact that the last words I spoke to him were groundless, angry accusations. I'm not all right. I'm not sure I will be for a while."

"Then come home, Tony. We miss you."

"Yeah," Tony Stark agreed. Then there was a click as he turned off his transmitter, and Pepper Potts was left alone with her thoughts.

"Johnny, wake up!"

Johnny Ko opened his eyes. He was still in the corridor leading into the Hydra control center, he saw, but the entire facility was empty. No Hydra agents. No movement of any kind. Upon further inspection, he found the wall behind him was unmarked by gunfire and the floor beneath him was unstained by his blood. In fact, the entire room, the very walls, seemed to exude a warm, peaceful cleanliness, a comforting light.

"Finally! I thought you'd never get here!"

Johnny turned and looked into the eyes of the little girl he'd seen in his blood-starved dementia. She held her hands behind her back and smiled at him, rocking back on her heels shyly as she did so. He returned the smile and put out a hand. She took it.

"You're ready then?" she asked.

"Yes."

He stood and strode hand-in-hand with his beautiful sister Meiko-as she had looked long before whatever had twisted her inside had sunk its claws into her-into the control center proper. There was a door of light waiting there for them, and its calm radiance reminded him of nothing so much as the sunrise over the ocean. Johnny Ko couldn't think of a better image of peace.

Grasping the hand of his older-now younger-sister, Johnny Ko stepped into the dawn.

Next Issue: A change of pace, as Iron Man races to save an old friend and places himself on a collision course with the Master of the World (remember him?). Be here for Part 1 of Sea Monsters!

Inventor, businessman, ladies' man, super hero. Gravely injured by an act of industrial sabotage, billionaire genius Tony Stark saved his own life by designing a life-sustaining shell--the hi-tech armor that transformed him into Iron Man! Today, the world thinks Iron Man is an employee--Stark's personal bodyguard--and in this dual role, he faces corporate intrigue and super-powered menaces. He's a modern-day knight in armor, fighting injustice wherever it rears its head. With the company he built from the ground up in other hands, Stark has recently begun working on Stark Solutions, a high-priced consulting firm that funnels its profits into charity, construction, and other projects that benefit the world.



#5

“SEA MONSTERS – PART ONE”

Written by Russ Anderson

Somewhere in the North Atlantic Ocean

Jim Rhodes woke to pain. Pain and an unfamiliar voice suspended above him.

"Mr. Rhodes? Mr. Rhodes, can you hear me?"

Jim opened his eyes and looked up into the face of a young, pimply-skinned Coast Guard medic. The glaring white lamp behind the kid's head hurt Jim's eyes, but he kept them open.

"My ship," he began his voice gravelly from little use. He wondered vaguely how long he'd been unconscious.

The medic's jaw clenched and he looked over his shoulder nervously. "Sir, your ship was sunk. There were... there were few survivors, sir. We were too late to save most of your crew."

"How many?"

"We pulled five of you out, sir."

Jim Rhodes closed his eyes and bit back a groan of remorse. His ship - the *Washington Carver* - had held a crew of nearly thirty.

"You're on the Coast Guard Cutter, *Lifeline*, sir. The captain would like a word with you when you're feeling up to it. Some of the reports we've been getting from the other survivors as to what happened are... garbled."

"That's a fact," Jim sighed. "If he's looking for an explanation that makes sense, though, mine is gonna disappoint him too."

The young man nodded, obviously reigning in his own curiosity. "I can put him off as long as you need, sir. For now, you rest. I'm going to duck out and get you some pain medication."

Jim nodded and, as the medic exited the room, closed his eyes again. He could feel the swaying of the boat beneath his cot. If you spent a little while at sea, it was easy to tune that motion out. It became so much a part of your world that you could hardly tell it was there.

Jim hoped he would get used to the pain of this failure as easily. Somehow, though, he doubted he would.

Tony Stark's Estate - Evergreen Island, Washington State

"How are you gonna tell me that was in bounds?"

The Avenger known as Wonder Man rolled his eyes at his teammate. "Clint, look at the impression in the sand. It was obviously in the line."

"It bounced there!" Clint Barton, also known as Hawkeye, insisted from his side of the volleyball net.

Wanda Maximoff threw her hands in the air. "Clint, you're being impossible!"

"Sticking up for your man and your team is one thing, Wanda, but don't let love blind ya! That serve was out. Tell 'em, "Tasha," Hawkeye prompted, nodding at his doubles partner. The former Soviet spy known as the Black Widow put a hand wearily to her forehead.

"I can't believe I turned down a mission in Fiji for this."

Off to the side, Tony Stark chuckled and sipped from his ginger ale. The summer sun was high and Evergreen Island was getting some of the best weather of the year - which was good, since most of Tony's guests were in bathing suits instead of their 'work clothes'. He was glad he'd arranged this bash for some of the Avengers - those who knew his identity as Iron Man, in any case. Playing Earth's Mightiest Heroes had been crazy lately. Between Loki, the fake Ultron who'd trashed the mansion, and the roster changes,* everyone on the team needed some down time. He regretted not inviting Justice and Firestar, but since they thought Iron Man was just Tony Stark's bodyguard, inviting them to a casual party at his house would have been pressing his luck on the secret identity front.

(* See recent issues of M2K's *Avengers*--Russ)

"Tony," Steve Rogers said, stepping up beside him to watch the escalation of the volleyball argument, "you don't happen to have anymore beer handy, do you?"

Tony raised his eyebrows at the muscular blond man. "Sure. I'll have some more brought out. I didn't realize Captain America was such a heavy drinker."

Steve laughed. "He's not--I'm not. Thor, however, loves the stuff. He's gone through two kegs pretty much by himself so far... Look, I'm sure he won't care what kind it is, but he seems to have a strong attachment to the Beck's."

Tony grinned. "I'll see what I can do."

"That's it! If you kids can't play nice, I'm taking your toys away!"

Tony and Steve looked back toward the volleyball court. Henry Pym, the aptly named hero Giant Man, had grown to massive proportions and plucked the volleyball net out of the sand. Hawkeye railed at him while the Black Widow tossed the ball back over her shoulder and headed for the pool. At Giant Man's shoulder, the diminutive Wasp flew close enough to kiss her lover's grinning cheek.

"You tell 'em, handsome."

On the other side of the field, Tony and Steve watched Natasha walk by in her black bikini. Tony had been the Black Widow's lover at one time, and he suspected Cap had once had feelings for her too, back when Natasha was leading the Avengers. He looked at Steve, who gave him an embarrassed smile.

"I'll go see about that beer," Tony said.

The house was empty as he moved inside through the rear arcadia doors. It wouldn't do to have servants around to see Captain America with his mask off, after all. Edwin Jarvis, the Avengers' butler, had been invited along, but had opted to spend the time with his mother in New York instead. In any case, Tony wouldn't have wanted Jarvis working today, even if he were here.

"Jocasta," he said to the empty kitchen.

"Yes, Mr. Stark." The female voice came from the walls themselves. Tony Stark's home was one of the most technologically sophisticated buildings on the planet, and its mainframe was currently home to a former Avenger named Jocasta. For a long time, Tony had believed Jocasta dead--as dead as a robot shaped to look like a human woman got, anyway--but a scheme by a power-hungry harridan named Sunset Bain had resulted in Tony recovering Jocasta's consciousness and downloading it into his home's computer system. Tony had been piecing together scattered designs and specifications on her old body for weeks now, since he fully intended to build her a new one as soon as possible. For now though, she seemed perfectly happy where she was.

"Thor needs some more beer. Could you have one of the robots bring some out? He likes Beck's, so if we've got it, send that up."

"Already on its way. Mr. Stark, since the Avengers are here rather than at their headquarters in New York, I've taken the liberty of monitoring the newsfeeds along the east coast. I found something that might interest you."

"What is it?"

Jocasta got twenty seconds into her narrative before Tony was sprinting down the hall. Pressing a button on his watch summoned his armor, which unfolded from its pod form and encased him in the distinctive red and gold of Iron Man.

"Tell the rest of the Avengers to enjoy the party," he said. "Extend my apologies for the abrupt departure, too."

"Should I tell them where you're going?"

"No need. This isn't exactly a world-threatening emergency."

"Then why are you hurrying, Mr. Stark?"

The floor at the end of the hallway yawned open, and Tony dove through, following an underground tunnel to the ocean beneath his Cliffside home. A moment later, Iron Man burst from the waves and sliced a path through the sky, heading to the east.

The entrance to the ocean tunnel hissed softly shut, and the house was dark and quiet for a time. Then, an electronically synthesized voice whispered through the halls, so softly that if anyone had been around to hear, they might have believed they'd only imagined it:

"Tony..."

Carol Danvers finished her 30th lap in Tony Stark's pool and decided that was enough. Hefting herself out of the water and sitting on the concrete edge, she grabbed her nearby towel and proceeded to dry her long blond hair.

As the former Avenger known as Warbird, Carol had recently left the team due to... well, best to not dance around the matter, due to alcoholism. Her irresponsible actions, along with the desperate, unthinking denial of an addict, had almost killed several of her teammates. Even after she'd been removed from the Avengers, it had taken her a while, to accept her alcoholism for what it was, and Tony had-through his own similar experiences-had a lot to do with setting her on the path to redemption.* She didn't feel like she was ready to rejoin the Avengers yet-wasn't even comfortable just hanging out with them like this, actually-but she knew she'd get there eventually.

(* See Marvel's *Iron Man* vol. 2 #25--which our M2K series immediately follows--if you don't believe me--Russ' Anonymous)

But she didn't need temptation. So she did her laps and she stayed away from the open bar.

A soft hum from above drew her attention skyward, where she just caught a glimpse of Iron Man disappearing to the east. She frowned. She had seen Tony go into the house a few minutes ago, but couldn't imagine what could call him away so abruptly that wouldn't also warrant the attention of the Avengers present. She glanced around the yard. No one else seemed to have noticed. Most of the guests were still quibbling around the volleyball net. The Black Widow had been in the midst of diving when the armor flew over, and Cap was watching Thor tip the new kegger back like it was a moonshine jar. She'd been the only one to see.

Putting down her towel, she lifted herself the rest of the way out of the pool and walked across the lawn to the back patio. Maybe Jocasta knew what was going on.

The deck of the Coast Guard Cutter, *Lifeline*

Jim Rhodes leaned against the railing of the cutter that had rescued him from the sea and looked out over the clamorous waters of the South Atlantic. He'd been many things in his life. A Marine chopper pilot, a mercenary, a philanthropist, Tony Stark's personal pilot... hell, he'd even been a superhero, first as Tony's stand-in as Iron Man, then on his own as War Machine-but he thought he'd been happiest as a seaman, searching the ocean depths for lost treasures. He'd rediscovered a love for the open water that had lain dormant since his days in the Corps.

Now though, all he could think about were the twenty-four friends the water had swallowed. He wasn't sure he could go back to being a seaman after this.

"Rhodey."

Jim recognized the low hum of Iron Man's boot jets, and didn't bother to turn toward the just-arrived superhero. "Was wondering how long it would take you to find out about this."

"I just heard." Iron Man landed softly on the deck then moved to join his old friend at the railing.

Jim Rhodes looked at the man in the red and gold armor. There were some issues between the two of them that needed resolving, he knew. Once, he would have trusted Tony Stark with his life, then Tony had... lied terribly, put Jim through a lot of heartache for nothing. He honestly wasn't sure where they stood anymore.

"What happened, Jim?"

"I don't know.... Damn it, I went through this with the Coast Guard too. We'd been searching for an old Spanish wreck called the *Santa Trelina* for two months, and we'd finally hit pay dirt. She was nearly 300 years old, but still pretty much in one piece. I sent two of my best divers down to do a prelim, and they checked the ship over, found it to still be structurally sound. I was just about to order them back up to the *Carver* when we lost contact with them. And then... then..."

Jim closed his eyes against the sea breeze and pressed on. "Jesus, it was like something out of Jules Verne. It was a goddamn sea monster. It hit the *Washington Carver* less than a minute after we lost contact with the divers. It was all tentacles, and it tore the ship to pieces in less time than it took to tell."

"Tentacles? Like a squid?"

"Yeah, exactly like a squid... if squids were green and grew to the size of oceanliners, with skin tougher than the titanium my ship was built with. Yeah... just like a squid."

"Where did this happen?"

Jim pointed. "That way. About 10 kilometers."

Iron Man nodded. "Mind if I check it out?"

"Be my guest. You might have to run it by the Coast Guard, though. They're supposed to be pulling together an investigation."

"I already did. I contacted the skipper of this ship before I got here. Why do you think we haven't been interrupted?"

Rhodey frowned. "You've still got all the bases covered, don't you Tony?"

"Not even close," Iron Man answered. His boot jets fired and he lifted off the deck. "Be seeing you."

"Yeah."

The Atlantic Ocean

Iron Man skimmed the wave-tops where the *Washington Carver* had gone under. A quick sonar reading told him all he needed to know about the fate of Rhodey's ship and her crew. There was a submerged cliff about 500 feet down, and a misshapen object that he assumed was the *Santa Trelina* sat atop it. The *Carver* had missed this ledge, and was still plummeting into the depths hours after it had been sunk.

At a mental command, the orifices in his mask sealed themselves shut and the armor pressurized. He angled his flight path downward, and with an entirely non-spectacular *kerplunk*, Iron Man was beneath the waves.

The deck of the Coast Guard Cutter, Lifeline

Rhodey turned from the railing when he saw Iron Man dive the first time. He wasn't sure what Tony Stark was playing at... maybe he was just looking for trouble. In any case, Jim could do nothing about it at this point. His superhero days and capabilities were long behind him.

An invisible hand closed itself around his body, and had whisked him hundreds of feet into the sky before he realized what was happening. By the time he comprehended that he wasn't standing on the deck of the *Lifeline* anymore, the cutter was little more than a dark blip against the blue expanse below him. Rhodey shot, unprotected, into the heavens, passing into a low cloud and finally coming to a halt in the middle of it.

He sucked in a nearly insubstantial chest full of super-hydrated air and looked wildly around. He wanted to cry out in surprise and terror, but the air was so thin up here, and so wet, he just couldn't spare the breath. Stranger things had happened to him, he told himself, but couldn't, under the circumstance, remember just when.

An indistinct blob appeared in the cloud before him, becoming more defined as it approached. In less than a minute, Rhodey was faced with a large flying ship, roughly the size of a Manhattan city block. The ship's designs were a simple black and silver. Jim had never seen anything resembling it before.

A portal opened at the point in the hull nearest to him, and as Rhodey fought to stay conscious, a balcony projected out from this new opening.

"James Rhodes," a distinguished, baritone voice drifted out from the opening, followed closely by its owner—a powerfully built, middle-aged man in a black body suit, complemented by a form-fitting red and silver helmet and a long black and crimson cape. His head was surrounded by an oversized protective neckpiece that extended down onto his chest to create a simple pattern there. He reached the edge of the balcony and stood within 3 yards of where his captive hovered, considering him.

"What... what do you want...?" Jim wheezed.

"I understand you've had... difficulties with large, powerful sea beasts today. I wish to know more of them."

"Go... stuff yourself... old man. Who the... hell are you?"

The other man raised his eyebrows in mild surprise, apparently at the fact that Jim didn't know of him. "Why, I am the Master, James Rhodes. Master of the World, and currently Master of Your Fate. You would do well to tell me what I must know if you hope to ever return to the ship I took you from."

Rhodey looked around, considered his options, then nodded. What the hell? "It was a-a huge, green squid. Tore... tore through my hull like it was rice paper. Killed most of my crew. That's all I know about it... all I saw."

"Green, you say? Impossibly strong?"

Rhodey nodded, too winded from his brief speech to answer with words.

The other man nodded. "That's what I thought. Very well, Mr. Rhodes. Thank you for the information. I return you now to your ship." The Master turned back toward his vessel, and Rhodey felt a loosening of the hand that had held him aloft here. He realized what was happening and reached frantically for the lip of the retracting platform, but it was just too far away.

Rhodey plunged through the cloud and down into the open air, the sea seeming to leap up to meet him.

He realized his mistake as he spotted the *Lifeline* far below him. The Master-whoever he was-had promised only to return him to the ship. He had said nothing of how or at what speed. Iron Man might have saved him, but he was somewhere beneath the water.

Jim closed his eyes as death rushed up to meet him.

Beneath the Atlantic Ocean

Iron Man was nearly on top of the *Santa Trelina* before it came into view, his chest beam blasting a cone of light down his path of descent. Tony hovered near it for a few moments, then aimed the chest beam down into the chasm the *Washington Carver* was plunging into. Even at maximum wattage, the beam gave him little more than 20 feet of visibility at this depth, and the ship was much farther away than 20 feet.

His armor would crack and implode before he reached the *Carver's* depth. He had a model in his lab specialized for underwater work, but his lab was clear across the country, and in any case, he had no interest in examining Rhodey's ship.

He turned his attention to the wreck of the *Santa Trelina* instead, circling it, fixing his light on it. Rhodey had said the divers lost contact just before the giant squid attacked. What that said to Tony was that they were simply the first to run into it. It also meant that said squid had climbed through 500 feet of water to the surface and Rhodey's ship in less than a minute. Tony couldn't think of a single creature that could survive that sudden and drastic a change in pressure unprotected.

Something the divers had done had pissed the creature off enough to attack, and then to go after what it probably saw as their headquarters.

He approached the rotting wooden hull of the ship and found a breach in the side that he could poke his head into. He couldn't fit both his head and his chest beam through the hole, and the light seeping through the cracks wasn't sufficient, so he switched to infrared and scanned the

interior. There was something... something warm but unmoving near the opposite wall. He pulled his head out and began to circle the ship, looking for another opening. He hadn't yet found one when something registered on his sonar as moving toward him at speed. Something fast as a torpedo.

Something big.

Iron Man did not waste time wondering at the blip's identity. He simply forgot the *Trelina*, pointed himself towards the air, and fired his jets at full power, rocketing up through the murk as fast as he could.

The blip on the sonar fell back for a moment then began to pour on the speed too, charging at him from below. Iron Man rerouted power from secondary systems and poured everything he could spare into the boot-jets.

The object was still gaining on him.

With less than a hundred feet to the surface, he realized whatever-it-was was going to catch him. It could match his best underwater speed and double it. There wasn't a chance of him outrunning the thing.

So he stopped, turned, and fired repulsor rays from both gauntlets in the direction the sonar said his pursuer was approaching from. The bolts of energy sliced downward, and Iron Man caught just a glimpse of Lovecraftian tentacles and a wide, gaping beak as the beams struck their target.

The creature paused under the assault. But just for a moment.

Iron Man shot upward again, carving a tunnel through the water until suddenly daylight exploded around him and he was in the open air.

The creature came up right behind him, traveling so quickly that it leapt halfway out of the water before splashing back down to the surface. Iron Man hovered at what he guessed was a safe distance, studying the thing.

Rhodey had been right. It was an enormous squid, with a rubbery green hide. It stayed submerged and glared up at him through the thin film of water with alien eyes that communicated an almost human look of frustration and rage.

"So what am I going to do with you now," Tony muttered. He couldn't just kill it, but he couldn't allow it to lay in wait here for more unwary salvaging operations.

He supposed he would have to go back and get his sub-sea armor after all. Then maybe he'd call in some expert help...

A green tentacle snaked out of the water below him and wrapped itself around his leg. He fired his boot-jets reflexively, but they couldn't compete with the monster's strength. God, he hadn't even seen it move.

That was the last thought he had before the monster squid pulled him back down into the sunless lands beneath the sea.

Next Issue: *Iron Man drowns, Rhodey goes splat, and we re-title this book The Master of the World and the Big, Ugly Green Squid!*

... Or maybe I'll think of something else...

Inventor, businessman, ladies' man, super hero. Gravely injured by an act of industrial sabotage, billionaire genius Tony Stark saved his own life by designing a life-sustaining shell--the hi-tech armor that transformed him into Iron Man! Today, the world thinks Iron Man is an employee--Stark's personal bodyguard--and in this dual role, he faces corporate intrigue and super-powered menaces. He's a modern-day knight in armor, fighting injustice wherever it rears its head. With the company he built from the ground up in other hands, Stark has recently begun working on Stark Solutions, a high-priced consulting firm that funnels its profits into charity, construction, and other projects that benefit the world.



#6

“SEA MONSTERS – PART two”

Written by Russ Anderson

High Above the Northern Atlantic Ocean

James "Rhodey" Rhodes plummeted through a low-lying cloud and found to his dismay that the surface of the Atlantic Ocean was still approaching at high-speed.

Rhodey had faced death many times, both as a Marine Corps chopper pilot and as a superhero, but for the first time he really believed that his number was just about up... kidnapped by some spandex nutcase calling himself the Master of the World, then dropped over the ocean from nearly a mile up.* There was no way he could turn this plunge into a controlled dive. At the speed he'd be going when he hit, he'd splatter across the face of the Atlantic like a bug on a windshield.

(* It happened last issue, along with a bunch of other stuff -- no-time-for-recap Russ)

This morbid train of thought was interrupted when something hit him in the upper back. What little air was left in his lungs blasted out and he felt one of his recently fractured ribs give under the impact. Then a woman's voice, in his ear:

"Go limp," it said.

He tried to follow orders, ignoring the grinding in his side from the floating rib, and realized there was a pair of black-gloved hands under his arms. The ocean kept getting closer, but his speed of descent had noticeably decreased.

"James Rhodes," the female voice was saying, "former pilot to Tony Stark. Imagine meeting you out here."

He had slowed nearly to a stop, and Jim craned his neck around to get a glimpse of his savior. A striking blond woman hovered behind him in a costume that amounted to little more than a domino mask and a one-piece bathing suit, along with long black gloves and knee-high boots.

Jim wasn't as conversant with the superhero set as he'd been during his days as War Machine, or as a stand-in for Iron Man, but he recognized the Avenger named Warbird immediately.

"Are you okay?" she asked. "I tried to make that stop as controlled as possible."

"Fine," Jim gasped.

"Who dropped you? Is Iron Man nearby?"

"Some guy... named the Master... dropped me. To-Iron Man went to... investigate my... shipwreck." Rhodey pointed downward and to the north.

Warbird nodded. "Okay, I'm going to find somewhere to set you down, then see if I can catch up with who dropped you."

Rhodey pointed downward and to the south this time, where the Coast Guard Cutter *Lifeline* lay anchored. Warbird understood his meaning and together the two of them descended toward the ship.

"What did this Master guy want with you?" Warbird asked.

"My salvage ship was... sunk by an enormous green squid... he wanted to know... about it. Said he'd return... me to the Coast Guard ship. Didn't say... at what... velocity."

Warbird chuckled grimly at that and swooped in lower towards the cutter.

Beneath the Atlantic Ocean

The impossibly strong monster dragged Iron Man down into the chasm Jim Rhodes' ship had disappeared into hours before. Inside the red and gold armor, a laser blasted a depth measurement onto Tony Stark's retina as they plunged below 1000 feet. Tony wasn't sure exactly how much water pressure this particular model could handle, but he knew the suit of armor he wore would crush him into hamburger helper long before he reached 2000 feet.

And the squid-like beast dragging him downward was moving very fast.

You're supposed to be brilliant, Tony. Think!

With a thought, he switched his visual receptors from visible light input to heat imaging. Everything in sight was a cold blue, except of course for himself and the squid. He focused on the behemoth, zooming in on the main mass of the creature, and found a warm red, pulsing light that had to be the thing's heart.

Okay, so the monster wasn't a robot. It was instead a living creature that could rip a thirty-man exploratory vessel to shreds and take a faceful of repulsor blasts with nary a flinch. It could also handle temperature and pressure extremes that would obliterate all but the most specialized of man's machines.

If the monster could shrug off shortwave radiation too, Tony Stark was screwed.

Iron Man grabbed the thick green tentacle wrapped around his midsection. Whatever the thing was, it was alive, and if it was alive, it could be cooked. He began pumping microwaves through his gauntlets and into the limb, immediately cranking the wattage up beyond tolerance levels for any land-dwelling creature except maybe the Hulk. The water began to boil around him and he had to switch his visual receptors back to visible light to avoid being blinded by the flash of heat.

He checked the depth readout. 1500 feet. He could faintly hear the seams of his armor beginning to groan.

Returning his attention to the job at hand, Iron Man pushed the output up even farther than he dared. He was risking penetrating his own radiation shields with this much power, but he didn't have many other options at the moment.

1650 feet.

The tentacle was beginning to blacken under the assault. Iron Man killed the radiation and switched on his gauntlet's laser assembly. Apparently his attack hadn't convinced the creature to stop their plunge, but he was betting it had weakened the tentacle enough that an industrial-power laser might have an effect on it. He began cutting, and one side of the tentacle separated cleanly from the other, neither stump bleeding as the laser instantly cauterized the wounds.

That got the monster's attention. A high-pitched shriek pounded upward from the beast's head. Iron Man did not hang around to enjoy it, instead angling himself upwards and firing his boot jets, heading for the sunlight. He knew the squid would catch him long before he reached the surface, but hopefully the injury it had just sustained would slow it down enough for him to reach the *Santa Trelina*, the Spanish pirate vessel the discovery of which had started all of this.

He had climbed barely 200 feet-still nearly 1000 feet below the *Trelina*-when his sonar told him the monster was charging toward him again. The chase was on.

The Throne of Atlantis

"Sir, the king does not wish to be disturbed."

Colonel Marza paused before the frowning face of the royal guardsman and offered the boy a frown of his own. "I come on a matter of great personal import to our sovereign, boy. Let me pass."

"Forgive me, Colonel. The king has expressed a degree of melancholy today, and left strict orders that he not be disturbed... 'lest the walls of the Atlantis herself are crumbling,' he said."

Marza sighed. The king was justly famous the world over for his massive mood swings, but the Colonel was convinced that he would want to hear this news.

"I bear tidings that may concern the king's dead wife, guardsman. Our former queen. I will answer for it if the king decides it was not worth his time, but I frankly doubt we'll have to worry about that. Now stand down."

The guard lost nearly all of his admittedly exceptional military bearing at Marza's mention of the queen. He glanced nervously at his companion on the other side of the enormous doors leading into the Atlantean throne room. There was no support to be had there, so the guard looked again at Marza.

With a nod, he stood aside to let the Colonel pass.

Colonel Marza, intelligence officer in the Atlantean armed forces, pushed through the great doors and strode through to meet with his king, Namor the First.

Above the Atlantic Ocean

Warbird hung around on the deck of the *Lifeline* just long enough to make sure Jim Rhodes was being taken care of, then rocketed up into the sky again. She could be little help with the man's injuries at this point. Her talents leaned in a different direction.

Warbird had no idea who this Master of the World guy was-though, given his name, she already had some opinions on the size of his ego-or what he had to do with this squid that had supposedly sunk Rhodes' ship. She had followed Iron Man out here after Tony Stark, the man inside the armor had abruptly left a party he'd been throwing for the other Avengers at his Seattle estate. She wasn't entirely comfortable around the Avengers anyway, and after Jacosta-the sentient program residing in the mainframe of Tony's smarthouse-had filled her in on why Stark had left, she figured it sounded a hell of a lot more interesting than the party. And she had been right.

No, she had no idea who this guy that had dropped Jim Rhodes out of a cloudbank was, but she intended to find out.

The sun was out in full force today, but there was no scarcity of clouds in the sky. She paused once she'd passed through the lowest level of cloud cover and glanced around. None of the cottony shapes were moving unnaturally or against the wind. She supposed she could try to hit all of them in, say, a 20-mile radius, but if the Master had left the area, she wouldn't know until after she'd wasted a whole lot of time. Another option was to fire an energy blast through every

cloud in sight, see which cloud the beam didn't pass through. It would be draining, but it wouldn't take as long....

She paused in her thoughts and looked down through the low-lying clouds at the ocean below her. The cutter *Lifeline* was barely a speck to her enhanced eyesight. She estimated she was about 10,000 feet above sea level.

Long before she'd been a superhero, Carol Danvers-a.k.a. Warbird-had been an Air Force pilot. This had given her a more than passing familiarity with meteorology, and she knew from that experience that there were certain types of clouds the bases of which generally didn't form above 6,500 feet. One of these cloud types was called nimbostratus.

The heavy, flat cloud hanging stationary 3 miles to the east was a nimbostratus, and its base was at least 2,000 feet above her, putting it at 12,000 feet... nearly double where it should have been.

With a self-satisfied smirk, Warbird arrowed through the Atlantic sky toward that cloud. She slowed as she reached it, paused, then continued into the dense mist slowly. She'd descended less than thirty feet when she found the silvery hull of the Master's ship.

"Bingo," she whispered.

Feeling along the moist metal shell now, being careful not to trip any concealed alarms, she looked for a hatch. After nearly 10 minutes, she'd found nothing. In fact, the ship had very few seams that she could discern, much less actual portals to the inside.

Carol shrugged. She'd done her best to be subtle about this.

Placing one hand against the metal hull, she drew back with her right fist, wound up, and smashed through the alien metal with one punch. It was a matter of only a few more seconds to rip a hole big enough to fit through. There was some explosive decompression as the atmosphere inside blasted into the much thinner air outside, but nothing powerful enough to rip her away from the ship.

She had opened a portal to some sort of featureless hallway, she saw. Poking her head in cautiously, she looked first left, then right-

And turned right into a speeding fist. The blow rocked Carol's head back against the wall she was climbing in through. Stunned, she started to fall back out the way she'd come, but the same fist that had struck her now grabbed a handful of her long blond hair and yanked her the rest of the way into the ship. Warbird was slammed by the face into the opposite wall, leaving a Carol Danvers-shaped dent in the metal there.

The hand released her as she slumped to the floor, barely conscious. Wiping a hand across her spouting nose, she attempted to rise, but a foot that was every bit as powerful as the hand had been smashed into her stomach, lifting her half a foot off the floor before letting her fall back down again in a heap.

The hand insinuated itself into her hair again, bending her head back, then smashing her face into the floor... once... twice... 3 times. Warbird's world started to swim away under a black curtain of unconsciousness. *Sucker-punched*, she kept thinking. *Might have had a chance if he hadn't sucker-punched me....*

She dimly anticipated being smacked against the floor until she was unconscious or dead, but 3 times must have seemed sufficient to her assailant, because she felt herself lifted up by the neck, her arms pinioned behind her, and through the already-swelling flesh around her eyelids, she finally got a look at the Master of the World.

The white showing in his beard was the only real indicator of the man's apparent age. Under a blood red cloak, he wore a skintight black bodysuit over an impressive physique, and his voice, while carrying the confidence of wisdom and experience, was as vigorous as a thirty year-old's.

"Fascinating. A Kree/human hybrid. Warbird, correct? Or are you going by the appellation 'Ms. Marvel' again?"

Carol's arms were still pinned behind her, and the cold hand that had beaten her bloody was still on her neck, so she couldn't see her mysterious assailant. Whoever he was, he kept respectfully silent while the Master spoke.

"I might ask what you're doing here, Avenger. Speak quickly."

In response, Warbird slung an imaginative epithet of her own creation. It involved a request for the Master to engage in sexual intercourse with certain rare species indigenous to the African Congo. Carol hadn't used it since her days in the military, and was pleased to see it hadn't lost any of its punch. The Master frowned at the outburst.

Suddenly, she was flying through the air, smashing headfirst into the bulkhead again. Every voluntary muscle in her body went limp, but she couldn't collapse because she was still being held up by her attacker.

"My efforts to claim my divine right as unchallenged master of this planet have been frustrated time and again by the 'heroes' of this age. Whether you are here alone or as part of a team, I will not allow you to return and inform your colleagues of my presence."

The Master stepped forward and took her chin in his hand. "You *will* talk, little one. The only question is whether it will be before or while you adorn my vivisection table. Either way, I have much to learn from your half-Kree physiology, woman. Take her away."

The strong hands holding her stationary spun her around and started down the corridor, away from where the Master stood. Carol Danvers realized she needed a plan to escape, some way to break free. She didn't get much farther than that before she finally blacked out.

Beneath the Atlantic Ocean

Iron Man was still 500 feet below the *Santa Trelina* when the squid managed to snag one of his legs. He fired all the power he could spare into his boot jets, but he knew from the start that effort was doomed to failure. The monster started to reel him in.

Tony triggered his repulsors, and sent a double-shot of them streaking down into the squid's face. The same blow had given the creature pause before, but the thing was obviously a lot more pissed now than it had been then.

The blast did give Tony another look at the squid's Lovecraftian head and beak though, surrounded by flowing tentacles. As the creature dragged him down towards its gaping maw, Iron Man threw all attempts at elegance out the window. When he'd come within a foot of the thing's head, he pulled back a gauntlet-clad fist and smashed it into the squid's beak with all the considerable power at his command.

His aural receptors picked up the thick *crunch* as part of the beak collapsed under his fist. The monster released him and Iron Man fired himself towards the surface again.

It was a close race, but the pain inflicted by that last blow had slowed the creature enough that Tony managed to reach the *Santa Trelina* before it could catch him again. Swooping around the hull of the old Spanish wreck, he found what he thought to be the right spot on the port side and shoved a hand through the rotting wood. It disintegrated at his touch, and he reached inside and grasped something cool and gelatinous.

The squid arced over the deck and stopped dead as it spotted the armored Avenger standing on the shelf of rock beside the ship. Iron Man stood waiting for it, one hand holding a glowing green egg, about the size of a baseball, to his armored chest. The other hand was poised above the egg, the repulsor projector in that palm glowing ominously.

"One foot closer, ugly," Tony breathed inside the mask. "One foot closer and you'll be able to order the babies sunny side-up."

The creature hesitated. Then, with a sweep of its 10 arms, it retreated slightly, hovering near the madly tilted deck of the *Trelina*.

Tony blinked sweat out of his eyes and reviewed his options. He'd spotted the egg on his first exploration of the ship,* though he hadn't figured out exactly what it was until halfway through his tussle with the squid. The monster was acting as a protective parent would, chasing off and doing its best to incapacitate anything that came too close to its baby. He suspected that the divers working for Rhodey had been killed simply for happening upon the wrong place. The squid had then followed the connecting lines up to Rhodey's ship and put that out of commission as well.

(* That was the warm, indistinct shape he'd detected deep in the ship -- I-take-mine-scrambled Russ)

The *Santa Trelina* was perched atop a shelf of rock jutting from an undersea cliff. Iron Man backed up against this cliff now, his glove still poised over the egg. The squid watched him closely with its enormous black eye. The two of them were in a Mexican stand-off. If Iron Man blasted the egg-and he didn't particularly want to do that, no matter the circumstances-the squid would go after him with all the fury of a mourning parent. If he tried to fly to the surface, egg in tow, the monster would probably risk charging him rather than let him leave with its offspring.

Before Iron Man could dwell on this further, the cliff face above him suddenly exploded, and he ducked down under the shower of rocks, protecting the egg and his own head with his body. The avalanche of rocks completely decimated the remains of the *Trelina*, and while he protected himself, Tony was vaguely aware of the wreck slipping over the side of the cliff and plummeting into the unknown chasm below.

The last of the rubble had barely settled yet when he felt a strong hand grab him by the helmet and wrench him out of the pile of debris he had become buried in.

"Namor!" Tony cried in relief, recognizing the lean, athletic form and black hair of the Sub-Mariner, former ally and Avenger. The man considered Iron Man with a scornful eye and put one hand out.

"Give me the egg," he commanded.

Behind the mask, Tony's eyes narrowed. Being born and growing up with a silver spoon firmly lodged in one's mouth didn't tend to make one enamored of being ordered around. Namor was a king, he was used to his edicts being followed without question, but Tony Stark was no man's serf.

"I'm sorry, Namor, I can't do that," he replied.

"That was not a request, bondman!" Namor barked. Tony's jaw dropped at the term 'bondman', but he quickly shrugged it off, reminding himself that as far as Namor and most of the world were concerned, Iron Man was Tony Stark's employee.

Still, the Sub-Mariner had never treated Iron Man with anything but respect before, even on the few occasions they'd opposed each other.

"If I give you this egg, that squid"-Tony pointed at the monster still hovering anxiously in the background-"is going to be all over me in a second. It's too tough for either of us, Namor, and this is the only way I'm going to reach the surface with my skin intact."

Namor sighed... then belted Iron Man square in the faceplate before his opponent even saw him move. The egg was dropped and Iron Man went sailing over the side of the cliff, plunging into the murky waters below.

Namor caught the egg and held it in one hand, close to his face. His eyes narrowed at the unearthly green glow emanating from it, and a strange expression touched his face that may have been a smile. Namor turned to the still-hovering squid.

"I have it," he said in his own Atlantean tongue. "It's safe now. *You're* safe now. We must depart for Atlantis so that the birth can be-

He never got to finish the thought. The rocky shelf beneath Namor's feet suddenly erupted, and the King of Atlantis was flung in the direction of the surface. Iron Man came rocketing up through the rubble.

"You wouldn't believe the kind of day I'm having, Namor," Iron Man broadcasted out through his helmet. He snagged the dazed Atlantean by his winged ankles and sent him careening farther towards the surface. "It started out well enough-the sun, the water, a good time with old friends-but then another friend almost died, and a lot of his friends *did* die. They died because they got too close to that damned egg."

He spun around and met the expected charge of the squid. He knew he couldn't match the thing's strength and speed. Instead, he grabbed the first tentacle that darted too close to him, leaned back, fired his boot jets briefly to create leverage, and used the thing's own momentum to smash it bodily into the cliff at his back. Not waiting to see what effect this had, he shot off in pursuit of Namor.

"I might have been able to handle all of that," Iron Man continued, firing a low-level repulsor into Namor's exposed midsection, "but to be sucker-punched by somebody I considered an ally, that's just too much to handle in one day."

Iron Man rocketed upward, catching the reeling Sub-Mariner by the ankle again and dragging him up toward the surface.

"So Namor, I'm going to have to insist that you step outside."

They exploded into the clear air above the Atlantic. Iron Man climbed a few dozen yards, then snatched the egg out of Namor's hand and dropped him back towards the water. He hit the surface with enough impact to shatter a normal man's spine, but the Son of Atlantis had emerged only a moment later. With blood in his eyes.

"Now," Iron Man said, electrified plasma arcing between his two gauntlets, "let's see how you play the game on *my* court."

Inside the Master of the World's Ship

"It begins," the Master of the World said softly, considering the images playing out their dance of combat on his computer screen. "I would have preferred to have done this before that half-breed Atlantean arrived. Now I must deal with Iron Man *and* the Sub-Mariner.

"Still," he continued, turning away from the control panel, "we may be able to take advantage of their petty bickering. I want you to concentrate on retrieving the egg, with your sister being the secondary target. Forsake her if you must, but that egg must be rescued at all costs. I will remain behind to direct the battle and offer you whatever assistance I may from here. Do you have anything to add?"

"Only one thing," his companion replied. The thin, seemingly frail woman with yellow skin stepped forward, snaking a hand behind the tall man's head and pulling him down into a lingering kiss. "You will be master of this world soon. And I will sit at your right hand."

"Soon, my love," he whispered in response, "my Marrina."

She smiled—a small smile that only curved one end of her mouth—then turned and exited the bridge. The Master watched her go, then returned his attention to the computer screen. A moment later, a flashing indicator to the right of the monitor told him Marrina had passed through the airlock, taking the direct route to the ocean's surface.

"Soon," the Master of the World repeated, and began to arm his ship's weapons.

Check out the oversized IRON MAN ANNUAL 2000 in 2 weeks for the action-packed conclusion to "Sea Monsters", then be back here for the...

Next Issue: "Hearts of Gold". We throttle down for an issue to check in on this book's supporting cast and deal with the repercussions from the "Sea Monsters" storyline.

Inventor, businessman, ladies' man, super hero. Gravely injured by an act of industrial sabotage, billionaire genius Tony Stark saved his own life by designing a life-sustaining shell--the hi-tech armor that transformed him into Iron Man! Today, the world thinks Iron Man is an employee--Stark's personal bodyguard--and in this dual role, he faces corporate intrigue and super-powered menaces. He's a modern-day knight in armor, fighting injustice wherever it rears its head. With the company he built from the ground up in other hands, Stark has recently begun working on Stark Solutions, a high-priced consulting firm that funnels its profits into charity, construction, and other projects that benefit the world.



ANNUAL 2000

“SEA MONSTERS – PART THREE (Conclusion)”

Written by Russ Anderson

Author's Note: Quick! Go read IM #5 and #6 for the first parts of this story, then meet us back here!

Somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean

Jim "Rhodey" Rhodes allowed the young Coast Guard medic to help him up onto the deck of the U.S.C.G. *Lifeline*. He'd been through much in the last 12 hours. Narrowly escaping with his life when an undersea beast had taken apart his exploratory vessel, Rhodey had then been abducted by some fruitcake calling himself the Master of the World, who'd dropped him from nearly a mile up after extracting certain information about the sea monster. The heroine named Warbird had saved his bacon that time, but not without injuring him further.*

(* This all happened in issues #5 and #6-sidekick-bashin' Russ)

He could walk though, and that was all he needed to do right now.

The railing was crowded with rapt seamen, and Rhodey and his friend the medic had to push through the throng to get in a position to see. The medic snatched a pair of binoculars from a nearby crewman and, ignoring his comrade's angry response, handed them to Rhodey.

"See, Mr. Rhodes, it's just like I told you."

Rhodey put the binoculars to his eyes and found that it was, indeed, just as he'd been told. Several kilometers away, Iron Man-known to a select few, including Rhodey, as Tony Stark-was engaged in a fierce aerial battle with a lean, but powerfully built man wearing nothing but a green pair of swimming trunks. Jim Rhodes recognized the Sub-Mariner instantly.

"No," Rhodey muttered. "You idiots, you're fighting the wrong person..."

He aimed the binoculars up toward the clouds, searching for the airship from which the Master of the World had dropped him barely an hour ago. He didn't find the ship, as it was concealed in one of the dozens of clouds overhead, but he did spot the thin, green shape plunging straight down through the sky, heading directly for the battling Iron Man and Sub-Mariner.

He gave the binoculars back to the medic, who handed them off to their still-grousing owner. "Take me to the skipper. Now. I'm going to need your fastest boat."

"Mr. Rhodes, you're in no condition to-"

"Damn it, kid, don't play mother hen with me now! Just take me to see the skipper!"

The medic nodded, then began pushing back through the crowd the way they had come. Rhodey followed as quickly as he was able.

"You've made a grave error, Avenger!" the king of Atlantis proclaimed. "Imperius Rex!"

Iron Man might have had a chance of blocking the blow, but he didn't even try. Namor, the Sub-Mariner, hit him hard, and with a resounding *klong*, Iron Man soared in a line parallel to the surface of the Atlantic, careening for nearly a mile before regaining control of his flight.

Namor was on top of him instantly, the wings adorning either of his ankles impossibly keeping the Atlantean airborne. Iron Man fired a repulsor blast at his opponent's head, but the Sub-Mariner dodged and pulled back to deliver another telling blow.

When he swung, Iron Man seemed to come to life for the first time since he'd picked this fight. He grabbed the hand hurtling towards him and pulled down, dragging Namor toward the ocean surface while simultaneously rolling on top of him. The Avenging Son's arms were now pinned behind his back, and it was only the work of another moment to manipulate him into a full-nelson hold.

The fact was, Iron Man wasn't sure he could take Namor in a fair fight. The man's lean body could withstand ocean depths that would crush any manmade vehicle. He'd even stood toe-to-toe with the Incredible Hulk on more than one occasion. Iron Man had many more weapons in his arsenal, but in terms of raw power, Namor probably outclassed him.

So it was best to level the playing field a bit. And Tony Stark, the man inside the Iron Man armor, was just mad enough to do it dirty.

Activating the microwave projectors in his gauntlets, Iron Man baked the back of his opponent's head with radiation. Namor howled, not in agony from the radiation -- which he could handle -- but from the massive dehydration that took place almost instantly. Namor was amphibious, but

when above the waves he needed to occasionally re-hydrate himself or he would weaken geometrically. The longer Iron Man held him like this, the less likely he'd be able to break free.

"Coward...," the Sub-Mariner swore. Tony didn't give him the satisfaction of replying. He told himself he was doing this for the 24 people who'd died when Rhodey's ship was sunk, but deep down, he suspected he was doing it for the sucker-punch Namor had laid on him minutes earlier.* Even then, the matter didn't trouble his conscience too badly.

(*Happened last issue-Right-in-the-nose Russ)

"It's over, Sub-Mariner. When you wake up, hopefully you'll be calm enough to explain what's going on in a civilized manner."

"I... will... not be... defeated by... Tony Stark's lapdog..."

"Well, guess what, Namor? That's just what's happening. And you asked for th-"

Something dropped onto Iron Man's back from behind. The impact knocked Namor from his grip, sending the Atlantean hybrid tumbling to the ocean water several meters below.

But Iron Man couldn't worry about that just then. Powerful green hands clutched at his mask, finding purchase in the eye and mouth holes. Iron Man grabbed at the hands desperately, cursing himself for being so involved in his battle with Namor that he'd ignored his proximity sensors; he had to deal with this new arrival before the Atlantean king recovered.

Finally getting a grip on his assailant, the golden Avenger channeled a few thousand volts of electricity into the appendages, then flipped the new arrival over his head when the hold on him momentarily weakened.

"What the-?" The woman dangling over the ocean in his grip was willowy thin, with yellow skin and a shock of green hair piled atop her head. Her enormous black eyes were narrowed in anger, and her webbed left hand-she was hanging in Iron Man's grip from her right-swiped at him in impotent fury.

"Marrina?" the Avenger asked, incredulous. He had never met the amphibious extra-terrestrial who'd used that name, but he knew her history well. She'd served with Alpha Flight for a while, then joined the Avengers briefly after marrying the Sub-Mariner, who was also an Avenger at that time.

And it was during her tenure among Earth's Mightiest Heroes that Marrina had died, slain by the Sub-Mariner's own hand after she'd metamorphosed into a deadly and uncontrollable sea leviathan. Iron Man knew death was sometimes a revolving door, particularly where metahumans were concerned-Lord knew he'd taken a few spins through that door himself-but Marrina had been stabbed in the brain with the Black Knight's Ebony Blade.* That was not a demise one should be able to walk away from.

(* In Marvel's *Avengers* vol. 1 #293-Bet-that-one-left-a-mark Russ)

"Marrina!"

Iron Man heard Namor's cry at the same moment the Avenging Son hit him in the side, refreshed from his plunge into the ocean. Iron Man lost his grip on Marrina and the impact threw him back into the water. The last thing he saw before the ocean closed over his head was Namor catching Marrina by the shoulders before she could follow Iron Man into the water.

Then he was beneath the waves, and he had barely begun to stabilize his descent before massively powerful green tentacles snapped out of the murky depths and lashed themselves around his armor. The squid that had destroyed Jim Rhodes' ship and had nearly taken Iron Man's life had found him again. Iron Man had stolen its child, the egg it had fought so hard to protect.

So the monster slowly began to crush him as it again dragged him into the abyss.

Warbird tested the manacles pinning her hands together over her head and found they were too strong to break. She'd already tried using the bio-energy blast she could channel through her fists to shatter the bonds, but the manacles somehow absorbed that energy, and powerful electromagnets kept the manacles bonded with the ceiling above her. Given time, she might have overloaded the absorption cell, but that would be draining and there were no guarantees it would work. In any case, she didn't think she was going to be allowed the luxury of that time.

The door to the holding cell hissed open and the Master of the World stood silhouetted in the light from the hallway.

"You present a quandary, Avenger," he began, stepping over the threshold and considering her. "My genealogy readings suggest that a half-human/half-Kreevian physiology such as your own should be impossible by natural means. However you affected this physical change, it wasn't the old-fashioned way. I would like to study your physiology further-including this intoxicant addiction my machines have found evidence of-and I believe I would enjoy extracting your story from you"

"I've been tortured by the best, old man," Warbird snapped. "It didn't do them any good, and I doubt a creep in a bad costume and the most pretentious name in history can do any better."

The Master's hand flashed out and struck her across the jaw, rocking her head back and bringing stars to her eyes. The man could hit a lot harder than she'd anticipated.

"You will speak to me with respect fitting my station, girl. I was ancient when your grandparents' grandparents were a-borning. I walked with prehistoric man-I *was* prehistoric man-and was elevated to a state surpassing the most evolutionarily advanced modern man millennia before you monkeys came out of your caves."

Warbird smirked. "So if you've had all that time, why are you still second-string?"

The Master gritted his teeth... then his tense shoulders fell and he chuckled with sudden humor. "My operative -- Marrina, the one who subdued you when you attempted to trespass on this ship -- is even now gathering up her Plodex sister and her offspring. When I have all the awesome power and potentiality of 3 Plodex at my right hand... then you shall hear of me, woman. Or rather, your comrades shall when I ascend to the role destiny prepared for me all those years ago: Master of this pathetic world.

"As for you, you will already be dead. You see, I have no interest in torturing you. Your physiology is of far more interest to me than anything you might be able to say. I can extract more useful information by gutting you alive than by talking to you."

Warbird glared silently in response.

"Think about it," the Master said. Then, with a twirl of his cape, he exited the room, leaving Carol Danvers alone with her black thoughts.

"Marrina?" Namor cried, holding the woman who so resembled his lost wife at arm's length. "Is it truly you? How can this be? How are you alive?"

Marrina answered by hissing angrily and kicking into Namor's sternum with both legs. The air rushed from his lungs forcefully, and Marrina writhed from his grip. Instead of falling to the water though, she grabbed Namor around the waist with her legs and raked her clawed hands across his chest, digging 4 deep furrows in skin that could withstand the crushing pressures of the ocean floor. Namor cried out and grabbed for the woman.

"Marrina, please-," he began, once he had her in hand once again.

His former wife smashed her forehead into his own, stunning him momentarily. Kicking back with her legs, and using Namor's own grip on her arms for leverage, she began ripping at his torso with the claws on her feet.

"Marrina... my love-don't..."

A stuttering report of automatic rifle fire sounded across the water. Marrina jerked violently as lead peppered her back, then turned from the dazed Sub-Mariner and spotted the speeding 2-man boat approaching her position from the Coast Guard Cutter, *Lifeline*. A black-skinned man stood next to the driver of the approaching boat, a smoking automatic rifle in his hand.

Growling, Marrina released Namor and dropped down into the water.

"Holy-," the boat's pilot cried. "Where did she go? Where is she?"

"Quiet," Rhodey said, scanning the surface of the water intently. The Sub-Mariner was hovering where the yellow woman had left him. He looked dazed from her attack, and would probably be of no help. "Stop the boat," he ordered, and the pilot quickly throttled down until they were floating stationary in the water.

"There!" Rhodey brought the M-16 to his shoulder again, wincing at the pain in his side the sudden movement caused him, and aimed at the green shape torpedoing toward them just beneath the water's surface. As he pulled the trigger, he held no real hope of the bullets doing any good-she'd just shrugged off 10 direct hits-but he had to try.

The rounds splashed into the water in a line, following the lithe green shape. But she was moving too fast; faster than Rhodey could swivel the gun to follow her.

"Oh," the pilot began "shi-"

The front of the speedboat exploded as the yellow-skinned woman burst from the water beneath it. As the pilot cried out in fear, Rhodey grabbed him by the life jacket and yanked him back into the rear of the small craft. Instantly, the boat tilted forward as water flooded its insides.

Marrina came down inside the boat, landing gracefully on the pilot's seat. Leaping down off of it, she raked one webbed hand across the side of the craft, and the reinforced wood and aluminum shattered at the casual blow.

"Get your gun!" Rhodey ordered the pilot, and brought his own rifle back up to his shoulder.

"Hold!" he heard, and glanced up just as Namor the Sub-Mariner slammed into the woman from above. The two of them smashed into and through the side of the boat, plunging into the water below together. Rhodey stared in astonishment at the massive hole in the side of craft, and then it tilted crazily again. The pilot was grabbing at Rhodey's life jacket.

"Come on, I've got the inflatable ready! We've got to get out of here!"

Nodding, Rhodey slung the rifle over his shoulder and clambered over the back of the wildly tilting boat. True to his word, the Coast Guardsman had an inflatable raft with a small outboard waiting for them.

"Rhodey!"

Jim Rhodes turned and found a dripping wet Iron Man hovering next to the raft. "Iron Man! Where the hell you been?"

"Fighting your sea monster," he answered. "It's susceptible to radiation, so I managed to break free... again. Where are Namor and Marrina?"

"Somewhere under the water, but they're not your concern now, Shellhead. There's bigger fish to fry."

Quickly, Rhodey explained what the Master of the World had done to him, and his assumption that the Master was behind this yellow woman and maybe even the sea monster itself. At the least, he was pursuing the monster for his own ends.

"And you say Warbird went after this guy already?" the Iron Avenger asked.

"Yeah, a while ago. Haven't heard from her since."

"Can you two get back to the *Lifeline* all right?"

"We've got an outboard," the Coast Guardsman replied. "As long as we ain't attacked by anymore yellow aliens, we'll be fine."

With a curt nod to acknowledge the man, Iron Man turned his face skyward and rocketed into the clouds.

"I think I'm beginning to understand now," the Sub-Mariner said, ducking one of Marrina's blows. The water didn't seem to slow her down at all.

"You're not Marrina," he continued, dancing just out of reach of all of her blows. "Now that I look at you closer, that is plain to see. You're one of her offspring, aren't you? One of the Plodex children I saw leave her 'nest' after I was forced to kill her."*

(*Again, check out Marvel's *Avengers* vol. 1 #293-Retro-Replay Russ)

In her fury, Marrina got too close. Namor grabbed her fist and spun her around-as Iron Man had done to him earlier-then pinned her feet between his own. "You Plodex acclimate yourselves to a world by becoming an approximate version of the first race you encounter. Your sister bonded with a squid, and you bonded with a human, as your mother before you did. And yet you are much too old to be her child. Someone has advanced you artificially into adulthood. Who is it, my child? Tell me, and I'll wreak terrible vengeance on whoever has used you."

Finding the Master's ship was no trouble at all for Iron Man's advanced detection systems. Tony Stark had spent a lot of time during the last 10 years developing stealth technology-both for sale to the US government and for the Iron Man armor. As a result, he knew tricks to negate that technology that no one else would even consider for at least 2 decades. He had a vague recollection of the Master of the World from the Avengers' files. It had all been second-hand accounts from Alpha Flight-most of it entered by Marrina, in fact-and he knew the Master had access to alien technology Tony couldn't hope to compensate for, but the cocky bastard was

apparently relying heavily on the cloud cover. Tony got around his stealth systems like they weren't there.

Then he blasted a hole in the alien metal of the ship and let himself in.

Namor sensed the squid's approach before it appeared before him and the Plodex girl. The beast made no sudden moves, just approached the two struggling forms and watched them, its tentacles flaring and darting about its long, thin head and body.

The squid's arrival only made the girl in Namor's grip struggle more fiercely. He considered taking her up into the open air, where she would be out of both of her elements, but if her abilities were like her mother's, Namor himself would dehydrate and weaken more quickly than she would. He was weighing his alternatives-including the distasteful option of knocking her unconscious and taking her back to Atlantis where she could be properly detained-when the woman-creature cried out:

"MASTER!"

Iron Man knew the time for subtlety was long past. The Master of the World certainly knew he was here after he'd punched a hole in the side of his ship. So when the troop of black-and-silver robot guards charged into the hallway he was following, he didn't waste time trying to evade them. Instead, he ripped through them with his repulsors. In under a minute, he was alone in the hall again, treading over the shredded remains of his enemies.

He activated a cooperative scanning program-one of the special "Iron Man-only" programs and systems he'd never patented or revealed to the public. The command series initiated a variety of scanning techniques throughout his armor, both active and passive, and collated the diverse information sets-things like infrared, audio pickup, low-level radiation emission-to determine the locations of nearby lifeforms. The program took nearly two minutes to run and spit out its answer, so Iron Man kept moving as it worked, heading for the front of the ship... the most logical position for some kind of control area. He met no more resistance while the program ran, but neither did he find the bridge before the onboard processor gave him his answer.

There were only 2 lifeforms aboard this ship besides himself; one showing a mixture of Kree and human traits, the other wholly human, though enhanced in some undefined way. The half-Kree reading had to be Warbird, and Iron Man breathed a sigh of relief that Carol Danvers was still alive. He was closer to the other lifeform-that one had to be the Master of the World-but his first priority had to be freeing his ally.

Ripping a control touchpad off of a nearby wall-this ship's high-tech version of a lightswitch, Tony guessed-he grabbed up a bundle of power conduits and wires and gathered them carefully

into both fists, being careful not to actually rip any free of the wall. Then he very deliberately fed a pulse bolt through them.

Pulse bolts sapped a lot of power from the armor, which was why he tended to rely on repulsors instead; but pulse bolts had 2 unique properties that were priceless in a situation like this: rather than dispersing, they gained strength as they traveled over great distances. And they were VERY conductive, allowing him to push them through this ship's power lines.

Lighting fixtures began exploding up and down the hall in either direction. He heard larger explosions farther off as the bolt worked its way through the ship's main power circuit. By the time the pulse bolt reached the central generator, it had built up enough strength to annihilate it. The ship rocked with that explosion, and Iron Man smiled with grim satisfaction.

Considering how easy it had been to breach the hull, Iron Man doubted the Master had any material strong and dense enough to restrain Carol, so it stood to reason that he was using some form of energy or electronic device to keep her contained. By destroying the power in this ship, Iron Man had simultaneously freed her and taken the Master out of the game. Without main power, his ship would be able to do little more than stay aloft...

At least he thought it would be able to stay aloft. Imagine his surprise then, when the ship shuddered violently beneath his feet, then a moment of weightlessness as it began to plummet from the sky.

A bolt of lightning exploded from the contact point between Warbird's manacles and the ceiling of her cell. The light overhead burst at precisely the same moment, and Carol toppled forward, suddenly not pinned to the ceiling anymore.

She didn't waste any time trying to figure out where this opportunity had come from. She didn't have enough leverage to break out of the shackles by strength alone, so she simply tucked her head into her shoulder to shield it from shrapnel and fired energy blasts from both fists. The shackle exploded, unable as it was to absorb her power like it had before. Even in the dark, it took her only a few moments more to do the same to the restraints on her feet.

Carol Danvers flung herself at the door to her cell, knocking it off its hinges and across the outside hall with one punch. Lights were out all up and down the corridor.

And then the ship started to fall.

"MASTER!" the young Marrina screamed again. She arched her back violently, bending backwards nearly double, then her hands seemed to dislocate from the wrists and she slithered free of Namor's grip. She was gone in the blink of an eye, arrowing toward the surface.

Namor gave chase, followed closely by the giant squid.

Iron Man rocketed through the ship's corridors, flashing around corners at speeds that were more than a little reckless. His scanners - now that they were locked on the 2 lifeforms aboard this ship - were keeping constant track of their movements. Warbird, he saw, was free and moving away from where she'd been imprisoned seconds earlier. The Master of the World, though, was stationary in his command center. That left Tony with seconds to find the man and get him out of the ship before they hit the ocean with all the grace of a runaway comet.

The door to the room the Master was sequestered in was marked with strange alien language that Tony couldn't even begin to decipher... nor did he particularly care what it said. Landing in front of it, he blasted the portal off of its sliding track.

And was immediately sucked out into the sky over the Atlantic Ocean.

"Did you really think your human scanning technology - no matter how advanced - could outstrip the knowledge of a race that was traveling between stars before man was using fire? Begone, armored barbarian!"

"Arrogant... bastard," Tony swore. He fought to right himself as he was sucked into the alien ship's slipstream. His armor automatically tracked the frequency the Master had transmitted to him on and fired his reply back along the demodulation of that frequency. "I'm trying to save you, damn it!"

"I have returned from setbacks more severe than this! I have all the time in existence!

"I am Master of this world, Man of Iron, and I will claim it one day over your long-dead bones!"

Warbird found a wall that looked like it might lead to the outside. She was weak from the pounding she'd taken earlier and her brief captivity, but she hoped she had enough left to poke another hole in this sucker, or she was going down with the ship. She fired on the wall, weakening it as she approached, then put her head down and charged.

The impact was stunning, but the hull shattered and she managed to make it through to the outside just as the ship plummeted below 2000 feet. Weak and dazed from the effort of breaking out, she fought to maintain altitude as the Master's ship fell toward the ocean.

"Easy, Warbird," a familiar voice said, accompanied by the comforting hum of bootjets. An iron-clad hand grabbed her wrist and pulled it around strong shoulders while the other arm wrapped around her waist.

"Took ya long enough," Warbird laughed.

"Sorry, my other date was a little clingy. Couldn't shake her."

"Really? Who is this other woman?"

Iron Man pointed toward the water below the Master's ship.

"There she is now."

"MASTER!" the young Plodex girl cried in terror, as she watched her beloved's ship plummet toward her.

"Marrina!" Namor cried, surfacing several yards away. He knew this woman wasn't his dead wife, but she looked so much like his lost love that he literally couldn't bear to call her anything else. "Move! You'll be crushed!"

He lunged at her, but a thick green tentacle snapped out of the water below him, wrapping itself around his middle and hurling him away with all the considerable strength it could bring to bear. As the world flipped over, Namor saw the green squid who had started all of this partially emerge from the water of the Atlantic and reach its enormously long tentacles into the sky to greet the plummeting ship.

The explosion when the Plodex ship struck the water was magnificent, laying waste to everything around it for miles.

EPILOGUE

"And that's all there is to tell," Iron Man said later, on the deck of the *Lifeline*. A young officer stood before him with a clipboard, taking careful notes. "The ship was vaporized, along with the sea monster and the alien who attacked the Sub-Mariner and I."

"And King Namor?" the officer asked. "What happened to him?"

Iron Man shrugged. "I honestly have no idea. Hopefully he wasn't in the blast radius when the Master of the World's ship detonated, but I haven't seen him since our fight was interrupted."

The officer nodded and tapped his pen on the clipboard. "That should be everything I need, sir. If I have to contact you for further questioning...?"

"Just call Stark Solutions," Iron Man finished for him. "I'll get the message."

The officer shook his hand and departed. Iron Man turned and strode across the deck to where a lovestruck medic-the same one who had treated Rhodey-was tending to Warbird.

"Are we done here?" she asked as Iron Man approached.

"I think so."

She stood, upsetting the medic, who had to chase her with the bandage he'd been preparing to apply to her cheekbone. She stood still long enough for him to stick it on, then thanked him and crossed to where Iron Man stood.

"So do we have to fly all the way home or do you think Tony Stark could arrange for some transport?"

"I already put in a call to Pepper. An aircraft is on the way to pick us up, but I've got one last bit of business to attend to first."

"What would that be?"

"His business is with me, woman."

Warbird turned. Behind her, Namor the Sub-Mariner was hefting himself over the cutter's railing. Warbird stepped aside as the King of Atlantis crossed the deck of the ship to stand in front of Iron Man.

"Namor," Iron Man said in cold greeting.

"What happened to the egg?"

"It's right here, of course." Iron Man put a hand to his side and clicked a hidden stud on one of the disc-like pods hanging from each hip. The pod opened and he drew a green, gelatinous egg, roughly the size of a softball, from the compartment.

Namor considered the egg, his black eyes narrowing in apprehension, then he returned his gaze to Iron Man. "And what will you do with it?"

"You tell me," his opponent replied. "I could give it to you for safekeeping and risk another one of the things we battled today rearing its head again in a few years..."

"Or you could vaporize it in your palm right now," Namor finished. "But can you do that, knowing that there's a life within?"

"You'd be surprised what I can do, Namor. What do you suggest?"

Namor put out a hand, palm up. "Give it to me. It is all that is left of my wife, and if I am with it when it hatches, I can ensure it will never be as destructive as it's parent was."

"Just as you 'ensured' Marrina wouldn't be destructive?"

Namor stiffened, and for a moment Tony Stark thought he'd gone too far. Then the Avenging Son nodded.

"I couldn't anticipate what happened to Marrina. But I can keep it from happening again with this little one, if only I am present when it hatches. Give him to me."

Iron Man stared at the Sub-Mariner, the two of them locked in a battle of wills with Namor's open hand hovering expectantly between them.

"Iron Man?" Warbird said uncertainly.

Sighing, Iron Man turned his gauntlet palm-downward and dropped the egg into Namor's naked hand.

"I pray that when next we meet, it is as allies," the King of Atlantis said, then he launched himself into the air, swooped backwards in an arc over the deck of the ship, and disappeared back over the railing.

"Wow," Warbird whispered, watching Namor's lithe body vanish beneath the deck. "I talked to him briefly during that crazy Morgan Le Fay business* a few months back, but..."

(* See Marvel's *Avengers* vol. 3 #1-3 - Russ)

Catching herself, Carol self-consciously stopped talking about Namor and quickly changed the subject. "So what do we do now, Iron Man? Now that your Dirty Harry impression is done, I mean."

The armored Avenger turned to regard her through his eyeslits, and when he spoke, even through the armor's voice synthesizer, Warbird could tell he was grinning from ear to ear.

"Why, I thought that would be obvious... we celebrate, of course. Isn't that what heroes are supposed to do when the good guys win?"

Namor had crossed barely a league when the egg began to stir in his hand. A sperm whale passing nearby sensed the Sub-Mariner's presence and offered in its body language to provide transportation back to Atlantis.

Go, gentle creature, Namor commanded. The Sub-Mariner has no need of your generous services today. If, however, you come to Atlantis in your travels, warn them that I shall be home shortly, and that I will not be alone.

The whale continued on. Veering off, Namor alighted atop an underwater peak and sat down upon its edge, the egg cupped carefully in both hands.

The gelatinous softball-shape tore down the middle. Namor helped it along, peeling the slimy chunks of egg away from the life within. When it was over, he held a yellow-skinned, humanoid baby in his arms, barely big enough to fill his powerful hands. The alien fussed for a few moments, then settled down comfortably into the King's palms. Within moments, it was asleep.

Namor smiled, an expression awkward and unfamiliar to the muscles in his face. The replication was complete. The child had bonded to and mimicked the form of the first being it came in contact with... Namor himself.

Marrina was dead, and her children were also gone, but the grandson of the King of Atlantis was alive and well. Maaken would be his name. It was an old Atlantean name, borne by a proud tradition of heroes. Namor would see that the child in his arms would grow to live up to it.

Tucking the newborn carefully against his body, Namor started for home.
