



#19

“RAMPAGE”

Written by Gregg Epstein

It was seven o'clock and Tony Stark was dressed in a black tuxedo with a bow tie on. He was in the basement of Stark Solutions and he was late for the Maria Stark Foundations Charity Ball for the homeless. He was supposed to be there with a robot double of Iron Man, to raise money for homeless shelters. His day was spent with his latest one night stand, Anastasia Swift, a night of hot sex and hotter love. When he looked at his watch, knowing that he would be late, he told her that he had to go and he would meet her at the Charity Ball.

Right now, he sits in his lounge swivel chair in his basement laboratory and talks with his sentient computer/ artificial intelligence and another current love interest who satisfies his every sexual fantasy.

He presses a stud on his computer console and Jocasta comes to life.

“Hello, Master Tony, what shall I do for you now?” she asks him, appearing before him in a tight business suit, sitting on his lap.

“I need to test the newest Iron Man armor for his combatant. I need War Machine.”

“|Right, Master Tony. As always, Tony.”

The image kisses him on the lips and then disincorporates into the computer mainframe. She appears on the screen and begins the process.

Tony realizes, breathes in and out, and places the VR equipment on his head. He plugs it in.

There is a large explosion in the other side of the basement wall and War Machine appears. The robot warrior is clad in his usual grey and white armor. He points his arm at Tony, who is by now asleep, and extends his machine gun at him.

“I’m sick and tired of being second string to the high and mighty Iron Man! Now my pain ends. Now yours begins! Die, Tony!!”

Before the ersatz War Machine can pull the trigger of the big machine gun, an amber and crimson hand reaches out from the darkness to grab his and twists it to the ceiling above him. The weapon discharges and punches a hole into the ceiling.

‘Jim Rhodes is way cooler than you.”

The newly arrived armor of Iron Man punches War machine squarely in the jaw, downing him. War machine writhes on the ground in mock pain and injury until he eventually dies a robotic death.

"You did good, boss," Rhodes says, as he enters from the darkness and the soot and dirt that the battle causes. "I particularly liked the part where you said I was cooler than the present War Machine."

Tony took off the VR equipment and unhooked it. "I thought you might. Now we might as well get on to the benefit."

Beep. Beep. Beep.

"I'll get it, boss." Rhodes answered the red emergency phone. After a quick conversation, he hung up the phone and turned to Tony.

"What was that all about?"

"You are not going to believe it."

"Try me."

"Okay, Remember that guy Psi-bot that was part of the Drug Mutants under the fatherly wing of the King Snake in Harlem. It seems that after his fight with the Thing, Code :Blue, and Crisis and Sonik he went to the Vault with the rest of the Drug Mutants and soon escaped. He is tearing up the city. What are you going to do?"

"I'll go as I.M. immediately. I want you to go to the benefit with one of my LMDs. No reason why Stark shouldn't be at the benefit."

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Iron Man flies over the skies of New York, making his way down to Harlem where Psi-bot and the rest of the Drug Mutants are headquartered. He knows that this will ensue in a fight, a battle or clash of titans, but he also knows that it is inevitable. He sometimes relishes in the thrill of the hunt and the fight itself.

Hitting Harlem through its south side, he sees a trail of debris that shows him where the path of destruction's origin is. He turns on his infrared scope to see where Psi-bot may be. He scans left and right, north and south, but he finds nary a Psi-bot.

The one person or persons who may know how to fight this Psi-bot is Crisis and Sonik but they are busy battling Klaw and his new team of super criminals. \*

(\*See Cap #14—shameless plugging Gregg.)

He does though see a bunch of figures entering and some exiting a what he thinks is a crack house. Those that are exiting are drugged out teens and the ones that are entering are members of the special task force, Code:Blue.

"This does not look good," Iron Man says to himself, as he makes a swift left arc and lands in the street. "I better see what this is all about. This may lead to Psi-bot and the rest of the Drug Mutants."

As he approaches the crack house, a young drugged out African American teen trips over himself and slams face first into Iron Man's iron clad armor. The Golden Avenger picks him up, sets him right, and asks for an explanation of what is going on here.

"Can't you tell, suh?! It's a war between those Drug Mutants and Code: Blue. Where are Crisis and Sonik to save us from this senseless bloodshed?"

"Don't worry, I'm here. I should be enough to handle these mutants."

Iron Man points to a Red Cross truck pulling up as the teen goes looking for medical attention and he runs into the crack house. There is a loud, large explosion and then, seconds later, Iron Man is propelled out of the building and slams against a couple of idle vehicles.

"That may not have been one of my best strategy moves," Iron Man said.

Suddenly, Psi-bot charged out of the crack house with a couple Code: Blue agents close behind him, obviously with one thing on their mind. To kill Iron Man. He had erected his machine gun in one of his robot hands, aiming it at the Golden Avenger's heart. Iron Man may not have as many heart troubles as he did before but Psi-bot was certain to make sure he did now.

Psi-bot aimed the weapon again and fired it at the torso of Iron Man. It seems that Iron Man was injured from his previous attack and this only confirmed it.

"What—what did you do to me?" Iron Man managed to get out, stuttering a little.

"Simple, my dear Iron Man. I transfigured an explosive device on the tips of the bullets of this machine gun so that when it struck its target, that's you, you went kablooeey!"

Iron Man's armor needed repairs quickly before he comes locked within that armor forever. Or he shatters his heart again. And the only place where he could get people to repair it or repair himself was back at Stark Solutions in Manhattan. Harlem was a long way off.

Iron Man hit his jet thrusters and he was off towards base. And all Code: Blue and the innocent citizenry of Harlem could wonder was how could a super hero abandon them in their time of peril?

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Later, at Stark Solutions...

Tony Stark had by now taken off his battle-ridden armor and was applying the final touches on repairing it. He had rolled in a huge machine into his basement factory and pressed a computerized stud on its mainframe console. Then, a laser escaped the gaping hole in it and started to literally sew up the damages to the armor plating that protected him from foreign attacks.

"Any luck, Tony?" Pepper Potts said, entering the enclosed room along with Harold 'Happy' Hogan, ex-boxer, ex-chauffeur to Tony Stark. Behind both of his dear friends was Jim |Rhodes, who went by the nom de guerre, Rhodey. He used to be War Machine but had

given up the life, since then. Now, a new, more pompous black man had taken up the mantle of War Machine.

"Sorry, Pepper," Tony said, after the laser had done its work on the armor, as he had lifted up the safety protection goggles that prevented him from feeling the backlash of the laser. "None so far. I have been able to repair is far more severe. It seems that this Psi-bot character has been packing the acute weaponry of a small army in his arsenal. Where did he get the money for these weapons and where was he able to get it?"

"I don't know, Tony," Rhodey said. "You said that he was a part of a larger group that fought the Thing of Fantastic Four fame called the Drug Mutants. It's only logical that he made his money, selling and using drugs to minors."

"We may have to contact Crisis and Sonik who have encountered these people in the past and enlist their aid in capturing them."

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At his penthouse apartment, the King Snake is surrounded by beautiful, naked women, all prostitutes. They were crawling on his large expansive bed, tasting his love.

When they were done having sex with this one man, the King Snake heard the door bust open. It was Iron Man, Crisis, Sonik, and various members of Code: Blue, including their leader, Stone.

When the King Snake saw the gig was up, he pulled his mink fur over his naked body, jumped out of bed, and flew out the window. The prostitutes scrambled for safety, some escaping, some not so much. There was one woman who was only wearing a gold watch and was apprehended by Crisis.

"It's over, miss," Crisis said, "you're going downtown."

"What should we do about the King Snake?" Sonik asked.

"Iron Man, if you would please," Crisis said.

Giving the heads-up sign, Iron man used his jet thrusters to fly out the broken window to go after the King Snake. When he was in the open air, he used his vision to spy the King Snake standing on one of the roof tops, carrying a rifle and shooting blindly at the Golden Avenger. Iron Man fired his lasers at the rifle, shattering it into a million pieces.

Then, Sonik fired a sonic burst at the King Snake, grazing his skull. Dazed, the drug dealer and pimp fell to the waiting earth below. Surprisingly enough, he landed on both feet.

Iron Man started to make a left arc to go after him, when he distinctly heard Crisis' voice ring in his neuro-transmitters.

"Leave him. We'll get him next time. We got what we came for," Crisis said.

Iron Man nodded and returned to the apartment. He saw that Code: Blue were carting the unnamed female back to the station and Crisis and Sonik were left to clean the mess up.

"So, that's it. No closure, no resolution," Iron Man said.

"Oh, there will be closure but not now. You can't expect to win them all." Crisis led Iron Man and Sonik out the door. "So, I.M., what are you going to do now?"

"I have a date with a supermodel. And if I'm correct, she will be very disappointed if I'm late again." Tony Stark frowned underneath his mask.

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#20

"THE AIM AFFAIR – PART ONE"

Written by Gregg Epstein

"43-44-45-46-"

Tony Stark was in the workout room, benchpressing some weights. He had to be in perfect, tip-top shape to be in the super hero business. He was alone thus far, until someone walked in. It was Pepper Potts.

"Do I have any appointments today, Pepper?" Tony asked his social secretary.

"No, I don't believe so.' She had memorized his entire schedule, a weird enough talent in and of itself. "Why?"

"Because I need the day off for some personal business."

"Where you going?"

"To Canada. I had contacted Alpha Flight recently and they have had some trouble with AIM\*, so I thought I might check it out. Give them a hand."

\* ( Check out Alpha Flight #1-11 and AF Annual 2001-Gregg.)

"Why do you feel you have to do that? Can't they do that themselves?"

"It seems that the first time they fought AIM\*\* the battle ended with MODOK and AIM missing. So I thought I'd check out what happened to our favorite floating head."

\* ( This time, Wolverine #142-3-Gregg again.)

"So I guess there's no changing of your mind?"

"No doubt about it."

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Harold 'Happy' Hogan runs down the hallway within the main offices of Stark Solutions, with a mission on his mind. He is terribly out of shape so that the simple sprint puts him out of breath. He makes it to the elevator and knows that Stark's office is on the third floor, so he presses the up and third floor button.

The elevator pinged and the doors opened. Happy stepped outside and once the doors closed again, he started his sprint again. By the time that he reached the door to Stark's office he was out of breath again.

He knocked heavily on the door.

"I've got something to talk to you about, Tony."

On the third knock, the door opened and Stark wasn't in the room. Two people were, Pepper Potts and Jim Rhodes. A long time ago Pepper was married to Stark's best friend and chauffeur Happy Hogan. They were divorced but now they are trying to get back together.

"Where's Stark?!" Happy asked.

"He's not here, Happy," Potts said.

"Where is he then?" he asked.

"What do you want, Hap?" Pepper said.

"I just need to know where he is."

"He's off saving the world, again," Rhodes said.

"Fine time for that, I say. Where's his priorities?"

Happy looked at his shoes. "Where is he?" he again asked, this time a whisper.

"He's in..."

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### **London, Canada, at the old AIM factory**

For the past few hours, Iron Man had been flying across the country, crossing the continental divide into Canada to make it to London, Canada, where he was sure that AIM was last seen. He knew that if Modok was still alive, that big monstrous head, that he would be a menace to society. And if he was formulating new plans then he had to be stopped post haste.

Iron Man opened a compartment on his wrist, it was a communicator that he would use to contact his artificial intelligence, Jocasta.

"Jo, could you patch me into the Alpha Complex and their mainframe computer and tell me what happened to MODOK and AIM?"

"Sure, Tony. I'll see what I can do. Wait a minute."

"Don't take too long, Jocasta."

Iron Man looked through his visual receptors at the wrecked AIM factory. It looked to him as though the factory itself had simply vanished but there was something in the rubble, a large figure. What could it be, he thought.

It was at that exact moment that there was a huge explosion emanating from the rubble. A figure appeared out of the resolute darkness. It was the former leader of AIM, it was MODOK.

"Jocasta, I think we have a situation here!"

"I'm right on it, Tony. MODOK may be still alive. Alpha Flight believes that he is still alive. I forgot to tell you earlier, Tony. We've been busy here at Stark Solutions."

"Thanks for telling me now, Jocasta. I appreciate the thought."

"Do you need assistance, Tony?"

"No, Jocasta. I think I can handle the situation at hand."

Iron Man turned off his A.I. connection and turned his attention to the ruined MODOK. MODOK started to laugh loudly and fired a single bolt of psychic energy from the band that was affixed to his brow. It shot past Iron Man and caused a crater in the ground.

"Alpha Flight is mine to do with as I please," MODOK said, soaring into the air. "I will destroy them!"

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## **Stark Solutions**

"Ouch! That hurts!"

"It's supposed to. It's iodine."

Returning to his headquarters in New York City, Tony Stark had taken off his Iron Man armour as painful as that was for him in his current beat up condition. The battle with MODOK had taken a lot out of him, physically. MODOK may be back but this was a more ruthless version of the on-again off-again AIM leader.

The woman applying the iodine on his chest and biceps was Pepper Potts. A long time ago she was Stark's secretary but her job has advanced somewhat. Now she was playing nurse to the wounds that were inflicted upon him as Iron Man.

"Feel any better, Tony?" Pepper asks.

"I do feel better. Now all I have to do is put on the armour and go after AIM. He said that he had revenge on Alpha Flight in mind. I have to stop him."

"Not now you don't. You're in no condition to do any fighting or super-heroing. You need time to heal. You need rest and relaxation."

"I know, Pepper. But I can't let MODOK roam free."

"I know you can't. But you need to let your injuries heal before you open them again." She sighed and continued. "Where will you go? Searching aimlessly won't help matters any. "

"I'll go to the Alpha Complex. I've a nasty feeling that that is where MODOK will go."

"Do you really think that MODOK is after the Flight? Why did he bruise you so badly if you were merely inconsequential? He probably wants you to go there."

By this time, Tony had put on the rest of his armour. "I know but I have to chance it. I may need Alpha Flight's help to defeat him."

"Be careful, Tony, I-"

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## The Alpha Complex

It is a quite night at the headquarters of Alpha Flight, especially in the security wing where Alpha flight keeps their criminals for incarceration. They have not kept a lot of criminals here because mostly their villains have been of a mystical nature and they are either housed within Live world or Shaman's pouch. The ones that are kept here are the members of Advanced idea mechanics, the Canadian division that plagued them a few months ago.\*

\* ( On and off between issues 1 through 15, where they were finally captured-Plugging Gregg.)

While Alpha Flight sleeps, the Scientist supreme, Brainwave, the AIM agents, and the Faux Alpha flight do not sleep. Instead, they brood and plan their first escape. Even though Guardian has placed power dampeners on their wrists, they believe that they can escape with every bit of success as their peers.

And their dream will come true.

BAAAAROOOOMMMM!!!!

A power blast from the brow of MODOK rocks the Alpha Complex's world as the wall leading to the outside world explodes in a blaze of fire and glory. MODOK sits there smiling at his compatriots. Another mindblast frees them of the power dampeners. They are free to use their powers. And not a moment too soon because here comes Alpha and Beta Flight.

The first one to enter the separation between broken wall and freedom is Kane. He extends his claws and vaults into battle, saying, "You tarnished my name once, AIM buddies, not this time! Not anymore!"

"And you do have a flair for the dramatic, don't you Kane? But we shall destroy you as Alpha Flight did to your robot form many months ago!"\* MODOK screamed, as he thrust a mindblast at Kane's chest, hurling him ever backward.

\* ( In the now-classic Alpha Flight #1-Gregg again.)

"What's going on?!" Dei Guan said, still drowsy from sleep. He transformed into his Jade Dragon self. "Doesn't anyone believe in giving Alpha or at least, Beta Flight any rest?!" He breathed in the nighttime cold air and breathed fire at the escaping AIM agents. But MODOK deflected it with one mighty powerful mindblast. The reverberation of the fire backlash distracted Beta Flight and the arriving Alpha, or what was left of it, \* to let the AIM agents escape.

\* ( See Alpha Flight #23-24 for their dwindling ranks-Gregg.)

As MODOK and AIM were just a dot on the horizon, Guardian saw a golden and crimson object approaching them. As it got closer, they saw that it was none other than Iron Man.

"It looks like I was too late," Iron Man said, as he landed in front of the Alpha Flight.

"Too late for what depends on your point of view," Guardian said. "I can't believe that MODOK is still alive."

"I'm afraid that that's my fault. He was near death but I found him and being near an energy source such as mine, he was jumpstarted to life. I'm sorry, Guardian."

"Don't worry about it. It's not your fault. I'm sure MODOK would have found another energy signature to jumpstart himself to life. The problem now is what are we going to do about it."

"I would like to help," Iron Man said. "I will search for them and bring them back here for incarceration."

"Okay, if you feel that way. "Alpha and Beta Flight will stay at the Complex for backup if you need it. Also, if you do need extra help, I would recommend contacting Kamikaze in Northern Canada. He's staying at Crawley's and Jeffries' apartment."

"Will do."

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### **Madison Jeffries' Apartment**

"What can you tell me about this new incarnation of AIM?" Iron Man asked Kamikaze who was staying with Diamond Lil at the apartment that she shared with Madison Jeffries. "Even though I'm going after him, you have as much a connection to MODOK as I do."

"What would you like to know?" Kamikaze said.

"They told me you were difficult but I never thought it would be like this. "

"Well, to be honest, I was never in the MODOK AIM. I came afterwards. Y'see, after MODOK disappeared, a new AIM was formed using a paranormal strikeforce with me at the helm. My assignment was to capture all of Alpha Flight so that AIM could mass produce the Faux Alpha Flight. They were successful."

"And then?"

"Then, after all that, Lillian, my darling Lil, offered me a job at Alpha Flight. But that didn't last too long."

"So I've heard. The Prime Minister has thinned the ranks of Alpha Flight. Life's a bitch." Iron Man started his jet thrusters. "Thank you. I'll keep you abreast of my progress."

Iron Man vanished in to the skyline.

"Darling Lil'? Why, I oughtta-

The fight between Madison Jeffries and Kamikaze started anew.

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### **Back at Stark Solutions**

"Back so soon?" Pepper asks, clad in a white terrycloth robe.

Tony was still in his armour with his helmet up, sitting at a computer terminal. "Yeh, Pepps. I found Alpha Flight but I was too late to stop MODOK from doing what he planned to do."

"Which was?"

"Breaking AIM out of the Canadian prison in the Alpha Complex. Guardian offered his help but I declined it."

Pepper was on alert. "Are you crazy, Tony? Frankly, you need all the help you can get to defeat MODOK?"

"I thought you were against me going to Alpha Flight."

"You read me wrong. I wasn't against you going for help but I was against you going to fight MODOK injured and all beaten. What were you thinking?"

"Trust me, Pepper. I know what I'm doing."

"Famous last words."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Only that you must be stupid to think you can defeat MODOK and AIM all by your lonesome."

"I did it before."

"No, you didn't. You always had help. Like War Machine."

"I can't this time. Rhodey's not War Machine any more."

"Don't I know it."

"Is it just me or is this argument going nowhere?" Tony asks.

"It's just that you're so bullheaded," Pepper affronts. "I hate arguing with you, anyway."

"So let's not argue."

"Let's."

Tony put on the rest of his armour and was off.

## Zytec Industries

A large head appears over the grassy knoll that passes for the entrance of this scientific institute. This head is none other than MODOK and with him are his large army of AIM agents, with ray guns and laser rifles in tow.

"There, my agents, is the place where we will find the radioactive isotope to grant us more power to take over this paltry planet that men call Earth," MODOK said, as he floated over the locked doors. Below him and the agents were two guards with barely enough weapons to stay alive rather than handle this tremendous threat.

"Shall we attack them, MODOK our great lord," one of the agents whispered in a tone of authority to his leader.

"Yes, my agent. Attack them we shall. Attack them and slaughter them and make away with our prize."

A crimson bolt of electricity suddenly hit MODOK on the temples and nearly struck him unconscious. The agents were all surprised and they opened fire on the intruder. They screamed bloody murder. They screamed at Iron Man, the Golden Avenger.

"You really don't think that I'm going to let you get away with this, do you, MODOK baby?!" Iron Man said, making a dramatic entrance to the grassy knoll that all presented and accounted for were at. He raised a dismissing gesture as a way to make peace, not war. It was an equivalent to raising a white flag in times of battle.

"Iron Man, you don't really think that you could stop me and us, do you, now?" MODOK asked his opponent. "For this transgression, you shall die a horrible death." With that statement said, MODOK fired a blast of psionic energy from the band across his brow. Iron Man was so distracted from the conversation he was having with MODOK that he didn't notice the villain's attack and had no way to defend himself against it.

Iron Man fell to the ground, stunned.

"With Iron Man out of the way," MODOK commanded, "we can proceed with our plan."

Ignoring Iron Man, MODOK and the rest of the AIM agents proceeded to enter the institute's inner entrance. They disabled the two guards easily, who thought that Iron Man would help them against MODOK and his beekeeper forces.

As Iron Man groaned awake, a SHIELD jet landed mere feet away from him. The exhaust alone from the jet was enough to awaken him.

"<UHNNNN> Did anyone get the number of the Mack truck that hit me? Who's that getting out of the jet? It better be the Avengers."

"No, not the Avengers. Someone better."

Iron Man saw three figures joining him on the grassy knoll. It was Captain America, the Falcon, and Sharon Carter, Agent 13 of SHIELD. He couldn't ask for better reinforcements.

"What are you guys doing here? As if I hadda ask.'

Cap reached out a hand for Iron Man to use to stand up. Ever the gentleman, eh Cap? Thought Tony Stark.

"It looked like you needed some help here, Iron Man."

Iron Man took Cap's hand and stood up. "Thanks, Cap. Hullo, Sharon, Falcon."

The two other associates nodded in the affirmative.

Bombs exploded within the factory.

"Looks like we have a fight to fight," the Falcon said.

"I just wanna kick some AIM ass!" Sharon Carter shouted.

"Let's go, men! This time MODOK's gone too far!" Captain America said, as he launched himself into battle.

Whatever business Alpha Flight had with AIM would have to be put on hold because this time it's personal.

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#21

"THE AIM AFFAIR – PART TWO"

Written by Gregg Epstein

*PREVIOUSLY IN IRON MAN: Iron Man was engaged in a battle with MODOK at the old AIM factory in London, Canada but failed in his attempt to capture and incarcerate him. He went to the headquarters of Alpha Flight to tell them of the news since they were the last super beings to encounter AIM. But he was too late; MODOK had already arrived to free the AIM agents imprisoned there, along with the Faux Alpha Flight. Declining Alpha's offering of help, Iron Man failed again to capture MODOK and AIM before they stole a nuclear device. As he was licking his wounds, Iron Man saw the arrival of Captain America, the Falcon, and Sharon Carter, Agent 13 of SHIELD...*

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"Fan out! Hit them from all sides! They mean business!"

One AIM agent recocked and loaded his laser weapon and started fighting at Captain America. Upon seeing the laser barrage approach him, Cap flipped backwards in a cartwheel. When Cap landed several feet away, he raised his shield to deflect the lasers.

"Sharon, move in! You're the only one who can match him, gun for gun!"

"You got it, Cap!"

As Sharon Carter pointed her service revolver at the agents and fired madly, Iron Man did not like that the Captain was barking out orders. They weren't even Avengers any more.\* Now, they were just heroes. The greatest heroes of the world.

\* (See Avengers #14-plugging Gregg.)

"Cap, look out!"

Iron Man vaulted in the air and fired a repulsor ray at the air, where MODOK had fired a psycho blast at Captain America.

"Thanks, Iron Man."

"Anytime, Cap."

Sharon Carter fired one shot from her revolver and missed on purpose; she singed MODOK's brow. He nearly fell unconscious.

"Retreat, we must retreat. AIM retreat!" MODOK screamed and used AIM's Teleportals to teleport them to another place.

"Dang. They escaped again," the Falcon said. He was swirling around and had just now landed. "Where could they have gone. Think they went back to Canada to exact their revenge on Alpha Flight?"

"No, they wouldn't be that stupid. They need to formulate a plan first."

"Iron man, this is your fight," Cap said. "Tell us what you want us to do."

"Cap, as much as I would love to have your help on this, I think I'll be flying this one solo. I have to go back to Stark Solutions to see what my next plan is."

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Harold 'Happy' Hogan walked with Virginia 'Pepper' Potts through Central Park. It was for the 150th celebration of the formation of the park. They even watched the anniversary documentary on channel 4.

Happy looked over at the grounds of the park and saw two teenagers throwing a frisbee around. They were excellent catchers and he was wondering what had happened to him and Pepper since that battle with the King Snake. He saw Tony, his boss, his ex-friend, kissing his ex-wife. He knew that there was an attraction between the two many years ago but that was before Happy had married Pepper. He just couldn't explain his actions. What had he been thinking? Tony knew that he and Pepper were reconciling, to patch up their failed marriage.

"What's up, Hap? You look troubled."

"Nothing," he whispered. It was almost a non-existent thought.

"I know you, Hap," Pepper said, trying to appeal to his rare sense of sensitivity. He was a brash man, always given in to the bad parts of his anger when provoked and this was a time when he was genuinely provoked. He couldn't think of a way to explain to his soon-to-be wife again that he was jealous of his boss and friend, the high and mighty Tony Stark, the invincible Iron Man, for kissing her in plain view of everyone. Not to mention revealing his secret ID to those upstarts, Crisis and Sonik. What had he been thinking?

On second thought, Pepper called him affectionate names and she had been the one who kissed him.

"Did you really mean that when you kissed him? " Happy finally said. He couldn't believe that he got the nerve to say what he wanted to say for so long a time.

"I know it looked bad but I didn't kiss him. Tony had a long talk with Crisis and Sonik after the battle, and they explained that one of the King Snake's henchmen is a psychic and he used his powers to confuse Iron Man and me, too. That was why Tony had that weird experience with Jocasta. Apparently one of them is a computer hacker." She paused, and then, continued. "You know I love you, you big lug."

"Oh, Pep, yer the greatest."

Before they had a chance to fully kiss, they saw a large floating head overhead.

Then, darkness.

Complete and utter darkness.

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## **Stark Solutions**

"What hit me?? Did you get the license plate number of that AIM agent?" Pepper Potts groaned awake. She had a nasty bruise atop her head where she connected with the wall.

"There, there, rest easy. You're in Stark Solutions." This statement came from Tony Stark. He was attired in his Iron Man armour but his faceplate was up, so that she could see his face. "It's Tony. What happened to you? And where is happy?"

"I don't know. Last thing I remember is my head hitting the wall. Then everything went black."

"That's not very encouraging. Why don't you tell me what happened?"

"Okay. Me and happy were walking, trying to get back together and all. Then, before we knew what was going on, MODOK and AIM was there. They said they wanted only Happy. I tried to resist and like the good book says, the rest is history."

Tony put a pillow under Pepper's head and placed an ice pack where the bruise was. "So that is MODOK's plan. They want happy to get at me. But what are they planning to do with him is the operative question. Kidnapping civilians is not their modus operandi."

"What are you going to do?"

"Why, rescue him, of course."

"But you don't know where they're keeping him or what they plan to do with him or you."

"I may just have to wing it."

"I don't know if I love Happy or I'm falling madly in love with again, Tony," she said, wincing in pain as she tried to sit up. "But I won't have you go there half-cocked. He was my husband once."

"I know that. But he's my friend or was once. I have to rescue him. I have to do something. Anyway, even though I don't have much of a plan, I know that AIM would probably make their move, by way of Happy's incarceration, before I make mine."

"I know, Tony. But thank you, thank you."

Tony slid back his faceplate and flew out the window to go to search for happy Hogan.

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## **AIM HQ**

"What do you want with me??" Happy Hogan asked, as he was chained to a wall in something resembling a dungeon. "I haven't done anything to you. Anyway, Iron Man will bust in here any minute to clean your clocks."

"I don't think so, dear Harold Hogan." MODOK said slyly. "First of all, Iron Man doesn't know that we apprehended you. Only that foolish female does but we took care of her."

"I saw how you took care of her, all right. You are awful quick to hurl helpless females against a brick wall. Iron man must have heard about that by now and how you cowards kidnapped me..."

"Maybe, maybe. But that is not important now. Because we are not going to destroy Iron Man; you are!"

"What the devil are you talking about? I'm not going to destroy Iron Man for you. You can't make me."

"Of yes, we can. Observe."

A mental command from MODOK's brow and a metallic device came soaring into the dungeon from a hidden compartment in the main office. It landed on Hogan's head and bizarre energy swirled around his head. There was a severe discharge and Happy collapsed on the ground. One of the AIM agents removed the device from his cranium.

"Now, will you destroy Iron Man, Harold Hogan?"

There was silence for a while and then, happy spoke with a dull monotone: "Yes, I will destroy Iron Man."

"Good, good. But you will not destroy Iron Man as yourself. We have fashioned a suit of armour for you to wear, equipped with its own brand of weaponry. Come, put it on... faux Iron Man."

With a speed that belies his size, Happy Hogan puts the Iron Man armour on.

"Yes, yes, yes!!! You are the most powerful Man of Iron ever, more powerful than that bastard Stark ever was. You shall kill him."

"I will kill Iron Man!"

"Now, go and destroy Iron man!"

"I will destroy Iron Man."

---

### **Over the skies of Manhattan**

Iron Man flew over the skies of New York City by way of his jet thrusters. It was truly a joy to behold. He loved flying because that was the time when he was really alone with his thoughts and could experience the beauty of Manhattan. But he couldn't be too alone with his thoughts, his inner most dreams because he was concerned about Happy.

Happy Hogan, his best friend, whom he felt that he betrayed him because his ex-wife Pepper was slowly falling in love with Tony. How could he deal with this? How??

A repulsor ray hit Iron Man on the back. Tony fell to the ground, stunned.

But then... did he just feel a repulsor ray? He thought he was the only one who possessed repulsor rays.

"I have been ordered to destroy you, Iron man."

Tony Stark saw another Iron Man facing him, wearing one of his older models. But he recognized the voice through the voice print.

"Happy is that you?!?"

"I am no longer Harold 'Happy' Hogan. I am Iron Man. And I must destroy you, Iron Man."

"I think you have something of an identity crisis."

Happy threw another repulsor ray at Tony's chest.

"Happy, don't! It's me, it's me, Tony."

"Who is this Tony?!"

"If you don't recognize me in my armour, perhaps you will recognize my face.' Iron Man lifted up his face plate revealing to happy that he was plain ol' Tony Stark, playboy, underneath. "I'm Tony. I'm your best friend."

"You stole Virginia Potts from me. She's me wife. She loves me."

"Yes, Pepper was your wife, but she is no longer your wife. You got divorced, remember? If you still love her, maybe she still loves you. But you have to let her know how you feel."

"Tony, I-I-"

Happy collapsed.

Tony lifted up the other Iron Man's helmet to reveal Happy's worn face. "Rest easy, my friend. It's over."

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*Author's Notes:*

*Captain America, the Falcon, Sharon Carter, and Iron Man: this story takes after Captain America #16, Avengers #14, and before Avengers West Coast #1.*

*Alpha Flight: this story takes places during Alpha Flight #26.*

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#22

"THE AIM AFFAIR – PART THREE"

Written by Gregg Epstein

*PREVIOUSLY IN IRON MAN: MODOK kidnapped Happy Hogan and while he was hypnotized, he donned a makeshift Iron Man armour and attacked the real Iron Man. Tony was able to reach through to Happy just in time to break through the spell that enraptured him...*

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### **St. Vincent's Hospital**

"This man is injured... he needs a doctor fast."

Iron Man stood in the entrance of the hospital cradling Happy Hogan in his arms. Underneath the mask and armour, Tony Stark was tired of this never ending battle between good guys and bad guys with the innocents among the casualties.

Nurse Angela approached him. "Ohmygod! What happened to him? I'll get Dr. Brendall right away."

Iron Man knew that he couldn't tell her or anyone here at the hospital what really happened; he knew he had tell a big fat lie, without revealing his secret identity. "He got caught in the crossfire of a battle between myself and MODOK. Please, help him."

A slew of doctors and nurses brought a stretcher to carry Happy to the emergency room. Iron Man started to follow right behind them but Brendall stopped him with a gesture.

"What's wrong, doc? He's a friend of my boss, Tony Stark, and Stark would want me to be by his side every step of the way."

"I'm sorry I can't do that, Iron Man. He needs a doctor's care not a bodyguard's. Tell Stark that he should be here himself."

Iron Man was silent and stepped away.

Suddenly, a familiar female figure entered the hospital and raced over to talk with Brendall. She was a tall redhead with a face full of freckles. Pepper Potts was worried about Happy, moreso than Iron Man or Tony Stark would care to admit.

"Who are you, miss?" Brendall asked. "I can only allow family members in here."

"I'm his wife. Is he all right?"

"Yes, I believe so. He seems to be in a state of shock from the battle across town. Come in, it's best if he's with family now."

"Pepper, I-I'm sorry, he..." Iron Man stuttered, fumbling with the right words to express how he was feeling. It came out empty, hollow. Words could not describe his emotions.

"It's all right, Iron Man," she said, keeping her composure under stressful times. "I'm sure you did all you could to save him. I'm just glad that he's all right and in a safe place."

"Thanks, Pep. You're a doll." Iron Man paused, what to say next escaping him until he formulated what he wants to say. "I have to go now. I have to get them. They did this to him and I can't let them get away scot free."

"I know. I'll give Happy your regards and Tony's too."

Seeing an open window to the side of the hospital, Iron Man's jet thrusters released air currents from his micro-transistors and he flew into the daytime sky, swooping over the canyons of Manhattan. All he could see in that moment in his mind's eye was Pepper's disappointed face at him not being with Happy in his hour of need.

---

## **Elsewhere in New York**

Frantically, to avenge his friend's injuries, Iron Man searches through the city for AIM's headquarters. He doesn't know where to start to look but he does know that the search won't be easy. They could be anywhere now, planning, scheming, plotting their next move against him and the free world.

Suddenly, an explosion tears up the concrete pavement below Iron Man and terrifies civilians, causing mass chaos. Seeing the danger at the present moment, the golden Avenger swoops down to see if he can exert some damage control and save lives.

As the smoke clears from the recurring concussion blasts and oncoming explosions and implosions, Iron Man views through his eye holes in his mask several familiar super human figures.

Alpha Flight, Canada's very own super human team.

The Faux Alpha Flight, their dark counterparts\*, who were engineered by AIM, the very villains Iron Man is currently after.

\* (For the Faux Alpha Flight's first appearance see M2K's AF #7-Gregg.)

Iron Man spies the real Madison Jeffries gesturing and the Faux Alpha Flight collapsing, deactivating.

Sensing that the battle is over, Iron Man lands in a clearing and approaches Alpha Flight's leader and founder, Guardian.

"Good job, team," Guardian says, congratulating his group. "You in particular, Madison. Without you, we couldn't have accomplished this. Oh, Iron Man, almost didn't see you there."

Iron Man laughs, getting the slight oversight. "I was going to ask if you needed any help. But I can see that you have matters well in hand."

"Don't worry about us, Iron Man," Guardian responds, confidence hinting at his voice. "We're just going to cart these losers to the Alpha Complex."

'How you expect to do that?' Iron Man asked, curious at the answer.

'We'll just use their teleports to transport them.'

"Guess you don't need me anymore. Bye, Alphans."

All of Alpha Flight says their good-byes to Iron Man as he makes a left arc into the skyline and flies out of sight with a slight push of the air currents.

---

Flying further across the city, Iron Man finally stops at a warehouse where he gets multiple readings on his mainframe computer. He calls in Jocasta.

"Jo, what do we have here?" He asks.

'I sense multiple figures in there carrying numerous and dangerous weaponry and one big fat head. That has to be MODOK.'

"You are as astute as ever. I'll get them. Over and out."

"Jocasta out."

Knowing that the time to attack is now, Iron Man flies straight through the brick wall of the warehouse. Upon entering it, he sees MODOK and a slew of AIM agents, planning and plotting, and mostly getting ready for their final battle with their arch-nemesis.

"Okay, MODOK, this is it! Your reign of terror ends here and now!" Iron man commands by upping the volume of his voice.

"Iron Man!" MODOK snarls, gritting his teeth. The big floating head spins around to face the Golden Avenger. "Attack him, my agents! Don't leave a trace of him left!"

"Oh, no, you don't, MODOK baby! This is for what you did to Happy!" Iron Man says, as he fires a bolt of transistorized repulsor rays at MODOK's general direction. But to defend himself, the big head fires a bolt of psionic energy to deflect the blast.

Then, the AIM agents fired their laser pistols at Iron Man's metallic hide. The laser bullets zinged and bounced off his shell, striking the crates that surrounded them. The bullets forced the crates to be open, out pouring other weapons of some sort.

One agent pulled the pin of a grenade and hurled it at Iron Man. Upon contact it exploded but seconds before it detonated, Iron Man used his jet thrusters to hurl himself in the air to avoid the blast.

Gotta get out of here before the whole thing blows, Iron Man thought, as he carried himself to safety.

"So, that's the end of this division of AIM," Iron Man said, as he watched the FDNY use flame retardant foam to smother the flames of the warehouse. "They couldn't have survived that."

But then, Iron Man hears a dull whisper; it almost sounds like laughter. He looks upward at the origin of the voice that it belonged to and saw a small speck in the sky. It couldn't be-

"They couldn't have survived that. They couldn't. Could AIM and MODOK be in the market of suicidal bombers?"

---

## **St. Vincent's Hospital**

Clad in his usual attire of a black three-piece suit, Tony Stark raced into the lobby of the hospital, approaching the front desk.

"What room is Happy Hogan in?" Tony asked, hurriedly.

"In 3B. You can see him now. He can see visitors now, not just close relatives."

"Thank you."

With that, Tony Stark walked over to room 3B. He slowly opened the door and saw Happy awake with Pepper sitting on the bed next to him, consoling him in his time of need.

"Oh, hi, boss," Happy says, getting up in his bed. "Look, Pep, it's Tony."

"I just came by to make sure that you were all right."

"I'm fine, boss. Just a concussion from the mind control device. If I ever get my hands on that MODOK bozo..."

Tony smiled and then frowned. "Iron Man went after them. They escaped."

"Too bad. Next time Iron Man gets them, I'll be there right beside him."

"You will not, Harold Hogan." Pepper scolded.

Tony interjected, "Pepper's right, Hap. Leave the heroing to the super heroes." He paused and then continued. "I'm really sorry for what happened. If there was anything I could have done to prevent it, I would."

"Don't worry about it, boss. If not me, it would have happened to someone else. I don't regret it. Just goes to show you how much of a boxer I used to be."

"No argument there, Happy."

The three laughed.

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#23

"I, SPYMASTER – PART ONE"

Written by Gregg Epstein

Night at Stark Solutions. It is midnight and the staff have already gone to their respective homes and turned in for the night. Tony Stark has gone to his mansion elsewhere in the city, along with Iron man, Jim Rhodes, Pepper Potts, and Happy Hogan. All this is meaningless to Spymaster, the master saboteur and arch-nemesis of Iron man; the only thing that matters to him is that Stark's factory is unguarded for his master plan to destroy the city of New York and its iron clad protector.

Spymaster parks his blue van in a parking space in the lot that when Stark Solutions is open, the staff would park their vehicles. It is disguised as a delivery van and that should suffice to the guards.

"Hey, what are you doing here?" one of the security guards says, as he draws his service revolver.

Spymaster does not speak, but he does move with the quickest speed. He does not need to speak because that would only alert the guards of his goings-on before it is too late.

He hurls a gas grenade at the guard and soon all the guards fall asleep due to the knock out gas contained within.

Ah, Stark Solutions, he thinks, surveying the product of Stark's years of success of being an inventor, now your inventions shall be mine.

Not wasting a single moment, Spymaster races into Stark Solutions proper. He knows exactly where Stark puts his greatest weapons, in the basement.

Entering the basement, he sees a locked safe where he knows that Stark would keep his inventions. He doesn't know the combination but a simple dissolve pellet should dispense of the lock in seconds. Watching the lock melt away with ease, he opened the safe and saw his most prized possession and Stark's as well.

The Lazer Gun.

He took it and held in his hands for brief moments, until pocketing it. This shall grant him new worldly powers. There are any number of international world powers that would give their eye teeth to possess this weapon. To destroy Iron Man.

In a matter of moments, Spymaster retraced his steps out of Stark Solutions and drove his van out of there.

---

Stark stood at his safe, within Stark Solutions the next morning. His whole cadre of staff members were there with him; Jim Rhodes, Happy Hogan, and Pepper Potts.

"Who could have done this, boss?" Happy asked Stark. "And right under our noses, no less?"

"My guess is Spymaster. He is a master saboteur and only he could have attempted to do this. I heard that he caused some trouble for the New Warriors recently."

"Damn that snake, boss," Happy responded with spite in his voice. "What are you gonna do about it?"

"Why, stop him, of course." Tony said. "Pepper, Hap, Jim... you can handle things at Stark Solutions until I get back."

Stark slipped into his office, closed the door behind him, and took out a special attache case. He opened it and saw his Iron Man armour folded into his component parts. He stretched them out and donned the armour of Iron Man. Now, he was ready for action and to find the elusive Spymaster.

Leaving thoughts of Stark Solutions and his staff behind, Iron Man soared into the morning sky. He made a left arc and flew over the cityscape.

---

For the past few hours, Iron Man searched the city for Spymaster but couldn't find him. That is not to say that he wasn't busy fighting crime.

He returned to Stark solutions hours later and he changed back into Tony Stark in his office and joined his staff members.

In the lobby, Anastasia Swift was waiting for him.

"What's this?" Tony asked surprised at her unannounced visit. "I didn't expect you to drop by here."

"Neither did I. I decided to forgive you for giving me the shaft the other day\*."

\* (See M2K's Iron Man #19 for details-Gregg.)

"Oh, you mean that. I'm sorry for deserting you but I had business to take care of here at S.S."

"I'm sorry for not speaking to you for days, Tony. My bad. Are you in the mood for a moonlight stroll?"

Tony tugged on his tie, loosening it a bit. "I'm sorry, Ana. I can't. I've got company business to take care of."

"Thanks a lot, Tony. I come here to share myself with you and you give em nothing but grief. Goodbye forever, Tony Stark."

She slams the door in his face on the way out.

"Not having lucky with women today, eh, Tony?" Jim Rhodes says to his boss and best friend, amidst a little laughter.

"No, I guess I'm not, Rhodey."

"Any luck with finding Spymaster?"

"No, I didn't find him. Guess I'll have to look harder."

"Are you going searching now?" Rhodey asked, a serious expression across his face.

"Might as well. Don't have much choice in the matter if I want to get my laser gun back post haste." Gathering up his special attache case, Tony again made it to his office, closed and locked the door behind him, and changed into Iron Man. Even though certain people knew that he was really Iron man, he felt more at home changing in private. He closed the attache case, folded his suit and underwear on the desk top, and flew out the open window going towards downtown.

It felt good to be in the air again. It was a certain thrill to be flying under his own power, rather than in his private jet as a passenger. He imagined it being a thrill and certain fun that Spider-man must have felt web swinging across town fighting villains. Or Captain America bounding from rooftop to rooftop. Any super hero he imagined would have loved the mode of travel under his or her own power wrapped up in their own thoughts.

He hoped he would catch Spymaster and get him soon as possible. Usually, Spymaster was a master sabateur and bring whatever weapons he stole to his boss. Who was his current boss? Who would have it in for Iron Man and Tony Stark, in particular? Any number of people. Justin Hammer came to mind. Also, Obadiah Stane. Or some new menace.

The problem with this particular clash with spymaster was that there were no witnesses, except for the guards and they were unconscious due to the knockout gas. So, Iron Man had to go on pure guesswork.

Where would Spymaster take the laser gun and why? He probably did it for the money or because he wanted to really stick it to Iron Man and Tony Stark, combined. A random thought occurred to him. Could Spymaster be working for international terrorists? The Mad Thinker was, a short time ago, as per Captain America's informing him told him.\*

\* (See Cap #13-14-Gregg.)

Iron Man turned on his radio-interconnect communications unit within his helmet to listen to the police band. Maybe they had picked up something that he couldn't see.

"<BZZTTT> All units respond to the downtown district for a superhuman emergency. A terrorist calling himself Spymaster is destroying private property using a laser device that he claims was made at Stark Solutions. All units respond immediately."

"That's my man," Iron Man said, as he turned off the radio connection and flew towards downtown.

When he got there he saw a horrifying sight. He saw Spymaster in the middle of rush hour traffic, pointing the laser gun at certain things; cars, buses, apartment buildings, shops, etc. The laser gun had certain explosive properties, so that whatever it hit exploded.

This was definitely not Spymaster's modus operandi. Sure he did these type of things in the past, but not now. Was a new man under the Spymaster's mask and guise? In this day and age, anything was possible.

Iron Man didn't want to alert Spymaster overmuch so as to alarm him of his whereabouts. He was afraid that he could point the laser gun at him and then his armor would explode with him in it. Dead Iron Men are not good. Not good at all.

The only thing he had to do was aim a pencil-thin laser from his own glove gauntlet to knock the gun from his innocent hands. Yeh. As if. Staying hidden, Iron Man held his aim hand with the other hand and pointed his index finger at Spymaster's trigger hand. He can't be a millimeter off, not more than a hairsbreadth.

ZZIITT! The laser missed. He missed. Iron Man never misses. But that wasn't the bad part. The bad part was that Spymaster heard and felt the laser and pointed his gun at Iron Man's floating form, pointed the laser gun at him and fired it.

This time it was Spymaster's turn to miss. This was developing into a pattern. But he did hit the fire escape above Iron Man and the rubble fell on top of him.

Iron Man slowly fell to the waiting ground below, weak as a kitten. The soot and dirt had gotten into his armor so that it wouldn't perform properly.

Spymaster approached the fallen Iron Man and pointed the gun again at his head. "I wonder what would happen if an explosive laser device hit iron?"

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#24

"I, SPYMASTER – PART TWO"

Written by Gregg Epstein

*PREVIOUSLY IN IRON MAN: Spymaster had stolen a laser device from Stark Solutions. While Iron Man had been searching for Spymaster to return the device to its original owners, which happens to be Stark himself, Spymaster had used the laser to wreak havoc on the city at large. Iron Man has been defeated by Spymaster and the villain has aimed the explosive laser device on Iron Man's armour...*

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## **New York City**

"I wonder who is the man behind the mask?" Spymaster asked Iron Man a rhetorical question as he pointed Stark's laser device at Iron Man's head.

"My guess is that you won't be around to find out." Iron Man retaliated by firing his jet thrusters at Spymaster's chest propelling him backwards against an old abandoned building's brick faced wall. In the meantime of the action, he dropped the device.

Iron Man stood up, the blast barely hurting him, and picked up Stark's laser device. "The day won't come by when I can't handle a two-bit crook like Spymaster. A man and his gun is thus defeated."

Police sirens wailed and the boys in blue finally arrived on the scene. Several cops exited their black and whites and approached the golden Avenger.

"Are you all right?" one cop asked.

"I'm fine. Nothing that my jets couldn't handle. I don't think that Spymaster will be going anywhere soon."

"Yes, he is. He's gone."

"What?!?" Iron man yelled at the top of his lungs, stunned at Spymaster's escape.

"Where is he? Where the hell is he?"

"We were hoping you could tell us."

"Sorry, I have to be going now. Stark keeps me on a very short leash." With that said, Iron Man flew above the throng of people, heading back to Stark Solutions.

---

## **Stark Solutions**

Dressed in his business suit, Tony Stark had arrived at his home base by way of Iron Man's jet thrusters and was now in the sub basement of his lab. He opened his safe and had put the laser device in it. He locked the safe and was greeted by his entourage of workers, Happy Hogan, Pepper Potts, and Jim Rhodes.

"Whassup, boss?" Rhodey said, as the three people entered the room. "I take it you took care of Spymaster. We all saw it on the news."

A slight smile crept up on his mouth below his moustache. "Yes, I did. But not completely. He escaped while the police came and I got my laser back."

"Too bad," Happy said. "But I'm sure he'll turn up. By the way, me and Pep have good news for ya."

"I'm listening," Tony said.

"We are going to remarry."

A bigger smile appeared on all their faces.

"Congratulations," Tony said. "This is like déjà vu all over again."

Jim Rhodes extended his hand and shook Happy's. "Congrats, Hap. But I hate to be a damper of your good tidings, but when did this come about? I know that you two kids have been deciding this for a while, falling in love all over again, but when did you decide this?"

Happy was about to answer, but Pepper stayed his hand. "I'll handle this, baby. It happened when Happy was put in the hospital by MODOK. We just realized how much we cared for each other. And that this time nothing will ever tear us apart."

"And Tony," Happy said, inclining his head to his friend. "I would like you to be the best man."

"I would be honored and it would be my pleasure."

"Thank you, Tony. You don't know how much this means to me."

"I think I have a nasty feeling."

And the four friends, all happy at the news, exited the sub basement of the lab to go to main office upstairs.

---

Tony had called Anastasia Swift the next morning to set up a date. He wanted to make amends with her, since she was willing and he parted company with her so abruptly.

"Tony, I'd love to go out with you," Ana said. "When would you like to go?"

Tony smiled. "How about right now? I could bring my limo around and pick you up."

"Oh, Tony, that's great."

"Hang loose, sweetheart. I'll be around."

Tony and Ana hung up the phone at the exact same time.

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### **Stane Offices in New York**

Obadiah Stane sat at his desk within his offices. He was deep in thought. He had been in hiding for some time now. he was an old enemy of Anthony Stark and his alter ego, Iron Man, back in the day. Now he was planning his next move to destroy his most hated enemy.

"Iron Man," Stane breathed, "has always eluded me. But now times are different. Now I shall destroy him, but he shall not die by my hand alone but by the hand of my agent Spymaster, the master saboteur. Soon, he shall arrive in my office and then our plan will begin anew.

"It was I who had planned the theft of Stark's laser device and it was I who had planted within the Spymaster's brain the idea of attacking Iron Man in person and the hapless citizenry of New York City."

Without knocking, the door to his office opened and Spymaster clad in his military costume entered. He didn't look pleased.

"You're not smiling, Spymaster," Stane said to his agent of destruction. "So I have to assume that your mission was not a success."

"What, you don't have a television? It was all over the news."

"What happened?" Stane whispered, annoyed at him.

"Well to put it bluntly, he kicked the crap out of me but I escaped, obviously. He also got Stark's laser device back."

"Regrettable but understandable. But we can defeat him again. I mean, you can. Down in the basement, that is where I keep my new and improved weaponry. Go there and get whatever weapons you like and destroy Iron Man. And this time I want no more failures."

"Mr. Stane, it would my pleasure."

---

After a nice dinner and a good movie premier, Tony Stark had his chauffeur drop Anastasia Swift at her apartment at another part of the city.

"I had a lovely time tonight, Tony," Ana said as they both walked to her doorstep.

"So did I, Ana. I hope that we can do it again sometime without our previous complications."

"I know what you mean."

Suddenly, a figure appeared seemingly out of nowhere, and approached Tony Stark. Ana screamed at the top of her voice and Tony turned around as the man grabbed the lapel of his jacket.

Spymaster punched Tony in the stomach, sending him sprawling backwards against the steps. "What... do you... want, Spymaster?"

"What I want, my dear Mr. Stark, is Iron Man. If you don't bring him here now, I'll kill your lovely girlfriend here."

"You sadistic animal!" Tony screamed and shouted clutching his stomach where Spymaster slugged him. "You'll never get away with this."

Spymaster charged at Tony Stark, lifted him up by the lapels of his jacket and hurled him into the street. Tony landed right beside the limo where his chauffeur parked it. He was still in pain but he had to fight back, change into Iron Man.

He opened the backseat of the vehicle and reached for his attache case. He opened it and unfolded his suit of armour. He held his helmet and looked into its dark, emotionless, vacant eyes.

"This is something that only Iron Man can handle," Tony whispered as he donned the costume.

Once the armour was on his person and he had shed his outer clothing, Iron Man stepped from the back of the limousine and quickly approached Spymaster and almost taking hostage Anastasia Swift.

"Let her go, Spymaster!" Iron Man ordered, deepening his voice to denote authority and something not to be trifled with. "Or you'll learn to regret it."

"Or what? You'll beat the living crap out of me, like you usually do. I've heard that same song and dance before, Iron Man. This time I hold the trump card. This is the deal. Either you take off your armour right now or I kill your sweetheart."

"Not on your life, buster!" Ana said, as she kicked Spymaster in the balls. I'd like to hear you carry more threats now, Ana thought, now that you'll be singing with a high voice.

Spymaster collapsed on the ground clutching his groin. "Now, I gotta admit that hurt but I'm not one to balk away from a challenge. Y'see, the girl dies, now."

"Anastasia, run! Now!!"

But Iron Man's warning came too late as Spymaster removed a gun from its holster and pointed it at Ana's breasts. Pointing one lone finger at his enemy, Iron Man trained a pencil-thin laser at the gun. The gun exploded and Ana was saved.

"As a second rate villain, you're really lame, Spymaster!" Iron Man said as he used his iron fist to knock him to unconsciousness.

Ana rushed over to embrace her savior. "Thank you, Iron Man. I was so scared."

"I know. But you did quite fine on your own. That kick to his balls was unexpected."

"You know me, Iron Man, I hate men that are all hands."

"I'll fly back to your apartment."

"No thanks, I rather go with Tony in the limo-waitasec, where's Tony? Spymaster threw him against the limo and then, you came."

"Just as I was arriving, I saw him cross the street to that phone booth and call the cops."

"Typical of men, all cowards."

"I think he's coming back right now."

Iron Man let his jet thrusters hurl him into the sky and in seconds, he was just a light in the sky. Ana started to walk back to limo when she saw Tony Stark sneak up behind her.

"Are you all right?" Tony asked, genuinely concerned.

"Yeh, no thanks to you. Iron Man had to save me. IT would not look good on my resume as a super model that a super hero had to save him. Super models and women in general are so empowering these days that a woman should be able to handle herself against a common mugger."

"But, Spymaster is no common pickpocket-"

"Anyway, why couldn't you save me and-"

Iron Man may have stopped a threat to his business and his lady partner, but Tony Stark suffers.

Another day in the life of a super hero.

---