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#25

“OPERATION: SWORD STROKE – PART THREE: THE MORE THINGS CHANGE...”

Written by David Wheatley

***Author's Note: This story is continued from Excalibur #22 and Captain America #19. If you've not read them, you might want to go and check them out first!***

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"I'm going to the East Coast for a little while," Stark said as he looked at Carol Danvers. "There's some things I need to do over there, and it's been a bit since I popped my head in to the office."

"After everything that's happened here, I guess we could all do with a break," she said. "You want me to tell the others?"

"Yeah," said Stark. "I'll be back in a few days, so try not to need me." He smiled. "Or Iron Man."

Carol chuckled. "We'll see what we can do," she said, with a shake of her head. "Though if the CSA comes back..."

"I won't be here, so it won't be my problem," Tony said. After the events that had occurred in Mayfield, the Commission for Superhuman Activities wouldn't be coming back to visit anytime soon, but if they did they'd be in for a very frosty reception.

"Have a good trip," Carol said. as Tony left for the airport and his private jet, waiting to take him back home. It had been had been a few weeks since he had been asked to set up the Avengers West by the CSA and after the debacle with Spymaster and Ana he had agreed because he needed to get away, to focus on something other than Tony Stark.

Rhodey had been doing a great job of keeping things going and it had been announced that Mr Stark had taken a well deserved holiday, his first since setting up Stark Solutions, and as the jet flew above the clouds and across the continent, Tony looked up the things that had been going on, things he needed to know, the improvements made to security to ensure someone like Spymaster didn't break in again. That had annoyed Stark above everything else but now things looked to be under control.

He loved it out west, but he had a fondness for the east as well. That was where his heart lay. He smiled as the thought crossed his mind. His heart. It was the shrapnel that was close to his heart that had meant he needed to be Iron Man and now that was gone, he was Iron Man still. It was as if he had moved one piece of metal from his heart

and exchanged it for another. There had been so many changes over the years, to the armour, to himself. He had died, several times and he had come back. He had kept coming back.

As he looked at his reflection in the mirror, he knew that he shouldn't even be here. He knew that he had died, died seeking redemption after betraying the Avengers for Kang, who it turned out had really been Immortus, pulling the strings. Those who had been a part of the Destiny War, and had eventually remembered had put him straight as to what had happened and he had known that it hadn't been his fault, but he had still been influenced. Immortus had used the neuro-web he had needed to survive to influence his mind and in doing so he had gained a hold on him, subtle in design and the master of time had altered things so that the evidence would point against him as a spy for Kang since the creation of the Avengers.

It had damned him to the others and his actions at Immortus behest had been inexcusable and he had known he was being used and in the end he had saved the team from the false Kang, at the cost of his own life. Then he had been replaced by younger version of himself from another dimension, and that version had joined the heroes in fighting Onslaught, and at the cost of their lives as well. The energy of Onslaught had been put in to each and every one of the heroes who had volunteered to contain the creature and they had known what came next.

The X-Men, in destroying the creature's physical essence and ending the threat, had summarily executed the possessed heroes. They had died. He had seen the television footage

What happened afterwards was the thing that had concerned him. He knew that Susan Richards had explained that in her last sentient moments, she had called out to her son as she died and as she did so, Franklin had reached to his mother and she had felt his presence and then she had felt no more, but Franklin had done something. He had recreated his parents, their friends, their very existence based on the memories in the head of his mother, and seeing it as a child being told a story he had altered some of the facts.

The teenage Tony Stark had been replaced by a grown up version of Stark, the way he had been before he had died. He was not the original Stark, as they were not the original heroes. They were all creations of Franklin, restored to their universe, given the memories of the past by whatever the Celestials had done. He knew this because of the test they had done to see how old the other universe had been and the Negative Zone tests had confirmed that their universe had been less than a year old and everything they had been was now called in to question.

On his return from the pocket universe as the best scientific minds had come to describe it, and those with lesser technical knowledge called the Franklinverse, he had seen the things from his life, the weaknesses, the dependencies on alcohol and his juvenile behaviour and he had been angry at himself. Never before had he seen himself

in such a light and it angered him greatly that he could have done such things, been such a person and he had promised he would change, but he needed to know who he was. Everyone else seemed to be satisfied that they were the original heroes, and it had been assumed that his dead body had been merged somehow with the younger version, but that had seemed wrong to Stark and he had looked in to it.

That body was still there, and so he had been left with questions, questions he could not take to his friends and colleagues. However, since he had made so many judgement lapses, however accidental, he knew that it was on his mind. His tryout of a silver and red armour had not worked, the Illuminati had made a fool of him and Spymaster... He sighed as he looked out at the clouds.

It was one of the reasons he was going to the east coast, back to New York. He needed to tell people what he had learnt, what he had discovered. He knew the best person to start with would be Steve Rogers, Captain America. Even though Steve had left the Avengers, he was still a reserve and he had helped with the recommendations for the West Coast team. He was the closest thing he had to a friend who would understand what he was saying, and he wasn't even sure how well Steve would take it. He'd know soon enough. They were meeting for lunch tomorrow, and tonight he had a dinner date with Rumiko Fujikawa. They hadn't spoken for a while, and he had considered how much he had missed her while he had been away from New York.

He had many changes to make in his life and he would take great pleasure in doing so, becoming a new man.

"Mr Stark?" said the air hostess and he looked at her.

"Yes, Olivia?" he said, thinking she was going to offer him a drink.

"You have a telephone call, sir," she said and Stark was surprised. There wasn't a great many who knew his movements. Rumiko was in meetings and Rhodey and the others were at some development somewhere.

"Did they say who they were?" he asked.

"Yes, they said they were calling from the office of the SHIELD Director."

"Forge?" said Tony. "How very interesting. I'll take it." He was intrigued at what the man could want, as he had not spoken with SHIELD for some time. They consulted with Stark Solutions on some contracting matters for technology and equipment, but that had lessened since Forge took over. Forge's mutant power to intuitively understand technology allowed him to build, design and repair things in advance of anything Stark could come up with, but Stark reassured himself by thinking that Forge's skills were a mutant ability, while his were self taught. There was a fine line, but it made him feel better. "This is Tony Stark."

"Please hold the line one moment, Mr Stark," said the female voice on the other end of the connection and Stark waited a moment. He knew Forge from way back when he had been working with the CSA, as his designs had been used in some of Stark's later works and he'd needed Forge's help.

"Hello, Tony," said Forge. "Sorry to disturb you."

"Not at all, Forge," Stark answered. "How can I help?"

"I'm sure you've been watching the news and seen the situation in Latveria," the SHIELD Director said.

"Sentinels," said Stark, closing his eyes. The day that Bolivar Trask had ever created such things was a day Stark cursed. They were a scientific menace, and Stark had created enough weapons technology to know what that meant.

"Yes," said Forge. "However we have another problem, one closer to home."

"I don't understand," said Stark and Forge explained that the sentinel technology had been purchased in the United States and the modifications that had been made had been done on US soil.

"Tony, there are an unspecified number of prototypes in Georgetown, Massachusetts."

"My God," said Tony, understanding the potential.

"Yes," said Forge. "It makes it an official SHIELD matter and I've assigned some of our best agents to go down and check it out. But I need someone with the technical expertise, or at least instant access to it."

"You're asking me to send in Iron Man," said Tony.

"I'm asking if you'd like to send him in as back up. I have one of his friends helping us out as well on this."

"Who?" asked Stark, thinking that it would be...

"Captain America." Forge's reply matched Stark's thoughts as well. Forge had played this one well, and he had grown to suit the chair he now sat in.

"The Avenger connection," said Stark.

"Something like that. I know I can't order you and I'd be a fool to try, but I can ask." Forge was being upfront about it all, Stark thought

"Okay," said Stark. "I'll ask him, and I think he'll say yes. He's as concerned about rogue weapons in the hands of Doom as I am and if they are on our turf, it needs to be sorted."

"Thank you," said Forge. "Hopefully we'll be able to get in before Doom activates them."

"Activates them?" Stark asked. Something was going on.

"Doom's obviously got something in mind," Forge said. "Knowing him, it'll be sooner, not later." Stark couldn't tell if the man was covering, but either way it was SHIELD business and not his.

"Understood. Tell your people that Iron Man will see them in Georgetown. As I remember it's not that big so finding them shouldn't be hard."

"Thanks, Tony. I owe you one."

"No problem," said Stark and hung up. His thoughts went to Rumiko. He wasn't sure how long this would take and he didn't want to cancel their date without a valid reason. He knew what he had to do - he would visit her on his way, as Iron Man. Then he would tell her the truth.

It was time to start letting people in to his life properly.

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Rumiko Fujikawa was in her office, thinking of what she was going to wear to go out with Tony at their get together that evening. They hadn't been together like this since the incident with the Illuminati. Iron Man had gone after them and he'd been humiliated by the Czar and she'd been instructed by her father not to see Stark again, until he and his staff redeemed themselves, for it would be dishonourable to be involved with such a man. She'd been furious, but she knew that soon enough that it would be forgotten, but that had been some time ago now and she had been surprised to get his call.

Surprised and pleased and she smiled as she looked out of the window as a red and gold streak hurtled through the sky. Iron Man, which meant he was back in town. Then she saw that Iron Man was coming towards the office and she tilted her head as she watched as he came closer. He landed on the balcony and walked towards her, then he stopped outside the window and gave it a gentle tap.

Rumiko was confused and she went to the window.

"What is it?" she said, fearing the worst.

"I need to talk to you, Miss Fujikawa," said the Armoured Avenger. "May I come in?" Rumiko nodded and opened the patio door.

"You need to talk to me?" she said. "I don't understand. Is there something wrong with Tony?"

"Not quite," he said and behind the mask she could see the eyes moving. "Just a moment, please." There was a high pitched noise for a moment and then it was gone. "That's better," he said.

"Better?" she said, not sure of what was going on. "What's better?"

"I deactivated the security system, so we could have some privacy."

"How dare you," she said, anger in her eyes at what the man was intimating. "I'm dating the man you protect."

"I know," said Iron Man. "That's why I feel safe doing this. Now." He seemed to hesitate a moment and then he removed the face mask. "Rumiko." His voice was no longer masked by the technical wizardry, and she could see a few beads of sweat on his forehead.

"Tony?!" she said, in amazement, wondering how she had never guessed and more than that how was it not more evident. "You're Iron Man?"

"Yes," he said. "I'm Iron Man. I always have been, well almost always. Rhodey was in here for a short time as well, while I was out of action."

"You're Iron Man," she said again, and Tony smiled.

"I needed to tell you," he said, "because I'm tired of running out on you, I'm tired of a lot of things and I want to clear the slate."

"You're not going to make tonight," she said, seeing the truth in his words and he nodded.

"I'm sorry, but something's come up, something for the attention of Iron Man. Now you see why I turned the security system off." She nodded.

"You're going to have to tell me how, why..." she said.

"When I get back," he said, and he held her hand, and though it was cold steel, she felt a warmth there as if it were his bare hand in hers. "I'll tell you everything." He looked in to her eyes. "I love you." She flushed and he lifted her face up with the lightest of holds on her chin and he kissed her.

"Wow..." she said, amazed at what had just happened and not sure what to work with first and while she paused he replaced the mask and the high pitched whine came again and she knew the security system was back in place.

"As I was saying, Mr Stark sends his apologies and he'll call you... the first chance he gets."

"I'll be waiting," she said and Iron Man nodded and headed out to the balcony and lifted off in to the air. "Wait!" she said, coming out after him and he hovered there. "Tell him it's mutual." He nodded at her and then he shot off across the skyline. "I love you too," she whispered and then she went back to her desk.

However there was no way she was going to get any more work done today.

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Stark flew from New York, across the state towards Georgetown. He couldn't stop smiling, which was a change as when he was going to see her he couldn't stop shaking. Rumiko had joined an elite group of people. The Avengers knew who he was as did his closest staff, and now she was one of the people he trusted with his greatest secret.

Aside from the fact he wasn't the original Tony Stark, and he would deal with that another time. If he got chance to speak with Steve he would, but now it was time for business. He approached the small town and almost instantly he could detect an amount of signatures emanating from an area and he could see the readouts across his eyes as the scanners told him what was going on, and what Doom had been up to. He could also detect the frequencies of the SHIELD vehicles in the area and he knew he was on the right track and as he flew over he could see them speaking with a local law enforcement official.

That was more Cap's area than his, and this was where Iron Man came in to his own as he looked over the immediate area. There were cloaking devices, laser weapons and a lot of other high tech artillery in the area as well as the remains of people and animals that had inadvertently discovered what was going on. Their intrusion had incurred the wrath of Doom and they had died without knowing why, and with their murderer never knowing of their existence.

"Damn you, Victor," said Stark softly, but he rechecked his logs and he knew he had enough to work with and put in a call to Stark Solutions, requesting back door codes for certain products he'd made and the competition had made as well. Doom had to have bought these things in from them, and that would have to be addressed later as well.

"There's got to be a way in though," said one of the agents Stark recognised as Maverick, which meant that the other SHIELD agents had to be X-Force. Who better to deal with sentinels than the people who'd had the most experience in their ways. "The sentinels are in that cave and we've got to make sure they stay there."

"Perhaps I can help," Stark called and they turned to see him land as close to them as he could with causing any problems for them. "I was in the area and Tony Stark got a call from Forge, requesting assistance."

"Glad you could make it, Shellhead," said Cap and the two Avengers shook hands.

"You think you can deal with the tech?" asked Maverick, looking at the Avenger.

"Oh, I think it's possible," said Stark with a smile. He didn't want to give too much away about his identity. He knew Cap knew who he was and he believed that Sharon Carter did as well, but he didn't know about the others and that was good enough. He'd revealed enough for today. "I did a quick overhead survey and I could see where the cloaking technology extends from."

Lydia Del Ruiz nodded and she went over to speak to Iron Man. "Agent Del Ruiz," she said introducing herself, and nodding to the other gentleman who was there. "This is Agent Raven."

"Thank you, I know," said Stark. "I was sorry to hear about what happened with Wisdom and Shadowcat."

"We'll get them back somehow," Raven said and Iron Man nodded.

"Of course," he said.

"The tech's in advance of anything I've seen," said Lydia. "The weapons fire as soon as anything goes past the cloaking field and it's thanks to my powers I was able to ensure I didn't, or if I did I could move out of the way in time."

"It's a very sophisticated system," Iron Man said. "Doom's made something impressive from a combination of things, and nobody would ever know what was being built. However, I think I can sort this." He was silent a moment, as he configured a panel on his gauntlet, using the data being supplied from Stark Solutions. "And that should do it."

He unleashed a pulse from his gauntlets that hit the cloaked area and shut it down and there was a the dying of a low pitched hum as the weapon systems were all taken off line.

"Now that was cool," said Raven as he looked about and Iron Man smiled.

"Not really," he replied. "Doom needed to get the tech for this from somewhere and I know some shutdown codes. Just took a little time to figure which ones were which."

"Let's go," said Cap and he led them in to the cave. Iron Man felt a shiver go down his spine, and he though how natural it felt to be like this, following Cap's lead and he wished he could have persuaded him to join the West Coast team, but he had declined, citing his daughter as the main reason. Then there was a warning alert on his LCD but before Stark could say anything, Cap was struck by a repulsor blast that threw him back. Tony winced as he saw the look on Steve's face as landed on the shield. It may

have absorbed impacts, but Steve's body did not. The question was where had the blast come from, and then he realised.

"What an interesting group of Avengers," said Doom. Doom wasn't being read on any of the sensors of the armour, but Tony could see his gauntlets were glowing, primed with energy waiting for a release. "Please don't make a move. Consider yourselves prisoners of war..."

"Like hell!" said Maverick and shot at Doom with a kinetic blast of his own and the dictator was struck in the face, but Doom still stood and he laughed, as Stark took advantage of the disruption to the armour to do a scan of the man before them and what he got confirmed his suspicions.

"Is that all you have?" Doom said as Iron Man made his scans and he fired his own weapons, making the heroes scatter.

"Doombot," said Iron Man, thinking that the shot should have blinded the Latverian Dictator if nothing else, and his readings confirmed what he had seen. It also meant that they could use lethal force against it.

"Understood," said Cap. "Take him down!" The heroes fired their weapons, Lydia and Agent 13 using their side-arms, with Marcus putting some extra force on the shots with his telekinetics as Maverick used his bio-kinetic blasts, Iron Man used his repulsors as Cap threw his shield and the Doombot's head was taken clean from its shoulder and the headless Doom staggered and fell to the floor under the assault.

"He doesn't make them like he used to," Iron Man said, looking at the robot.

"Very true," the head of Doom said, "I make them better." A signal flashed past Stark's eyes on the display and he reacted quickly to negate the signal but he wasn't sure if he'd done it in time and then they all heard the noises, the gears and machinery coming to life as the sentinels awoke.

"Oh hell," said Iron Man. "I'm reading approximately a dozen sentinels coming to life..."

"This is bad," said Maverick and he fired his energy blasts at the robots, and they had no effect. "This is very bad."

"No time for negativity, son," said Cap as he threw his shield towards one of them and the sentinel caught it and tossed it aside.

"Mutant energy signatures detected. Metahuman signature detected. Enhanced human signature detected."

"Gigs up," said Raven. "Now what do we do?"

"We fight!" said Cap and the heroes went to work, trying to find away to ensure they weren't killed in the process of shutting these monsters down. As Stark fired repulsors blasts and his unibeam, he was working at finding a way of shutting them down. He could try an EMP but these things had taken that when Onslaught had unleashed his powers, so he wasn't sure that would work and to do so would leave himself helpless.

There had to be a way, something he could do, and he promised he would find a way. Doom had left him the tools, it was up to him to find a way around it and he put in a call to SHIELD. Forge had left a number at Stark Solutions to contact him and see if they could work on the problem together.

"Forge," said the voice.

"This is Iron Man," he said, the external speakers disabled. "I could do with a hand here. I'm not having a lot of time for ideas, and anything you have would be appreciated."

"Understood. I need an uplink, to see what you're seeing," Forge said and Iron Man obliged. "Thank you," Forge said.

"Can your powers work at this range?" said Stark.

"We'll find out," Forge replied and then alarms started going off and Stark could feel the armour being squeezed. He'd been caught by one of the sentinels and it was slowly crushing him and there was nothing he could do to get free!



ANNUAL 2003  
"THE TRUTH HURTS"  
Written by Gregg Epstein

***NOTE: This issue follows the events in Captain America Annual 2003. Some plot ideas were suggested by David Wheatley.***

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### **Steve Rogers' Brooklyn Apartment**

"Where's Captain America?" Iron Man asked, as he stood by the door of the apartment. He was addressing Sharon Carter and Maria, who was hugging her leg. "I need to speak with him."

"He's not here right now," Sharon admitted. "He's on a mission right now in another dimension."

"What d'ya want wit' my daddy?" Maria asked. "He's Cap'n America."

Iron Man bent down to look Maria in the eyes. He put a comforting hand on her head and another one on her shoulder. "I'm sorry to tell you this, Maria, but your father is not the real Captain America."

"No, yer lyin'. He's real. Yer the fake. He's the real Captain America."

Iron Man stood up. "I'm sorry, Maria, Sharon. But he's as fake as I am."

There was a crackle of energy in the bedroom.

Sharon seemed too distracted to notice. She then went to the bedroom to see who that was. "That must be him. We'll straighten this out."

"You better go with your mother, Maria," Iron Man suggested.

"I'll prove to you he's real. He's really my father."

Seconds later, Sharon and Maria explained to Captain America that his best friend, Iron Man, was here, with dire news. He listened to what Tony had to say but he just couldn't believe it. That he was a figment of someone else's imagination, that he was a byproduct of some child's power. It seemed that it was part of some bad science fiction movie.

"Liar!" Cap said, once the news had digested into his system. He launched into battle and attacked Iron Man. He hurled Shellhead against the opposite wall, creating a hole in the wall.

Iron Man retaliated by blasting Cap with a repulsor blast in the stomach but he had blocked with his shield. "You have got to believe me, Steve. I don't mean to cause you grief, but what possible motive would I have in lying to you?"

"I don't know. But somehow I believe you. I've seen the result of Franklin Richards' power and it seems probable and possible, too."

"I'm sorry, Cap. This hurts me as much as it does you. I'll take my leave now."

Cap extended a hand and Tony shook it. "Goodbye, Tony. Take care."

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## **Stark Solutions**

"You did what?!" Pepper Potts asked Iron Man, as he had arrived at his headquarters later that day. She had an incredulous look upon her face; in fact, Happy Hogan and Jim Rhodes all had incredulous looks on their countenances. What Tony had done seemed to be nigh impossible.

"I don't think that was wise, boss," Happy said, trying to reason with him.

"You should have consulted us first, Tony," Rhodey said. "That wasn't too smart, and if what you say is true, you shouldn't have told his daughter first."

Iron Man lifted up his face plate, revealing the face of Tony Stark. "I know, I know. Hindsight is always 20/20, right? Somehow in the back of my mind I knew that Steve wouldn't take it well. Who would? So I told Agent 13 and Maria first, hoping that would break the impact. I realize my mistake now."

Rhodey left the room, in a huff. He was really steamed, angry.

Happy continued with his work. He followed Rhodey out the door. Apparently, the two were discussing possible ways to rectify this situation. The good thing was that Cap wasn't an Avenger anymore, so this wouldn't tear the Avengers now.

Once the door slammed closed, Pepper approached Tony. Stark by now had taken off his armour and put it in his briefcase. He then opened his closet and took out a black three piece suit, putting it on.

"How did he take it?" Pep asked.

"Not well at first. But once I explained to him the situation behind it, he began to see my view point. But his daughter was in denial the whole time. I just feel bad for her. I wonder how she is going to take this."

"Only time will tell," Pepper said nonchalantly. "Only time will tell."

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## **Rumiko's Apartment**

Rumiko Fujikawa lay in bed, torn by dreams of her beau, Tony Stark and his alterego, Iron Man. Several days ago, Iron Man revealed to her that he was really Tony Stark. She was surprised at first, but somehow relieved. She was glad that they were one and the same because now she wouldn't be torn between two lovers. Now she could love the same man and not feel guilty.

A couple hours ago, Tony said to her that he had to go to see Steve Rogers, Captain America, on a personal matter. He didn't tell her what the personal matter was, but she was sure that he would reveal it to her in due course.

There was a knock on her open window.

She was startled at first, but once she saw Iron Man's silhouetted form she bade him to enter.

"You might want to close the window, Tony," Rumiko suggested. "When we talk in here. I guess I don't want my neighbors to find out your secret identity."

"Good idea." Iron Man slammed the window shut, closed the shades, and walked inside her apartment. "I have something to tell you. Something very important."

He took off his mask to reveal the face of Tony Stark. "I love you, Ru. And I think you love me. So you have to understand that this is very hard for me to say."

"Does this mean that you-" she began to say, but Tony shushed her quiet.

"Ssshh. What I have to say has to be said without interruptions." When she nodded her assent, he continued. "Now, Ru, please listen to me. This is hard for me."

Rumiko massaged his hands and brought him closer to her. "Whatever you have to say, you can tell me."

There was a giant pause.

"I'm not the real Iron Man."

"Whatever do you mean? There is another Iron Man? Like that War Machine character?"

"No. I'm not the real Tony Stark. Y'see, Iron Man, Tony Stark, died in battle with a being called Onslaught. Franklin Richards, the son of Reed and Susan Richards, created the Franklinverse where he created duplicates of the heroes that had died. Like Captain America and I."

"So, you're what? Alternate Iron Man?"

"I guess you could say that. I hope this won't break our relationship."

Rumiko embraced Tony. "I love you, Tony. I don't care if you're from the future. I will always love you."

"And I love you, Ru."

They kissed like long-lost lovers.

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### **Back at Stark Solutions (The Sub-basement)**

"Did everything go well with Ms. Fujikawa?" Jocasta asked.

"Better than with Steve. She reacted in the exact same way that I hoped my relationship with Anastasia Swift would have turned out."

"Miss Swift was too headstrong. She is very similar to Captain America in some ways. Models are like that. Typical girl power."

"I have to give Steve credit tho. He has done what most super heroes only wish at doing. To become a father. He has raised a beautiful daughter, who hangs on his every word and adores him like none other."

Tony picked the cordless and dialed Captain America's Hotline number. There was one ring and then, Steve Rogers answered.

"Captain America speaking. How may I assist you?"

"Steve, it's Tony. I called because I wanted to apologize to you for telling your daughter that you're not the real Cap, before I told you. I-I don't have the words to describe my guilt."

"Don't worry about it, Tony. I explained to Maria that it doesn't matter what world I came from, I am as real as her and I love her. She still doesn't like you."

Tony laughed. "I feel better now. Thanks, Cap."

Tony hung up the phone.

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#26

Written by Gregg Epstein

In the offices of Stane Limited, Obadiah Stane sat in his office with Arno Stark, the Iron Man of 2020. A meeting in progress on how to destroy Tony Stark, the current Iron Man. One of Stane's assistants have created a time machine and traveled to the time of 2020, extracting Arno Stark, asking him to help him duplicate Arno's armour, giving it to career criminals, and using it to kill Iron Man.

Iron Man of 2020 took off his helmet, revealing the face of Arno Stark. "Tony Stark has been a thorn in my side for a long time. I believe that I shall be the only Iron Man in existence, whatever time I exist in. So it will be my pleasure to destroy that infidel once and for all. But I cannot do it alone. I will need help. That is why I have enlisted a couple familiar faces to assist me in my endeavour."

"Good, good," Stane said, as he clasped his hands together. He had a pleased look upon his face. "That shall please me beyond measure. What Iron Man does not know is that I am also from an alternate time line like yourself, where mine is of a time when I killed Iron Man and I, like you, want to kill all the Iron Men in existence. But who shall these familiar faces be? Someone in Stark's employ, I hope."

"That is exactly who I am talking about," Stark said. "Some of Tony's best friends who I shall make sure will betray him. Let me introduce you to the three of them." Arno snapped his fingers and a door opened. In walked three figures. "The first is Jim Rhodes, whom Tony calls Rhodey, but whom the world knew as War Machine, until he retired from that gig. He is incredibly smart, strong, and versatile in any wide variety of weaponry. Next is Harold 'Happy' Hogan. MODOK had brainwashed him to don an Iron Man suit of armour in an effort to destroy Iron Man. That effort failed but ours will succeed where theirs failed. And finally, Virginia 'Pepper' Potts, Stark's secretary."

"Do they know they are being hypnotized?"

"No, they do not. I have placed a disc on the back of their necks. As long as the discs remain where I have placed them, they will stay hypnotized."

"Good. Can I command them to do their bidding?"

"Of course."

Stane stood up and approached the three Stark employees. "Don your armours and go to Stark Solutions."

Stane and Arno Stark watched them change into their Other Iron Men suits. They eyed one another, seeing the proud look on each other's faces as they flew out the window.

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Tony Stark, in the guise of Iron Man, flew over the Manhattan, right over the offices of Stark Solutions. Even though he loved being a super hero, he felt the need to do his business-minded side of his personality. He landed on the roofline of S.S. and took off his helmet. He had been Iron Man for a long time and had been in any number of adventures. Recently, he told Captain America that the both of them weren't the original heroes, that they were in fact figments of Franklin Richards' imagination and mental powers after the original heroes died at the hands of Onslaught.

Soon, he was in his office and he changed from Iron Man to Tony Stark. He left his armour, folded, in his briefcase. He exited his office to greet his fellow employees. The problem was that they weren't there. They seemed to be among the missing.

"Pep, Hap, Rhodey?" He called over and over again. "Where are you guys? You do know that you are paid to show up on time."

Suddenly, there was an explosion. Shards of glass, plexiglass, and brick hurled into the helpless form of Tony Stark.

"What the hell?!" Tony said, as he raced back to his office. What was going on? Was this an attack by Al-Quaeda? Blowing up the World Trade Center was serious indeed but this was personal.

Then, he saw the object of the explosion. It was War Machine. But that can't be. The new War Machine was a hero, just like when Rhodey wore the armor. He may be a jerk but this was serious business, blowing up Stark Solutions.

War Machine pointed his machine gun arm at Tony and fired. Tony took out a service revolver and fired back at War Machine, the bullets zinging off his armour, ricocheting onto the large office area.

There were more footsteps and three Iron Men appeared; Gray Iron Man, Yellow Iron Man, and a female Golden and Crimson Iron Woman. He had to get his own armor in the office because he was out of bullets.

Tony closed the door and seconds later, he reappeared, in full armor regalia. "I don't know what you people have done with my staff, but it ends here and now!"

As one being, they fired their repulsor rays at Iron Man but Tony reflected it with a force blast.

"This should do the trick," Tony said, as he threw a armor dampening grenade at the four Iron Men. It exploded right in the center, sending electricity coursing through their armors. They collapsed on the ground. Tony went about the task of unmasking them.

And got a big surprise.

"No! Pep? Hap? Rhodey?" he said in shock. "And one person I don't know." He saw hypno discs on their necks and he removed them.

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## **Stane Limited**

Obadiah Stane was looking at Arno Stark, disappointed at their combined failure. "You may be from an alternate reality like myself, Arno, but you failed just like my previous one has failed over and over again to kill Iron Man."

"Who knew that Stark would have a service revolver in his jacket pocket? That was surely unexpected." Arno Stark said.

Stane eyed him. "True. But who would expect that Stark would have a device to deactivate the armors that you carefully created?"

"I wish I had thought of that. So where does that leave us?"

"That leaves you with a tremendous sense of failure. And that leaves me with trying to come up with another way to kill Iron Man. I have contacted the Scarecrow, y'know, Ebenezer Laughton. He was recently resurrected. He is a free man for the time being, and could be used for our purposes."

"That sounds good. As long as Iron Man doesn't find out that either of us is responsible for his downfall, that would fit our purposes perfectly."

"And then, we will have Iron Man, and he shall perish by my hand, alone."

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## **Stark Solutions**

"So, can any of you three tell me what that was all about?" Tony asked.

Pepper Potts, Happy Hogan, and Jim Rhodes were all in a meeting room at Stark Solutions. The fourth member of the Iron Men was carted off to the Vault. Tony had placed the armors that they wore to kill him in a safe in the sub-basement for later study.

'Honestly, I don't remember," Rhodey remarked. "I just that those hypno discs whoever placed on our necks wiped out our memories, too."

Pepper and Happy both nodded, as they agreed to Rhodey's sentiments.

"Well, I'm just glad that the three of you are all right, safe and sound," Tony said. "If you were seriously hurt, that would severely damage our company."

"But what kind of psycho would want to dress us up in Iron Man suits of armor?" Pepper asked curiously.

"That is the question," Tony said. "Any number of my enemies could be the key, but which one?"

"Maybe the same person who was controlling Spymaster when he robbed you of that laser device a couple weeks ago," Happy Hogan said.

"Anyway, I want the three of you to take a couple days off to recoup yourselves. It's the weekend so I could close the factory down. I'll find some temps to fill in your positions in the meantime."

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#27

"A.I.M. STRIKES

Written by Gregg Epstein

Alternate 1962. South Viet Nam.

Arno Stark had traveled through time to arrive at a point in time where the origin of the original Iron Man took place before his death at the hands of Onslaught. And before he was reborn by Franklin Richards as he created a pseudo-version of him to live and prosper in the twenty-first century.

Ahead of him, in his field of vision, was Tony Stark with his troop of inventors and army privates to fight the Viet Nam Conflict. Stark was talking to his associates and that sickened Arno.

The Iron Man of 2020 had to do something about this quick to expediate the process.

Without knowing what he was doing until it was too late, Tony Stark tripped a booby trap and a landmine exploded at his feet. Under normal circumstances, a piece of shrapnel would have been lodged within Tony's heart muscle. This would have forced him to have a serious heart condition that would have needed the added protection of a chest plate. In the present day, that heart condition would have been cured through the use of a pacemaker but Arno changed that little scenario.

Arno Stark fired a beam of laser light through one of his glove gauntlets to make the landmine that much more powerful and deadly.

One of the army lieutenants looked at Tony's fallen form and surveyed the situation. "I think Stark is dead. It looks like that without him, his little Transistors are no use to us at all."

"Right," an army general said. "He's the only man who knows how to operate them. We better drag his body back to the chopper and send him home. He'll get a hero's funeral."

"What a way for a genius to go. The world will miss him."

As the army officials began to do as the lieutenant instructed, the Iron Man of 2020 changed into the form of Arno Stark. He walked over to the army in plainclothes. He wore a black three piece suit and penny loafers.

"May I be of some assistance?" Arno asked, a she approached them.

"Who the hell are you?!"

"My name is Arno Stark. I'm Tony's older brother. He sent me here to operate the Transistors in case he couldn't make it. Now that he's dead, I think that I should take his place."

"I don't know. I-"

Suddenly, the army officials and Arno were surrounded by the Viet Cong. They had brandished weapons that they had pilfered from other American soldiers.

"You American pigs are now the property of Wong Chu. And you-" one Viet Cong said, pointing to Arno, "-will construct a suit of armor the likes of which the world have never seen."

Arno smiled. "That will be my pleasure."

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Earth 616. Present Time.

Tony Stark felt a twinge in his heart muscle, like the times before when he would have a heart attack. He didn't know what it meant or what could have caused it. This was because he hadn't heart difficulties for several years now. The pacemaker in his heart helped soften matters.

Tony gripped his heart. As he massaged it, he felt that it was getting better.

"Mr. Stark," one man said in the large conference room, "Are you unwell?"

"No, I'm alright." Stark lowered his hand and sat up straight. "It will pass. You were saying?"

Senator Boyd pointed a finger at Stark accusingly. "For years, Stark, you have supplied weapons to the US Government. Recently, you have stopped that because you felt that it was inhumane. But you have always had Iron Man as your bodyguard. My father has asked you years ago who is Iron Man but you declined then as you had now. We live in a terror war where everyday the terror alert is raised on orange or high alert."

"What are you suggesting? That I am Iron Man?"

"No, Mr. Stark. But we feel that for the betterment of this country, it will be advantageous for us to know Iron Man's identity. You have twenty four years to reveal his identity to us or you will pay the consequences."

"Are you threatening me, Boyd?"

"That's Senator to you, Stark. No, do not think of this as a threat, just a caution. Since Iron Man has aided us in the past, we feel that to better serve this country he should reveal his identity to us. Not the world, just the US government."

"I'll have to think about this."

Stark stood up and turned his back to the group of senators and governmental aides. He didn't like how this going. This was just like what had happened in the sixties with the original Senator Boyd.

Stark's cell phone beeped. He took it out of his

pocket and answered it. "Stark here. What is it?"

"Tony, it's Pepper. Someone has broken in to Stark Solutions and particularly, the sub-basement."

"Who is it? Not Spymaster again?"

"No, it's agents of that vile scientific organization, Advanced Idea Mechanics."

"Hang in there, Pep. I'll be right there."

Stark hung up the phone and turned to the senators. "I would love to chat all night with you but there is an emergency at the plant. I have to go."

Boyd stood up and faced Stark. "Remember your deadline, Stark."

Tony smiled. "I don't take kindly to threats. Or ultimatums. Iron Man's identity is a privileged secret known only to me. You have no right to force to divulge that. Good-bye."

When Tony walked out of the room, he slammed the door closed to further his point.

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Stark Solutions.

Tony Stark, in his guise as Iron Man, flew all the way from the New York City to the plant in Queens. It was a bright day filled with sunshine. When he got to Stark solutions, he saw a futuristic ship circling the smokestacks of the building. This was the message of A.I.M..

I wonder what A.I.M. wants with my plant, Iron Man wondered, as he made a left arc to land in the grassy plain at the entrance. But then, if they are in the sub-basement, then the only thing that he could want is my weapons.

Iron Man entered through the side entrance, because that is where A.I.M. would least expect it. He saw that the trail leading to the sub-basement was a gutted ruin.

He used his muscles to open the elevator door manually. There was a long, empty shaft leading to all the floors underneath him. He grabbed onto the pulley cables and rode it down. When he reached there, he again used his muscles to open the elevator door and saw a most peculiar sight.

A.I.M. was in the sub-basement room, rummaging and foraging for weapons of any kind. He had tangled with A.I.M. in the past but he didn't think that it would happen again so soon.

"A.I.M.! What are you doing here?" Iron Man upped his audio receptors so that the decibel levels of his voice were amplified to an incredible degree. "Petty theft is not your specialty."

An agent turned around and snarled underneath his breath. "Iron Man, fancy meeting you here. MODOK would like some of your armor. At least the ones that your staff wore a couple weeks ago."

The agents of A.I.M. had by now opened the glass compartment that had held the suits of armors and agents of Obadiah Stane had carried it to his headquarters.

Iron Man tried to stop him, but A.I.M. had fired their laser pistols at Iron Man, halting him in his tracks.

Iron Man collapsed on the ground in pain. He ripped off his faceplate, his eyes tearing.

As he saw the Scarecrow escape with his prizes, Pepper, Happy, and Rhodey entered the sub-basement area, only to find a debacle in their wake.

"What happened, boss?" Happy Hogan said.

Tony tried to catch his breath. "I fear this is only the beginning."

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Stane Limited.

Obadiah Stane sat at his desk, surrounded by Arno Stark and agents of A.I.M.. To his side was the four suits of armor that Arno had given to the brainwashed members of Tony Stark's staff.

Without missing a beat, Stane turned to Arno. "So, Mr. Stark, how did your trip to 1962 go? Did you manage to kill Tony Stark?"

Arno took off his helmet and faced Obadiah. "Very well, Mr. Stane. But you have to take into account that I didn't kill the real Anthony Stark, but an alternate version of Stark. I will try to kill all the alternate Starks from different alternate timelines until the real Tony Stark is dead as well and I am the only Stark in existence."

"That is good," Obadiah said. A slight smile came across his face. "You have pleased me beyond measure. Find another timeline to alter. I would like to talk to A.I.M. alone, please."

"Whatever you desire, Mr. Stane." Arno Stark put on his helmet and left the room.

"Now, A.I.M.," Stane said. "I see your mission was a success. You have brought to me the suits of armor I requested. That is good. And you also avoided a direct assault with Iron Man. You have also pleased me."

"If my mission is complete, I would like to take my leave now. I hate to keep MODOK waiting."

"By all means do so," Stane said, as he watched the agents of A.I.M. along with Stark before him. Then, he was all alone with his thoughts and his plans. Everything was going exactly according to plan. Iron Man was oblivious to the events that were happening around him.

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