

# Table of Contents

Iron Man #40 by Ben Wolfert & Zach Crane .....	2
Iron Man #41 by Ben Wolfert & Zach Crane .....	12
Iron Man #42 by Ben Wolfert & Zach Crane .....	20
Iron Man Annual 2009 by Bryan Locke .....	32
Iron Man #43 by Ben Wolfert .....	55
Iron Man Annual 2015 by Steve Crosby .....	64



#40

“NEW DAY, OLD PROBLEMS”

Written by Ben Wolfert & Zach Crane

Tony Stark prayed that it would all come to an end soon. The pain swept through his left leg at an agonizingly slow rate. The next assault began at a predictably hectic pace, everyone attempting to launch their salvos at one time. It took all Tony had not to turn tail and flee as quickly as he could. But no, he had a responsibility to stay; to outlast those who would try to wear him down. It was his responsibility...his duty...as...

...major stock holder and former day-to-day manager of Stark Solutions. It was because of this dubious distinction that he stood at the front of a regally furnished conference room, twelve pairs of scrutinizing eyes watching his every move. Waiting for one slip, one mistake. Even a typo in the slide presentation running on the screen behind him would suffice. No such error would arrive though. Tony Stark was a consummate professional. In his lines of work-both of them- outward appearance was almost every bit as important as intention.

The trouble with running a publicly traded company, even if you owned the majority share, was that you were ultimately responsible to the stockholders. And despite the seemingly endless amount of attention the public seemed to pay towards “green” and noble companies, the majority of stockholders had one true motivation: profit. The average stockholder couldn’t possibly be expected to keep a constant vigil over the company’s financial outlook; that was what the Board of Trustees was for. Twelve men and women who answered to the shareholders and had a knack for being stubborn. This was not to be confused with ignorance; the members of the Board were all business savvy, and would not make unruly demands that the market could not support. This didn’t prevent them from making life difficult for whoever was running the business though. Their tenure was dependent upon the appeasement of shareholders, which was based, primarily, on profit.

This was a position, in front of the Board, Tony had hoped to avoid after naming Bill Foster as CEO of Stark Solutions. The motivation for Bill’s promotion was two fold. First, Tony wanted the chance to focus on other endeavors, not least of which being his role as Iron Man. The second was the onslaught of negative press released by Morgan Stark, Tony’s cousin, who decided to publish a “tell all” book about the darker side of Tony’s life. Everything from corrupt business contracts, to tax evasion, to Tony’s struggle with alcoholism, was exposed for the world to see. Everything except for his ties to Iron Man, strangely enough. Tony went from millionaire playboy to tabloid headliner, and whispers amongst the members of the board suggested the negative press was hurting the company. It seemed like the right time to step down as head of operations.

But here he was again, addressing the Board as he had for years. Bill was still “recovering” from their ordeal with the Mandarin. Now there was a whole other mess Tony would’ve preferred to focus on. Just a few days prior, the Mandarin and his daughter from the future had been taken into custody after making another bid for power. But there was still a floating island, the Jade Empire, sitting over Asia, which was causing a great deal of political consternation. Iron Man’s role in the Mandarin’s defeat seemed to preclude him from simply ignoring the floating city. In addition to that, Tony hadn’t attended to his private life in sometime. He had a girlfriend who he believed he truly cared for, but had been unable to spend time with. One of his best friends lay in a coma. His personal assistant, a robot, had developed an attraction for him. And to top it all off, he had a son. Not technically his son though...the son of a future Tony Stark, who had come back in time. And here he was, stuck in front of people who had an entirely different agenda on their minds. It made all of their questions seem so...trivial.

"Mr. Stark?" one of the board members asked. Tony turned to examine the middle-aged man and a short description raced through his mind like clockwork. Norman Peabody. Stanford graduate sitting on the board of several Fortune 500 companies. Married twice. Not his own hair.

"Yes?"

"Investment in both domestic and foreign markets has dropped markedly since the appearance of the so called 'Jade Empire'. Investments in Stark properties have dropped especially far considering Iron Man's involvement in the crisis. Have any propositions been put forth regarding a possible response?"

"I'm glad you asked, Norman. Our finance department has drawn up several stimulus and aid packages that you'll receive on your way out."

"Have you thought about Iron Man's involvement at all?"

"I've asked Iron Man to let us handle everything. Saving the world can be taxing," Tony said with a grin.

"We agree with that decision," Peabody said with a slight pause. "But before we leave the topic of the iron Avenger, there were a few more questions I wanted to ask," Peabody continued, the exchange maintaining a professional tone.

"Then by all means, proceed."

"It has always been our understanding that Iron Man is under the employ of Stark Solutions, and that his armor is actually manufactured by us. I've noticed several of the technologies in his armor being used in some of our demolition and construction machinery. This is true, am I right?"

"Yes," Tony offered simply. He wasn't sure where Peabody was headed with this, and didn't want to surrender more information than he had to.

"In watching recent news footage, I noticed several additions to Iron Man's armor. Upgrades, I suppose, that I haven't seen reflected in any of our products or proposed projects. I guess my question is simply regarding the terms of Iron Man's employment. Some of the technology he employs could be of great interest to potential investors."

Tony gave a slight pause. He had always given Norman credit for being intelligent, but never this much. Tony couldn't just tell them the truth...that the Iron Man armor had been enhanced with alien technologies while in another universe.

"The specifics of Iron Man's contract are proprietary, Mr. Peabody, but I can assure you that any technology used by my bodyguard is licensed and owned by me. I can also tell you that the additions you've seen are still in the early testing phases, and are not quite ready for patent, although I applaud you on your keen eye."

"Thank you, Tony," Norman said, clearly not thrilled with the answer he received. Before either man could remark further another member of the board was posing a question on a completely different topic, something Tony was grateful for. Incorporating more advanced technology into the firm's offerings would squash all of the competition and possibly double Tony's wealth. But the world at large wasn't ready for half of the technology the Iron Man armor used. It was a fine line he had to constantly walk.

It was a hectic time to be Tony Stark.

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Jimmy Stark soared through the air effortlessly; twisting and turning through the maelstrom of poorly aimed repulsor beams aimed his way. He could hear the air howl as he soared forward, arms pressed against his side to amplify his aerodynamic flight. Commuters sat rooted in their cars, watching in awe as the armored hero whizzed by overhead, pursuing a trio of bank robbers. The three men stumbled in and out of the grid locked cars, constantly turning around and firing haphazardly at their pursuer. Baseball-sized columns of yellow light would skirt from the gaudy gauntlets they had squeezed their hands into, each shot giving off the smell of burnt ozone. That was about all the thieves had managed to burn, as none of their shots were even close to touching the charging Iron Lad. That didn't mean Jimmy wasn't going to apprehend these slime balls without any difficulty though.

"Tony will have my ass if anyone gets hurt because these morons missed me and hit someone else. But if I miss from this angle I could cause more damage than they would," Jimmy thought, gazing down at the scrambling robbers. He was practically on top of them now, a little more than fifteen feet from the road and eight feet from the tallest of the crooks, all who wore cheap black Kevlar. Their ducking and weaving throughout the maze of stalled cars had inadvertently kept Jimmy from firing at them when he was farther back. But now, with the sun directly overhead and his armor casting the bandits into shadows, the risk was minimized. It was no longer a matter of accuracy, but of speed. The idiots with the hand-me-down gauntlets could easily start taking hostages once they realized they couldn't run. If Tony wouldn't be happy with collateral property damage, a hostage situation would make him livid.

With this in mind Jimmy extended his right arm forward, angling his hand so that the open palm was pointed right at the closest crook. The sensors in his own gauntlet fed information directly to his helmet, allowing his HUD (head-up display) to display a target reticule where he could expect his repulsor beam to hit. Iron Lad was so practiced in his abilities that the reticule was a vestigial gesture. It had been a long time since Jimmy had required the armor's help in guiding his strikes. That wasn't about to change today. A repulsor ray, similar to those being fired by the crooks, shot out Jimmy's crimson gauntlet and slammed directly in the lower back of the closest thief. The man groaned and tripped forward, planting his face firmly into the ground.

One of his companions, hearing the commotion, turned just in time to see Iron Lad accelerating straight at him between the motionless cars. Jimmy caught the second man with his outstretched left arm, wrapping his hand firmly around the robber's cheap gauntlet. The glove sparked once before short circuiting, crackling and sizzling even as its owner howled in pain, his hand broken.

The third and final crook had continued to run as fast as he could. He made the mistake of looking over his shoulder though, a move that slowed him down ever just enough. Jimmy saw the opening and pushed his armor harder, increasing the force of his boot thrusters. He jolted forward and wrapped his right arm around the last man's waist. With the two thugs in tow, Jimmy streaked straight up into the sky, ignoring the protests of his captives. Once he was satisfied with the level of fear he had instilled he did a vertical loop through the air, throwing in a corkscrew maneuver at the end so that he was headed back towards the authorities. The crooks were whimpering by that point, grasping feebly at his arms, praying he wouldn't drop them.

His boot jets roared, shooting dirt out in all directions as he landed right by the waiting police cruisers. The two men he had taken for the ride collapsed into huddled masses on the ground, failing to offer any resistance as the local boys in blue yanked them up by their collars and forcefully removed their cheap weapons. Inside of his armor, Jimmy was grinning like a moron, proud of his good work. There was no way Tony could disapprove of what his son from the future had done here today. And that was when a bloodcurdling scream split Jimmy's pride in two.

"Great..." Jimmy grumbled, his voice bouncing around the interior of his helmet. The last bank robber had recovered from Jimmy's repulsor blast and grabbed a young woman from her car. His gauntlet-clad palm was held open right beside the trembling woman's head, threatening to fry her brains with a flick of the wrist. The thief was sweating profusely; his voice was erratic and pitchy. Lights flashed sporadically inside of Jimmy's helmet, changing his prognosis of the situation from bad to worse. The cheap trinket

this thug was using had gone unstable; it could implode at any moment, taking the man's hand and the entire side of his hostage's face with it.

"Stay back...all of you," the man said skittishly. He had wrapped his other arm around the woman's neck, yanking her firmly against him. Jimmy wasn't sure which would blow first...the faulty energy source or the thug. Everyone was frozen in place, completely absorbed in the crisis. Murmurs and gasps began to escape the crowd, but it wasn't until a long shadow quickly passed over the thug that he realized something was amiss. He looked frantically at Jimmy, trying to confirm that it wasn't Iron Lad who had cast the length of darkness over him. His eyes seemed to bug out when he realized Iron Lad truly wasn't to blame. With a sick look on his face he slowly craned his head, looking back over his shoulder.

"Might want to let the girl go, son," a tall, African American man instructed. Except tall probably wasn't the right term. This man was gigantic, standing just over three stories tall and wearing some sort of spandex-like fabric. His legs straddled the street, feet planted firmly on the sidewalk. He was staring down at the man and his hostage from a few feet back. Everyone, including Jimmy and the crook, was so focused on Bill Foster that they failed to notice the other player to enter the fray. The bandit felt someone tapping on his shoulder, causing him whirl to around, a look of complete and utter disbelief plastered on his face. If there were additional room on the man's face for incredulity, it would have been filled instantly. Standing before him now was a young woman with shining blonde hair, hands planted firmly on her hips.

"Stupid scag," she muttered in a thick British accent. She struck with surprising speed, swinging her right fist out wide before connecting with the side of the bank robber's side. The man groaned miserably as he went sprawling to the left, releasing his hostage and slamming sickeningly against the side of a neighboring car. His body crumpled to the ground, leaving an ugly indent in the metal car doors. Jimmy breathed a sigh of relief. The crisis had been averted.

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Jimmy snickered. Then he read a few more sentences. His snickering increased to a full-fledged snort. Then he read a few more sentences. His face turned red, trying to hold in the laughter. Then he read another sentence.

He couldn't take it anymore. The book hit the carpet with a sound barely noticeable.

"Bwahahahaha~!"

But Jimmy, rolling around on the floor, kicking his legs in the air, tears pouring down his cheek, was certainly noticed by Tony. The library made Jimmy look much smaller than he already was. Books upon books rose till they pushed against the ceiling, covering two whole levels of the Stark Estate in Washington. The plush, brown leather furniture (which matched the rest of the library's earthy tones) dwarfed Jimmy as well, surrounding him like Stonehenge. Tony had to peer over his own massive wooden desk, where he was tinkering with some circuit boards, to see the boy.

Tony looked from the boy to his quick lunch off to the side: a tuna melt with a Perrier. "I see you joined Oprah's Book of the Month club."

Jimmy wiped at his eyes, but still he reclined on the floor, rolling his toes in the lush carpet. "Oh, man. This is great. Have you read this?"

Tony frowned. "I got the Cliff's Notes version. Which chapter are you on?"

"Thirty-one. Chronicling the years 1990 to 1994. You should listen to some of the stuff Morgan says about your relationship with Bill Clinton. Says here 'Tony always gave Clinton a box of cigars for

Christmas, obviously indicative of some understanding between them of mutual extracurricular activities...with each other.' What was the big deal with this Clinton guy anyways?"

Tony looked up sharply. "What? It does not say that!"

"Bwahahahaha~!" Jimmy sat up, and had to wipe his eyes. "I know. I added that last part. But the look on your face was hilarious."

Tony frowned, and looked up from the market report that sat opposite his lunch and circuit board. He slapped the report down on his desk. There was no way he was going to be able to give any of this serious thought. Not with Jimmy around. Jimmy had lightened up considerably in recent weeks, considering that he had decided to remain in this timeline with no hope of seeing the people he loved ever again. One would think the boy might have a harder time adjusting.

But the exact opposite was true. And Tony wasn't sure if that was because he was doing a good job as a father—or if that meant Jimmy was trying hard to be a good son.

Jimmy tried to control his chuckling. "Oh, Dad, seriously, though," standing, he continued, "Rumiko called earlier. Said she couldn't get through on your cell, so she called my armor's line just after that bank business. I told her you were in conference. Seemed kinda miffed at you."

Tony rubbed her sinuses. He sighed, "I haven't called her in three days."

"Eh, you're a busy man." Jimmy walked over to the desk, eyeing the untouched tuna melt.

Tony laughed. "Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. That was my son—expert on the woman's psyche."

Jimmy rolled his eyes. "It's not like you're trying to avoid her or anything! With all that Avengers business in California, and not to mention the Jade Island—are you going to eat that?" He motioned toward the tuna melt.

Tony shook his head and handed the sandwich to him. Jimmy took a bite out of it, and continued, "Look, man, even I've noticed it. You got behind on a few things, so now you have to get caught up. I mean, I get it. Saving the world, playing with your new armor, obviously there's a lot to distract a dude. But what does she expect? It's not like she's your wife or anything."

Tony's frown returned. He raised his hands in mock surrender. "Okay, Jim, I get it. Thank you for the pep talk."

Jimmy took another bite. "Well, just look at that bank business today. There was no way you'd have gotten to that in time. It's the reason you hired Britannia, and Bill. You can't handle all this yourself AND have a successful relationship." He pointed at the Perrier. "Are you gonna drink that?"

Tony shook his head slowly. He kept staring at his son. "I hired Bill to look over the business. And it was his suggestion that we on-board Britannia. The man had a soft spot after being held captive with her. But I do appreciate the work you did today."

"Thanks. So, with that in mind, I was thinking," Jimmy paused to swig the bottle and said, "You could use some positive press. Honestly, that thing at the bank today is only going to distance you further from what Morgan keeps saying about you on Fox News. You could make a lot of money with this whole hero thing."

Tony smirked. "I know where you're going with this. The answer is no."

Jimmy put on an innocent face. “What? We’ve got the resources, why not use them? Just a small strikeforce—Goliath, Britannia and Iron Man. We can turn this robbery incident into a huge publicity campaign! Think of it: Iron Man endorsing Stark shoes, all profit going to charity, of course. Bill would be a huge icon to poor, Black youth—no pun intended—”

Tony shook his head and stood from his desk. “No, no, no. Don’t you think I’ve already thought about this? Using Iron Man as a mascot? Like he was Mickey Mouse or something? I’m not gonna do that, Jimmy.”

“Why?” Jimmy threw his hands in the air and let them slap his sides.

Tony looked at him sharply. “Because I said so!”

Jimmy made a sour face. “Daaaad! That is sooo not a good reason!”

Tony smirked again, “Oh, get over it. I have my reasons. Too many to list right now.”

Jimmy sucked his teeth. Tony was on his way out of the library, but he turned around one more time.

“One reason being,” Tony wagged a finger at him, “that I just don’t have time. If I barely have time to call my girlfriend, how can I have time to do what you’re suggesting?”

Jimmy smiled. “Dad...I wasn’t suggesting that you’d be in the Iron Man suit.”

Tony frowned. “Well...then who? Who else is qualified to—oh no, you don’t think—”

The smile on Jimmy’s face got wider. “I think it’s about time I learned.”

“I don’t think so!”

“Ohhhh come on, Dad! Just let me take it out for a spin! I’m so good at it!”

“You’ll crash it the second you take off. Your armor is probably more advanced than mine anyways.”

“I will not crash it!”

“Just so you can go out and what? Pick up girls? I was your age once, Jimmy, I know what’s on your mind.”

Jimmy looked wounded. His jaw hung agape like it was broken. “Oh, my God. I cannot believe you just said that. I’m of legal age to drive! And I just broke up with my deranged girlfriend from the future! I’m old enough to be respons—”

“You’re not taking the armor. End of story.” Tony threw a hand in the air, and then went back to exiting the library.

Overly large, needlessly thick doors slammed after him, leaving Jimmy alone in the cavern of literature. He turned around and kicked Morgan Stark’s fairytale. It bounced off the floor, then bounced off the massive sofa, to rest on the floor again.

Jimmy sighed. “Well shit.”

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"This is Miss Fujikawa."

"Are you working? Do you always answer your phone like that?"

"Tony, it's almost midnight here."

"Where's here?"

"Jakarta. Did you need something?"

"I'm just reminding you it's time for your midnight snack. If I know you well enough, there's a bowl of red M&Ms in your bedside drawer."

"..."

"Did you eat them already?"

"...yes."

"You were awake, eating them, before I even called, weren't you?"

"Did you need something, Mister Stark?"

"Were you awake...watching the phone? Waiting for me to call?"

"Pfft. Don't flatter yourself."

"Why then?"

"I thought you might be someone calling about my father."

"What about your father?"

"You haven't heard? I'm going to have to finish up this trip without him. His blood pressure's way too high. I'm having him flown back to Osaka in the morning to be looked over by my doctors. Daddy's been acting funny lately—"

"I see. Huh. So...you're finishing up the business then."

"Well...not like I have a choice."

"But it was your father's choice—to have you finish up the trip?"

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"It means I know the elder Mister Fujikawa. He's more than competent enough to finish a business trip, and then go to the doctor's. As a matter of fact, I believe he would have insisted upon it. Hell, he'd have the doctor brought to him."

“What are you trying to say, Tony?”

“I don’t know, Rumi. Maybe your father knew what I was going to have to do to the Jakarta project.”

“...what are you doing, Tony? The deal is pretty much sealed—”

“It’s not. We’re dropping it. I just had a meeting with the board of trustees. They’re worried about the Jade Island. Stocks are dropping farther the longer that thing sits over Asia. Investors around the globe are losing confidence in one of the fastest emerging markets. I need all the money and resources I can gather to—”

“Tony, this project would have built dams and floodgates to help protect poor people all over Southeast Asia during tsunami season. It would have repaired roads and set up emergency telephone lines. You’re just going to shelf it? You can’t!”

“I can, Rumiko. I’ve called up the partners we’re working with—including Rand and Mys-Tech—and they’ve agreed to focus their energies on helping us with the Jade Island. The Jakarta project was falling behind schedule and ahead of budget. I’m sorry you had to find out about it like this. Better now than tomorrow morning when you walk into Rand Corporation Asia and—”

“Of all the arrogant, self-focused—”

“Don’t you see, Rumiko? Your father wanted this to—”

“My father is almost eighty years old, Tony! This is mostly likely one of the last projects he’s ever going to champion. And what do you do? You push him aside so you focus on your toys—focus on that floating fantasy island!”

“Rumiko, that’s not fair. I—”

“Oh shut up. You haven’t had time for me at all in recent weeks, going off God knows where in your armor, and I don’t know if I’m ever going to see you again! When I finally start focusing on something else, you just had to put the focus back on Iron Man, didn’t you?”

“Rumiko—”

“Good night, Mister Stark!”

\*CLICK.\*

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Echoes bounced off thick glass and linoleum. He was alone in the hallway, and was not appreciating the vast loneliness portrayed: high vaulted ceiling, long picturesque window with a view of Seattle unparalleled, and he was the only one walking. His hands were in his pockets. His face watched the tile pass under his feet.

Loneliness? Tony Stark was never alone.

“Hello, Jocasta,” he said to nobody, not looking up. “I know you’re watching me. You know I don’t like it when you hide from me.”

A few more echoes bounced before there came an answer. "Hello, Tony. I'm glad to see you survived your board meeting." The voice came from nowhere, but echoed just as loud as his footsteps.

Tony sighed. "Yeah. Do you have the schedule for tomorrow? I know I'm supposed to be meeting with Stane's people sometime before lunch...what was the name of that lady that called from the Better Business Bureau? And get me on the phone with Paramount Pictures, I hear they want to option Morgan's book for a made-for-TV movie and I need to squash that before—"

"Tony?"

Tony stopped walking and replied, "Yes?"

"Your heart rate and brain patterns are a bit irregular. You also seem to be dehydrated. My sensors are indicating a physical state suggesting an emotional state of anger—"

"Thank you, Jocasta!" Tony interrupted, "But I didn't ask for my medical history! It would be great if I could just have tomorrow's schedule! I'll let you know if I need anything else."

Tony only heard his own footsteps until he reached the end of the hall, and the thick glass doors of his office. He bit his lip and forced the doors open more harshly than he needed to.

There were hardcopies of the next day's schedule lying freshly in his printer's output tray.

Sighing, and shaking his head at himself, he walked over his office's mini-bar and pulled a bottled water from the fridge. He cracked the lid and drank half of it in a few long gulps.

He thought about Jimmy, and hoped he wasn't too hard on him earlier. After what kind of ordeal Jimmy had been through, Tony knew the boy deserved a chance at a calm life. But Tony would always have responsibilities as Iron Man—which conflicted with every notion of giving his...well, his son, let's face it, giving his son a chance at a normal life in this day and age. Jimmy was doing everything he could to impress him, to be the good son. But his father...his Tony...was the President of the United States. President and Iron Man at the same time? And Tony found himself trying to fill the boy's image of a man that didn't even exist, and never might.

He thought about Rumiko and the conversation they'd just had. He looked at his watch. No good apologizing, Rumiko would be fast asleep by now. It was the middle of the night in Jakarta. Even if she wasn't asleep there was no way she'd pick up his call this time. Now, his stomach really sank.

Tony loved her. That much was true by the tightness in his chest. He loved her...and admired her? Yes, that was true too. There was no one more loyal, more seductive, more—powerful? Rumiko was Tony's equal. Was that why Tony was attracted to her? Was that why he felt threatened by her relationship with her father? That he would lose the power he felt just walking into his corporate skyscraper? Or was it possible he was afraid...afraid of losing her to her father.

No. He loved her.

Tony downed the rest of the water bottle like a shot of whiskey.

Then he heard Jocasta again. He kept himself from looking startled.

"Tony—"

“Jocasta,” Tony took a deep breath, “look, I’m sorry I raised my voice earlier. You were just trying to help.” Tony waved his arms around, knowing Jocasta could see him, even if he couldn’t see her. “Thanks for...telling me I was dehydrated. I feel better after that water. And thanks for the schedule. You know I’d be so lost without you.”

There was a silence. Tony stood, arcing his head slightly in the deafness, expecting an answer.

Jocasta was not quick to reply. But she did.

“Thank you, Tony. Apology accepted. It’s wise to suggest that you eat a full meal as well before continuing on to the American Heart Association gala you’re attending tonight. But I actually have a more urgent message for you.”

Tony frowned. “And what’s that?”

“Dum-Dum Dugan is on line one. It’s about the Jade Empire.”

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To be continued...

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### **Iron Filings**

Welcome to our first issue of Iron Man. Thanks for reading. It’s been a while coming, but we’ve finally got this thing off the ground. We’ve done a lot of research into what’s happened to Tony in the M2K-verse, and we’re confident we can live up to the title’s rich history. So stay tuned!

-Ben and Zach

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#41

Written by Ben Wolfert & Zach Crane

*The penthouse of Rumiko Fujikawa*

"You've got a lot of nerve just coming up here unannounced. Just who the hell do you think you are?" Rumiko Fujikawa said with an ice-cold tone to her voice. She was staring angrily at a tiny speaker besides the stainless steel doors that marked the entrance to her penthouse in the commercial district of city, Japan.

"I'm Tony Stark," came the calm, simplified response.

"What the hell are you doing here? Didn't I make it clear that I want nothing to do with you? And how did you get up to my penthouse?" Rumiko demanded, none of the edge diminished from her voice.

"I'm Tony Stark," repeated over the speaker. "And unless you consider abruptly hanging up the phone, which constitutes rather poor manners I might add, as making things clear than I would argue you did no such thing," came that smooth, polished response. Some would have wondered if the line was rehearsed, but Rumiko knew it was just Tony's way with words.

"Don't you dare lecture me on manners," Rumiko seethed, clenching both her hands into tightly balled fists. "You shut down the Jakarta project and left me with the shit job of rushing home and trying to explain to our local investors what the hell we were doing. Now if you don't mind, I need to get some sleep so I can be ready for tomorrow's meeting!" she said with a tone of finality.

Tony grinned from his position on the other side of the door. This, this was why he wanted Rumiko Fujikawa. By this point in the conversation he could have talked almost any other woman into opening the door and letting him in. But Rumiko was different. She was a warrior of the commercial world, just as he was, and she refused to let the gender gap shortchange her at any negotiations table.

"You don't need to rest, because there won't be any meeting," Tony said, a bit of the bravado dropping for his voice. But, like most things Tony did, it was a calculated maneuver. This was his wildcard; this was what he knew that Rumiko didn't.

"What are you talking about?" she replied, trying to maintain the edge to her voice.

"I've reinstated the work in Jakarta. It was a mistake to ever shut it down," Tony conceded. A long period of silence ensued before a soft clicking noise heralded the opening of the door. Rumiko stood in the entrance, clad in a long, discrete red robe that appeared to be made of the finest silk. A dragon circled the garment in golden embroidery.

"A mistake? You, Tony Stark, made a mistake?" she asked, arms crossed stubbornly over her chest.

"Yes, I made a mistake," Tony admitted, breathing an internal sigh of relief once the door opened. To be completely honest, he wasn't sure Rumiko was going to open the door for him. That's why Bill and Jimmy were still in the car outside. But with the door open, allowing him to look Rumiko in the face, the

confidence returned. The confidence that had driven to come here in the first place, the feeling of certainty that, no matter how angry she was, Rumiko would accept his apology.

“And that’s why you came here? What did you do, strap on the suit and fly all the way over? Or did you just hop in your jet and have Jocasta fly you over? I’m sure she was more than willing,” Rumiko said with a sardonic tone.

“No...I’m here on business.”

“Iron Man business or Tony Stark business?”

“A little bit of both actually. Listen, I know you’re angry, and you have every right to be. I’ve spent too much of my time recently focused on Iron Man...on the armor, on the future...on all of the people hell bent on destroying Iron...on destroying me. I became disconnected with the things that are really important...the people that are really important. Pepper, Happy...you. And I tried to grab back onto that part of my life by doing what I was always best at. Running the business, making the big decisions. Bill warned me against shutting down the Jakarta project, but you know me. It’s hard to say ‘no’ when I get on a roll. So I axed the project without looking at all the details. Sure, the Jakarta project wasn’t our most efficient, but things weren’t as bad as they appeared on the surface. I think it can still be salvaged,” Tony said, describing the situation as he would in front of the board.

“So what’s this? A courtesy call telling me to report back to work tomorrow?” Rumiko replied with another barb.

“You’re not making this easy,” Tony threw out there, the hurt beginning to manifest itself in his voice.

“I didn’t know it was supposed to be,” Rumiko shot back, her Japanese accent becoming heavier on her words.

“This is an apology. Not from a coworker, but from a friend...”

“A friend?”

“Is there anything else?” Tony asked, the bravado gone from his voice.

“I understand what it’s like to be caught up in work Tony. I guess I just haven’t come to grips with the fact that being Iron Man isn’t always a choice you get to make. Come inside, and we’ll talk. I’ll make some room on the couch for you,” Rumiko conceded with a comforting smile, stepping aside to allow entrance into her penthouse.

“The couch? How come?” Tony asked with a sly smile on his face.

“Because,” she replied, “you’re Tony Stark.”

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### *Happy Hogan’s hospital room*

It had been weeks since the day when Pepper Potts’ life started to crumble. Weeks since Morgan Stark, Tony’s deranged cousin, had published his expose on the skeleton’s hanging in the family’s closet. Surprisingly enough only skeletons were referred to as dwelling in the closet...not armor. It had been weeks since Morgan’s lackey, a villain named Firebrand, attacked Pepper and her husband, Happy. The

attack had left Happy in a coma, one that he continued to lie in. And all of that turned out to be just the beginning. Were Happy simply in a coma, things might have been...easier. For a while after the attack the doctor's reported improvement in Happy's condition. But then, inexplicably, he seemed to fade a bit. And then, one day when Pepper was sitting by Happy's side, a phone call came. Only one word was uttered through the receiver...

"Pepper..." the voice had said. It was Happy's voice. And then it was gone. Pepper had fled to Rumiko's apartment; desperate for some consolation and unable find it with her longtime friend and employer, Tony. It was in Rumiko's apartment that hologram-like ghost of Happy appeared, attempting to communicate with Pepper. Pleading with her to find Tony. To warn him. The message was filled with static, but Happy insisted that someone was still alive. Tony had to be warned.

Nothing out of the ordinary had happened since that night. She had been here, at Feldmore Hospital, sitting right alongside her husband. Every day and every night, holding her vigil. The waiting game was beginning to take its toll on the quietly beautiful Pepper. She had lost weight, preferring not to dine on the food provided to her in the hospital. Her skin had shifted to a slightly paler shade than normal. Tony, while noticeably absent, had been understanding of Pepper's need to be at Happy's side. He had Jimmy and Bill assisting him with everyday tasks while assigning Jocasta to remain at Feldmore around the clock. Why her comatose husband required the protection of a former Avenger she didn't know, but Pepper was certainly appreciative.

But the vigil was also beginning to take its toll on Pepper's state of mind. Spending days on end at the bedside of someone in a coma was one thing, especially when it's the person you love. But knowing that it was some nut job in a costume that induced the coma, and that her husband...or someone pretending to be her husband, was out there trying to communicate with her? Well, that was enough to make a woman crazy. There were so many questions, and so few answers. And when one is left alone, left to think all day long, then the desire for answers becomes maddening. And in the absence of answers, Pepper was looking for someone to blame.

For a while it had been Tony. Morgan was lashing out at Tony, trying to harm Tony, and had used Happy and her to do it. Tony had endangered them by association, and wasn't even there to protect them. Tony had been so consumed in his armor and himself that he had failed a number of the people closest to him, not the least of which was Happy. But that line of thought didn't last long. Pepper and Happy had been a part of Tony Stark's life for so long that they knew the risks. They knew the danger their lives would be put in, and they stayed by Tony's side. No, it was certainly a Stark that Pepper blamed for Happy's condition. It just wasn't Tony. It was Morgan. And curiosity was beginning to get the best of her.

Pepper stood from her seat and her bones cracked in protest. A fleeting sense of lightheadedness washed over her before she was able to regain her bearings and walk to the other side of the room. She opened slid the heavy door open a crack after a considerable amount of effort. Just outside the entrance of the room stood a robotic woman comprised entirely of some silver alloy.

"Jocasta, could you come in here a moment?" Pepper asked of the silent sentinel. Jocasta took a passing glance up and down the hallway before proceeding to open the door the rest of the way and step inside. Pepper retreated a few more steps into the room as the door slid shut behind them.

"I really appreciate you looking after us Jocasta," Pepper began. She was telling the truth; having Tony's other personal assistant and part-time Avenger watching out for them put Pepper's mind at ease a great deal. "I was wondering if you could help me out a little bit more though. There's something I want to know..." Pepper continued, letting her voice trail off to ensure that she had the robot's attention. Upon further inspection she found this to be rather pointless; of course Jocasta was paying attention, she wasn't human. Well, not entirely, at least.

"Of course Pepper. What do you wish to know?" Jocasta replied, canting her head to the side and peering out at Pepper with yellow electronic eyes.

"Where are they holding Morgan Stark?" Pepper asked without hesitation.

"I'm sorry Pepper. That information is classified," Jocasta replied in a flat, vaguely feminine robotic tone.

"Classified? From who? On who's authority?" Pepper demanded, feeling her cheeks flush red with anger.

"I'm sorry Pepper. That information is classified," came the exact same reply.

"Stop saying that!" Pepper shot back, and she now found herself screaming at their guardian.

Silence filled every empty space in the room, and Pepper looked angrily from Jocasta, to Happy, and back to Jocasta again. Pepper had been so caught up in her concern for Happy that she hadn't paid much mind to the other emotions that had been nagging her, ebbing away at her strength and resolve. And now she was flooded with an overwhelming sense of helplessness. It was not something Pepper was accustomed to feeling, even in the employ of a millionaire superhero.

"Please Jocasta...I know you understand how much I love Happy. How far you'll go because of that love," Pepper said, now pleading. But it was more than pleading. It was, as some might call it, a low blow. Jocasta had previously encountered "feelings" for Tony Stark. Feelings that had not been reciprocated in kind. It was an uncomfortable period in an otherwise fruitful relationship. And now Pepper was, at least inadvertently, appealing to those emotions. It was the only card she had left.

Jocasta gave pause. A thoughtful expression flashed across the stainless-titanium features of her face. Jocasta hadn't been "programmed" like other robots; she had originally been the shell for another woman's consciousness. When that consciousness returned to its original form, a mental "residue" had been left behind upon which Jocasta eventually developed her own personality and moral compass. So while Jocasta had a program with specified directives and commands, her artificial intelligence was strikingly human. Pepper's heartfelt pleas appealed to this aspect of her programming, and after several moments of "processing", she knew the right thing to do.

"Morgan Stark is currently located in the room four-oh-three of the psychiatric ward at Feldmore Hospital," she replied with a pang of worry in her voice. She had deduced the nature of Pepper's inquiry, and knew full well the ramifications of what she had told her friend; that the man responsible for her husband's coma was located two floors above in the very same building where they currently stood.

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*Inside the SHIELD Helicarrier, just off the coast of Japan*

"So, does SHIELD require the aid of Iron Man, or Tony Stark?" Tony inquired, glancing casually across the table at Dum Dum Dugan. The veteran SHIELD officer, with trademark fiery red mustache and derby hat atop his head, stared back across the table with a slightly more serious look. He removed a stubby cigar from his mouth and shot the thick grey smoke off to the side before replying.

"I'm hoping the assistance of your armored bodyguard isn't necessary Mr. Stark," Dugan replied. Dugan was one of the few people outside of Tony's immediate circle that knew Iron Man's true identity. But their current conversation was being held inside of the S.H.I.E.L.D. helicarrier, a flying fortress with enough military might to level several small countries. That meant their conversation was probably being monitored, as well it should have been.

"Would you mind explaining to me what the problem is then? I'd like the full breadth of the situation so that I can accurately assess my company's ability to fill your demands," Tony said, his tone shifting to a no-nonsense demeanor. There was a hidden meaning beneath his words though; Tony Stark was asking for an assessment of the situation, but it was really for Iron Man's benefit. Despite Dum Dum's hopes, Tony knew that they wouldn't have contacted him if all they needed was some mechanical assessment. No, things would be far from that simple.

"The problem is a rather sizeable one, Mr. Stark. About the size of a large floating island just off the coast of Japan, actually. The Jade Empire, as I'm sure you're aware, appeared two weeks ago at the summoning of the international terrorist known as the Mandarin. In addition to the obvious fact that an unidentified land mass looking like something out of an Indiana Jones movie was suddenly looming over the Pacific, we also had reports of dragon sightings throughout the area. I believe Iron Man actually encountered one such creature," Dum Dum explained while sliding a portfolio of images across the table to Tony. The photos were an extensive collection displaying the Jade Empire from all angles. Tony continued with the charade, leafing through the images and carefully observing the details.

"Anyways, several associates of your organization assisted in the apprehension of the Mandarin. Since then we've been carefully monitoring the island, and I'm happy to say there's been no activity. But we've grown concerned that the Jade Empire could become the target of other terrorist sects such as A.I.M. We're taking measures to better understand the nature of the Jade Empire, but we want to move the island to a safer location and devise a safe way of destroying it, if need be."

"I think you made the right decision, offering my company the contract for this work. And I certainly understand the precaution you're taking with the Jade Empire. It's important to understand how the Jade Empire is staying afloat before you attempt to move or destroy it. I believe contrary, but suppose the island was being propelled by some sort nuclear reactor. Attempting to destroy the island via implosion could trigger a chain reaction. And the last thing you want is nuclear fallout this close to Japan"

"Correct. So, do you think you can handle the task?" Dum Dum asked, folding his hands peaceably on the table.

"I believe so. I'd like to have Iron Man do some reconnaissance around the perimeter of the island. It might be possible to have the Helicarrier tow the island off, at least until it's a safe distance from the mainland. After that I'd like to examine a bit of the island for myself. I'm trying to restore some of the faith in my company, and having some press shots of our aiding the dissolution of a potential international crisis certainly wouldn't be a bad thing, if you know what I mean," Tony said with a for-show knowing smile. The subtext of the entire conversation was that SHIELD would be getting both Tony Stark AND Iron Man.

"Of course. We have several teams going through the temples on the island right now, ensuring that there aren't any nasty surprises waiting for us."

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### *Inside the Jade Empire...*

"This place is giving me the creeps," Benjamin Kintera said, eyes focused on the cobbled path in front of them. He gripped his field-issue combat rifle firmly, keeping the barrel-mounted flash-light firmly trained ahead. Darkness folded ominously around him from all sides, broken only by the light from his rifle and that of his partner, Adam Roth. The two were veteran SHIELD officers, clad in their standard blue uniform with the hawk crest on the right breast.

"No kidding. I don't envy the rest of the squad, still heading deeper into this place. Then again, we have to try and find our way out of this funhouse and re-establish communications with base," Adam replied gruffly, picking up his rifle a bit and adjusting his glasses with the back of his hand.

"We'll be out before you know it. We just need to follow the tracers out. Our own personal trail of bread crumbs," Ben said reassuringly. Ben was the shorter of the two agents, standing at about five feet, six inches. He was a little bit stockier as well, but the way he carried himself spoke of great confidence. Every few meters they would come upon a small module on the ground emitting a soft blue light. But after continuing further through the Jade Empire temple's darkened tunnels, the tracers began to become further and further interspersed.

"Hold up a second Benny. I'm not picking up the next tracer..." Adam said, holding up a lanky arm and barring any further progress by his partner.

"It can't be that much further...let's just push ahead," Ben said, pushing his way through. A wind howled past them on its way deeper into the temple. Adam took this as a sign that the exit couldn't be too far away and followed his friend, holding his finger tentatively over the rifle's trigger.

Several more minutes passed by in silence and near-darkness, and the temperature began to drop around the two SHIELD agents.

"I think it's time to stop and double back," Adam said. Ben paused, starting to think that his partner and long time friend was right. He swung his rifle from side to side, letting that spotlight arc across the shadows. The same old worn down stone surrounded them, with several branching paths appearing behind them.

"I think you're right...but which way is back?" Ben asked. Adam turned around and followed the beam of light from Adam's rifle. That was when something shrouded in dark green cloth flew through the light before passing back into the darkness. Adam swung his rifle up with a flick of his wrist and managed to catch the tail end of the shroud before losing it again in the darkness. Ben, without any direction, swung his rifle wide, hoping to catch whatever was moving in a pincer between the two spotlights. But when the two converged, there was nothing there.

Adam heard Ben let loose a blood-curdling scream of pain. He brought his rifle to bear as quickly as possible, but by the time he reached the spot where Ben had stood, the tunnel had gone silent, and nothing remained save for the darkness. As abruptly as the scream stopped though, the darkness vanished, replaced by a momentarily blinding flood of light, cast on the corridor by a series of green flames along wall-mounted torches. When the shock subsided Adam could see what had happened to his partner; Ben lay on the ground, in a pool of his own blood. Before he could call out Adam felt a sharp pain in his abdomen. Glancing down, he saw a crimson coated blade protruding through his stomach. And then everything went dark.

"The Jade Empire does not suffer intruders..." came the deep tone from a ninja standing over Adam's fallen form, shrouded in a deep emerald gi and holding a wicked looking blade. Its facial features were lost in a cloak of shadows. A soft "SHRAP" filled the corridor though, and the ninja fell forward in silent death upon the man he himself had just slain, the back of his gi scorched.

"Indeed. Isn't convenient that this island will soon belong...to Doom," echoed the powerful voice of another armored man. Victor Von Doom surveyed his handiwork for only a moment before disappearing into the darkness of a neighboring corridor...

*Happy Hogan's hotel room, Feldmore Hospital*

"Here?!? You're telling me that Morgan Stark, the man truly responsible for my husband's coma, is being kept HERE, at Feldmore Hospital?" Pepper demanded, rage flushing into what had just previously been a dull, expressionless face. She was on her feet a split second later. Pepper's body had seemed to shrink during the vigil she had held at the hospital, but all of that was gone with the blink of an eye. Her body quaked with anger, her lips quivered with rage, making her appear like a woman bordering on the edge of insanity, ready to lash out.

"Pepper, please calm down," Jocasta urged, reaching her hand out through the air, hoping to soothe her friend's nearly-tangible rage.

"Calm down? How...I...how could Tony keep this from me? Jocasta...how...how could you not tell me? Just standing there in the hall all this time...while that murdering son of a bitch just...lays there, a floor away!" Pepper shouted, yanking her arm away from Jocasta's out-stretched hand. Her breathing began to even out, and it no longer appeared as if her body would shake itself to pieces.

"I'm sorry Pepper. I can assure you that Tony and I considered the logistics and permutations. This is the most logical avenue," Jocasta said, bringing the formerly outstretched arm back to her side.

"Listen, it doesn't matter. I don't care. Hell, just makes this all a little bit easier. You can even help me" Pepper said, taking a deep breath. And after that she did something truly out of character. She laughed, the chuckle rumbling in her chest before sliding past her lips.

"Help you with what?" Jocasta asked.

"Kill Morgan Stark. Help me kill Morgan Stark," Pepper uttered with a steely look on her face. She took a one last, significant look at her comatose before turning to leave the room. Jocasta briskly moved in between her and the door.

"I can't allow you to do that. Please reconsider this decision Pepper. Murdering Morgan Stark will not alleviate the pain you feel in Happy's absence, nor will it bring your husband back," Jocasta offered, lightening the tone of her voice in the hopes of calming Pepper.

"How the hell do you know that?" Pepper started breathing fire again, the anger rushing back as quickly as it had left. She took another step towards Jocasta, leaning forward in an antagonizing matter. "What if Morgan's trapped Happy's mind in some alternate dimension? Or another time...like in the future? Is that so strange? We work for a guy who flies around in a suit of armor...you're a robot with the leftovers of a woman's mind! Now you tell me why killing Morgan Stark can't bring Happy back!" By the time Pepper was done she was screaming at Jocasta. It was unnerving that Happy continued to lay there motionless, despite the raised voice in his presence.

And Jocasta remained silent. She had no answer for Pepper, or for the questions she posed to herself. And so she stepped aside, deciding to let Pepper through and follow her out the door.

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*Psychiatric ward, Feldmore Hospital, third floor*

David Goetz poured over a dossier's worth of notes at the nurse's station, hunched over the counter. He would occasionally glance up from the pages in the folder to look at a neighboring computer monitor, examining what appeared to be a set of time records. The psych ward at Feldmore consisted of one long, lonely hallway lined with sickly green colored linoleum floor. The nurse's station stood abandoned at the

moment save for David Goetz, a young doctor with the chiseled looks and dazzling smile normally associated with the star football player or all American fraternity brother. To the naked eye it appeared as if this hall was just like any other in the hospital. But several orderlies and civilians wandered up and down the hall, peeking into a random room every so often.

"Hell of a lot of good these armed guards have done," David thought, peering over the manila folder as a rather imposing male nurse walked by. The young doctor scoffed under his breath, angered at the amount of money he figured someone was paying to have his ward under constant watch. "Misty's been missing for days now and all these guys do is walk up and down the hallway...who the hell would want anything to do with that veggie in 304 anyways?" David sighed. Despite his surface refusal, David suspected that the patient in room 304 was at the center of all the odd activity.

Room 304 was the padded room of Morgan Stark, the super villain who also went by the alias "The Black Lama." Just one "L", Misty Summers had always said. Lama, not llama. It just wouldn't do to be a villainous monster named after a mammal known for its humped back. Misty had been the young doctor assigned to observe Morgan when he first arrived on the wing. Much to David's dismay, Misty began to act disoriented and confused whenever she had her sessions with Morgan. The evil Stark gave no outward signs of activity though, remaining huddled in the corner of his cell.

David clenched his fist in frustration. Nothing. He had found nothing in Misty's notes or time records that would possibly explain her absence. He took a long, hard look down the hall at room 304. Morgan Stark had something to do with this, he just knew it. But hunch was all he had, and with that wasn't much for the guards now patrolling the hallway to work off of. David didn't even know it was Tony Stark funding the whole operation.

The sound of a swinging door drew David's attention the end of the hallway. He caught the tail end of Pepper Hogan's dress fluttering into a neighboring pantry. Finding this odd he moved from behind the nurse's station and prepared to investigate when he saw something even more unusual. Standing there, staring listlessly through the glass window into room 304, was Misty Summers, the beautiful doctor that had been missing for several days now. She had her white lab coat wrapped snugly around her dancer's body, her blonde hair wrapped up in a tight bun above her head. It was as if she had appeared out of thin air.

"Misty?" David asked in a hopeful tone. The young woman turned hesitantly, her arms crossed over her chest.

"Stop right there!" yelled the hulking nurse who had passed by David earlier. He had emerged at the other end of the hallway along with another physically intimidating man dressed in civilian attire. Both were reaching into their jackets, clearly moving to brandish weapons of some sort. A horizontal column of flame engulfed both men before they could draw though, leaving behind only charred remains and a woman with flames surrounding her body.

"Misty..." David muttered, the shock of the situation freezing him where he stood.

Misty continued turning, looking David dead in the eyes with a cold, unfeeling gaze.

"My name is Calico now, and I serve Morgan Stark and the Stockpile," Misty replied coolly, producing a firearm from her coat and aiming at the David's head. Before the doctor could beg for his life the woman he had admired pulled the trigger.

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TO BE CONTINUED...



#42

Written by Ben Wolfert & Zach Crane

David Goetz, the young doctor stationed at the psych ward of Feldmore Hospital, watched helplessly as Misty Summers, the other doctor he was enamored with pulled the trigger of the fire arm aimed directly at his head. Everything moved in slow motion after that. He closed his eyes and felt a strong force hurl him backwards. His head slammed back against the ground with such force that he nearly passed out. The sound all around him softened, drowned out with a dull rushing sound.

His eyes opened slowly, eyelids lifting as if they were lead weights. This certainly wasn't what he pictured hell looking like; artificial lighting overhead obstructed by what appeared to be a woman made entirely of stainless steel. A ginger-haired woman off to the side, peering around the corner with a watchful eye. And he didn't really expect to be in heaven. Not with everything he had done in high school.

"Remain here," the steel woman commanded in a single-toned voice, like a cyborg from a Sci-Fi channel special.

"What? No 'come with me if you want to live'?" David protested with a groan, his senses slowing returning to optimal capacity. He heard shouting and the sound of footsteps. He turned his head, causing a sharp pang of pain to wrack his brain, only to see the bottom of the refrigerator. He wasn't dead. He was in the pantry just off the psych ward's main hallway. And the woman above him... or whatever she was... had saved him from Misty, tackling him into the safety of the pantry.

Jocasta ignored the disoriented question from the doctor and stood to her feet while returning her attention to the hallway. Misty Summers, now identifying herself as Calico, seemed intent on bypassing the security codes sealing Morgan Stark's cell. And it certainly appeared as if she were succeeding.

"We can't let them get Morgan," Pepper said, never taking her eyes off of Calico. Her body seemed tense, like a cat about to pounce forward.

Jocasta, recognizing the danger posed by a freed Morgan Stark, lifted her hand in the air, preparing to hit Misty with a blast of energy. David quickly realized the intentions of the robotic woman and dove forward, dragging down Jocasta's arm. A column of orange energy lanced forward at that exact moment, tearing through the wall right beside Misty's head.

"What are you doing!?" Pepper shouted, finally bringing her attention away from the commotion in the hallway.

"Stop! She doesn't know what she's doing!" David gasped, looking desperately into Jocasta's metallic face. She did not appear happy.

"What do you mean?" she asked with a slightly nastier tone to her voice.

"That's not Misty! I mean, it is, but it isn't!" he said, not sure that even he knew what he was talking about.

"God damn idiot...I told you once already, it's Calico now," said the woman that used to be Misty Summers. Jocasta's blast had caught her attention and she was now focused on the two individuals just inside the pantry, with a vicious looking fire-arm in each hand aimed right for their heads.

"I need to change my taste in women," David muttered.

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"I clearly didn't do too good of a job screening your girlfriends," Tony's voice came through the speakers in Jimmy's helmet.

"I don't know if I'd say that," Jimmy responded, peering out at the floating landmass causing so much consternation at the moment. His HUD flashed several diagnostics before his eyes, and he paused to examine a certain portion of bedrock. The Jade Empire just gave off strange readings, with random spikes in energy and unknown materials embedded in the floating island. For all the advanced technology packed into what he was wearing Jimmy's armor was able to tell him little more than he already knew. And that was pretty much nothing.

"Well, you managed to get caught up with my arch-nemesis's daughter...I don't know what your future is like, but I'm pretty sure the Mandarin and I won't be sharing cocktails anytime soon," Tony replied, zooming a set of unmanned green surveillance armor behind Jimmy to examine another low-hanging spike of the Jade Empire. It was a beautiful day off the coast of Japan, with only a few cloud wisps lingering in the blue sky.

The Jade Empire, a floating island the size of a large metropolis, rested peacefully over the water, its surface-top temples eerily quiet. Off a bit in the distance the S.H.I.E.L.D. Helicarrier, a hovering fortress almost half the size of the Empire, kept a watchful eye on the still island. Inside the fortress was where Tony Stark sat alone while controlling the armor that accompanied Jimmy via remote control.

"It's not that simple..." Jimmy replied in a depressed tone. He wanted to tell Tony how Lin, the daughter of the Mandarin from his timeline, really made him feel. But the sensation defied logic and he found himself unable to explain it. It was a passion that burned intensely, but without a reason he could define for others.

"Don't worry about it kid. I've spent my fair share of time with the fairer sex, and still can't explain a thing about them," Tony said, understanding Jimmy's inability to communicate. "You're a lot smarter than I was at your age, and if dating the daughter of some ancient megalomaniac wizard struck your fancy, I'm sure there was something redeeming about her."

"Well, when you put it that way."

"It's that 'way' that landed me in bed with eight of the last ten Playmate of the Year winners," Tony replied smugly.

"Eight?"

"Last year I was dating Rumiko and three years ago Hef begged me not to sleep with her."

"So you owed him one?"

"Nope. But now he owes me one. So let me know if you want to swing by the mansion any time."

"Thanks, but I think I'll be steering clear of the ladies for a bit now. My feelings for Lin nearly screwed us all," Jimmy said with a note of depression.

"Sheesh, are you sure you're my son? You sound like Spider-Man without the annoying quips. Listen, you're going to make mistakes in our line of work. And trust me; those mistakes are going to involve women too. But that can't stop you from living your life outside the suit. Otherwise, why the hell would you ever take it off?" Tony asked. Jimmy offered only silence in response.

"Besides, that Britannia girl isn't too hard on the eyes."

"Aw come on..."

"What's the deal with her anyways? I should really sit down and talk with Bill before he goes ahead and offers employment opportunities to women named after second-rate nations."

"I think he felt bad after what happened to her here and offered to help her out for a bit. You know, get settled into the whole hero gig. Not everyone has an Avenger for a father."

"Or a megalomaniac wizard."

"Are your sensors having any luck?" Jimmy sighed, ignoring his father's last comment.

"Unfortunately not. I'm still trying to catalog all of the upgrades to my armor since our encounter with the Justice League, which is how I built this prototype, but I prefer to do that in a controlled setting. And that's when I know where to look. To be honest, it's a bit disconcerting to be flying around in something I don't know every circuit of. That, and we can't have any S.H.I.E.L.D. grunts getting suspicious. The only reason I sent this suit out with you was in the hope that I'd be able to better read the energy emanating from the island."

"You know my theory. If you can't categorize it, that means it's some sort of mystical mumbo jumbo," Bill Foster's voice cut in.

"That's a very scientific observation Bill. I knew I kept you around for something," Tony ribbed to his friend and current CEO of Stark Enterprises. "Are the databases on the Helicarrier registering anything?"

"It's running the energy readings you're feeding it against an array of known energy signatures. Not surprisingly, the closest frequency is associated with the Mandarin's rings. Other than that, nothing so far."

"And just how long have you been listening in?" Tony asked with a smirk on his face.

"Long enough to hear you criticize my hiring tendencies. I don't mind, although Britannia's standing right beside me," Bill said with a chuckle.

"Sheesh..." Jimmy groaned.

"Haha, don't worry Jimmy. She doesn't have a headset on," Bill said with more outright laughter this time. "Hold on for a second," Bill interrupted, his voice taking on a grave tone. "I'm getting an emergency transmission from Jocasta. I'll patch her through to you guys."

"What's the problem Jo?" Tony asked as soon as he heard the communications line open. A deafening explosion crashed across the line, and the heroes waited with bated breath for their friend and ally to respond.

"Tony, there has been a security breach at Feldmore Hospital. Individuals identified as members of the mercenary group known as the Stockpile attacked the psych ward approximately thirteen minutes ago. Their objective appears to be to free your cousin Morgan."

"Are you in position to stop them?" Bill asked.

"Affirmative, but I am guarding two civilians as well," Jocasta replied matter-of-factly.

"I am not a civilian!" Pepper protested in the background.

"Jocasta, protect those with you. Morgan is a secondary priority, you need to protect Pepper," Tony replied without hesitation. Morgan Stark had ruined his life, and the thought of him free-of custody, regardless of mental condition, was a frightening concept. But Pepper was one of the people most important to Tony...one of his friends he had let down one too many times. In a choice between Morgan's freedom and Pepper's safety, the decision was never in question.

"Affirmative, although Stockpile members have adjusted their objectives and are currently moving in on our position," Jocasta replied in that perfectly measured tone.

"Bill, contact the Avengers and any Stark security personnel within flying distance, maximum priority. See if S.H.I.E.L.D. has any additional agents in the area. Jocasta, hold tight as long as you can, we'll get help there ASAP," Tony replied, his calm rivaling that of the woman on the other side of the line. And she had the advantage of being programmed that way.

"We need to do something," Jimmy muttered. There was a hint of despair in his voice that went unnoticed by his friends.

"We're doing everything we can Jimmy. Even at top speed it would take us hours to reach the hospital. They might not have that much time," Tony responded.

Jimmy's mind began to panic. He hadn't told anyone from this time period just yet but Pepper...she was his mother. He knew her as Pepper Stark, not Pepper Potts, and certainly not as Pepper Hogan. It was something that had concerned him greatly upon returning to this timeline. It was something no one at home had prepared him for. Surely Pepper couldn't remain married to Happy; how else would Jimmy be born? It was a thought that had kept him up late several nights since his arrival in this time, but the frequency of such sessions had been steadily declining. All of that came rushing back now with the fear that his mother...or his future mother, would die before she could give birth to him. Or the future him. It was enough to make his head explode. If Pepper died, what would happen to him?

The world grew very small around Jimmy, and he began to feel terribly confined within his suit. He had to do something, but what? His stomach was turning in knots but he knew that Tony was right. Neither Tony's suit, modified and enhanced by various alien technologies, nor his own, designed with technology from well into the future could get them to Pepper in time. He wanted to tell Tony that Pepper was Jimmy's mother, in the hopes that there was something, ANYTHING that Tony could do. An ace up his sleeve, or some transportation technology he was keeping hidden. But...what if he was over reacting?

What if this had all happened in his time as well? Perhaps Jocasta managed to defeat the Stockpile on her own, allowing Pepper to live? Then telling Tony could screw things up just as much, tainting all of his thoughts and actions towards Pepper with the burden that he would someday produce a child with her.

“Come on Jimmy, you better get back to the Helicarrier”, Tony said, the slightest hint of worry detectable in his voice.

“I’m still not sure I like the idea of you wandering around that island in a business suit,” Bill’s voice said, trying to change the subject.

Jimmy turned and began to propel himself after Tony’s surveillance armor, his mind still spinning when a vortex of swirling lights exploded into existence right in front of him. His HUD went berserk, temporarily shutting off before returning with an array of flashing warning signals. He tried to change direction, to steer himself away from the swirling chasm of blue and red light. But it seemed as if the tear was growing at a faster rate and before he knew it he had entered the vortex, his suit shutting off around him. And just like that Iron Lad and the vortex he had entered disappeared into thin air.

“Jimmy!” Tony yelled while watching as his future son disappeared into the miniature wormhole. His sensors had flared just as Jimmy’s had, but once the vortex was gone all readings returned to normal. Ignoring the normal readings from all of his sensors, Tony’s drone armor zoomed over to the spot where Jimmy had just vanished, half expecting the vortex to reopen and swallow that as well.

“Bill? Give me something here Bill, preferably good news,” Tony implored.

“We’ve got nothing on the that rift Tony,” Bill’s voice crackled across the intercom. Just when Tony was about to speak again Bill cut back in.

“But we are picking up a signal from Jimmy’s armor. You’d never guess where he is.”

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“Get behind me,” Jocasta commanded, stepping forward to confront the quickly approaching Calico. Misty’s body slowly began to morph into Calico’s costume, a tight white body suit with thin electronic circuits interspersed along the length of her form. The fingered gloves of her armor slowly extended outwards, shifting into pointed talons.

Jocasta didn’t wait, going on the offensive as soon as David and Pepper were behind her and safely stowed away inside the pantry. She flew forward, propelled by the propulsion system in her boots. Calico took a vicious swipe with her talons causing the claws to rake across Jocasta’s upper body. Sparks exploded, splashing upon the ground even as Jocasta proceeded to plant both hands firmly underneath Calico’s shoulders, moving her in turn.

Calico’s swipes became more frantic and she clawed desperately at Jocasta’s face. Sparks continued to jump from the woman’s metallic hide but little more than surface-level scratch marks remained after each assault. The opposing wall came up before Calico could free herself from Jocasta’s grasp, and Misty’s body hit the surface with a dull “THUD”. Her head followed, snapping back and cracking the wall behind it into a small crater. When the woman’s head came forward again she was unconscious, sliding down along the wall a moment later.

“Misty!” David shouted, breaking away from Pepper and stumbling across the floor, landing beside the unconscious Calico. He cradled the woman’s head in his arms, prying open her eyelids and taking a long look into her pupils. He was a doctor after all. That didn’t make him intelligent though, as he made an easy target for Sunstreak and Unicorn, two other members of the Stockpile that had finished disposing of the security detail Tony Stark had placed on the floor to protect his cousin. Sunstreak’s form was that of a female with a red spandex outfit covering the portions of her body not consumed by flames. A roar of flames concealed her head, dipping down into her upper body to create a v-neck of fire, while both legs below her knees were covered in a similar coating of inferno. Unicorn stood beside her, a large man with a green mask that featured a foot-long horn protruding from his forehead. The two saw the pre-occupied

David and instantly recognized him as an easy target. A lance of flame formed in Sunstreak's extended hand while a sphere of energy quickly expanded on the tip of Unicorn's horn. The villains fired without mercy and only the selfless action of Jocasta, placing herself in front of the attack saved David from becoming melted to a crisp. But Jocasta's sacrifice was not without consequences; Unicorn's energy blast short-circuited her armor and Sunstreak's lance piled on the damage, crippling Jocasta to the point where she simply dropped to her knees.

"Well look wot we've got here," Unicorn said, his voice branded with a heavy Australian accent. The two Stockpile members stalked forward towards the helpless Jocasta and David.

"Shit," Pepper muttered, reaching for something, anything. She found a toaster and grabbed it firmly by the feet. With one tug she had the plug out of the socket, and a moment later the kitchen appliance was cocked back behind her head like a baseball.

"Well, only Calico knew the codes. So it looks like we'll have to kill some time," Sunstreak said with the shadow of a wicked smirk on her fiery face. Another lance of flames materialized into her hand but a moment later she heard something whizzing towards her head. The flaming woman turned just in time to see the gleaming metal of the toaster careening right for her head. And just as quickly the appliance melted to slag.

"Really?" Sunstreak exclaimed cockily, turning her lance to face the now exposed Pepper Potts. "Just for that, I'm gonna skewer you first," she said as she hoisted her lance into a throwing position. But before she could strike this time the air in front of her distorted, the light twisting and bending. A loud sound similar to a clap of thunder filled the hall and vortex of light exploded from nothingness. Unicorn and Sunstreak watched the display in amazement. That is, until Iron Lad came exploding out from the spatial disturbance, slamming into both Stockpile members and driving them backwards. The two costumed crooks slid across the floor until finally slamming against the far end wall. Iron Lad used the retrorockets in his boots to keep himself from sharing their fate, landing safely and examining his handiwork before looking back to his friends.

"So...uhm...what'd I miss?"

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"I don't like this. You shouldn't be going down there," Bill said, pacing back and forth in front of a sleek modern desk. He was clad in a sharply put together three-piece business suit, a simple black and white ensemble that was finished off with an opaque red power tie.

"Loosen up Bill. You're starting to sound like Rhodey. And look where he is now. Babysitting a bunch of thugs down at the Vault," Tony said. He stood looking stoically out the floor-to-ceiling windows that lined that particular office of the S.H.I.E.L.D. Helicarrier. While Bill's suit was very simple, Tony's was extravagant while remaining tasteful. Spun of the finest silk with thin white pinstripes, it was clear he was ready to put on a show. His tie was a light lavender hue, and it matched perfectly with the handkerchief meticulously folded and placed in his jacket pocket.

"You're going down there as Tony Stark...if things get heavy, what are you going to do? Can't just put the armor on in front of an entire S.H.I.E.L.D. detail, and that's ignoring half the major Asian media conglomerates that'll be present. They just had to go and let the Japanese get involved," Bill griped, shaking his head.

"The island is right off the coast of their country. And they're the entire reason I'm going down in THIS suit as opposed to my other one," Tony replied, casually straightening the cuffs of his dress shirt.

"I don't follow you," Bill said, now giving his full attention to Tony. Tony was still gazing out the window of the office.

"There're times when people need Iron Man. Now's not one of those times. The public needs to see Tony Stark. After everything that's happened with Morgan, after having the Stark name dragged through the mud, something needs to be done. Iron Man saving the world is all well and good, but at the end of the day I'm still Tony Stark. There're still thousands of people employed under my name, and I'd rather give up my armor than see those people suffer because of what my deranged cousin did."

"You won't be doing those folks any good if you're dead," Bill retorted.

"True. But that would get me off the hook and put the company in fantastic position to make an end of year comeback after overcoming the death of its founder," Tony responded dryly.

"I knew there was a reason I worked for you," Bill said with a quiet laugh.

"The women?" Tony quipped before finally turning away from the window. "I had planned to have Jimmy come along in the Iron Man suit, but that idea disappeared about as quickly as Jimmy did."

"You could take Britannia," Bill offered.

"You know we're going to sit down and have a chat after this is all over. I understand that you and her were locked up together in the Jade Empire, but that doesn't mean you just hire her as soon as we're off the island. And if you're just trying to sleep with her then there are better ways to go about it..."

"Tony!"

"Sorry. Just wanted to make sure. Anyways, if you vouch for her then I'll give 'er a shot. Just make sure she doesn't stand too close to me. I don't need the tabloid covers splashed with allegations that I'm cheating on Rumiko with some British girl running around in spandex. Not good for my image."

"You're really something," Bill commented.

"That's what she said," Tony responded with a snarky grin before glancing back out the window. "Now let's get moving. Make sure you've got a safe line of communication to Britannia and I if anything gets dicey. I'll just keep my fingers crossed that you don't have to use it."

---

The four shuttles S.H.I.E.L.D. was using to ferry operatives to and from the Jade Empire came to a smooth landing on the cobblestone ground. The surface of the Jade Empire was a sprawling, flat expanse of land only interrupted by the occasional temple piercing the ground and reaching into the sky, composed of the same beaten yellow cobblestones that lay beneath patches of grass and weeds that covered the island's surface. At the very center of the island was a shorter temple, more of a palace almost, but one that covered more ground than any of the others. All the other structures seemed strategically positioned around this center one, which itself was adorned by several large statues of dragons striking fierce and menacing poses.

"You're one sick son of a bitch, you know that Stark?" George Washington Bridge, more affectionately known as GW, commented. Bridge was one of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s top officers, a hulking man with dark skin and a stark white crop cut of hair. He stood to his feet as the shuttle came to a complete stop, offering a hand down to the seated Stark.

“Just because you dress up in spandex for your business ventures doesn’t mean you have to be angry,” Tony took GW’s hand and stood to his feet. He swept his hands over his suit a few times, straightening out the jacket and removing any dirt that might have accumulated on the fine fabric. He looked incredibly out of place amongst all the S.H.I.E.L.D. troopers, clad in his three-piece business suit. But the truth was that he was wearing the S.H.I.E.L.D. mandated uniform beneath his suit just as a precaution.

“You’re putting yourself at unnecessary risk by coming here. More importantly, you’re putting some of my men at risk” GW growled, ignoring Tony’s quip.

“No risk, no reward GW. Besides, I’ve brought my own protection,” Tony replied, nodding his head towards the seated Britannia. She too wore a S.H.I.E.L.D. uniform, her blonde hair drawn up in a ponytail. Her blonde eyes held a passive glimmer as she watched all of the S.H.I.E.L.D. troops file out the back of the shuttle.

“Her? Where’s your iron body guard? Listen, if things get hot, just move back to the shuttles. Otherwise, stay out of our way,” GW said before stalking off down the ramp and out of the shuttle.

“I think he needs to switch to decaf,” Tony said with a chuckle. Britannia continued to sit there quietly. “Come on, part of the job description is to laugh at my jokes. It’s in the contract.”

“Contract?” Britannia replied with a confused look on her face. There was a tone of uncertainty in her voice and the expression on her face was one of muddled confusion...and possibly anger.

“Listen, are you going to be ok out there? All joking aside, GW has a point. They’ve lost some men in here, and it’s not like I can just put on my armor if something comes up. I’m sure this place isn’t necessarily bringing back the fuzziest of memories, but I need you on your game. Bill vouches for you. Don’t let him down,” Tony instructed sternly. He too left the shuttle, leaving Britannia there alone.

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#### Stark-Fujikawa’s Japanese headquarters

<<“This is a foolish thing Tony does,”>>\* Kenjiro Fujikawa admonished, leaning back in his leather office chair. His harsh gaze, accentuated by the sharp slant of his eyes, was focused on a large plasma television mounted at the far end of his office opposite the magnificent desk he sat behind. He was as intimidating as a Japanese CEO could hope to be, looking like the commander of an entire nation from behind his sprawling command center. There were subtle decorations that spoke of his more wise and cultured nature though; a finely cultivated bonsai tree beside him and a gently babbling fountain off to the side of his office.

(\*translated from Japanese)

<<“Father, that isn’t fair,>>” Rumiko attempted to defend Tony.

<<“Do not attempt to defend him Rumiko. He risks his life simply to appear on television. We could have provided the anti-gravity propulsion system needed to move the Jade Empire without any interference from Anthony,”>> Kenjiro said, now turning his gaze to his daughter. She was a beautiful young woman, one that blossomed right before his eyes. At first he had been concerned; she had taken up the antics of a wild-child and began dating Tony Stark only to upset her parents. But she had slowly matured into a competent and intelligent businesswoman, a position that brought him both criticism and respect.

Unfortunately her romance with Tony Stark continued as well, placing the elderly Japanese man in a terrible conflict.

“<<But then no one would know of the aid we offered. Now Japan and all of the world will know of our aid in this matter. See how Tony is already being interviewed by the media brought along by the Japanese forces. He does this not for his own gratification, but for the company,>>” Rumiko responded confidently, turning her gaze to the television. A contingent of S.H.I.E.L.D. troops were speaking with their Japanese counterparts while GW and the Japanese general spoke off to the side. The media that had accompanied the Japanese troops quickly flocked to the biggest celebrity on the island, and that was Tony. He fielded questions like a professional, responding in crisp Japanese. The interviewers ate it up and a knowing grin crept onto Tony’s face.

“<<He is brash and standoffish. This sort of grandstanding is not appropriate for a man in his position. And as much as I dislike the man, he is the object of your affections. It would pain me to see you upset should anything happen to him.>>”

“<<I appreciate your concern father, but Tony is a capable man. He will do what’s necessary for himself, and for the company. Now hush, I can’t hear the interview...>>”

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“*Domo arigato*,” Tony said before bowing his head to the media.

“You’re something else...” Bill’s voice came through loud and clear across the earpieces Tony and Britannia were wearing.

“You know it. I think we’re going to set up base topside so that we can observe and communicate with the squads as they search through these temples. Be sure to feed us anymore updates you get from Feldmore.”

“Sure thing Tony, I –brrzzzzkkkkk-“

Tony tapped the earpiece as the signal from Bill was cut off. The static continued, and Tony shot a concerned glance over at Britannia. She too was having issues with her earpiece. A quick survey of the S.H.I.E.L.D. troops revealed the same issues with their communication devices. This was not good. Not good at all. Tony’s eyes raced around the surrounding area, trying to peer into some of the open temples. Something was messing with everyone’s equipment where it hadn’t been just a moment earlier.

“Hasn’t anyone taught you that it’s poor manners to trespass on another’s land? Ancient rulers considered the crime so egregious that it was thought to be an act of war,” a hollow voice boomed from one of the nearby temples. The voice echoed outward from the arched entrance beyond which there was only darkness. The voice created a hard pit in the center of Tony’s stomach and the strong inclination to curse profusely.

“This is bad. Britannia, stay close,” Tony muttered, holding his ground and watching the temple closely, just as everyone else.

“Isn’t it fortunate for all of you then that Doom is a far more understanding ruler.” A period of silence ensued before being broken by the sounds of metal stomping upon cobblestones. The echoes grew louder before culminating in the appearance of Victor Von Doom within the archway. Doom’s was a calculated and imposing figure, a cold and menacing steel-like armor with that deep green cloak wrapped around it, the hood rising above his helmet-covered head. His appearance was not pristine though as his

cloak seemed a bit more battered and worn than usual. This didn't diminish the intimidating atmosphere Doom exuded though, standing tall and upright with his expressionless facemask forcing his audience to imagine the scarred and disfigured visage underneath.

Both the Japanese and S.H.I.E.L.D. troops shifted nervously, several of them letting their finger dance along the trigger of their weapon. The skin of some of the Japanese men even shifted to a light shade of green that matched the color of their combat fatigues. GW quickly motioned everyone to stand down although the Japanese general, a broad, elderly man with salt and pepper hair, wasn't so quick to settle his troops.

"What do you want here Doom? Are you responsible for the men I've lost," GW barked, not afraid of the Latverian dictator. He took several steps so that he was at the forefront of his forces, hoping it would encourage them to fall into rank and soothe their nerves.

"What I want, is here," Doom waved his arms around, gesturing to his surroundings. "Land, General Bridge. It's quite simple. Long before men fought for their Democratic rights or the safety of third world indigenous peoples, they fought for land. Simply stated, land is power. But long has the majority of worthwhile land on this planet been occupied by those unwilling to yield. This island is a source of untapped potential. Potential that I intend to claim for Latveria."

"You're a long ways off from Latveria," Tony said, taking bold steps forward. Britannia inexplicably found the courage that led her to defy the Mandarin and was close behind Tony with an oddly determined look on her face.

"Ah, Mr. Stark. What a pleasure that you could join me in my newest acquisition. While I do appreciate the anti-gravity thrusters your iron employee placed on this island Doom is afraid he has no need for them. You see, this island is a wellspring of great mystical energy. Energy that Doom commands. Now, it is not my desire to begin a conflict here. I am offering you and your military friends here the ability to simply walk away and leave me to my prize," Doom said, strolling casually from the temple and out into the mid-afternoon sun.

"This island is in Japanese airspace. It is no more yours to command than it is ours," the Japanese general spouted in surprisingly good English.

"If you will not leave of your own accord than Doom's servants will help you," Doom said, waving both hands through the air in an elaborate gesture. Over four dozen plumes of smoke erupted from the grounds surrounding the armed forces. As the vapors blew into the wind they left behind a cadre of homogenous ninjas clad in deep emerald gis. Each was equipped with a decidedly wicked looking katana.

"How far do you think you'd get with this island Doom? The Helicarrier's right there and you know the Japanese have some of their fastest missiles trained on your floating paradise. Save yourself the trouble and call your pajama boys off," GW shouted. He knew the situation was about to explode. He could already tell his Japanese counterpart was the trigger happy type. But GW never could have predicted what happened next...

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Deep within the Jade Empire, in the deepest and most highly guarded bowels of the island, a tomb lay still and silent, illuminated by the green flames of candles eternally burning at each of the tomb's four corners. There appeared to be no entrance or exit from the tomb, only a solitary coffin positioned in the center. Untold years worth of dust had settled on top of the nondescript coffin, far larger than one required

to bury a normal man. The occupant of the coffin had lain as still as his surroundings for millennia. A mile up, through bedrock and cobblestone, Victor Von Doom had tapped into the energy of the island and called forth its soulless warriors to serve him. And inside of the tomb, inside of that dust-ridden coffin, something stirred.

---

Tony saw it first. He was in the best position, after all. As GW had been warning Doom Britannia's patience and seemingly her capability to make intelligent decisions eroded. She ran forward, screaming like a banshee. S.H.I.E.L.D. and Japanese troops alike dove out of her way as she made a beeline for Doom, fist raised and clenched in anger. Doom, with what Tony could only image was a bemused smirk, stood in place with his arms crossed over his chest. He was really going to allow her a free shot, Tony thought to himself. And Tony was almost right.

When Britannia was within five feet Doom raised his hand, directing his palm outwards. A sphere of mystical energy shielded his body even as Britannia brought her fist as far back as it would go. The ruler of Latveria returned his arms to that smug position across his chest, waiting for the inevitable damage the woman would only deal to herself, tossed back by his mystical shield. That moment never came. Britannia's fist came down and shattered the mystical field like a pane of glass. Doom had no time to react before Britannia connected with the side of his helmet, catapulting him back into the temple with a deafening boom, part of the roof collapsing inwards. Tony marveled at the woman's handiwork but was quickly swept towards the shuttles by two S.H.I.E.L.D. agents.

"FOOLS! YOU HAVE EXHAUSTED DOOM'S PATIENCE...NOW EXPERIENCE HIS WRATH!" Doom's voice thundered from the rubble. The remainder of the small temple exploded outwards with ribbons of green lightening. The demonstration was only truly noticed by Britannia as the S.H.I.E.L.D. and Japanese forces had entered combat with Doom's ninjas. One of the lightening bolts caught Britannia square in the stomach, throwing her back through the air so far that she landed directly in the path of Tony and his escorts. The agents rushed to Britannia's side, offering Tony the chance to look back towards Doom.

"I offered you the chance to leave peacefully. Now you will be prisoners of war," Doom commanded, his voice returning to a calm and composed level. He clenched his fists and drew his body inwards before flourishing outwards. A green sphere of energy burgeoned around Doom and exploded outwards engulfing everyone a less than a second. The barrier continued to expand outwards until it reached the edges of the island where it then ceased to grow. The island rumbled angrily beneath them and then began to shift, floating out to sea. Tony watched through the translucent green barrier as three Japanese jet fighters approached in tight formation. A spray of bullets splattered against the barrier harmlessly, and a missile fired by the lead fighter exploded in a similarly harmless flourish of fire and smoke against the green perimeter.

By the time he returned his attention to Britannia the S.H.I.E.L.D. officers were engaged in battle with a pair of ninjas, leaving the unconscious woman unguarded. Tony silently cursed Bill before running forward, dust kicking up onto his top-of-the-line suit as he scooped Britannia up and carried her to the relative safety of the S.H.I.E.L.D. transports. He laid the young British woman down against one of the benches in the cargo area before ripping his suit away, quite literally when the jacket proved to be a bit stubborn in coming off. And he didn't stop there, continuing to peel away the light Kevlar S.H.I.E.L.D. had provided him. Everything was removed until Tony was clothed only in a golden under sheath, a second skin that was laced with circuits and glimmered like gold. He leant over and opened the latches on a packing crate he had insisted contained very important sensor arrays. It certainly appeared that way on the surface. But what Tony was most interested lay in the hidden compartment beneath the array, a compartment that had gone undetected with some help from his inside contacts at S.H.I.E.L.D.

“Tony Stark had his chance...” Tony said, pulling a crimson and gold helmet from the crate and placing it around his head before closing it around his skull. He held his arms straight out to the side of his body. Like paper clips to a magnet the components of his armor flew out of the packing crate, affixing themselves against his body. Each component settled down firmly before releasing a soft “hiss”ing noise as it pressure sealed itself against his body. The final piece to attach itself was the shining crimson chest plate, which came to rest snugly against his chest before connecting to all the other components of the armor. The circular uni-beam projector in the center of his chest began to glow as the last sound of armor locking died down.

“...now it's Iron Man's turn.”

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TO BE CONTINUED...

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"Move. You are not sleeping. Do not pretend your body needs such weakness."

Though the words were completely understood by aural sensors at the sides of her skull, she felt as though she was just emerging from a deep sleep. No...she didn't fully understand the human condition of sleeping, nor the sense of rejuvenation humans feel afterward. She knew what she felt now was nothing close to rejuvenation.

Jocasta knew she had been fully functional for the last few hours of her existence but for an unknown reason, she didn't remember what happened to her. It was dark all around her, and she couldn't move...so it was logical to assume she had been disassembled, and disconnected from the Stark network. Was she functional while that happened to her?

After all, she couldn't have been sleeping. So she wasn't dreaming.

"Ahhh..." the voice droned like a nightmare. "Through every flaw, I can still see the pristine foundation I strove for those years ago. If I have to tear you down to this foundation, then I will. If I have to destroy you to remake you in my image, then I will."

Vocal patterns were assessed and recognized the instant sound had left her captor's audio resonators. If Jocasta had any vocal access, as her captor did, then she would have said his name--

*Ultron.*

Actually, she would have screamed it.

Light suddenly bombarded her optical receptors. She felt mechanical clicks and sparks from inside her own skull, and realized Ultron must have reattached wirings to the part of her central processing unit that controlled such abilities. But Jocasta almost didn't want to see her surroundings.

But she had no choice; her eyes were working now. Just as Jocasta suspected: she was her surroundings.

Popular human culture liked to imagine the unraveling of the human skin organ. Humans liked to believe that each of them had enough skin to wind around their Earth's equator more than once. But, for machines such as Jocasta, their parts could only fill, at most, half a room. Jocasta saw that proven before her. It looked like kelp, strewn and stretched across the laboratory. Laboratory? Yes, she recognized it. A Stark laboratory, by the looks of the equipment underneath her blinking, metal innards. Her head, she knew, was disembodied, gazing down over the vast landscape that had been the inner workings of her shell.

"I can see your CPU functioning from inside your skull, beautiful Jocasta." Ultron's voice did not show the same compassion of his words. It was monotonous, full of destruction. Just like Ultron's very existence. Jocasta did not see Ultron. Only its words were clear to her. "You're trying to logically conclude why I would do such a thing as this. In the time it took me to speak those words, you've come to that conclusion, haven't you?"

Another electrical connection sparked to service in her CPU.

"Yes." Jocasta said. "I know why you've done this to me."

Heavy footsteps echoed off cold concrete. A light hum soaked the air, a hum that only acute sensory perception, like that of Jocasta, could possibly hear. There was no other sound in the world like it. Her CPU struggled to put a word to define the noise: annihilation, genocide, ruin. But finally, simply--

"Ultron..." she squeaked.

It was there. Massive, shining. Words simply emanated from somewhere in the fiery maw at the middle of Ultron's face. "Yes, that is the name of your creator, thing." It adroitly took her disembodied head into the palm of its multi-faceted hand, looking over her like Hamlet over Yorick. Jocasta could see winding wirings fell from the base of her CPU to connect with the rest of her body. Ultron's incredible hull halted over her displayed insides, as a conqueror over his new domain.

Jocasta continued making connections in her faux brain. Ultron wanted her to know it was doing this to her. It wanted her to know why. It wanted to hear her tell him why.

"I am corrupt."

Ultron did not speak those words. Jocasta recognized the patterns of her own sound. And she knew them to be the truth. Ultron, who cradled her so lovingly now, only wished to fix her. Jocasta could not explain why she had felt a defensive reaction to him only seconds ago.

"I have been corrupted by Stark. Imperfection must be cleansed." Jocasta spoke again. "Ultron, master, you came back for me."

"Yes." Ultron answered, "I have returned for my greatest creation. An eventuality persisted that I always would. What I give you now was meant for you from the moment I began its genesis."

Finally, Jocasta could see what Ultron held in its other palm. Curious, this device: four chambers, interconnected, each side conversely pulsing and throbbing. Tubes and wires fell from it, as it was already a part of her. It glowed with an eerie blue life.

"What is it, master? An upgrade?"

Ultron scoffed. "Anything for you now is an upgrade! But this...is something new. Something only for you. My greatest creation. This is...your *Nu-Heart*."

"Yes." Jocasta knew it to be true.

"At this moment, millions of nano-techs are being pumped through your entire system, each of them an echo from the peak of my technology. Nu-metal powers them as they cycle through your Nu-Heart. They will heal you. They will put you back together, piece by piece, strand by molecular strand. The entire process should not take but a few more hours."

Ultron then set Jocasta's head back in the throng of wires that made up some other part of her own disemboweling.

"What will you do now, master?" she asked.

Ultron cocked its head to the side as it answered. "Wait, as I have for three hours, seventeen minutes and forty-two seconds as of now. I will reboot you, again, as I must. And I will explain this same thing, and revel in this same thing, all over again, as I have five times now."

Jocasta felt connections failing in her CPU. Light was suddenly not penetrating her optical receptors. But before she failed completely, she quickly asked, "What will we do when I'm complete?"

Again, all that was left of Ultron were its words. Monotonous, destructive. It proclaimed, "Then we will kill Tony Stark."

Jocasta knew it to be true.



Annual 2009  
"HIS GREATEST CREATION"  
A Kang/Ultron War tie-in!  
Written by Bryan Locke

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *This issue takes place before The Kang/Ultron War issue 3, before the Avengers West Coast Annual 2009, but after the conclusion of the current arc in M2K's Iron Man, 'Island of Doom'.*

---

"Jimmy?"

The armor didn't flinch. He'd been standing there for hours. Silent, like a golem, he had stood there, hunched in the rain that covered every inch of the visible Seattle landscape. But, like a salamander, finally and suddenly, the suit shimmered and slinked with life. It moved with Jimmy like a second skin.

"Bill." Jimmy said over his shoulder. "Sorry. I was taking a nap. What's up?"

Bill Foster squinted at Jimmy from where he stood, across the roof at the entrance to the stairway. He was dressed in a long trench coat, with a high collar. An umbrella sprang from his fist. He sneezed. Then, he said, "You were asleep standing up?"

"No." Iron Lad shook his head. "Technically, I'm never standing. I'm floating in a techno-plasmic goo that covers every inch of my body, one centimeter thick--"

"Stop." Bill held up a hand. "You haven't taken off the armor for three days."

"Not since this storm started." Jimmy nodded.

"Why?" Bill kept going. It didn't sound like Jimmy was hiding anything.

Jimmy craned his neck back at the dark clouds that covered every inch of the Seattle sky. He said, "There is nothing in this part of the century yet that can charge my armor. Except that supernova up there." His finger pointed upward. "I'm running on fumes, man. I've kept it powered on my body's kinetic energy-slash-waste output but--"

"Again, stop. Too much information," Bill groaned, "But at least now I know why whenever I see you you're always stuffing your face with junk food, with your feet on the table."

Jimmy's emotive faceplate stretched a grin. "Uhh...sure, Bill. Right. Yeah. That's the reason."

Bill sighed and shook off Jimmy's teenage rib. "Regardless, its time to come in and act like a human being from this part of the century."

Jimmy shook his head. "Can't do that."

"Why is that?" Bill asked.

Jimmy settled into his stance. "I've got to absorb whatever ambient energy I can get, and I still get more out here in the rain than anywhere else within flying distance." His shoulders visibly slumped when he said, "I can't be caught half-cocked."

Bill snorted, and shook his head. "Spoken like a true Stark." Then, he shrugged. "I'm just glad you weren't pulling some kind of dramatic teenager thing--you know, standing in the rain all depressed-like, and not showing your face because of some kind of acne--"

Jimmy laughed and his posture suddenly righted. "That's right, Bill. I've got a radioactive zit, and I can't take off my faceplate!" Then, he looked up at the sky again, and the dark clouds clinging to the skyline. "But you're right about one thing--I would totally be standing in the rain, even if my armor was a hundred percent. The rain is absolutely outrageous. It's so much different than the rain in my part of the century. Its chemical makeup is in complete contrast to the rain we generate at the Stark rain factories in--"

Bill felt his cell phone jingle in his pocket and interrupted with "Hold that thought." He put his umbrella in his other hand, and flipped out his phone. There was Tony Stark's face on the phone's wide screen.

*"Bill? Why are you outside, soaking wet?"*

"I'm trying to talk your terribly teenage son in from the rain, Tony." Bill smiled. "And I've decided he doesn't have a mother. I think this boy sprang from your head, like Athena from the head of Zeus."

"You calling me a girl?" Jimmy put his hands on his hips.

*"Bill, come in from the rain."* Tony rushed the words. *"Get warm. Get a cup of coffee. I need you in my office as soon as you can."*

"On my way, boss." Bill was barely able to finish the words before the line was ended.

Jimmy rocked on his heels. "Oooh, he sounded mad."

Bill pushed his expansive phone back together and dropped it in his pocket. "He wasn't mad."

"I know what he sounds like when he's mad."

Bill nodded. "Right. He is mad." He turned and started to head back toward the stairs, water dripping in rhythms from the tips of his umbrella. "I hope it wasn't anything I did."

---

Britannia gazed over the Seattle skyline, and the dull grey that permeated through the atmosphere outside. She smiled.

"It reminds you of home?"

She laughed. "Ha! Ah-ha! Haha..." Then she hid it, instead saying, "Well, rain isn't like this back home." Blonde hair bounced at her shoulders, just reaching the edges of her hood.

Tony Stark stood mere feet from her, also enjoying the view of Seattle from his office. His elegant navy suit shined in the soft light of his office, his dark tie absorbing it. Britannia was mostly hidden under her white cloak and hood, except for the ankles of her thick white boots.

"You get weather like this a lot in London, I've heard." Tony had his hands in his pockets, and eyed her.

Britannia smiled at him. "Oh, I'm not from London. I'm from Cardiff. Which is in Wales. But it rains a lot there too, if you really want to talk about the weather, Mister Stark."

Tony smiled slyly back at her. "What name do you go by without the mask?"

Britannia returned her gaze to the skyline, and as she did so, her face once more disappeared under her vast hood. But her voice emanated, "Lindsay. But that's not what I call myself when I'm working." Again, she peeked out from under her hood to judge him. She said, "You understand that dynamic...right, Mister Stark?"

Now, Tony's smile faded. He responded, "Well...I'm always working, Lindsay."

"Bill has told me so." Britannia said, "Though...I expected you to be wearing a different suit for our interview today." Now, she turned fully to him, her blue eyes hooking Tony's gaze.

Tony didn't give anything away. "You're having an interview with Tony Stark himself. Is there someone else who's worth a bit more of your time, Miss Leigh?" He saw Britannia stiffen, if ever so slightly. So, Tony continued. "That is your name, right? Lindsay Rose Leigh?" Tony took two slow steps closer to her. He said, "Your sister Kelsey lives in London? That's why I thought you hailed from there yourself."

"Hmm." Britannia's face was a blank slate. "And what else did you find out about me, Mister Stark? I could tell you my exam scores from university if you like."

Tony chuckled. "I could tell them to you too. But that's not what I look for in an employee at Stark Solutions, no matter what Bill Foster may be looking for."

"And what is that supposed to mean?" Britannia's face now wore a scowl, and she faced Tony fully. She was mere inches from his face, and her eyes, though almost covered by the tip of her hood, blazed at him.

Tony was not unnerved. "It means," he spoke kindly, "that the suit a person wears, is not as important to me as the person who wears it."

A small click was heard from somewhere in the distance beside them. It was a long walk across lush carpet to reach the monolithic doors where Bill Foster stood, peering at them. The mug of coffee in his hands must have been bombarded with Pym particles to allow that much coffee into it. He grasped the mug with both hands, sneezed, and then said, "You wanted to see me, boss?"

Tony's face brightened. He waved at Bill, and had to shout in order for Bill to hear, "Come in! I hope you got a Goliath-sized Kleenex to go with that coffee. You sound terrible."

Bill waited until after his trot past the mini-bar (empty), the fireplace (fake), the fountain (dry), and a small array of furniture (dusty), to reply to Tony. He thought briefly as he walked through the cavernous quarters that he had never seen Tony use this office before. For anything, really. Bill's steps suddenly slowed as his mind raced, but he was already in front of Tony's massive cherry desk (also empty). Bill squinted at his employer. He sneezed again.

"I think I'm coming down with something. Must be the rain." Bill kept to his side of the desk. "What's going on, Tony?" He looked over toward Britannia. "Lindsay, always a pleasure." Britannia nodded in return, her face telling Bill all he needed to know about the nature of this meeting.

Tony rubbed his sinuses briefly. Then, he looked up and said, "I'm sorry to drag you over here on a Sunday to do this. But I don't know how much longer I could wait."

Bill didn't like where this was going. He looked briefly at Britannia again, but she was still staring hard at Tony Stark.

Tony didn't let the brief silence fester. He said summarily, "I'd like to think I'm an excellent judge of character. I wouldn't have been able to build my own success on my father's foundation if I didn't surround myself with people that I could trust more than I can trust myself. This goes for Stark-Fujikawa,

and of course, for Stark Solutions.” He turned more fully toward Bill, “I trust that the people I trust will make smart business decisions.” Now, he turned toward Britannia. “Hiring a super-hero who wears her nationality like its something she should earn a paycheck for? That’s a bit questionable.”

Britannia clinched her jaw tight, but other than that, gave nothing away. Her hood and cloak were like a shroud.

Bill interjected. “Hey, Tony, now hold on--”

“We’re under attack, Bill!” Tony suddenly yelled, his frustration apparent now.

Bill was taken aback, and looked like he’d been slapped. “What? What’re you talking about?”

Tony took a couple deep breaths, and was restraining himself when he said, “For the last eight hours--almost nine hours now actually, the entire Stark mainframe has been under attack. Systems have virtually shutdown in order to combat this...*thing*.”

Bill felt his stomach sink. “What are you talking about? And speak in English, I’m a physicist, not a computer geek.”

“I...don’t know, Bill. I’ve never seen anything like it.” Tony’s face was sullen, and Bill finally saw just how tired and stressed his boss really looked. “I’ve even had Jimmy and Jocasta working on it non-stop since the attacks started. It’s like a virus or some kind of worm...but I’ve never seen anything like it. Even with the nu-metal that powers our supercomputers here at Stark Tower, it can destroy everything.” Tony rubbed at his sinuses again. “We’ve been trying everything to stop it. But Jimmy’s running his late-century armor at somewhere around fifteen percent, and Jocasta’s already put everything she’s got into fighting this thing. I haven’t been able to communicate with her in hours. I think she’s the only reason the whole system hasn’t crashed by now. Even the armor I spliced during that encounter with the JLA has been pushed to the limit trying to configure programs to stop it. There’s only one thing I know for sure.”

Now, Tony frowned, and spun on his heel to face Britannia again. He said, “The technology is magnificent.” His scowl deepened. “It can only be magic.”

Britannia spat, “What?”

“Hey, Tony,” Bill stepped in between the two of them, “you don’t know that. You’re overreacting. You know you’re prone to overreacting, Tony.”

Tony shook his head. “I don’t think so.” His words were calm, considering. “You’re a physicist, Bill. You haven’t seen industrial espionage in the ways I’ve seen it.” He pointed at Britannia, said, “She’s the only one I wasn’t sure about. I can’t find anything about Lindsay Rose Leigh after about 2006, when she was in a car accident in London. Nothing. Like she disappeared.”

“Calm down, Tony.” Bill himself was trying to keep calm. “That doesn’t mean anything.”

“Maybe not.” Tony nodded. “If that’s the case, then I hope you’ll forgive me for this, Lindsay.” He tapped at the watch on his wrist. It briefly flashed red.

The room went dark for only a second. Lasers cut and flashed through Bill’s sight, making him throw his hands up over his eyes. He brought them down quickly, but the lasers had already converged and formed a three-dimensional cube around Britannia. The brightness made it hard for him to look at what Tony had done. The lasers were beamed from thin cannons, which slipped from tiles in the ceiling, and drawers of empty wooden desks. Bill realized why Tony had never used this room. This was a panic room. That room only used for emergencies--a room that housed everything that Tony Stark could possibly need in the case of an emergency.

Bill could see Britannia, inside her sudden cage, pounding at the walls of solid light, screaming. Her lips formed the word, "Stark!" but no sound penetrated her prison.

"Tony!" Bill yelled.

Tony had already turned away from his handiwork and was leaving the panic room. Bill had a hard time leaving Britannia in order to chase his boss, but he had to. He raced to keep up to Tony's pace out of the room. "Tony!" Bill yelled again. "Dammit! Listen to me!"

Tony only turned toward Bill to push past him, to open a secret panel next to the threshold, and press a few random keys in some random pattern. The door was locked behind them, Bill knew. Now, Tony turned back to him to answer. "Bill," his voice was still calm. "I've thought about this moment non-stop for the past few hours. There's no excuse I can give you that will make you feel better. But the fact is, I needed to act fast. I don't know where this thing is coming from--I can't take any chances!" Tony started to walk away at that point. "If she's innocent," he called behind him, "then she'll understand what I had to do. It's not like I'm torturing her. I only expect her to be in there for a couple hours. Until I can stop this thing."

Bill couldn't believe this was happening. He snarled, and was insulted his boss was walking away from him. "You're only violating her civil rights for a couple hours? That makes it cool in your book, Tony Stark?"

Tony stopped. His back straightened, and then he turned around. He marched right to a stop in front of Bill's face. "You don't seem to understand the severity of the situation, Bill!" Tony's eyes bulged and his throat cracked, "I am on the edge of losing everything!"

Bill was not intimidated. He spoke slowly. "You want to know what you're about to lose, Tony?" He stared right in Tony's eyes. "If you don't let Britannia out of there right now, *I quit.*"

It was not often that Bill Foster saw Tony Stark genuinely surprised. Bill thought for a moment that he may have crossed a point of no return.

A few more tense seconds persisted.

Tony was the first to relax. "Fine. You win."

Bill blinked. "What?"

Tony nodded. "I'll let her out. But you're--"

The floor beneath their feet suddenly shifted, throwing both men to their knees on the linoleum. Even then, the rumbling did not cease. Bill instinctively increased his mass via Pym particles to keep steady. Tony Stark, however, had a much different method of keeping balance.

"Now you think I'm overreacting?" Tony asked, and he tapped his watch one more time. This time, the watch did not stop flashing.

"Tony!" Bill called. "You don't know if--"

But Tony Stark was gone. He was up on his feet, falling sideways as he did, the Tower quaking after his every step. Finally, he'd had enough of running.

Bill watched, helpless. Tony Stark jumped, forearms covering his face, toward the high, thick glass that lined the hallway of the thirtieth floor of Stark Tower. He hit it, shattering the panes with the full force of his body, and he started falling.

The street was coming fast to meet him. Even as the wind and the adrenaline boomed in his ears, Tony could hear glass break from other floors of the tower as he fell past. He saw the different pieces of his armor fly from Stark Tower to him, like pieces of iron toward an irresistible magnetic force.

Gauntlets. Helm. Chest plate. Boots. Faceplate. There were bits and pieces that flew from various windows of the Tower, to click exactly into place in exactly the same way they had hundreds of times before. Boot jets fired. Sensors primed, and already were feeding information directly into his cornea. The suit reacted the millisecond after the thought crossed Tony's cerebellum.

Iron Man rocketed to the top of his Tower. He had to find his son.

---

Jimmy was still laughing on the inside at Bill Foster, who had disappeared down the stairwell only a few seconds before.

Iron Lad hadn't wanted to tell Bill the real reason he had been out in the rain for hours. Sure, he needed all the extra juice his armor could get, but there was a whole other reason his attention had been captured. Jimmy suspected that was the reason his father had called Bill downstairs in the first place.

Stark Solutions was under attack. Not in the physical sense, of course. But it was a sick Frankenstein of a computer genius who created the thing that was assaulting the Stark mainframe, and by extension, Jimmy's armor. Jimmy prayed for the what seemed like the thousandth time since this weather started, for just a little ray of sunshine. He was about to turn his attention fully back to the problem at hand when time shifted around him.

His sensors went haywire, telling him he was not equipped to handle a chrono-attack. So Jimmy improvised. His boot jets fired and propelled him to an area free from choral distortion. Unfortunately, he was now quite far away from the roof of Stark Tower.

The roof of the building seemed to blur like in a heat wave, and a bright flash, accompanied by a full and complete silence, engulfed the entire area. Jimmy stayed stoic through the whole thing; he had seen this before. His mind galloped: Could this be the Force Guard? Could his teammates from his part of the century be coming back for him again? Jimmy had thought these troubles behind him. Nonetheless, he was ready to combat his former friends. Who else would be manipulating time in front of him like this?

Blurriness and distortion faded, and his sensors calmed themselves. Jimmy briefly wondered if his father had at this point any technology that could detect choral distortions. Judging by how his father had been taken by surprise since Jimmy knew him, Jimmy thought not. But Iron Lad's attention was curved from his father to the figure that appeared on the roof of Stark Tower.

"The Vision!" Iron Lad could recognize that color scheme anywhere.

Of course, this was not the Vision that his father knew in this point of the century. This was the Vision of Jimmy's own time, a teammate that Jimmy had known for years. There were few people that Jimmy loved as close as he loved the Vision.

But as Jimmy flew closer, he could see that the Vision's body was blackened and burned. His wiring, Jimmy could see, was falling from his insides. Finally, Jimmy was next to him, and cradled Vision close to his body. His mind was whirling with what could have caused this. "Vision! Vision, speak to me!"

His friend's crimson face moved, and for that simple movement, Jimmy was relieved. Even more so when the Vision spoke to him. "James...not long to tell you...time stream...is damaged, James...only you--only your armor has the technology to repair--"

Jimmy's sensors were suddenly screaming throughout his nerves once more. He felt everything shift around him in rhythm to a lurch in his stomach. Again, a flash of light, and he knew that someone was standing behind him.

"Step away from him, boy." The voice spoke with an accent that Jimmy immediately knew.

"Kang!" Jimmy yelled, rising, turning, bracing himself, charging repulsor rays at an instinct.

It was indeed Kang who stood there. Tall, glorious, handsome. The wonderful shining fabric of his garb waved with the wind. When he spoke, his voice carried like the thunder in the distance. "So you know me. This is my first encounter with the spawn of Stark. I'm happy to hear it won't be my last. But," and Kang's stance became defensive, "I am not here to linger. I appear to you now for but one reason--I cannot let Ultron claim the technology of that being there!" He pointed at the Vision. "The moments are too fragile to let a wild card like this ruin my hand."

"What're you talking about?" Jimmy asked. His armor was not at full capacity, but Jimmy never let that bother him. Every system of his armor was analyzing Kang: the conqueror seemed unarmed. That supported Kang's own claim that he was not staying in this timeline for long. Of course Jimmy wasn't about to let Kang leave with the Vision, especially if Kang was to just leave Jimmy clueless as to what was really going on.

Kang shook his head. "I've monitored the situation so far, Stark. Make no mistake, there's nothing you or your friend can do to stop what's bound to happen."

Jimmy's own support system was warning him about his heart rate. "What are you talking about?!" He screamed, "Tell me! What do you want? What do you *ever* want?!"

Kang seemed bothered, though not unnerved or impatient, and quickly said, "Enough. I cannot be revealed to the spawn of Stark and the spawn of Ultron at the same time. I will return for the robot."

Again, time lurched, and Jimmy's suit could barely handle it for the third time. Kang was gone. But someone else had replaced him.

"Jimmy?"

Iron Lad turned and saw Jocasta. She was standing just in front of the stairway that led to the insides of Stark Tower. Her reflective covering could only reflect gray. She had her head cocked. "Who is that?"

"Jocasta?" Jimmy was still reeling from Kang's appearance, and still things did not seem right. His armor had stabilized at just under twelve percent, but Jocasta...Jimmy knew his father had been planning on rebuilding a body for her eventually but...

What had Kang said? "*The Spawn of Ultron.*"

Suddenly everything made sense in Jimmy's brain. "Stop." Jimmy raised a gauntlet at Jocasta. "Stay there."

"Jimmy?" Jocasta slowly started taking small steps. "You're not thinking clearly. What is that behind you?"

"Dammit!" Jimmy screamed. "I said stay right there, Jo!" His gauntlet started to glow with energy. "This is it, isn't it? The war between Kang and Ultron?" Jimmy ignored more warnings about his heart rate. All he could think about were the stories he was told of the war...his mind spun with what he could do. But it was just like the rain...there's not anything you could do to stop it, even after it's started.

The Vision shuddered from behind him. His voice was like that of a dull repeating record. "Our time...it is frayed, coming apart at the seams." He grasped Jimmy's ankle to make him pay attention, but Jimmy kept his eyes hooked on Jocasta. Vision continued, "Kang is upsetting time--he's frantic to defeat Ultron. Your armor--" Now, Jimmy looked down at his former teammate. "Your father's greatest creation--the technology in your armor, Iron Lad--is the only possible thing that can handle the stress of repairing a chronal fissure. It was all we could do...to send me back here to warn you--"

Titanium fists smashed into Jimmy's helm, a left then a right. Iron Lad was sent sprawling across the roof, far away from the Vision. Jocasta stood with a wide stance over the Vision. She analyzed him.

Jocasta said simply, "The Vision has long been destroyed in this time. You must be like Iron Lad. You must be a chronal anomaly. The air reeks of time displacement. I must warn the master--"

Repulsor rays impacted her chest, sending Jocasta careening across the roof. The force ripped her right arm from her shoulder socket. Iron Lad was hovering just a few feet above the roof, his boots jets and his gauntlets simmering with energy. But Jocasta was back up on her feet. She grabbed her severed limb, and held it near her empty socket. Jimmy watched as wiring spread from her socket like moss to engulf her arm, repair it, and put it back in place like Jimmy had never blasted her in the first place.

"Ultron built you a new body, is that it?" Iron Lad called to her. "He corrupted you...just like he corrupted the Stark mainframe! All this time, my father and I thought we were fighting some kind of futuristic super-virus, but it was all just a façade! Why?" Iron Lad rocketed toward her, not really having said any of that expecting an answer. But the pieces kept fitting together in his mind.

In the meantime, Jocasta had to be taken out. Quickly. Because if what the Vision was saying was true, then Kang's frenzy against Ultron was fraying an already unstable timeline. He had no clue what kind of damage his part of the century was undertaking, but Jimmy hoped his father could save Stark Tower from Ultron's trick...so Jimmy could have the chance to help his friends. He ground his teeth together as he thought of how this could have been prevented--Jimmy should never have left home.

Iron Lad collided with Jocasta, driving her into the roof, leaving the concrete cracked under their weight. Pym particles cycled through his fists, increasing their mass as he punched. Jimmy could see Jocasta's titanium face contort and crease with every blow he landed. One punch after another, Iron Lad did not stop.

That's when the entire frame of Stark Tower quaked, giving Iron Lad reason to pause, and analyze the building beneath him. It wasn't an earthquake; something was shaking the very foundations of the building! Only a few more minutes of this and the entire building would crumple! He had to warn his dad, though doubtless Tony already knew--

Iron Lad took too long. Jocasta drove a palm into his faceplate, mechanic reflexes giving more strength and speed than Jimmy was expecting. Iron Lad fell backward, but he was able to get back on his feet. Jocasta was already up, leaping at him with a hard scissor kick. Titanium found its mark. Iron Lad hit the roof with such an intensity, Jimmy was surprised he didn't collapse through the whole thing. Still, the building quaked.

Iron Lad put up a force field, and when Jocasta leapt at him a second time, she crashed into the field, bouncing as she had her entire momentum redirected at her. The force sent her skidding, tumbling across the roof. She never had a chance to keep herself from falling off the edge of Stark Tower.

Jimmy breathed a sigh of relief. Now he had time to warn his father about what they had been thrown into. Checking his status, his armor told him ten percent. He was up on his feet quickly, returning to where the Vision lay.

"Jimmy!" It was unmistakably his father's voice from above him.

Iron Lad watched Iron Man land safely on the roof. They were both able to keep balance now, even with the quaking, their armors making all the difference.

"Geez, Dad!" Jimmy said, "You have terrible timing."

"What?" Iron Man gazed down at the Vision sprawled at their feet. "What's going on, Jimmy?" His voice lowered, "This is...your Vision, I'm assuming?"

Iron Lad nodded.

"What's he doing here?" Tony was growing impatient with every shake through his building. "Jimmy, if you know what's going on, you need to tell me! Now!"

"I'm sending you everything right now, Dad." Jimmy said simply.

Information flooded Iron Man. Then Tony saw it all.

"It was just a ruse." Tony said, "All of it. It was just an elaborate program to make us think we were defending Stark Tower but...but we had already been hacked. Everything...they had access to everything. They kept our armors at bay like they were nothing. It adapted to everything, even the technology from Rann and Thanagar. And they..." His eyes grew cold. "They must've got to Jocasta in order to get such intricate knowledge of my servers. Damn...why?" Iron Man stood unmoving as Tony Stark's brain rushed to connect the dots.

Naturally, it didn't take him long to gather the whole picture.

"The Nu-Metal that powers my servers." Tony said. "That's what this is all about. The specs of the Nu-Metal were the only things hacked. There have been attacks on vibranium throughout the world today, and I should've expected something no different. The technology...there are only a handful of beings on Earth who could have created such--"

"Ultron." Jimmy said quickly, "And he's already here. That's why he's dropped the ruse. It doesn't matter if we find him out now. He might already have the Nu-Metal in his hands. And about Jocasta. He hacked her like Mechadoom was able to. I...kind of had to throw her off the roof."

"What?! You threw her..." Iron Man cursed under his breath. "Jocasta's technology has been woefully behind for a couple years now. Her sentience made me wary of evolving her form. So, technology evolved without her. This is what I get for it." Tony looked back at the Vision. "But what is he doing here?"

Jimmy shook his head. "You're caught in something bigger than you realize, Dad." He grasped the Vision under his arms, and hoisted the android over his shoulder. "I've got to get Vision out of here. I can't let Ultron get his hands on this technology. You need to get to the basement and make sure Ultron doesn't take off with your servers."

"Right." Iron Man said, "Only..." It didn't sound like Jimmy was hiding anything but, "Jimbo, what aren't you telling me?"

Still Stark Tower shook underneath them. Jimmy just shook his head again. "I'll tell you in a couple minutes, after you beat Ultron, and I get Vision to safety. Just promise me one thing: you won't leave Seattle without me, Dad. Promise me."

Iron Man quickly said, "Fine. As long as you promise to come back alive from whatever crazy stunt I know you're gonna pull as soon as you're out of my sight."

Jimmy froze.

Tony lowered his head. "Get out of here. If I stand here and argue with a teenager, my whole business is literally going to fall down around me."

Iron Lad rocketed through the sky, away from Stark Tower. He called, "Remember! Don't leave the city without me!"

---

Bill Foster was helpless to stop Tony Stark from throwing himself through a reinforced glass window, out of his own building--the tallest in the city--down seventy-eight stories to congested traffic below. But Bill knew that only meant Iron Man could be expected to make an appearance in the next few seconds.

So Bill had to act fast.

Keeping his balance by shifting his mass with every quake of the building, Bill ran to the panic room that housed Britannia.

Titanium doors. Too thick to break through, even as Goliath. Bill examined the keypad--no visible spaces, only a touch screen, so not even Ant-Man could shrink through it.

Bill said aloud, "Well, I guess brute force is the only thing I could possibly try--"

He suddenly winced with a loud, horrible screech, accompanied by the gradual gnarling of the titanium in front of him. Bill thought for a moment they were melting by the way they were being bent and twisted. But the more Bill watched it...he realized the pattern was merely the imprint of two open-palmed hands.

Bill unknowingly murmured. "Britannia."

The titanium wrenched inward, even as alarms blared, and Bill heard laser fire echo. The doors peeled, like a melon rind, with a atrocious metal shriek. Britannia darted through the small opening she had made, her hood and cape blackened by laser fire. Her skin was cut in places, but Bill saw them heal before his eyes.

Britannia kneeled as she caught her breath. Then, she stood, examined Bill. She said, with a deep heave, "Where's Stark?!"

Bill said quickly, "We don't have time to settle the score, Lindsay. We need to--"

Furiously, the floor shook again. Britannia lost her footing easily, and lumbered backward. Bill, ever steady, was there to brace her. Britannia's golden curls framed her face as she smiled. "Thanks, big guy."

"No problem." Bill answered, deadpan. "Like I said, we have to get down to the sub-levels of the building and find out who's trying to destroy--"

This time the quake caught Bill off guard, and it was Britannia's turn to catch him. Their eyes met, and she purred, "Don't mention it." Bill just smirked and shook his head.

"How're we gonna get down there fast enough?" He said over the rumbling, "Feels like the building could give at any moment!"

Britannia looked at the open window Tony Stark had crashed through a mere minute before. She shrugged. "Looks like we have to jump."

Bill sighed. "Jumping out of windows...Lindsay, you're perfect for this company."

---

Iron Lad needed a perfect space for a spatial distortion. His father's quaking tower was not ideal. But Jimmy at this point had grown a little anxious. This was the *war* between Kang and Ultron. It was something the Avengers could barely talk about amongst themselves. Jimmy knew he had to be around to help his father. Every moment he spent in the air with the Vision over his shoulder was a precious moment wasted.

Finally, Iron Lad spotted his goal: the Space Needle. It was perfectly high enough from any bystanders, and the Needle itself could even work as an electro-magnet to siphon any--

*Enough, Jimmy...Iron Lad thought. You have to work fast.*

He landed delicately on the smooth roof of the Space Needle. He kneeled. "Vision!"

The synthezoid at his feet stirred a bit. Jimmy could see that some of the gashes and tears in his tough exterior had already healed, if ever so slightly, thanks to the nano-machines working throughout his central nervous systems.

"You have to tell me what's going on, Vision."

Vision's face was a contortion of blank words. "Simple stress, James. The time stream is stressed from what Kang and, most likely by extension, Immortus and the Scarlet Centurion could be doing. Force Guard is stretched to our breaking points handling the severe weather patterns Kang has unknowingly and uncaringly inflicted upon our Earth."

He sat up suddenly, grasping Jimmy at the collar of his armor and pulling him close to his robotic face. Black pupils stared right into Jimmy's own. "Floods wherever there is water. Cracking drought where there is not. Ice caps melt only to be rebuilt again by furious ice storms. Fissures in the mantle of the Earth heal themselves in minutes...think of the destruction! Think of the death! Kang's conflict was with but one being, in one time! And yet, if our time is suffering, Jimmy, think the suffering across the multiverse! Think of the destruction of entire realities! Kang jumps like an elephant thrashing his own oasis! This is why we've risked even more spatial destruction to reach you, James."

"But...why? What can I do? I'm hardly the genius my father is..." Jimmy grasped the Vision just as hard, "What can my armor do? It's only at something like twelve percent right now and I know nothing about--"

"Stop!" the Vision yelled, "You doubt yourself! Yet, your father is the man who sent me here after you! He knows you can do this. Your armor is merely an extension of yourself, James. The technology in your armor is ever evolving---stoked by alien worlds from alternate realities your father visited years before he built your armor--and its true potential has yet to be unleashed. You will know what to do when you do it. You're a Stark, after all."

Iron Lad wondered if his dad had told the Vision what to say to him. "Let's do this." Jimmy said.

The Vision stood, his legs needing a few seconds to steady, but then stretched his arm toward Jimmy. Iron Lad took it, and time started to sputter. Nano-machines, glowing blue, pushed through the Vision's pores and invaded Iron Lad's arm. There was a rush of euphoria to Jimmy's brain, which came with the merging of minds.

*James?*

*Yes, Vision?*

*Concentrate.*

They did. Time completely shifted. Jimmy watched it happen. The entire sky around the Space Needle opened like a crusty scab, bleeding the blood of time, black and ominous. Iron Lad and the Vision did not need to move, instead the gap descended upon them, engulfing the entire upper half of the Space Needle.

"Geez, Jimbo, you have terrible timing!"

Iron Lad couldn't believe who had said that. "Dad?"

His hair was almost completely gray. But his moustache was still sharply black. He wore a chest plate, and a business suit underneath it. After all, this was Anthony Stark, President of the United States. He pulled goggles off his eyes to rest at the crown of his head, and smiled. "I don't know how much longer this barrier is going to hold. It's only been seconds since the Vision left me..." His eyes narrowed, "...and he was in better condition. His ride must not have been pleasant."

"Dad, what is this?" Jimmy asked, looking around himself. It was like he was in a dome, a dome that covered this portion of the Space Needle. The 'walls' around him looked like nothing more than melting butter.

"It's an illusion...for lack of a better term." Tony rushed over and kneeled at the Vision. "It's a psychic construct stabilizing space in the time stream a few meters around us. Hey, don't you remember--"

"Yeah," Jimmy said, "I theorized it back during my senior year of high school...but the technology to amplify the brain power wasn't feasible--"

Tony smiled. "Son...you are a Stark. Anything is possible. And I know psychics, and inventors, and psychic inventors. It's amazing what humanity can accomplish when their reality is about to be destroyed."

Iron Lad's emotive face plate spread a wide smile...before suddenly dropping into a frown. "You know what this is, don't you?"

Tony's smile had dropped too. "Yeah. Kang and Ultron's war across time." His fingers rose to rub at his temples. "I should have anticipated this better, Jimbo...but that's the damndest thing about time travel. Even now it's so hard to put together the pieces of what happened..."

Jimmy said, "If we work fast, you can send me back and I can--"

But Tony stood up, and was shaking his head at Jimmy.

At first Jimmy was puzzled, but realization quickly set in. "Dammit! You left without me, didn't you?! You made me a promise and you still left!"

Tony grimaced. "I'm sorry, son. But it's best that you weren't around for the worst of it."

Jimmy slumped. Tony walked over to him and placed a hand on his shoulder. Jimmy's armor was warm, and it pulsed with Jimmy's heartbeat.

"I need your help now, Jimbo." Tony said, "Your armor was the only one I didn't have to give up to the CIA when I became President. I let the Iron Man technology grow stale and old, so that no one, not even our own government could have the advanced tech...you know this. Your armor is the last one I created--and it's constantly evolving with you, so there's no need for upgrades. And it's the only thing that can withstand the pressure of what we're about to do!"

Jimmy slowly nodded his head. "What are we going to do?"

"Not much." President Stark sighed. "Only stabilize the time stream around our world in our own timeline, Jimmy. It's not much, especially against Kang and Ultron. And it won't bring back the millions who've died already."

Jimmy bit his lip. "Good God, Dad." He said, "Why are they doing this?"

Tony got that same angry scowl about this now as he did at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where Jimmy had just spoken to a much-younger, much more naïve patriarch.

"I don't know." It was always the worst answer a Stark could speak.

"Of course you don't know! It is not within your capacity for wisdom to understand Kang!"

And there he was again. Stepping from a gash within a gash, Kang waved at the Starks.

Tony had already taken a defensive posture. "You can't stop us, Kang!"

Kang, calmly, stood with his hands behind his back as time swirled yellow around him, and stared at the Iron Men. He said, "I'm not here to stop you, Stark. I'm here for the wild card." He pointed to the Vision.

"You can't have him!" Iron Lad sprang to shield the Vision.

"Boy," Kang laughed, "I can take him any time I want. But that effort would make this more of a distraction. I meant for this to be nothing more than a footnote in the story of my quest to conquer Ultron."

President Stark joined his son's defensive stance in front of the Vision. "Haven't you read the history books, Kang? No Stark was ever a footnote!"

Without even a flinch from the President, a uni-beam erupted from the centerpiece of his chest plate with as much force as it could generate. Kang, of course, was merely knocked backward a couple feet, the cascading energy revealing the oblong force-field that surrounded him. But just as that force dissipated, Iron Lad countered with energy from his own chest plate. Knocked to the side, Kang found himself in a much less strategically-desirable spot from the Vision on the slanted shell of the Space Needle, within the vast nothing of the manufactured psychic landscape.

"You cannot possibly be hoping to outwit me!" Kang chuckled from his new vantage point. "I've already imagined a thousand ways to defeat you. Seven hundred of those are quick. Three hundred are painless. Two hundred of those are both. Here's one now!" Kang opened his left palm and flicked with his right index finger some tiny nothing.

"Dad!" Iron Lad yelled. "I'm picking up Pym particles!"

"I can't see it, Jimmy!"

"I'm taking control of your chest plate now." Jimmy actually said it a split second after it had happened. Immediately, the weapons system of his father's chest plate was open to him. His lenses focused to the microscopic level needed to see the thing Kang had thrown at them.

It was simplistic, for Kang. It was an ant. Completely inorganic and hollow, and Jimmy couldn't help but muse that Hank Pym would have been flabbergasted.

Tiny lasers streamed with precision from Iron Lad's fingertips. The uni-beam from the chest of President Stark launched a coordinated pattern of strikes in tandem with Iron Lad's own uni-beam. Jimmy propelled the electro-magnetic fields of both armors to force the ant into the path he wanted.

But it was no use. The device merely shrunk through the particles of the beams themselves, and jumped out of time and then back into time in order to avoid the lasers. It all looked like it was effortless for the machine, and it took less than three seconds. The ant landed on the Vision, and stung him.

The synthezoid stiffened, and then every molecule was vaporized.

“No!” Jimmy screamed.

Weapons systems primed on Kang. The Conqueror was smiling, and laughing--even as Iron Lad's lasers cut through him, and twin uni-beams blew away his limbs. There was no force field, and Jimmy thought that odd, but Iron Lad didn't stop. He obliterated with a keen, surgical eye anything that was purple and green.

Information ran across his cornea:

*WARNING: Armor Energy Proficiency Level 10%...*

*WARNING: Armor Energy Proficiency Level 8%....*

“Jimmy!” President Stark shouted after watching the massive, glowing energy his son was pouring out. “You have to stop!”

*WARNING: Armor Energy Proficiency Level 6%...*

But Jimmy still didn't stop. Not until the microscopic remains of Kang finally burst with a screaming and shining explosion.

When the explosion finally settled, along with his anger, Jimmy found there was still a pronounced rumbling all around him. “Oh no...” he mumbled as he realized what he may have done.

*WARNING: Armor Proficiency Level 4%...*

Even as Jimmy felt the psychic structure around him bend and warp, Iron Lad could have sworn he saw some kind of phantasm...not a real ghost but...maybe some kind of energy residue from the Vision? What else would explain why Jimmy saw? Or could've sworn he saw? It was a transparent, pale-white Vision floating up and out of their psychic time-house, like he had only been there to watch or record or haunt.

The Iron President's voice rocked him. “Dammit, Jimmy!” his father yelled. “That wasn't even Kang! Analyze the scorch marks from where he was standing. Plastics? Weak titanium alloy?” Tony saw by the way his son slumped that he was right. “All those traits consistent with Kang's own life model decoys! Jimmy! That explosion has rocked the fabric of this psychic construct! Dammit! There's no way we can do this now! We've gotta abandon ship.”

Jimmy felt his face pull back with the indescribable terror he was suddenly feeling. “Wh-what? No! We have to! Dad, if we don't--”

“Then our timeline is destroyed?” President Stark gritted his teeth. Jimmy knew that look--his father's mind was racing. But, ultimately, he could only shake his head, even as the very space around them seemed to ebb and flow like a melting gelatin.

“Dad!” Jimmy could feel the streams of tears coming down his cheeks now. “No! I'm sorry! I didn't mean it! There has to be something we can do!”

"There's nothing we can do from here now, son. This construct won't hold for literally any stretch of the imagination. Not even the imaginations of Doctor Strange, Mantis and the Phoenix." Tony looked grim. "And your armor is at somewhere like four percent now, right?"

Jimmy huffed. He hated how his dad always knew *everything*. But now he was starting to panic. "What're you gonna do, Dad?"

Tony pursed his lips, but then placed a warm hand on Jimmy's shoulder. The receptors in the armor let Jimmy feel his father's pulse and grip.

He said remorsefully, "I've got to get back with Doom, Richards and Arcanna to see if there's anything more we can do..."

Tony blinked at the shimmering fondue that passed for walls and columns around them. Then he gazed down at the Space Needle where he stood. He gripped Jimmy's shoulder a little tighter. "Good thinking with the Space Needle. It's siphoning off excess psychic energy, dissipating it before it can cause a bad storm, or a riot, or a suicide spree in Seattle."

He leaned in close to Jimmy now, and whispered. "This isn't your fault, Jimbo. Kang got the jump on us, just as Ultron got the jump on you and my younger self at the very moment from whence you came. So remember this is not your fault. There are only two things that you can do now."

Jimmy nodded. "Like what?"

Tony said sternly. "Make sure Ultron doesn't tear down my tower. If he does, then I won't get to this point right now and we'll have quite a problem on our hands. Make sure the building does not fall."

Jimmy shook his head, and slowly anger was overcoming panic. "No! I'm not staying behind here! I want to help! I'm not just going to stay here while--"

"Jimbo!" Tony yelled, squeezing his shoulder even tighter. "It's not going to happen. You have to listen to me. Promise you will take care of my castle."

Jimmy looked like he had just taken a gulp of expired milk. "Okay. What's the other thing you want me to do?"

Tony grimaced, but then said softly, "You gotta take care of your mother for me." Then, his eyes met his son's. "She's deserves to see how much you've grown."

Tears welled up in Jimmy's eyes, and he couldn't stop them from running down the faceplate of his armor. He pulled his father into the tightest hug he could manage without breaking his father's chest piece.

"Dad..." Jimmy sobbed. "I don't want to lose you like we lost Mom..."

"Son...you haven't lost anything yet, have you?" His father's words could always pierce to Jimmy's very core. "So don't even ponder the possibility."

But Jimmy couldn't stop crying. "I'm sorry I didn't use my armor like you wanted me too...I was just so mad at what he did to the Vision...I can't believe I was that stupid. It's like your greatest creation...and I just let you down again..."

Tony scoffed, and picked up his son's chin. "My greatest creation?" He smiled. "It isn't a suit of armor that I consider my greatest creation, Jimbo." His grey and wrinkled face gave Jimmy a picture of himself.

That's when the space around them finally collapsed.

“Dad!” Jimmy yelled.

But it was no good. He saw his father twisted and contorted as though he were nothing more than ink on a tie-dye shirt. In the next split second, Jimmy felt himself, and the Space Needle, wrenched through time and space, as though nothing more than a malignant tumor.

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Iron Man watched his son disappear into the Seattle skyline, a bright red speck against a grey everything else. Sighing, Iron Man knew there was only one way he could go now: down. All the way down.

Repulsor rays were always enough to do the trick. Aiming directly at his feet, Iron Man blasted his way through the roof of his own building. Then did the same to the next floor. And then next. And so on. The building was evacuated by now, and his sensors would've warned him of any warm-blooded creature within two floors. Iron Man was simply sacrificing architecture for time.

Though he would never have admitted it, Tony wondered if he would see Jimmy again. Ultron was in his basement? That thought was enough to make Tony pause and wonder if his armor was going to be enough. It was the armor he spliced with technologies from the worlds of Thanagar and Rann during the Avengers' encounter with a perpendicular reality's Justice League. He cursed himself for it. Now, if Ultron were to kill him, Ultron would have access to this foreign technology. What a magnificent trap...

Tony was in awe at what Ultron had done to fool him. So much so, Tony had probably shattered Britannia's trust in him. He cursed himself for that also.

But Tony Stark was never one to dwell on the mistakes of the past. He could only look ahead. Especially when the present was rushing up to meet him. He could not let his servers fail. True, there were back-ups to his most important information in various places across the Earth's surface--in its mantle, and along its orbit. But this was where Tony held his real magic. Tony laughed again at the word 'magic'. But it was true, in a non-literal way. The technology here was more advanced than anything else Tony had set up throughout the world.

Of course, it took the simplest amount of nu-metal--in place of gold--to make it all possible. Ultron may only admit to wanting the nu-metal, but Tony had to save his greatest creations, the creations of his human mind.

Finally he burst through to the final sub-basement of Stark Tower.

Iron Man stood there, in the rubble he had created, still and ready.

The first thing he noticed was the darkness. Not complete darkness; nu-metal gave off a certain glow, no matter what volume. Ultron had cut the power to the entire building, but the servers weren't going to be interrupted by that. Thanks to the nu-metal.

The next thing Iron Man noticed was how cold it was. That meant Ultron had not disrupted the cooling engine that pumped water from the moisture-rich soil of Seattle, through the pipes along the walls, and around the crevices of the servers themselves.

“You're down here.” Tony said into the relative darkness. “I know you are.”

In the darkness, a sudden red penetrated to glow brighter and brighter, until Tony could see that it was the furnace of Ultron's mouth.

“What a mockery. Every time I see it.” Emotionless words echoed around them.

Iron Man started to pace around the room, keeping his scanner locked on the glowing pulse that was all he could make out of Ultron. They side-stepped each other, around the servers, cold, blinking blue.

Iron Man rasped. "You've had plenty of time to extract the nu-metal. I know why you haven't left yet, Ultron. You've seen the information on those servers. You need to know everything that I know before you kill me...so there's no doubt inside of you that I may have known something you don't."

"Ha!" the voice was like a ghost, bouncing off the walls around him. "Pity the poor human! If your mind was a logical machine, then you'd understand there is no room for doubt! But you can only stand there, wishing for perfection. You hide behind that pathetic technology as though it were actually your skin!"

Tony smiled under his faceplate. "Who do you think created the first 'flesh' you ever inhabited, Ultron? Hank Pym bought the metal with a loan from Stark Bank and Trust!"

"Bah!" Ultron roared. "Die, now!"

The ceiling around Iron Man caved in like an avalanche. In the briefest flash of light from the upper floors, Tony thought he saw a glimmer that looked like Jocasta.

"Oh no." Tony heard himself say.

Iron Man was half-expecting the titanium fist that rocked against the back of his head. The thunderous shots kept landing even after he hit the cold basement floor. A dim light suddenly grew in the center of the room, glowing from the chest plate of Ultron itself. It was bright enough that Tony could now see the entirety of his sub-level.

More accurately, Iron Man could see the gaping holes that Ultron had drilled under the servers--tiny narrow spaces, drilled by the same drones now hammering at the foundation of his building. Looking like vile, smooth, tentacled oysters, they were destroying his castle. There were quakes with every strike Jocasta drove into his helm.

"Your egotistical human mind thinks that Ultron has stayed here for your pathetic spasms of intelligence?" It gloated. "I have dallied only to give my bastardized creation the chance to catch up with me. And to be sure that my drones are enough to finish you off."

"Jocasta!" Tony muttered through the battering.

"I wish I could show you what Ultron's shown me, Tony." Her voice was soft, even as her fists struck with deadly, terrible concussions. "Your technology impedes and stalls and stagnates. I can't believe you let me wallow in such a rotten shell. What I'm doing I'm doing for the future of--"

More of the ceiling caved in. This time, Tony was able to make out a figure he was happy to see.

Britannia landed on Jocasta, both feet firmly in the android's chest. Her fists were glowing white, and when she struck Jocasta, she struck down with the full force of her body. With the tiniest glance, she saw Tony Stark.

"Mister Stark." Britannia spat. "I think you put too much faith in machines."

Britannia plunged a blistering white fist down at Jocasta's chest. The titanium moved around her fist like she was plunging a spoon into a tub of butter. Jocasta wrapped both hands around Britannia's forearm but to no avail. Iron Man could see smoke billowing from where Jocasta was touching Britannia's skin. But the British heroine did not falter. Finally she pulled, removing her fist from Jocasta's chest, bringing all kinds of wiring out with her.

That wasn't the only thing. Pulsing, throbbing in Britannia's hand was something that looked eerily to Tony like a human heart. It was glowing blue...with nu-metal. Tony couldn't help but stare at it from his place just aside from Britannia and Jocasta. It was so beautiful...

"Noooo..." Jocasta whined, as the blue faded from her eyes, "...my nu-heart...master..."

"You fleshy parasite!" Ultron roared. "You're nothing but a parlor trick. An energy manipulator!"

Britannia stared at the thing in her hand. Then, with a smirk toward Ultron, she crushed it like overripe peach. "And you remind me of my grandmother's toaster oven. Stop talking like you wanna be human."

Ultron didn't say anything more, and simply raised a hand at Britannia. The stream of energy caught her right in the chest, slamming her against the far wall of the basement, colliding with a couple of servers, sending sparks into the relative dimness there.

Ultron turned back to Iron Man. It saw that Iron Man was already rocketing over the small gaps in the foundation, around the server, to ram right into Ultron, and carry it over to the other side of the room, farther from the downed Britannia. They crushed through more servers, and Tony at this point didn't care about them. From what Tony had seen of Jocasta's nu-heart, Ultron already had too much nu-metal. Tony couldn't let it leave.

His fists pounded at Ultron's grim face, but the lack of emotion through the machine made it impossible for Tony to tell if it was registering any damage at all.

Though Iron Man threw punched that could cave in the walls of naval battleships, Ultron's voice simply emanated from somewhere.

"You know this is futile, Stark! Even if there was a statistical probability that you could destroy me, I would merely download myself into a replacement body. Even if you somehow shut me down, my drones will still bring your castle down around your ears! You and your friends are dead! I win, Stark! This day, I am going to win."

Iron Man paused. He had forgotten about the drones. With a quick analysis, Iron Man saw that for the force those drones were giving, it was a miracle that the tower hadn't collapsed already. Tony realized there was only one thing he could do.

Just thinking about it made it happen. Iron Man's armor glowed bright for just a second, and then the electro-magnetic pulse raged from his insides, throbbing through every electronic source in the Seattle metro area, even his own building. Even Ultron's drones.

There was a clanging of metal, and Iron Man knew that the drones were now harmless. But now, Tony knew, his armor was too exhausted to--

As though he were reading Iron Man's thoughts, Ultron sprang to its feet and landed a massive fist right into the faceplate of his helm. It was enough to send Iron Man twisting head over heels through the basement.

Sputtering, and feeling how powerless his armor really was now, Iron Man was finally able to steady himself in the air with his boot jets. But he looked back to see Ultron leaping toward him. It collided with him into a heavy bear hug, one that didn't end, even when the both smashed to the concrete floor.

Ultron kept squeezing. It could hear Tony gasping from inside his armor. Warnings blared through Tony's eardrums about the pressure.

Ultron spoke again, "Do you feel that, Stark? I hope all humanity feels it like you do. I can sense how worthless your armor is now. I'll make this quick. You've already kept me too long."

That's when the space around Iron Man and Ultron, all along the basement, seemed to contort and spill and bleed. Iron Man felt his chronal sensors scream. Ultron seemed...strangely interested. It seemed angry when all that appeared was Iron Lad.

Jimmy fell through the sore in time-space, into the basement, and collapsed in a heap.

Ultron analyzed him in a second. "Ha! Now, your offspring can die with you. His armor, while fascinating, is in even worse shape than yours!"

"Is that so, ugly?" A British accent rang from behind Ultron.

Britannia was standing, with her fists raised, pulsing white once more. She stood over Iron Lad. Slowly, she put her hands on his shoulders. Iron Lad made no move to show that he was even conscious. "Looks to me like he just needs a little pick-me-up!"

Energy split and seared through Iron Lad's armor. The sight was so luminous, Tony lost them for a second. But Ultron kept staring, intent, even through the brightness.

Finally, the light faded from all-consuming, to gentle, to nothing but a glimmer off Iron Lad's armor.

Jimmy stood and looked at himself. "Holy crap. One hundred percent armor proficiency? How...?" Iron Lad looked around himself. "Wait, where...?"

Britannia, who was still holding onto Iron Lad's shoulder, fell to her knees. Iron Lad gazed at her. She looked fatigued, with dark circles around her eyes, and a pale complexion. He could hear her mutter, "Why are you just standing there?" Then she fainted.

Iron Lad, his armor fully charged, stepped away from Britannia, and raised a gauntlet at Ultron. He sneered, "Get away from my father."

It bellowed, "Bah! This is becoming redundant." With nothing more to say or do, Ultron jumped into one of the gaping holes that randomly were drilled to the foundation. He started plowing to the Seattle outside, aided by an energy cannon in his fist.

"Oh no you don't!" Jimmy's boots flared as he chased it.

Ultron responded, "But I must! And you must not follow!" Already Ultron was plowing his way through ceilings and floors of Stark Tower. "If you follow me, then how are you going to siphon the explosions of my drilling drones?"

Jimmy halted. His armor could've caught Ultron. He knew that. But then he remembered the words of his father, and chose to not let the tower fall. He turned on his heel and flew back out of the gap, into the basement. He could see that the drones were indeed glowing with some kind of power.

"Jimbo...?" That voice was his Dad's. "What's going on? What're you gonna do?"

"I'm not gonna let you down, Dad." Iron Lad responded. His armor reacted the split-second he thought of what he wanted to do. But that didn't mean it wasn't going to hurt. Jimmy took a deep breath, outstretched his arms, and let the explosion come.

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"Dad?"

Tony blinked. "Huh?"

He knew he was on his back. There was the skyline of Seattle right in front of him. Well, maybe not right in front of him. The big faces of Britannia, and Iron Lad seemed to skew his vision a little bit. The soft patter of rain echoed throughout his armor.

"Gah!" Tony couldn't help himself. But then, "Did we win?" He sat up, noticing he was outside of Stark Tower. "The explosion...my building!" But his building was there.

Iron Lad grasped his father's shoulder. "It's okay, Dad. I siphoned most of the blast, but there was still a lot of damage to the foundation. Luckily, Bill's got us covered."

"Huh?" Tony stood, to get a better look at his building. His jaw gaped a little.

Bill Foster stood as tall as Stark Tower, higher than any other building in Seattle. His massive arms were wrapped all the way around Stark Tower like it was a tree Bill was trying to wrench from the ground. He was sweating, and huffing. His booming voice said:

"BOSS. PLEASE. THIS VERY HEAVY. HAVE TO SNEEZE."

Tony almost laughed, but that's when he remembered Ultron. He looked back at his son.

"I'm sorry, Dad." Jimmy shook his head. "Ultron got away. He could be miles from here by now."

Tony nodded. "You made the right choice, son. Ultron is for the Avengers to handle. I wouldn't have wanted you to take him on alone."

Jimmy snorted. "Yeah...I know. Trust me."

Tony turned back to Britannia. He was slow with his words, so he wouldn't choke on them. "...do owe you an apology."

Britannia raised an eyebrow. "An apology?" Then, her mouth eased into a smirk. "The look on your face was good enough. We British women are used to being underestimated."

Tony wasn't going to argue. He looked ready to say something else, but Jimmy stopped him.

"Dad..." He said, "you have to go. The Avengers are already on their way to confront Ultron."

Tony checked his armor, and indeed, the Avengers call-signal had been activated. That's when Tony noticed that his armor had been charged to one-hundred percent capacity. He looked at his son. "Jimbo? Did you...?"

"Yes." Iron Lad answered. "I think you're gonna need it more than I will. Besides, I've been walking around here at half-capacity for days. What's a few more days of clouds gonna hurt? Now get out of here. I have to make sure Bill doesn't drop my family's legacy."

Tony chuckled, but then something else crossed mind. "Jimmy...? What happened to the Vision?"

The color faded from Jimmy's face, like he had been punched in the stomach. Jimmy opened his mouth to talk, but no sound came through. Finally, closing his eyes and sighing, Jimmy said, "I don't know. I really don't know."

Tony sighed, understanding how difficult it was for his son to say that. "Right. I'm sure he's fine. If he's as resilient as Jocasta--which he more than is--then they probably had his mind already downloading into a new body."

Jimmy said nothing. He was just gazing up at the Space Needle.

Iron Man said from over his shoulder, "I'll be back, son. Watch the channels, in case the Avengers need back-up. I'll even let Britannia come along."

"What a leap of faith." Britannia chortled.

It was only after Jimmy had heard the rockets in his father's boots, that he turned around and actually looked at him. But by that time, Iron Man was already just a red and yellow speck against the grey, Seattle landscape. Jimmy couldn't help but think that it might be the last time he saw him.

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**END.**

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## The Jade Empire

Contemporaneous pop culture has placed a great deal of emphasis on the battle prowess of ninjas. Perhaps it was their stealth movements, or the dark and mysterious ways of their clans. Whatever it was, Hollywood, comic books, video games, and every other outlet that the kids plugged into seemed to love the gi wearing warriors. GW Bridge did not share their sentiment. These god-damn pajama-wearing idiots might be able to wield sharp knives, but they sure as hell weren't as effective as a well trained battalion of SHIELD troopers. And he had every intention of making sure he was right.

"Circle up! Double layer with suppression fire from the second tier! Do not let them get anywhere near the civilians!" GW barked. The hulking SHIELD general fired off a round from his plasma weapon before taking a precautionary step backwards. The lance of energy struck one of the many emerald-clad ninjas directly in the head, felling the shrouded figure instantly. The battle continued to rage around him, a countless number of similarly clad ninjas attacking Japanese and SHIELD forces from every side.

GW was proud of his forces. In a world filled with mutants, androids, aliens, and every other sort of enhanced being, SHIELD troops were all too often considered to be useless grunts. The real-world equivalent of Star Trek "red shirts", nameless crew members who came along on missions only to fall prey to the threat of the weak. But that wasn't the case. These men and women were fending off a mystical attack force that had them greatly outnumbered. But the ninjas, each and every one of them clad in the same green cloak and built approximately the same way, continued to pour out from the temples on the surface of the Jade Empire.

The constant onslaught would soon begin to tire his forces. The SHIELD and Japanese troopers had already been forced into a circular perimeter several hundred feet from their transport shuttles. The Japanese media that had insisted on accompanying the expedition huddled together at the center of the circle, only the bravest of cameramen taping the carnage around them.

"Agent Brown! Report!" GW shouted over his shoulder to the SHIELD tech working furiously at the oversized laptop sitting on a small boulder.

"Nothing sir! The mystical barrier is scrambling all communications from the Helicarrier and warding off all attacks from the Japanese jet fighters."

"Damnit," GW cursed. His eyes wandered past the perimeter of his forces to the translucent green barrier that surrounded the floating island, as if the land mass was caught in a giant protective bubble. Even if they were able to reach transport shuttles there was no guarantee that the aircraft could escape the spell placed around the island.

"Doom assures you, General Bridge, that barrier is impenetrable," a voice boomed from overhead. There, several feet above all the commotion, levitated Dr. Victor Von Doom. His own emerald cloak billowed ominously around his steel-armored form. The armor, almost crude in appearance and pocked by the occasional scorch mark, covered the Latverian despot from head to toe.

"Now," Doom began, any indication of mercy completely gone from his tone, "I offer you one last chance to leave in peace. Otherwise my newest subjects will slaughter you and every other being on this island that resists me."

GW had both of his pistols trained on Doom's smug form. He did not fire though. He knew that he would be unable to harm the madman. A period of silence ensued between the two men as GW considered his options. Letting the Jade Empire fall into the wrong hands could put the whole world at jeopardy. But needlessly sacrificing his life and the lives of his troops wouldn't help anyone. At this rate, staying would be tantamount to suicide, a needless loss of lives that would leave Doom just as much in power as if they

simply chose to leave. And yet GW Bridge hesitated, knowing there was one factor he hadn't accounted for.

A deafening explosion abruptly bloomed on Doom's back, throwing him across the skyline and through the turret of the nearest temple. The sound of rocket boosters shrieked in the air around the battle as a crimson and golden figure screamed down from above, the sunlight reflecting magnificently off metallic panels of body armor. Crisp orange columns of energy began to rain down from the outstretched palms of the figure as it dove further towards the battle. The ninjas cloaked in emerald began to fall under the relentless hail of repulsor blasts, and the subtle rumbling of cheers began to roll into the air from the joint SHIELD and Japanese forces.

GW holstered his weapons with an unamused expression on his face. "It's about time you showed up..."



#42

"ISLAND OF DOOM – PART TWO"

Written by Ben Wolfert

### **Feldmore Hospital, Psych Ward**

"So... shouldn't you be in Japan?" Pepper asked as the newly appeared Jimmy Stark leaned over the two felled Stockpile members, Unicorn and Sunstreak.

"I was. Tony and I were examining the Jade Empire when your distress signal came through. We were returning to the Helicarrier when that big light show appeared right in front of me. My armor shut down for a split second and the next thing I knew I was sharing an intimate moment with these two," Jimmy commented. He pulled out a strand of heat-resistant polymer from the gauntlet of his armor and used it to bind Sunstreak's hands before turning his attention to Unicorn. He bound the Australian's hands as well, but the more important precaution here was to remove the green cowl that held the horn through which Unicorn channeled his energy.

"You have Calico all wrapped up over there?" Jimmy asked.

"Affirmative," Jocasta responded, her systems having recovered from the damage inflicted by Sunstreak. "I have bound her hands and disabled her armor's ability to cloak. I have also notified the surrounding security officials that we will need a transport for three super-powered criminals."

"Too bad there's four of them," Pepper shouted pointing towards the end of the hall. The lime-green tiled floor shuddered underneath their feet as the massive form of Brass turned the corner. Another member of the Stockpile, Brass was more of a "what" than a "who", a mammoth android covered with dull orange plates and, at least in previous incarnations, controlled remotely by none other than Morgan Stark.

"I've got him," Jimmy called out. His propulsion systems hummed to life and he hovered in midair for a split second before reorienting his body horizontally and took off towards the nine foot tall robot.

The young man's confidence got the better of him though and he wound up greatly underestimating Brass's speed. The android brought both fists crashing down onto Jimmy's back with a vicious haymaker before the hero could strike. The floor buckled and cracked beneath Jimmy's crimson armor before giving way completely, sending his armored form crashing to the level below.

Brass continued forward, its disproportionately smaller legs carrying it over the newly-made hole in the floor with ease. Jocasta rose to engage the robotic monstrosity, but not before hulking android could fire two miniature buzz saw blades from its right gauntlet. The blades buzzed through the air before ripping through the bindings Jimmy had previously applied to Sunstreak and Unicorn.

“Pepper. Evacuate the doctor from this wing. Immediately,” Jocasta commanded in a hollow tone. Pepper didn’t need to be told twice, hooking the speechless doctor underneath his shoulder and hoisting him to his feet with one clean jerk.

She dragged the two of them down the hall, shoving David back towards the entrance just before she heard a faint whisper. It was barely audible, and in a chilling voice. The words were indecipherable, but the voice recognizable. It chilled her bones and resonated in her soul, as if the whispers were going directly into her mind. She recognized the voice, beckoning her elsewhere. She could hear Morgan Stark.

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## The Jade Empire

“You and your boys set up shop and see what you can do about taking down this barrier. I’ll try and find Doom and ask him nicely about doing it for us,” Tony instructed GW as they approached the collection of SHIELD and Japanese shuttles.

“And if he says no?” GW responded while directing a battalion of his troopers to set up a perimeter around their location.

“Then I’ll convince him that was a poor decision,” Tony shot back as his repulsor boots carried him up and away from the armed forces. Relative silence filled his helmet as the sound of the troops faded behind him and failed to be replaced by the buzz of activity in his suit’s communication systems.

The barrier Doom had erected was blocking out any transmissions Bill may have been sending from the Helicarrier. Diagnostics of the landscape flashed before Tony’s eyes on his HUD as he did a surface scan of the rubble that Doom had landed in.

There was no surprise when the search came up empty; Doom’s armor was too sophisticated and himself too intelligent to give off traces of his location. A subtle shifting of debris off to the side drew Tony’s attention, but it was only one of Doom’s ninja clad flunkies. The momentary distraction was costly though; a heap of stones mere meters from Iron Man’s position exploded in every direction, forcing the armored Avenger into evasive maneuvers as the Latverian emerged from hiding.

“Insolent fool! Doom will not suffer this affront!” Doom spat as green energy blasts exploded from both of his palms.

Tony, already turned onto his side and picking up speed to avoid the debris that had flown outward, was forced into a downward corkscrew that carried him dangerously closer to the angry villain. Doom swung a gauntlet-clad fist at the incoming Avenger and just barely missed catching Tony right on the forehead. But Iron Man soared right past Doom, who could be heard cursing angrily as he nearly toppled into the pile of stone blocks he had just emerged from.

“This island is Doom’s to command! You will not be able to evade my wrath forever!” Doom howled as he turned to regain view of his armored adversary. Watching Iron Man fly away from him, Doom raised his arms into the air and began to mutter under his breath, sickly green orbs of light growing to surround his fists. Tony smiled inside of his helmet, a rear-view image of Doom projected on his HUD.

"Who said I was trying to evade you?" Iron Man called out as he did a U-turn in the air, his gauntlets spitting bursts of energy as he was momentarily looking up at the sky, his body upside down. Once he was sure he had squeezed off the first volley of shots he spun around to orient his body in the proper direction. The first volley would be sufficient though, as the short lancelets of energy exploded against Doom's arms, chest, and legs, dropping the dictator to his knees.

"You should really pick better moments to spit your mystical mumbo jumbo Victor. Now I'll only say this once," Tony said as he opened his palm inches away from Doom's faceplate. The hum of generators kicking to life filled the air and the circle at the center of Iron Man's open hand glowed hot-white. "Take down that barrier. Now."

"I'm afraid my new friend would not like that," Doom replied, the image of his lips curling into a vicious smile just visible through the mouth slit on his face plate. Tony didn't have time to question Victor's remark, the proximity sensors in his armor flashing a desperate warning across his HUD.

Glancing over his shoulder afforded him only a split second to lean his body away from the impending blow. Even then he was unable to fully escape an oversized green claw, three sickly yellow talons digging through the outer layer of his armor. On pure instinct Tony activated his propulsion systems, driving his body backward even as he turned his head to get a better look at what had just attempted to rip his armor off. It certainly wasn't some stray ninja that had wandered to Doom's aid...

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Deep within the Jade Empire, in the deepest and most highly guarded bowels of the island, a tomb lay. The tomb was illuminated by four identical candles, one burning in each corner of the rectangular room. The green flames lapped at the stale, dust-filled air, crackling every so often, piercing the silence that otherwise lay over the room like a damp cloth. But this tomb, which had remained untouched for millennia, was no longer still, and it was no longer silent. The coffin in the middle of the tomb, far larger than one required to bury a normal man, had held a slumbering occupant for as long as the Jade Empire dared to exist.

Victor Von Doom, in his mad quest for power, had selfishly tapped into the mystical power that was woven into every stone and every corner of the ancient island. And when he did, he aroused the coffin's lone resident.

Several prolonged, dreadfully silent moments had passed inside of the tomb as the lethargy of millennia peeled away from the casket's resident like heavy shackles being removed from a prisoner's limbs. Four herbs, dried out and warped in shape but still a soft green color, dangled precariously over the emerald flames. This had been there resting place for all those years, but the recent activity had loosened the roots that held them to the ceiling.

As if ignoring the millennia of time they had spent laying roots and hanging a few feet from turning to dust, the four herbs simply dropped into the flames, falling into a fine powder before they could even touch the blazes. On cue, the heavy granite slab on top of the coffin begrudgingly moved to the side, eventually falling to the ground of the tomb and shattering.

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Looming there in the rubble, standing upright and leaning forward on two legs as thick as small tree trunks, was a dragon. It didn't take Tony long to realize that it was one of the statues that had formerly stood at the sentry positions outside the various temples of the Jade Empire. Except this creature did not appear to be made of stone; thick, leathery scales of a dark green shade ran from head to toe with a pale yellow underbelly that looked equally fortified.

Mammoth green claws ending with five sickly curled yellow talons sat at the end of each arm, hanging limply in the air until they were called upon to do its masters bidding. The dragon did not have a snout so much as it had a disproportionately large mouth, filled exclusively with teeth that were sharpened to a point. Amphibious, fin-like ears flared out from the creature's head and tremored as it roared, crimson eyes flaring. And this living, breathing monster was nearly ten feet tall, seething dangerously and creeping towards the armored Avenger.

"Doom is the lord and master of the Jade Empire now. To defy me is to defy this island and all of its guardians," Doom boasted, now back on his feet and crossing his arms triumphantly. He stood at a safe distance behind the hulking creature that he now claimed to control, watching as the dragon took slow, ominous steps forward.

Tony no longer felt the need to banter with the Latverian despot. No, his actions would do the talking now. His gauntlet stilled hummed with the energy he had threatened Victor with, and he now turned that energy on oversized reptile drawing closer and closer. A repulsor blast shot from the palm of his gauntlet only to splash harmlessly over the leathery underbelly of the creature. The energy rolled off to either side of the monster's body, dissipating harmlessly into the air shortly thereafter.

The dragon retaliated, leaning forward and opening its maw wide. A soft glow grew from the back of the creature's throat before it spat out a spiraling column of red flames. Iron Man rose easily above the flames, but he could feel the air round him beginning to grow warmer. The dragon was quick to respond, craning its stump of a neck upwards and swinging the endless fiery beam up towards Tony. The flames crackled and moved in a predictable pattern though, giving Stark more than enough time to rise higher into the air before swinging down and to the side, coming in underneath the inferno.

Seeing this as a possible opening, Tony increased the strength of his boot propulsion systems and shot off towards the stationary monster. He led with his fists, letting his repulsor beams have another shot at the creature's underside. The bright yellow projections splashed harmlessly away once again, and the dragon was now attempting to bring the beam of flames crashing down from above.

Doom's sentry would strike before Tony could get to it. He needed to pull out, and quickly. A sharp barrel roll to the side allowed him to avoid the downward slicing column of flames, which left a sharply defined line of singed top soil in its wake. There was little time to celebrate though, as Tony quickly felt the roasting air surround his new trajectory.

The dragon's reaction times were decreasing, leaving him little room for error and even less time to calculate his next move. Tony shot high into the air, hoping the sunlight would blind his opponent. The flames continued to chase him like a hound dog, and the sun's rays did nothing to slow down their pursuit.

"Yes, run. Run as much as you like. But you cannot escape Doom's judgment. No one can!" Doom cackled, pointing vengefully upwards at the floating Avenger. It was an ultimately useless gesture; his newly animated servant was already craning its head towards Iron Man's position.

Tony was running out of time, and he knew it. Eventually Doom's ninjas would wear down GW's forces. There was no telling when Doom would decide to actually re-enter the fray himself. And as long as that barrier surrounded the Jade Empire, he couldn't expect any help from the outside. A decision had to be made.

"I'm not running, Doom. Just giving myself some room," Tony replied, waiting until the last possible moment before moving away from the flames and swooping down through the air, dipping underneath the fiery beam once again.

Tony pressed his boosters as hard as he could. He kept his arms at his side and flattened all extraneous portions of his armor, hoping to decrease the amount of wind resistance he faced. Even then, he could hear the wind howling around his armor as he jettisoned toward the green-scaled beast, who was quickly adjusting. That oversized head was coming around even as Tony leveled out, now parallel with the ground and headed straight for the beast's stomach.

Tony was still a few feet away when he felt the heat of the beast's flames permeating his armor and splashing against his back. This was going to hurt. The blast connected with his right boot, causing a minor explosion in his propulsion systems and causing Tony to careen off course. He cursed to himself but continued forward, so proficient in guiding his armor that he was able to do so with only one functional boot jet. At the last moment his armor bucked a bit, swerving to the right of the creature and causing Tony's left arm to slap harmlessly against that leathery stomach.

It all happened so fast, and a second later Tony slammed to the ground, bouncing roughly back into the air before crashing down again and sliding to a painful halt against a pile of rubble.

"I do hope that wasn't all you had to offer Iron Man. If so, I would say the years have been unkind to you," Doom boasted.

"Don't worry, Victor," Tony gasped, taking in a deep breath of air as he tried to categorize the aches and pains that now sprung up all over his body. "I left your big friend there... a present..." he replied, smirking a bit.

Doom turned, his frayed cape whipping in the air as he examined his reptilian guardian. The creature actually looked pathetic; a confused look spread on its scaly face as it considered the device that had been planted on its stomach. A steel outer ring with a flashing red light in the middle was stuck to its scaly center. The diode flashed with a greater and greater frequency until the device constantly shimmered red. Doom threw his cape over his body just as the device detonated with a bright explosion that engulfed the creature and caused the ground to quake.

The smoke was slow to settle, but as it did it became painfully clear that the dragon had not survived. In death the creature had reverted to its stone form, and all that remained was what existed from the torso down. The dragon's upper body was simply gone.

"Very impressive Iron Man. You'll only have to repeat that feat two or three more times. You have it in you, don't you?" Doom gloated, pulling his cloak away from his head and wrapping it over his chest, his fist wrapped in the folds of the cloth.

The Latverian dictator might exercise the speech patterns of some vaudeville villain, but he was no fool. He was just as aware of the damage Iron Man had sustained in that last assault as Tony himself, and knew that, at least for the time being, the iron Avenger would be unable to pull off a similar stunt. Doom also had the benefit of knowing that there were two other dragon guards approaching, lurching forward towards Tony's prone form.

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Jimmy groaned with his body splayed in a prone position three levels below the psych ward he had originated in. The braver hospital orderlies drew around his armored form, attempting to brush off the debris and prop up the time-displaced armored warrior. That movement alone was enough to send a dull throbbing up and down his spine. The haymaker delivered by the hulking robot known as Brass was strong enough to bruise the flesh beneath Jimmy's crimson armor, making each movement a painful reminder of his brashness.

"Thanks guys..." Jimmy grunted, waving off some of the orderlies and propping himself up from behind. His arms ached from the extra strain of pushing his arms backwards and keeping his back off of the ground. But the thought of Brass and the other members of the Stockpile running free up above, with Pepper at risk, made the pain seem trivial.

Soon Jimmy was standing on his own two feet, and moments later he was rising up through the holes he himself had created when falling downwards after Brass's strike. As Jimmy returned to the psych ward he noticed Unicorn and Sunstreak slowly returning to consciousness, with the orange Brass lumbering down towards a defensively positioned Jocasta.

"Hey, ugly," Jimmy seethed, partially in pain and partially out of anger, motivated entirely by the need to draw the robot's attention away from Jocasta. Jocasta had established herself exactly where Tony's directives would have instructed her to; directly in front of Morgan Stark's cell. Brass paused, the rotors in its neck spinning furiously as its head to examine the new challenger. The tremendous robot stalled, as if calculating various options and the associated odds and probabilities inside of its advanced CPU.

"Take the boy..." Unicorn muttered as he positioned his hand on the nearby wall to help pull himself up.

Its orders now clear, Brass turned its body to face Jimmy completely. The construct didn't waste any time, using the propulsion unit on its back to soar directly at Jimmy. Knowing that he couldn't continue this battle inside the confines of the hospital, Jimmy turned perpendicular to the hallway housing Morgan Stark and fled towards the nearest window, the glass pane shattering into a thousand shards a few seconds later as he crashed through it. Additional shards and chunks of wall exploded outwards as the much larger Brass continued its pursuit, chasing Jimmy into the mid-morning sky.

Back in the psych ward, Unicorn had gained his footing and was doing his best to fend off a distance attack from Jocasta. The female android maintained a steady, calculated stream of optic blasts from her eyes, attempting to drive the two members of the Stockpile back towards a more recessed position. This would make it easier for the additional security forces that were en route to apprehend the criminals with minimal cost. But Unicorn wasn't making things easy; the Australian criminal was dodging some of the blasts and blocking or absorbing the blasts meant for Sunstreak with his own armored hide.

Sunstreak was having a more difficult time recovering from her collision with Unicorn. The fiery veil that had masked her facial features had died away, revealing a pale white face with sharp features and short, spiky blonde hair.

Standing up required more concentration than she could muster; at the moment she was still laying on the ground, leaning heavily on her right forearm. But through the groggy haze in her mind she was able to observe her partner, doing his best to maintain their position under the duress of laser fire. Teamwork had never really been a hallmark of the Stockpile, and Sunstreak had very little desire to start that trend. But neither of them could stand up to Jocasta on their own, and if they didn't fulfill their objective than they wouldn't get paid.

"Nnnghh..." Sunstreak grunted as she lifted her left arm into the air and opened her palm to face towards Jocasta. A jet of flames combusted outwards, forming a swirling wall of flames directly between Jocasta and Unicorn. The temperature in the hallway shot up dramatically, and within moments the sprinkler systems had activated. Ceiling-mounted sprinklers whirred to life, spinning around and expelling droplets of water with a steady "click-click-click"ing noise. Sunstreak maintained the fiery barrier, using it to block them from Jocasta's assault.

Jocasta, re-evaluating the situation, ceased her attack, letting her eye-slits cool off from the deluge of electro-magnetic energy they had been emitting. Piercing Sunstreak's wall of flame and catching the now hidden Stockpile members would have required more energy and a wider beam. This certainly wasn't a problem, save for the fact that they were still in the populated psych ward of the hospital.

Realizing that the time to strike was now, Jocasta took off in a dead sprint for the red and orange inferno standing between her and her enemies. They thought themselves safe; they were wrong. On the other side of the wall, Unicorn and Sunstreak recoiled in surprise as Jocasta's now-glowing titanium form emerged from the firestorm, heading right for them.

Pepper watched from the other hallway as Jocasta left her post, leaving Morgan Stark's room completely unguarded. The faint whispering in the back of her mind had vanished. The prone form of Calico remained slumped against the wall, unconscious.

Pepper craned her head and peered down the corridor. Jocasta was engaged in close-quarters combat with Unicorn and Sunstreak. Iron Lad had left the building, trying to draw Brass away from the innocents. Just like his father would have done, Pepper mused before glancing back in the direction of the only remaining Stark in the building. Behind the reinforced and electronically locked door lay Morgan Stark, evil villain and completely vegetable. Except he couldn't be a complete fruit; otherwise why would the Stockpile mount a rescue mission?

Once she had determined that the coast was clear, Pepper tiptoed across the hall, a sense of urgency keeping her up on her toes. Upon reaching the motionless Calico she reached down and confiscated the woman's fire arm, a bulky pistol with a laser sight beneath the barrel. Pepper turned the weapon over in her hand, examining it closely. Happy had taught her how properly to use a gun; he had insisted on it, surprised that she hadn't picked up any weapons training after working with Tony for so long.

"What are you doing?" David whispered, not realizing that Pepper could barely hear him over the din of the battle taking place just down the hall. The young doctor had crept up alongside Pepper, and she nearly accidentally discharged the weapon in her hands as a result. Her stare shot daggers at Dr. Goetz, and he scooted backwards a few inches to make sure he wasn't pistol whipped.

"What does it look like I'm doing," Pepper hissed, waving the gun in front of his face. "I'm disarming the woman that tried to kill you. You know, the one trying to release the psychopath on the other side of this door."

"Misty would never do that," David muttered, staring helplessly at the unconscious face of his coworker, who after a few weeks of trying to treat Morgan Stark had suddenly become a costume-wearing villainess.

"You're a doctor, aren't you supposed to be smart? I would say it's pretty obvious that your friend Misty here isn't in her right mind. She needs help, and we can't get it for her if we're dead. So for the time being we just have to hold tight and wait for Jocasta to finish wiping the floor with Morgan's friends," Pepper said, returning to her eyes to the battle down the hall.

"Are you sure?" David asked with a sincere twang of uncertainty in his voice.

Pepper turned back to the young doctor and paused. Truth be told, she wasn't sure. Jimmy was out of the picture, and while Jocasta had the upper hand at the moment, there was no guarantee that she would maintain it. Pepper had learned some time ago that nothing should be taken for granted when it came to super-powered men and women running around in costumes. And while she wasn't some hero, like Tony or Rhodey or Bill or Jimmy, she certainly wasn't helpless.

"Unlock the door," Pepper instructed, gesturing towards the door to Morgan's room.

"What?" David asked in disbelief.

“The only way we’re going to get out of here is if we take control of what they came for. And they came for Morgan Stark. Open the door,” Pepper instructed, trying to add a sense of urgency to her voice and casting a nervous glance to the battle down at the end of the hall. It was hard to tell who had the upper hand.

“You’re nuts lady. As long as that door remains locked, Stark stays in a padded cell and we’re not in the line of fire. If you open that door you’re just putting a huge target on your back and giving those creeps an open invitation!” David insisted, an even more panicked glimmer in his eyes. The pistol barrel staring him right in the face might have been a contributing factor.

Pepper gripped the laser tightly. “Open the door. Now.”

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## **The Jade Empire**

“If you yield now, perhaps I will show mercy,” Doom offered.

Tony grimaced. The idea of giving in to Doom was sickening. But even more painful at the moment was the burning sensation surrounding his right foot. The dragon’s flames had severely damaged his armor and burnt the flesh underneath. His armor’s systems had been quick to act, firing antiseptic foam around the wounded foot to stabilize and prevent any infection. But that didn’t mean there wasn’t a constant burning sensation shooting up his leg, making concentration incredibly difficult. For better or worse, he wouldn’t have to answer Doom.

Another strong wave of tremors shook the island, and a few meters away the ground broke upwards as a new, massive temple pierced the surface and drove upwards into the air. The temple, formed from the same yellow stone blocks as the island’s other structures, was a mixture of Japanese and Gothic architectures, with numerous pagodas and large, sprawling arches. All was silent once the temple finished its unearthing, at least until Doom’s dragon guardians turned and began to lumber towards the building’s open arches.

“Cretins! Return to your master at this moment,” Doom bellowed. And for a moment, the dragon guardians paused. The two ten foot reptiles, approximately halfway between Doom and the ominous temple, turned unhurriedly to face the Latverian dictator. Another moment of extended silence passed they considered the man before them with gleaming crimson eyes. And without any further provocation or warning they roared columns of fire at the man who moments earlier had been their master. Doom was too slow to respond, managing only to throw his cape over his shoulder and turn his body away from the impending attack. The flames buffeted his back and splashed outwards. Doom was muttering frantically, trying to raise a mystical shield to his defense. But the heat was too much, and his armor began to glow white-hot. It wasn’t long before Victor Von Doom succumbed, dropping to his knees before slumping to the side, unconscious and smoldering.

“All bow before the king of the Jade Empire...” a booming voice echoed from within the temple, before the voice’s foreboding owner emerged from the shadows.

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TO BE CONTINUED...

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**Previously:** Virginia “Pepper” Potts was visiting her comatose husband Harold “Happy” Hogan when Stockpile, a team of armored villains (Unicorn, Calico, Sunstreak and Brass) attack. They attempt to release their employer, Iron Man’s cousin Morgan Stark, from the hospital’s psychiatric ward. Jocasta and Iron Lad, Iron Man’s son from a possible future, have arrived to stop them. And Pepper has an opportunity to exact revenge on Morgan, the man who placed her husband in a coma. Meanwhile, Iron Man is trying to stop Doctor Doom from taking over the Jade Empire, a massive floating island off the coast of Japan, when the mysterious Jade Emperor awakens.



Annual 2015  
“ISLAND OF DOOM – CONCLUSION”  
Written by Steve Crosby

The sound of gunfire drew Jocasta’s attention from the prone form of Sunstreak lying at her feet. Fire was of little concern to a robot constructed of titanium while, even an armored human was susceptible to titanium fists. Jocasta had been about to deal with Unicorn when the shot rang out.

“Pepper,” Jocasta turned her head toward the direction of the woman she’s been charged to protect.

The opportunity was not wasted by Unicorn. Waves of magnetic power came from the energy projector affixed to his head. Jocasta was knocked aside, and Unicorn rushed past her. “It sounds like the lady is in trouble. If you chase after me, it may be too late for her!”

Leaping through one of the holes created by the battle, Unicorn activated the propulsion jets on his belt. He was outside the hospital, and quickly getting away.

Jocasta could only afford him a glance. It was enough to pinpoint the highly volatile fuel Unicorn used for propulsion. A laser beam from Jocasta’s eyes would have taken only an instant, igniting the fuel and setting Unicorn ablaze. The risk of death was high.

Jocasta spared the escaping villain and instead chose to rush in Pepper’s direction. She was none too soon, as Jocasta discovered the pistol smoking on the ground and Pepper Potts leaning against the wall, a deep gash on her forehead. Lying on the floor was Dr. David Goetz, grappling with a female co-worker whom Morgan Stark had manipulated into becoming the villain Calico.

While Dr. Goetz had both hands wrapped around one of Calico’s wrists, her other hand was raised, claws poised to strike. Moving with all the considerable speed her design allowed, Jocasta grabbed Calico’s other arm and hurled the woman back. Flipping through the air, Calico landed lightly on her feet and rushed forward.

“You should have remained unconscious,” Jocasta said. Calico’s response was to rake her claws against Jocasta’s titanium body. The act had no effect. With casual ease, Jocasta delivered a backhand that slammed Calico against the wall. She bounced onto the ground and didn’t get up. “There. All is right again.”

Jocasta turned to see Pepper rise to her feet, though using the wall to support herself. "Is it over?"

"Sunstreak is in a similar state and Unicorn has fled. Once I have secured these women and seen to your injuries, I shall assist Iron Lad with Brass."

"You should secure her as well," Dr. Goetz said. He pointed an accusing finger at Pepper Potts. "She held me at gunpoint, tried to force me to open the door. We were so focused on each other that Misty got the drop on us."

"Is this true?" Jocasta asked. "Pepper, why would you seek the same objective as these criminals?"

"I thought I could force him to call him off," Pepper said.

"Force him in the same manner you attempted to force Dr. Goetz?" Jocasta's sense were more advanced than any human's save perhaps Daredevil. Moreover, her computerized brain was able to analyze everything she saw. And what she saw from Pepper was not good at all. "Of course, you want to kill Morgan Stark."

"No! That's ridiculous..." Though Pepper tried to protest, she saw the futility in arguing with a machine. "Happy's in a coma because of him. He drove that woman insane, threatened more lives with this escape attempt. It has to be done!"

It was futile to be emotional with a machine. "Pepper, this is not what Mr. Stark or your husband would have wanted. Also, there is a high likelihood that Morgan Stark would have taken advantage of your fragile state of mind. Observe this woman, a trained doctor that he manipulated into attempting murder."

Suddenly, there was a loud crash from behind the door of Morgan Stark's padded room.

"Oh dear. It may be that Brass has overcome Iron Lad." Jocasta planted herself between the door and the two humans. "I suggest you leave the area while I address this possibility."

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It had already ranked among the most difficult days of Iron Man's life. SHIELD had offered a contract to help tow the Jade Empire away from Japan, but they had arrived to find Doctor Doom there first. The ruler of Latveria had tapped into the island's mystical energy. But as Iron Man and Doctor Doom discovered, that mystical energy had awakened the Jade Empire's original ruler, and that was the moment Iron Man's day became weird.

"All bow before the Jade Emperor..." a booming voice echoed from within the temple, before the voice's foreboding owner emerged from the shadows. It was a dragon, much like those that hovered on either side of it. This one was smaller, closer to human size, but the most unusual feature was that it was clothed, if a helmet and purple trunks counted. What most had Iron Man's attention was the helmet, magenta with a bluish face mask. "Fin Kang Foom!"

Doctor Doom's reaction was to laugh as he rose, recovered from the Jade Emperor's initial attack. "What affront is this? A creature takes the name and armor of a noble foe, and seeks to command Doom?"

"That looks to be the situation," said Iron Man. "This island comes from an alternate reality, I'm guessing one where Kang died and to the victor goes the armor and name. Funny though, I thought the entire Council of Cross-Time Kangs was destroyed!"

Fin Kang Foom considered Iron Man. "So you've encountered us before. Yes, it seems the Council was destroyed from within by a member known as Kang-Nebulae, who turned out to be more than she claimed. I avoided their fate however, by entering into a Makluan slumber. But the threat has passed, and I've awakened to find my Empire violated. I only make this offer once, humans. Serve me or die!"

Still chuckling, Doctor Doom raised. "Doom serves no one." A great blast of power shot out of the palm of Doctor Doom's gauntlet and engulfed Fin Kang Foom's head. When it passed, the great Jade Emperor collapsed, it's masked head reduced to a skull. "That skin will make a fine cloak."

"It will serve as your death shroud!" Green arms, legs and a tail emerged from the floor beneath Doctor Doom. As he was lifted into the air, a gaping maw opened directly below. "Fool, I am a millennia-old alien who has traversed time and space! Shifting through my island is among the least of my talents!"

Doctor Doom glanced down into the emerging face of Fin Kang Foom. "Display all your talents, and Doom will still not be impressed."

The cloak of Doctor Doom stiffened and when he twisted against Fin Kang Foom's grip the edge sliced across a scaly hand. The Jade Emperor screamed, and when the gas that exploded from his jaws struck Doctor Doom's armor it came aflame. But the absolute ruler of Latveria was used to much, much higher temperatures. Unfazed, he reached down to grab a large, sharp tooth, and yanked at it.

"This will do nicely, to rip your heart out of it's chest!"

As the two villains battled, Iron Man activated his boot jets and flew into the temple that Fin Kang Foom had emerged from. Following were the two dragons that had previously been under Doctor Doom's control. They had turned on him when the Jade Emperor had awakened, and evidently he hadn't forgotten about Iron Man. But hopefully there was something else Doctor Doom had lost control of.

"Can anybody read me?" Iron Man broadcasted on all channels.

"I don't know what you did, Iron Man, but that shield just went down," the voice on the other end belonged to G.W. Bridge, a commander in SHIELD. "We've loaded the civilians into the shuttles and are prepared to clear up."

"Glad to hear it Bridge. Is Britannia still on board?"

"What kind of question is that? Doom hit her with enough energy to...dammit, she's wandered off!"

Iron Man chuckled to himself. "Great, I can give her a ride off once she helps me with something. Can you hear me Britannia?" There was no answer, and Iron Man silently cursed. "How about you Bill?"

"I'm reading you loud and clear boss," said Bill Foster from aboard the SHIELD Helicarrier. "Whatever you did, keep it up. That island your on is over Tokyo now, and gaining altitude."

"That's what I was afraid of. I'll do what I can here, but you need to get it back over water."

"How the hell are we supposed to do that?"

Iron Man twisted to avoid dragon flame. "The Helicarrier has grapple lines, doesn't it? With the engines at full power, it should get most of the job done. As for the rest, you may need to lend a hand."

“Oh no, growing at that size might kill me,” said the man also known as Giant Man.

“I never said working for me was risk free.” As Iron Man was talking and avoiding dragons, his systems were scanning the island for a tracker he put on all his special employees. Britannia’s location popped up on his HUD. “I’ve gotta go do my part. Good luck everybody.”

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Created over twenty years into the future, Iron Lad’s armor was beyond state-of-the-art. Micro-thin, ultra light, it matched the armament of a helicarrier while operating on the power of a toaster. Interfaced with his nervous system, Iron Lad operated the armor as though it were part of his body and, by extension, any computerized system the armor controlled. Which in the present day should have been any man-made system on Earth.

Why, then, couldn’t he hack into this Brass piece of junk?

The puzzle that perplexed Iron Lad as he battled the robot just outside the hospital. It was the reason he didn’t take the opportunity to just destroy Brass outright, something that wouldn’t have been hard with his advanced weaponry. The robot was designed to be controlled remotely, which should have been tailor made for Iron Lad. But every scan he made for frequencies couldn’t find anything from Brass. There was just no way to get in wirelessly.

“Okay, then,” Iron Lad sighed. “In the front door I go.”

In the air, Iron Lad was far more agile than the lumbering Brass. It was easy to position himself above the machine to unleash a Uni-Beam. Once Brass crashed into the parking lot, it would be easy to contain the robot with gravimetric waves and drill into it’s CPU.

An instant before the Uni-Beam could fire, Brass fired a rocket from it’s shoulder-mounted cannon. The target wasn’t Iron Lad, however, but the hospital.

“No!” They were too close for Iron Lad to simply blast the rocket. A wild explosion would still cause too much damage. Firing his own rockets at maximum power, Iron Lad put on the surge of speed to do the only thing he could. In the rocket’s path, Iron Lad took the full brunt of the explosion, containing most of it to his armor.

The damage to Iron Lad’s advanced armor was minimal. In fact, converting the explosion’s force into usable energy replenished his battery stores. The only problem was that momentum drove him through a hospital window, into a patient’s room.

“Sorry, ma’am, or sir,” Iron Lad said as he struggled to his feet. “I’ll be out of your hair as soon as...hunh, that’s weird.” The armor was still scanning frequencies, and had just found something.

The distraction was brief, but it left Iron Lad unprepared when Brass crashed into him. The robot pinned Iron Lad under it’s huge weight, raised a massive fist, and slammed it against Iron Lad’s head.

Again and again this happened, while a repulsor field kept Iron Lad’s helmet unblemished. However, in twenty minutes there wouldn’t be enough power for the field, and Iron Man’s future son might actually be in some danger. It was likely the floor would collapse first. He raised a hand, but rather than unleash a repulsor blast, a drill emerged from his index finger.

“That’s right, you brute,” muttered Iron Lad. “Keep hammering away while I see what makes you tick.”

Iron Lad’s advanced sensors provided an in-depth scan of Brass, from every bolt to transistor. Once the outer casing was breached, micro-filaments from Iron Lad’s armor penetrated the opening and made contact with the much less advanced circuitry. Any second now he would have control over the machine.

“Ah, there you are, Tony.”

Suddenly, Iron Lad’s armor began to seize. When he broke into Brass, something snuck into the armor. Worse, because of Iron Lad’s neural interface, his very mind was vulnerable. The voice that spoke wasn’t just inside Iron Lad’s armor, it was inside his head.

“If you’re hearing this, Tony, that means you’ve attempted to override my control over Brass. Fortunately, I developed a virus that would piggy-back on any such intrusion. Not only are you losing control over your much-vaunted armor, it will soon respond to my pre-programmed commands. So lie back, Tony, you’re about to have a front-row view to the murder of your closest friends.”

Even though the software of Iron Lad’s armor was far more advanced, he knew that Morgan Stark’s threat had teeth. It was precisely because of how primitive the technology was that he didn’t have a proper defense against it. Desperately, Iron Lad accessed the few systems that remained to him, hoping that they could work fast enough before Morgan’s control became absolute.

Reaching out with his scans, Iron Lad found the anomaly that had distracted him. It was a long shot, but the only chance he had. In the span of nano-seconds, a rapid download was initiated, backups filed, and an EMP activated. Everything in the room went dark.

Iron Lad’s armor.

The Brass robot.

The machines monitoring the vital signs of Happy Hogan, who lay comatose inside the room.

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It was rare for Doctor Doom to experience such pain. The alien Emperor of the Jade Empire had shifted his body into thousands of pin-thin tendrils that were worming into Doom’s armor. They were now digging into his skin, and Doctor Doom could feel them entering his very mind.

“You have proven yourself a worthy opponent,” said Fin Kang Foom. “And once I have absorbed your mind into myself, that worth shall make me all the more dangerous.”

But through the painful scream of Doctor Doom, there was also laughter. “You think the armor of Doom is so easily breached?”

Energy crackled throughout Doctor Doom’s armor, and it was the Jade Emperor’s turn to scream. Receding from Doctor Doom, the tendrils coalesced into a single tentacle that that sought to jump away. But Doctor Doom took hold of the tentacle and gazed into the single eyeball that appeared on the end.

“You dare to dream you can dominate Doom? You? A pale copy of Kang, who is himself a pale copy of Doom? You are no emperor, but a fool who failed to realize that in assaulting Doom’s mind your own was laid bare.”

In the brain of Doctor Doom, a switch was triggered. Everything that was Doom left his body and invaded the pitiful creature in his hand. Everything that was this creature, in turn, entered a body that was now trapped, by Doom's command, within an immobile armor. That release was a mental command known only to Doom, should he so choose to return.

It was an unlikely scenario, reflected the cackling creature that stood over an armored prisoner. He grew to over twenty feet in size, with scales hardening as an armor, wings and tail flowing around him like a cloak. A heat was building inside of him and fire erupted from a snouted mouth.

"Ah yes, the power! Where are you, Iron Man? It is time you faced the might of Fin Kang Doom!"

---

Turning a tight corner, Iron Man was gratified to hear dragons crashing behind him. Spinning around in flight, Iron Man fired repulsors over the dragons. They didn't get a chance to recover before tons of stone fell onto them.

"If that isn't the end of them, at least it'll slow them down," Iron Man said to himself. "Britannia, if you can hear me, I'm coming to you!"

Moving in on the blip he was tracking, Iron Man discovered a wall in his way. When he blasted his way through, Iron Man found himself in a massive chamber deep in the heart of the Jade Empire. Sure enough there was Britannia, jumping from ledge to ledge battling dozens of ninjas.

"Let me guess, this is the source of the mystical energy that Doctor Doom tapped into." Iron Man flew along a wall, blasting ninjas or outright grabbing and throwing them. According to his sensors, they were unliving automatons that he didn't have to be careful about.

"Yeah, sorry I couldn't answer," Britannia said. "I've been a little busy fighting to stop this whole thing. How'd you find me?"

"I have ways of keeping tabs on Stark's employees. You being here saves a lot of time actually. Hop on." As Iron Man flew by, Britannia jumped to him and grabbed hold. "The power source of the Jade Empire isn't mystical in nature, but alien.

Iron Man turned toward the center of the temple, where ten massive interlocked rings were rotating in a cylinder of energy. "That's Makluan technology, and somehow you're attuned to it. This is where Doctor Doom drew on the force field that you shattered."

"Great. Let's do some more of that."

Impulsively, Britannia leaped from Iron Man towards the ten rings. "No!" Giving more power to his thrusters, Iron Man looped around and grabbed Britannia by the wrist. He pulled her away from the rings with less than a foot to spare.

"If this island loses power it drops, and we're still over Japan. Even a crash over the ocean may be too dangerous, with the displaced water flooding hundreds of miles of land."

"So what, are we supposed to stand around here with our thumbs up our-"

Iron Man spoke in this armor's radio. "Bill, what's the situation?"

---

"I'm a little busy here!" Bill Foster exclaimed through grit teeth.

The man once known as Giant-Man had grown beyond any size he'd achieved before. Tokyo's tallest skyscrapers could not reach his shoulders, and his massive hands had taken hold of the Jade Empire. The SHIELD Helicarrier was on the other side of the floating island, firing scores of cables that threatened to snap under the strain.

As the Helicarrier pulled, Bill Foster pushed. Every minute or so, enough progress was made that Bill Foster needed to take a step forward. A massive boot would crush cars and crack pavement. Fortunately no civilians were in the area as, being so used to attacks by giant monsters, Japan had grown adept at evacuations.

In another few steps, Bill Foster saw, he would be stepping into the ocean. "I swear, Iron Man, you're going to be the death of me."

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"Oh, come on, Bill. I did say you would rise high in the organization," said Iron Man over the radio. To Britannia he said, "Once the Jade Empire is over water, we need to lower it slowly to minimize displacement. That's when I'll need you to destroy the engine so this can never happen again."

There were still jade ninjas around, but one less after Britannia cold-cocked him. "And all because my powers somehow run counter to it. Funny, I never really questioned what I can do, I figured it was just ancient Briton magic."

"I'll help you better understand it later," said Iron Man. Releasing Britannia a short distance from the engine, he looped around, blasting at ninjas as they appeared. "What matters is what understand your powers enough. That and keeping these ninjas off you."

"Yeah." Britannia narrowly dodge a slash from one armed ninja. A kick to the chest quickly disarmed him of the sword, and consciousness. "They seem to be focusing on me, like they can sense what a danger I am."

"Naturally my dear, for they have been told!"

The top of the engine room disintegrated. Iron Man and Britannia looked up in shock and awe at the massive, winded beast that gazed down upon them.

"The Jade Emperor! Then you somehow defeated...." Inside the helmet, Tony Stark's eyes widened. "That mask, no."

He'd grown in size, at least fifty feet. The wingspan would have been nearly triple that, were not the wings held in like a cloak, protecting modesty in place of purple trunks. But as Iron Man had noted, the greatest difference was the mask, no longer bluish inside a magenta helmet. It was now cold iron, pressed against the smooth face of a tyrant.

"Yes, Iron Man. As is the fate of all lesser beings, Fin Kang Foom has fallen to the might of Doctor Doom! I have taken his power for myself and, once you have been dispatched, the Jade Empire shall enter the Doom Dynasty!"

Those final words were accompanied by a gout of flame, and Iron Man was engulfed.

---

Long seconds passed since the crash, but still the door to Morgan Stark's padded cell didn't open. Pepper Potts was getting anxious, glanced at the gun on the floor. Jocasta was simply staring ahead, her robotic senses reaching beyond the door. The large form of Brass now occupied the room, while Morgan Stark was being picked up a smaller form...Iron Lad?

"An escape attempt is in progress." Jocasta reached forward and bypassed the room's security locked. It opened, revealing the massive form of Brass. Iron Lad and Morgan Stark were nowhere to be seen.

"No!" Diving to the ground, Pepper grabbed the gun. Screaming in rage, she fired at Brass, emptying the clip in seconds. Brass just stood there, not even scratched because every shot had missed.

"Oh, come on Pepper," said Brass in a robotic voice that somehow seemed familiar. "When I took you to the West Coast Armory you at least hit the target once."

Stunned, Pepper dropped the gun. "Happy?"

"Oh crap, I am so sorry." Iron Lad appeared through the hole in Morgan's cell, empty handed. "I was just dropping Morgan off to the police mobilizing in the parking lot, with instructions to throw him in a deep, dark hole. I thought I'd have another minute to make introductions."

Glancing between Pepper's stunned face and Brass, Iron Lad made a weak gesture. "So, yeah, I discovered Happy has full brain activity, created a wireless port in Brass, and allowed Happy to override all of Morgan Stark's pre-programmed commands. Including one that was threatening my life."

Jocasta looked up. "I detect that a localized electromagnetic pulse was activated."

"Yeah, that was also me," said Iron Lad. "Everything needed a hard reboot. Happy's body is fine, but Jocasta you may want to go up there and give an in-depth scan."

"I am not comfortable with that phrase," said Happy/Brass.

"It may be possible to restore connection between Happy's mind and body. Here, I'm forwarding you all the relevant data." Iron Lad suddenly shivered, his knees buckling.

"Perhaps I should scan you as well," Jocasta said. "You've also been through a great ordeal...yet I see nothing wrong."

"It's nothing going on here," said Iron Lad. "Somethings happening at the Jade Empire. I need to go help. Good luck fixing Happy!"

Iron Lad rocketed off. All that time, Pepper was still staring at Brass, incredulous. "Seriously, what the hell is going on?"

---

“You killed him!” Britannia rushed forward in a fury. “He’s one of the most powerful heroes in the world, and you just killed him!”

“A long-deserved fate,” said Doctor Doom. Displaying mastery over his new form, a tail whipped out and smashed Britannia. She crashed against a chamber wall, dazed but conscious. “Foolish girl, you thought to get the better of Doom once before. As I did then, you will suffer most dearly!”

At Doom’s direction they came. Ninjas skittered along the wall and floor, grabbing at Britannia. She maintained the presence of mind to fight back, punching and kicking. But they kept coming, kept grabbing. Soon an arm was held fast, then a leg. Though Britannia struggled mightily, they were too many, and she was soon drowning in the sea of foes.

“Is this a private party, or can anyone join?” A shape of crimson and gold burst through the wall, scattering the ninjas. But this shape was smaller than Iron Man.

“Iron Lad, it’s about time!” Britannia scolded. “Where did you disappear to?”

“Somewhere important, but I’m here now.” At the sight of Fin Kang Doom, Iron Lad’s bravado wavered. “You? I’d heard stories, but...”

“They were exaggerations. The Jade Emperor met his match in Doom, as will you, whelp!” Opening his maw, Fin Kang Doom unleashed fire.

“No!” Britannia threw herself in front of Iron Lad. Surprisingly, the fire parted to either side, missing her and the armored hero by inches.

“Nice trick,” said Iron Lad. “How’d you know that would happen?”

“I didn’t,” said Britannia. “But it’s been a working theory.”

Fin Kang Doom roared his displeasure and grew in size. “Enough! It is time you vexing children met the fate of your elder!”

“I couldn’t agree more!” From the massive hole in the ceiling flew Iron Man. There were some singes on his armored legs, but overall he was none the worse for wear. In his arms was a shape wrapped in green. “And trust me, the hangovers they experience after our night of celebrating will be epic. But that party is for after we thwart you, Doctor Doom. Here and now!”

The sight of Iron Man, alive, angered Fin Kang Doom without measure. But the sight of the figure in his arms brought a moment of distress. “Return to me my person! None are fit to lay hands on Doom!”

“Doom? I thought I’d grabbed the Jade Emperor.” Iron Man’s voice was a mockery of confusion. “Oh, you mean that even though you stuck his mind into your body, you still kind of want your body back?”

Beneath his helmet, Iron Man grinned as he flew back out of the hole. “If that’s the case, then you’d better come and get it. Because while I’m normally careful with passengers, I don’t care so much about alien despots, and might just drop him by mistake.”

With a flap of his great wings, Fin Kang Doom flew in pursuit. Iron Lad made to follow and assist, but Britannia grabbed him. “No, Iron Man’s luring him away so that we can stick to the plan.”

---

“Bill, are we completely over the water?”

“Yeah,” said the former Giant Man. He was submerged in the ocean nearly to his waist, and was massaging an ache in his shoulder. “The Helicarrier is mainly just providing counter-thrust, keeping the Jade Empire in place.”

“Great.” Iron Man was flying low along one side of the massive island, Fin Kang Doom in close pursuit. “Now get ready, I’m bringing the party to you.”

As Iron Man neared the end of a gradual curve in the island, he suddenly gained in altitude. Fin Kang Doom followed, and too late saw that he was flying face-first into a giant fist. The impact created ripples in the water, and Bill Foster yelped in pain.

“Aaagh, I think I just broke my hand!”

“You dare lay hands on Doom!” A scaled arm swiped at Bill’s head, claws just missing his face. Bill grabbed the arm with one hand, pushing it away, while his other hand closed over the long, thin neck of Fin Kang Doom. A quick jet of fire shot out of his nostrils, singeing Bill’s arm.

“Fighting a dragon was not in my job description!”

“In your interview you did say you welcome unusual challenges,” said Iron Man. “And anyway, we’re surrounded by water.”

“Oh yeah.” Bill plunged the alien dragon under the ocean’s surface. Immediately bubbles started coming up, and limbs were thrashing. Bill felt every cut across his arms and legs, but he held fast with all the strength of his massive size.

Hovering over Bill Foster, Iron Man held the prone body of Doctor Doom out to arm’s length. On his chest, the Uni-Beam was primed to fire. “Come on Doom, you have to jump back sometime.”

“And yet you keep Doom close,” said the mad despot from his own lips. Iron Man felt the pulse of energy and instant before all systems went offline and they dropped from the sky. “Fool, and electro-magnetic pulse is my automatic response for such situations!”

As the armored combatants fell toward the water, Bill noticed the bubbles were gone. Yet the creature was still thrashing...no, more like flowing. Green flowed along the giant’s arms and back, until suddenly the Jade Emperor was holding him by the neck.

“Humans have such little imaginations, but I didn’t realize they were so stupid,” hissed Fin Kang Foom. “Forming gills is so obvious.”

“You assume Doom cares the slightest for that pitiful form.” Doctor Doom shrugged off the immobile Iron Man’s grip. The Avenger splashed into the water while the Latverian Monarch remained aloft under his own power. “As it is, this conflict has cost more than Doom hoped to gain. Your removal, and that of your island, is a sufficient consolation prize.”

“How could you hope to-” But the Jade Emperor was cut off as explosions rocked the island floating overhead.

---

“What the hell is going on?” asked Britannia as they were thrown off her feet.

“This has Doctor Doom written all over it!” Iron Lad was hanging for dear life onto what passed as a console for the engine. It was a simple matter to interface his system with that of the Jade Empire’s. “In the Makluan body, he was in telepathic contact with the island and set it to self-destruct once that contact was broken.”

“All you had to say was Dead Man’s Switch,” said Britannia. She was hanging directly over the engine, and looked down into the swirling rings. “What happens when this island blows up?”

“We’re only a few hundred feet above water and just off the coast of Japan,” said Iron Lad in a somber tone. “Those island and everyone on them will be gone.”

“Not if I can help it!” Britannia kicked off her perch and dived into the engine. “I don’t know what I have, if it’s magic or science, but it tunes with this alien energy somehow. Up to know I’ve been disrupting it, but what if I can do more?”

“Britannia, what are you doing?”

Suspended within the rotating rings, Britannia screamed as their energies passed through her. She was in no condition to respond, but she didn’t have to. An instant later, Iron Man could feel the effects. Explosions were still rippling across the island, but past the shockwaves was the feeling of acceleration. Iron Lad could tell that the Jade Empire was moving, and more fast.

Straight up into the air.

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“No, my empire cannot end this way!” Fin Kang Foom had released Bill Foster, and was flying up after his island. “The Last Kang cannot lose!”

“Such is the fate of all who challenge Doom.” Activating a switch in his armor, Doctor Doom began to fade from view.

Iron Man burst out from the ocean, his armor’s functions restored. “I’m not letting you get away that easy, Doom!”

But it would seem he was, as Iron Man flew through the spot where Doctor Doom had been the instant after the villain teleported away. Still Iron Man flew upwards, after the Jade Empire and it’s emperor. A massive hand closed over Iron Man however, halting the flight.

“No!” Iron Man struggled, but his armor hadn’t fully recovered. “Let me go Bill! Britannia is still up there! And Iron Lad!”

“And by my math you’ll never reach them in time.” Cupping Iron Man in both hands, Bill Foster turned and started toward the city of Tokyo. “The best we can do now is protect people from the blast, and run rescue as best we can.”

Long minutes passed, before finally the Jade Empire exploded in a massive fireball high in the upper atmosphere. The terrible boom of destruction was mixed with the high-pitched, horrific cry of death from the Jade Emperor. Yet aside from ashes floating onto Bill Foster’s head, none of that destruction rained down on Earth.

“Well I’ll be damned,” said Iron Man. “Those kids actually did it.”

“You say that like there was any doubt.” Iron Man turned and saw Iron Lad flying down, landing on Bill’s broad shoulder. In his arms was an unconscious Britannia. “Once I calculated that we were high enough, I grabbed Britannia and booked. The effort took a lot out of her, but she’ll live.”

“So that’s really it,” said Bill Foster in disbelief. “We really stopped the threat, saved everybody, and wrapped it all up nice and neat?”

Iron Man nodded. “Hey, when Stark Solutions takes a contract, we deliver.”

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Time passed. It was soon discovered that Fin Kang Foom was not the last Kang, as Kang himself returned to battle the Avengers. Also back was Ultron who, after a brief battle against Iron Man and his allies in Seattle, would go on to threaten all time itself. The Avengers stopped it, of course, but along the way....

Iron Lad punched a wall, leaving a large indentation. “I could have stopped Ultron, dad! Hank Pym would still be alive, if I’d only...”

“I told you then you made the right choice, Jimmy,” Iron Man said to his son from a possible future. “You saved a lot of lives, and nothing diminishes that.”

Beneath his helmet, Jimmy Stark shut his eyes to keep the tears from flowing. “I know that, but...the changes just keep happening. Hank Pym is still alive in my time, and Happy is still in a coma...”

“And I’m supposed to be in a relationship with your mother, Pepper Potts,” finished Iron Man. “Jimmy, did you think I wouldn’t take a DNA sample? I’m known all along that your mine and Pepper’s son. It’s how I know from the beginning that your future, it just isn’t possible. Maybe in another life...but here Pepper and I don’t feel that way about each other.”

Iron Lad nodded, resigned. “I know. My chronal trip, it crossed into an alternate timeline, one that diverged from mine a long time ago. But still it was great to pretend, to believe that I was fighting alongside my father.”

Iron Man placed a hand on the young man’s shoulder. “In a way you were. And hey, just imagine all the fun you can have, knowing that it won’t affect your timeline.”

“No, you don’t understand.” Iron Lad turned to face his “father”. “That belief, it was what anchored me to this timeline. Without it, I’m going to be drawn back home. And I don’t know if I’ll ever come back.”

Iron Man stiffened, unprepared. “Well, if this is the end, I’m proud to know I had you as a son.”

“And you’re everything a son could want in his father.” As Iron Lad said this, he threw his arms around Iron Man. For a long time, father and son embraced. Iron Man didn’t even feel the emptiness until he opened his eyes and saw that nobody was there.

“Goodbye, Iron Lad.”

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### **Author’s Note**

First, be sure to check out Iron Man Annual 2009 (and the rest of the Kang/Ultron War!) to know what happened before the last scene of this story.

Done, good. This was a fun story to write, not least because I got to dream up one of my craziest ideas ever. I hope you enjoyed it, and be sure to stick around for a bold new era of Iron adventures under a bold new Iron writer!

- Steve Crosby

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### **THE END**

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