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GAUNTLET

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MARVEL

IRON MAN

**THE
GAUNTLET**

EOIN COLFER

MARVEL

Los Angeles • New York

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*A modern-day warrior mean, mean stride,
Today's Tom Sawyer mean, mean pride.*
—Rush



THE BIG IDEA

Los Angeles, the 1980s—which were not as bad as people think

Tony Stark paced the lacquered wooden floor outside his father's office, chewing one stick of gum after another. For three hours he'd had to hang around waiting for a meeting with his own dad.

It was ridiculous.

Forcing your only son to wait on a sunny day was, teenage Tony felt sure, against some universal good-parenting guidelines. Especially since Tony was about to change the face of Stark Industries forever. All his life Howard Stark had griped that nobody ever brought him the *big idea* and he had to think of everything himself. Now Tony had that big idea in his backpack, and dear old dad was making him

wait while he had lunch with the baby-faced governor of Arkansas.

Howard Stark's secretary, Annabel, sat behind her glossy wooden desk without offering so much as a word of sympathy, or even a glass of water. In fact, the only thing she sent Tony's way was a disapproving glare so heated that Tony felt it was interfering with his elaborate hairstyle.

"Come on, Annabel," he said. "Ease up on the daggers. You're melting my head."

Annabel did not ease up. If anything, her glare grew more intense, and she added a curled lip to the expression.

Tony felt he should challenge this blatant antagonism. "Is this about Cissy? Is that what this is about?"

Annabel snapped a pencil between her clenched fists. "My daughter's name is Cecilia, not Cissy."

"Hey, she told me Cissy, and I was not about to argue with such a pretty girl. She told me Cissy, so I went with Cissy."

Annabel jumped on that. "You went with her, all right—down to the beach in the middle of the night."

"It was nine thirty," said Tony. "I wanted to show Cis—*Cecilia* the dolphin that swims into the cove. That was it. Nothing happened. The dolphin didn't even show up."

"Maybe nothing happened," conceded Annabel, "but you have a reputation, Tony. Every mom in Malibu has your name on her watch list."

"Come on," objected Tony. "I'm fourteen. Harmless."

Annabel actually snorted, which was new for the

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normally demure secretary. “Harmless? Boys like you are never harmless. You are the opposite of harmless.”

“That would be *harmful*,” said Tony, who had never learned the talent of keeping his mouth shut, even while chewing gum.

“That’s right,” said Annabel. “And maybe you haven’t done any harm yet. But you will.”

Tony was a little stunned.

He had been in this outer office maybe a thousand times, and all Annabel had ever said to him was “Good morning, Master Stark,” or “I’ll tell your father you’re here, Master Stark.”

Now it was all laser eyes and insults. Could it be that Annabel had a point? Could it be that he, Tony Stark, boy genius and all-around charmer, was actually harmful in some way?

Every mom in Malibu had his name on a list?

They would soon cross his name off that list if they knew what was in his backpack.

“Cecilia is a great gal,” he said, giving some of his all-around charm a try. “I would never harm her.”

Annabel straightened some papers on her desk that already looked pretty straight. “First,” she said, “don’t call my daughter a *gal*. This is twentieth-century California, not the Wild West. Second, maybe you won’t harm her, but you probably won’t call her, either. That’s how cruel boys like you operate, isn’t it, Master Tony?”

Tony squinted suspiciously. When Annabel called him

Master Tony, it did not sound like she meant *Master Tony*. It sounded like she meant exactly the same thing that his mom meant when she called him Anthony, which was pretty much the same as his father meant when he called him anything—as though every variation of his name was an accusation of something.

Tony!

Anthony!

Master Stark!

All disapproving.

Tony could hear his father's voice now.

"Tony! Get your head out of the clouds."

Actually, he *could* hear his father's voice as Howard Stark, back from his three-hour lunch, steamrolled through reception, the customary thunderhead scowl pasted on his face.

"Tony, let's go. This better be good, because I don't have all day."

Tony hitched his backpack a little higher.

"It's good, Dad. Real good," said Tony, thinking, *He's gonna make me partner when he sees this.*

"It better be," said Howard Stark, pushing through the double doors into his office. "Annabel, hold my calls," he said over his shoulder, then added, "For three minutes. Shouldn't take more than that."

Tony swallowed. It would take him two minutes to get the device set up. That left one minute for the pitch.

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He squared his shoulders.

One minute is all you need, boy genius, he thought, and he followed his father into the office, or, as the employees of Stark Industries referred to it in whispers, the Lion's Den.

Howard Stark was not a fan of California architecture. Floor-to-ceiling windows were not his thing. In his opinion, more looking out meant less looking in, which for years Tony had thought was stating the obvious, until he realized that by "looking in" his father meant *thinking* or *inventing*.

Having said that, his dad was doing his share of *looking out* right now, staring at Tony as though he were an alien who had just come through a wormhole.

"What the hell is that?" he said eventually, pointing in the vague direction of his son's head.

"That's my head, Dad," said Tony. "And this Q&A is not coming out of my three minutes."

"Not your head, Tony. The thing *on* your head. Are you wearing a wig?"

"A wig?" said Tony, injured. "Come on, Dad. A little gel, maybe, but not a wig. This is the latest style. There's an English band called Duran Duran; maybe you've heard of them?"

"No, I have not," said Howard Stark, settling into his leather office chair. "Modern music is just old music dumbed down for a dumb generation—though that governor guy

blows a pretty mean saxophone, they tell me. He'll be president one day, mark my words."

When other people said "mark my words," it was a kind of vague prediction not to be taken seriously. When Howard Stark said it, it meant he planned to use his fortune and influence to make whatever event he had marked happen, and you could bet your last dime on its coming true.

Mr. Arkansas doesn't know what's about to hit him, thought Tony.

Howard was not finished with his hairdo lecture. "I bet that style you've got going there takes, what, an hour to get right? That's an hour of gaping at yourself in the mirror. Looking *out*, Tony. Looking out, when you could be looking *in*."

"I *have* been looking in," said Tony hurriedly, eager to stop this style lecture in its tracks before his three minutes were up. "And I've come up with something."

Howard crossed his arms and grunted softly. The message was clear: *I'll believe that when I see it.*

Yeah, well, you're about to see it, old man, thought Tony. *Prepare to experience the awe.*

And while he shrugged off his bag, he also thought that as soon as he was partner he'd be able to say that kind of stuff out loud.

Tony laid the bag on his father's desk, then unzipped the main compartment. He reached inside gently, as if

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to cradle a newborn kitten, but what his hands came out with was a small flying machine with a bulbous nose and two sets of low-slung wings with inset rotors.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he said. “A model airplane. Big deal, right? But this is so much more than a model.”

Tony was prepared for his father to be unimpressed. What he was not prepared for at this point was for his father *not* to be unimpressed. Or rather: impressed.

“Wait a minute,” said Howard Stark, literally jumping from his chair. “Wait just one minute, young man.”

Howard Stark hurried around the desk and grabbed the plane right out of Tony’s hands.

“This is . . .” he said, turning the craft over in his hands. “I don’t believe this. Have you been in my files? The battery, the cameras . . .”

Tony pulled the miniature plane from his father’s grasp. “No, I haven’t been in your files. This is all me, Dad. One hundred percent Tony. I call it the *Tanngrisnir*, which was the goat that pulled Thor’s chariot. Not that I believe in any of that stuff, but I needed a name, and I know you like the Greek classics.”

“Norse,” corrected Howard absently. “Thor is a Norse god, but never mind that now. How did you put this together?”

For a second Tony’s usual stream of patter dried up, because it seemed as though the moment he’d dreamed

about for so many years (i.e., impressing Pop) had finally showed up, and now that it was there, he didn't want to blow it.

Three minutes, he told himself. *Get cracking.*

"I combined all the traditional sensors for weight efficiency. Magnetometers, gyros, and accelerometers, in one little box."

"I see," said Howard, taking the *Tanngrisnir* gently from his son. "You did all this at home?"

"Yes, in my room." This was not as tough a task as it sounded, because Tony Stark's room had more tech in it than most universities. "The brain is a tiny embedded computer, which I control with this." Tony pulled a gray box from his pocket. "This is a prototype of something called a Game Boy. It's not really your thing, Dad."

Howard surprised him. "Nintendo's revolutionary gaming device. That's not even coming out for a couple of years. How did you get hold of it?"

"I have my sources, Dad," said Tony mysteriously. "I modified the program, boosted the output and—here's the clever part—linked it to a communications satellite so I can fly the TOT—Tony's *Tanngrisnir*, that is—halfway around the world on one battery charge. And what the TOT sees, I see on this dinky little screen. What do you think?"

Howard Stark's features aligned themselves into an expression Tony had never seen before.

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Was it?

Could it be?

Admiration.

Maybe there would even be a hug? The first one since he'd turned ten.

"I am impressed, Tony," said Howard finally. "You've saved me eighteen months on our drone program with this combination sensor alone. All this time we were working in parallel, and I never knew. That is inefficient resource management. I need to pay closer attention to your work."

Being labeled a *resource* to be *managed* was not exactly the warm embrace Tony was hoping for, but it was infinitely preferable to being ignored completely.

Howard Stark tugged his glasses from his breast pocket and studied the cargo bay. "Just one question for you."

"Sure, Dad, fire away."

"That's kind of the problem. I don't see a mount for the missile. . . . Or is the TOT itself the missile?"

Tony frowned. "Missile? Dad, there's no missile. The *Tanngrisnir* is a delivery system for medical aid. With the TOT I can drop malaria vaccines into a war zone with no loss of life. I can flit over minefields with a microcargo of penicillin or blood plasma. With a thousand TOTs I can avert a famine from my bedroom."

Tony activated the Game Boy and flew his creation right out of Howard's hands.

"Look how maneuverable it is. That's because I used

rotors and wings. The TOT can do anything, Dad. This is our chance to move away from weaponry. This is Stark Industries' chance to do something good."

Howard's face hardened, and Tony knew he'd blown it.

"*Something good?* Something good, you say? So keeping this country safe isn't a good thing?"

"No, Dad, that's not what I meant."

"Because the only reason you can sit in your bedroom single-handedly averting famine is because I keep your bedroom, and this entire country, safe."

The hoped-for hug seemed very far away now. "I know that, Dad. I know you do."

"And still, knowing that, you waltz in here and casually suggest that it's time for Stark Industries to do something *good*."

Tony felt his heart sink. He had been so close to breaking through his father's barriers. But with a few badly chosen words, he had raised those barriers to an all-time high.

"Dad, listen. . . ."

But Dad was not in the mood for listening. He was in the mood for delivering another lecture.

"Tony, what you fail to understand is that . . ."

We are at war, thought Tony, his heart sinking even further.

". . . we are at war," said Howard Stark, right on cue. "And just because you can't see the enemy does not mean that they are not out there."

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And I just bet me and my hippie friends are blind to the dangers.

Howard Stark was on autopilot now. “Of course, you and your hippie friends have no idea what’s really going on.”

Tony attempted an intervention. “Dad, no one even says the word *hippie* anymore.”

Howard steamrolled over him. “No, no. You’d much prefer to fritter away the freedom that I provide by finding ways to undermine me. Coming in here with this gadget to save Stark Industries.”

Tony brought the TOT in for a landing on his father’s desk. “Forget it, Dad. It’s just a toy. It doesn’t matter.”

Surprisingly, something Tony said seemed to penetrate. “*A toy?* Just a toy . . .” Howard held out his palm.

“Spit,” he ordered.

Maybe this is code for something, thought Tony.

“Spit,” said Howard again. “The gum. Now.”

What could Tony do but obey? He spit the gum onto his father’s palm.

“A toy, you say,” muttered Howard, his hands busy with the TOT. “Let’s see what our enemies can do with a toy.”

“Dad, I get it, okay? There’s no need to freak out.”

Howard laughed. “*Freak out,* Tony? Nobody says that anymore.” He rummaged in his desk and found what he was looking for, then stuck it to the bottom of the TOT with the blob of chewing gum.

“Now, let’s see, let’s see,” said Howard, almost feverish in the throes of his demonstration. “What have we got? What do we have?” Tony’s father went over to his small

bulletproof window, opened it, and gazed into the parking lot. “Yes, there it is. My DeLorean. I love that monstrosity, Tony, love it. But let’s send it back to the future, shall we? Why not?”

And he tossed the TOT outside. A year’s work, right out the window.

“Dad!” shouted Tony, rushing to look. But his father held him back.

“You better get flying, Son. Tick-tock.”

Tony whipped up the Game Boy and managed to take control of the TOT an instant before it crashed into the parking lot’s asphalt. Even from a dozen floors up they could hear the craft’s motors whine in protest at the rough handling.

“Well done,” said Howard, and some part of Tony appreciated the rare compliment even in a moment already jam-packed with emotions. “Nicely handled under pressure. And there will be a lot of pressure when you’re averting famine and so forth. But not crashing is the least of your worries. The *mission* is your priority, and in this case your mission is my DeLorean. Everyone in that car has been affected by a fatal virus, and your little plane is carrying the antidote. But this is a time-sensitive mission, Tony. You need to land the TOT on my DeLorean’s roof in thirty seconds, or everyone in that car is dead.”

Tony wasn’t sure what was actually going on. Was this a real test, or just a lesson? Either way, he was not going to fall at the first hurdle. Or second hurdle, if you counted

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the expert and cool way he'd regained control of the plummeting TOT.

Land on the DeLorean, he thought. No problem, Pop.

Tony knew exactly where the DeLorean DMC-12, with its distinctive gull-wing doors, was parked: in the executive section of the lot, far away from the riffraff's cars. He quickly nudged the TOT in that direction, pulled up the nose twenty degrees to give the camera a better view, and made a looping approach from twenty feet off the asphalt.

"Better not scratch the car, Son," said Howard in his ear. "That's my favorite vehicle."

Which was saying something. Howard Stark had something of an obsession with cars, but John DeLorean was the only automotive engineer he was on record as admiring. And if Howard Stark admired a person, then that person was doing something very right.

So what was all that talk about sending it back to the future? And what did Dad stick to my TOT? The weight feels a little different.

It was another test, he decided.

Pops is piling on the pressure by throwing off the TOT's balance. Good luck with that.

Tony had been practicing for weeks with the Game Boy in preparation for exactly such a baptism of fire, and he felt pretty darn confident in his piloting skills.

I could land this baby on a playing card, he thought. Setting her down on a luxury sports car will be zero problemo.

Tony had enough smarts not to smirk. If there was

anything his father hated more than his son's hairstyle, it was his irrepressible cockiness.

I will smirk later, Tony decided. And maybe punch the air. I might even call Cissy.

But later for celebrating. Now for landing.

The DeLorean grew large on the screen, and Tony glanced quickly at the sensor readouts to make sure the TOT was not going to be buffeted by wind, but conditions were perfect. Even the sun was playing along by staying offscreen.

Ten feet, thought Tony, holding the craft steady. Five.

A crazy thought flashed across his mind, something crazy thoughts often did.

I should do a barrel roll.

But good sense prevailed, and he opted instead to expertly execute a gentle vertical touchdown. A textbook landing, no cockiness whatsoever on display.

Or at least a gentle vertical touchdown was what he'd *intended* to expertly execute, but an instant before the aluminum landing skids could seesaw onto the DeLorean's hood, Howard Stark closed his hand over those of his only son.

"Dad, don't!" objected Tony, attempting to pull away, but the strong fingers held him fast.

"Watch and see," said Howard Stark.

Tony could do nothing but obey, and he watched as the TOT's pointed nose dipped sharply, scraping a long groove in the DeLorean's paint.

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“You’re doing this, not me!”

“Don’t worry,” said Howard Stark. “It’s just a toy, remember?”

Tony wriggled his fingers out from under his father’s, abandoning his grip on the Game Boy. He ran to the window just in time to see his precious TOT nose-dive into the windshield of his father’s even more precious DeLorean.

He winced but was not overly concerned. After all, from that distance, how much damage could a featherlight craft do? Even one with chewing gum stuck to its cargo doors.

As it turned out, the answer was quite a lot.

Like most explosions, it was over before the brain got a chance to process what had happened. But when Tony replayed the incident in his mind, slowing it down to view it frame by frame, he remembered an ultrawhite flash followed by a roiling ball of flame about the size of a cantaloupe from which the DeLorean’s windshield seemed to recoil like a membrane before shattering into countless pieces (technically not countless, if you’re being picky) and then the entire hood crumpled as though stepped on by an invisible iron boot.

At the time, all Tony could think was: *I hate cantaloupes.*

He would continue to hate them for the rest of his life and never consciously realize why.

Then the sound wave hit the building, followed by heat and the cacophony of concentric circles of car alarms.

In the grand scheme of explosions, this one was nothing

special or major. Certainly not special enough for Howard Stark to be called on to explain personally. Big enough to send a security guard down if a black and white showed up, perhaps, but there would never be so much as a noise pollution fine as a result of Howard's demonstration.

Whatever that demonstration was supposed to prove, thought Tony. Aside from the fact that my dad loses it on occasion.

Which was a surprise to absolutely no one in the compound.

Tony was surprised to feel a hand on his shoulder.

"Do you see, Tony? Do you?"

Tony did not see, and he was not about to irritate his dad with wild guesses.

"I don't see, Dad. I don't. You melted my flying machine and your favorite car."

"Correct," said Howard. "Because a picture paints a thousand words, and a picture of an explosion paints a million more."

"I still don't get it. The TOT was an instrument of peace."

"Exactly," said his father. He turned Tony away from the window, stooping to look him in the eyes. "It took you a year to build that drone, and it took me ten seconds to weaponize it with some gum and a minigrenade, because you told me all I needed to know. Don't give away your secrets, Tony—not to anybody—or they will inevitably turn them against you, as I did."

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Tony wondered later why his father kept minigrenades in his drawer and whether that was even legal.

“Why would you want to do that?”

“Because that’s what we do. We men. We make weapons. Everything we build is on its way to becoming a weapon, and only a fool or a child does not see that. If we put your mercy plane into the hands of our enemies, they will fly it back to us bearing a payload. Do you understand?”

Tony did, but he didn’t like it and said so.

“You don’t have to like it,” said his father. “You just have to remember what you’ve seen here and accept it as the way of this world. There are no toys in this world, just un-evolved weapons. The weapon will always be our greatest achievement.”

Tony glanced once more through the window at the narrow plume of blue-black smoke rising from the DeLorean’s engine block.

“I will never forget what you showed me here today, Dad,” said Tony, and he meant it. Maybe his dad’s methods were a little out there, but he sure could get his point across.

“Good boy, Tony,” said Howard Stark, handing his son the Game Boy. “Someday you’ll take over this company, and it will be up to you to keep this country safe. You won’t be able to do that with toys. Got it? Promise me now that you will continue my work when the time comes.”

Tony gazed down at the game device in his hand and knew instinctively that a defense contractor somewhere was already adapting the technology. Probably Stark Industries.

“I promise, Dad,” he said. “No toys, just weapons.”

And if he had to pick a moment when his childhood ended, that would have been it. Followed closely by the moment two weeks later when both his parents were killed in a car accident on the Pacific Coast Highway.

Tony Stark never looked at toys the same way after that. For years he wouldn't play with any at all. And when he did eventually begin to play again, he studied his old building sets and physics kits with hardened eyes. Tony Stark worked on his toys until they were of an altogether more dangerous kind than the ones of his youth.

His new toys were armored and explosive, and they could fly. In fact, they weren't toys anymore; they were weapons.



PROTOTONY

Twenty feet above the Irish Sea, present day

Tony Stark dreamed he was flying. But it wasn't just any flight of fantasy. It was a very special flight over the Hawaiian volcanic peaks with a very special, very beautiful woman: Anna Wei. Lithe, strong, and brilliant, she was the only other scientist he had ever considered his equal, and one of just a handful of people Tony had ever loved. And like all the other people Tony had loved, Anna had died before her time. After the police found and identified her body, they ruled it a suicide. As much as Tony had not wanted to buy that, he'd had no choice. His heart had hardened a little more that day, and he'd resolved never to love again.

So Tony Stark dreamed he was flying, and the fact that

he dreamed he was flying while he was actually flying added an extra dimension of reality. The previous Iron Man operating system had once put forward the hypothesis that one more layer of dreaming could prove inescapable. In other words, if Tony dreamed that he was dreaming he was flying while he was actually flying, then he might never wake up. At which point Tony had decided that the OS needed a reboot and maybe a virus check.

Tony's current onboard AI was his girl Friday, who was a little more free-spirited and knew better jokes and even occasionally laughed at Tony's.

Friday woke him with a gentle vibration that massaged his spine, which she detected from his bio readings was about to spasm after many long hours of flying across the United States and the Atlantic Ocean.

Stark opened his eyes and yawned and, feeling his chin nestle into the helmet's jaw strap, remembered he was in the suit.

"Morning, Friday."

Friday winked into existence in the form of a holographic red-haired young woman, who was crystal clear even in full daylight thanks to the Stark multinode projectors. Right now she was confined to the helmet display, and Stark knew that if he focused on her for too long, he would throw up in the helmet. But even out of the corner of his eye, he noticed something.

"You've changed your hair?"

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Friday shook out the long red tresses that had been shorter the day before.

“That’s right. This is more me.”

Friday had changed a lot of features lately. The whole Irish thing, for example. Friday had been programmed Californian but had turned Celtic in the past few weeks. Also, Friday’s virtual bone structure had changed so her face had more character. Tony was intrigued to see what the AI would do next. He had built Friday, but she was intelligent and could choose to appear as she pleased.

“Where in the world are we?” he asked the artificial intelligence.

“Twenty minutes out, boss. Heading north northeast one mile off the Irish coastline.”

“How are the systems looking?”

“All the readings are in the green, appropriately enough, considering where we are,” said Friday. “And top of the morning to you.”

“*Top of the morning?*” said Tony. “Friday, I never took you for a stereotype. What’s next? A pint of Guinness and some Riverdancing?”

“Just trying to get into the swing of things, boss,” said Friday. “Ireland, I have decided, is my spiritual home. And I don’t think *Riverdancing* is an actual verb.”

“Increase lumbar vibration to four,” said Tony. “And throw in a stretch, why don’tcha. I know I look as cool as all hell, but these transatlantic jaunts take it out of a fella.”

Friday took hold of Tony's spine and pulled till it creaked. "Maybe if you took any notice of international law and didn't do so many uncleared flights, Tony, your back would be in better shape."

Stark ignored this. "Don't we have a first-class Iron Man suit? Didn't I build something with a minibar?"

Friday laughed. "We have recycled water and caffeine patches, boss. I'm afraid that's it."

Tony grimaced. "Recycled water. I know where that water came from and it's putting me off, to be honest. And getting back to the transatlantic flights, there are a lot of big weapons in the hands of bad people, and someone's got to clean it up, right? If S.H.I.E.L.D. won't sanction my missions, then I gotta strap on the stealth suit and do it myself."

Tony thought back to a recent meeting with S.H.I.E.L.D. during which Nick Fury had made it abundantly clear that he was not about to rubber-stamp Tony's covert missions.

"You must be out of your playboy mind if you think I'm going to ask the president to green-light your Boy Scout trips," the S.H.I.E.L.D. leader had yelled in his office at S.H.I.E.L.D. HQ. "You think you're God, Stark? You think you can make up for fifty years of Stark Industries' manufacturing weapons by deciding who gets to have tech now? That ain't how the universe works, Tony. You should know that. You're a genius, right? You've told me so enough times."

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And Tony had said, “Yes, Dad.” Which had been more than embarrassing; it had been mortifying.

“Did you just call me *Dad*?” Fury had asked, wickedly delighted. “Let me get the S.H.I.E.L.D. psychiatrist in here. I think you might be suffering from some kind of genius-level PTSD.”

“I was being sarcastic, Fury,” Tony had said, trying to cover for the slip. “As in, you are not my dad. And you are not the boss of me.”

“You’re wrong there,” retorted Fury, pounding his desk—which was, Tony thought, a little grandstand-y. “I *am* the boss of you. And if you get yourself in hot water during one of your escapades, don’t expect S.H.I.E.L.D. to send in the cavalry, because I ordered you not to go in the first place.”

Tony Stark left Fury’s office realizing that not only was there no backup forthcoming, but he would have to be a lot sneakier in the future when he was taking down arms dealers, because Nick Fury would be waiting for him to slip up.

Luckily, thought Tony as he flew above the choppy surface of the Irish Sea, *one of the facets of my genius is definitely sneakiness.*

“Friday,” he said, “how’s my yacht doing?”

Friday brought up the yacht’s locator and hummed as she checked it—an endearing tic she had developed herself.

“The *Tanngrisnir* is at anchor one mile outside the mouth of picturesque Dún Laoghaire Harbour, as programmed,” replied the suit’s AI.

“*Done Leery*,” said Tony, sounding it out. “The Irish sure know how to spell things. You can never have too many silent letters, right?”

“Watch it,” said Friday. “Those are the physical manifestations of my people you’re talking about. Any more insults and I might send you for a swim.”

“Any pings on the boat?”

“Two S.H.I.E.L.D. sats and three helicopter fly-bys from news networks. Judging from the chatter, all seem satisfied that Tony Stark is getting a little R&R with Shoshona Biederbeck, the world’s newest pop superstar.”

“Why wouldn’t they be satisfied? It’s a totally believable story: Tony Stark with a beautiful woman.”

Friday made an unconvinced kind of sound, a little like a single note from a clarinet.

“What’s that supposed to signify, Friday?” Tony asked. “Are we doing noises now?”

“I am an intelligence, boss. You do want honest opinions, don’t you?”

“I do. But I prefer actual words—you know, verbs and nouns and so forth—over beeps and honks. What are you, Artoo-Detoo?”

“Well, if you must know, Shoshona seems a little young. Twenty-five at most?”

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Tony laughed. “Are you jealous of a robot, Friday?”

“No. Jealousy is certainly outside my program parameters. I am concerned with the sustainability of your cover story.”

“First, I think you’ve been outside your program parameters for weeks now, and second, I worked a long time to make the ‘beautiful young woman’ cover realistic. Any other worries while we’re on the subject?”

Friday made another clarinet sound, which turned the helmet display pink for a second.

“Mood lighting,” said Tony, delighted. “Maybe we should play some disco music. Come on, Friday. Out with it.”

“Well . . .”

“Well? Well? What is happening to you, Friday? Are your language patches disintegrating?”

“It’s just that I know how touchy you are.”

“Tell me. That’s an order.”

“Very well, boss, but you pushed me into it, so don’t get mad.” Friday took an audible deep breath, which she accomplished by flushing the suit’s vents, a little humanizing trick she’d come up with herself. “It’s the Prototony.”

“What’s wrong with the Prototony?” asked Stark. “That thing is a marvel of modern engineering—and pretty darn good-looking, too.”

“I’m not disputing the engineering of the Prototony, boss.”

“So, what is it? You have a problem with his appearance?”

Another honk, followed by, “Well . . .”

“Well what?” asked Stark. “Come on, Friday, you’re killing me.”

“Well, he’s a little buff.”

“Sure, he’s buff. I’m buff. And he’s supposed to be me. S.H.I.E.L.D. and the tabloids spy on the Prototony, which leaves me free to do my little side missions. Never be where you’re supposed to be, remember?”

Friday persisted. “If he’s supposed to be you, then maybe he shouldn’t be so muscular. I mean, you’re in good shape, boss, don’t get me wrong, but your shape is documented. And the Prototony’s shape is a little more *developed* than yours.”

“I’m not exactly the Hulk, is what you’re saying.”

“I knew you’d be angry.”

“I’m not angry. A little peeved, maybe.”

Friday giggled. “*Peeved?* According to my records, you are the first person to use the word *peeved* outside of a romance novel in fifteen years. There should be a prize.”

“So the Prototony is too buff?” said Tony, unwilling to leave the subject. “Or maybe I’m too puny.”

“I’m sorry I mentioned it,” said Friday. “My observation is based purely on your muscle mass and BMI, and it wasn’t meant as a criticism.”

Tony was silent for a long moment, then said, “We have EMS on this rig, don’t we?”

“Yes, boss,” replied Friday. “The defib can be used for electromuscular stimulation.”

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“Then give me fifteen minutes on abs. I wanna look good for the satellites.”

The electromuscular stimulation had barely finished its work chiseling Tony Stark’s torso when Friday sealed the vents and took the suit subaqua so they could approach the *Tanngrisnir* from below. After all, it might seem a little curious if Iron Man touched down on the yacht while Tony Stark was visible on deck. It was a safe bet that Nick Fury would be yelling through the sat phone within seconds of seeing that video. So Tony had fitted out the *Tanngrisnir* with underwater doors and an airlock that could accommodate a billionaire philanthropist genius in a metal suit of armor without raising so much as a ripple, physical or electronic, on the surface.

Tony dodged fish for a while until Friday retook control half a mile out and guided the Iron Man suit into the welcoming claws of the *Tanngrisnir*’s support rig. It cradled Tony like a newborn babe while he was winched gently into the yacht’s loading bay.

“Okey-dokey,” said Friday. “The lotion is in the basket.”

The suit peeled back almost fluidly, panel by micro-panel, until Tony Stark stood exposed in his black unitard.

“*Okey-dokey?*” he said. “I don’t remember slang being part of your programming.”

“I am an AI, boss,” said Friday. “Therefore, I learn. What did you think of ‘The lotion is in the basket’?”

Tony stepped out of the suit entirely. “I liked it. You

took a quote from one of my favorite movies and turned it into a command. Nice. You know something? I really am a genius.”

Friday transformed herself into a glowing life-size hologram in the loading bay.

“And humble, too,” she said.

Tony stretched until his spine cracked. “No such thing as a humble genius, Friday. All that humility gets you in this world is stepped on.”

“Or happiness and respect.”

This was an unusually philosophical line from the usually bubbly AI.

“I have all the respect I need,” said Tony. “And I’ll be happy when I’ve taken all the weapons of mass, medium, and small destruction out of the hands of people who shouldn’t have them.” He rotated his head. “I am so stiff. People have no idea. They think the Iron Man suit is all saving the world and being cool. And it *is* about those worthy endeavors, but a few hours in that thing is like riding the world’s longest roller coaster. I need to loosen up.”

“How about twenty minutes of capoeira before dinner?” asked Friday.

“Perfect,” Stark said with feeling. “Brazilian martial arts and a steak. Just what I need.”

Friday stepped into the Iron Man suit, closed it up, cued Stark’s capoeira playlist through the yacht’s sound system, and faced off against Tony.

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“Take it easy on me, Friday,” said Tony, limbering up. “I’ve had a long flight.”

The Iron Man eye sockets lit up, and Friday’s voice came from the mouth speaker. “I never take it easy,” she said. “That’s how you made me.”

And for twenty minutes Tony Stark sparred with his own suit in the hidden loading compartment of his multimillion-dollar luxury yacht, which, along with a two-screen theater and a small nightclub, had enough tech on board to run the Pentagon.

An hour later, Tony watched the Prototony, the android version of himself, fry up a rib eye in the yacht’s galley, which was a galley in name only, as there was nothing galley-like about it. No tight squeezes and cramped cupboards there. The kitchen had three induction rings and two double ovens, of which Tony had only ever used one, to dry out his favorite sneakers after they had fallen overboard.

“You know what?” he said to Friday. “Maybe the Prototony *is* a little, you know, beefy. It’s not attractive, is it? All those muscles.”

“No, boss. Women hate that,” said Friday mischievously from the other side of the table.

“Maybe I’ll shave him down a few inches all around when we get back to Malibu. We can say I went on a detox.”

“I will schedule an overhaul,” said Friday. “Now, if you’re going to eat that steak, you’d better get chewing, because we have a party to drop in to.”

At that moment the Prototony turned from the cooktop, frying pan in hand, and said in a fake Texas accent, “Who’s hungry, pardners? If you are, stick out a plate for the best steaks this side of the Rio Grande.”

The real Tony winced. “Ouch. That accent is terrible. I think old Proto’s speech package needs an upgrade.”

Friday disagreed. “I don’t think so, boss. The accent is terrible. But that’s how *you* do Texas.”

Tony was surprised. “Really? Well, if I ever attempt a Texas accent in public, please administer a low-level shock to shut me up before I upset an entire state.”

Friday, being a loyal AI, promised that she would.

The Prototony was not, in fact, a prototype. It was just that the name had stuck from Tony Stark’s first attempt to build a replica of himself several versions previously. Other trial names had included the Tonybot, the Replistark, and the Toborg, which had been Friday’s favorite, as it sounded like an insult somehow. She had even taken to referring to people she didn’t like as “total Toborgs.” In any event, android Tony swanned around the oceans on board the *Tanngrisnir*, giving the actual Tony a little wiggle room to fly his solo missions to remote and dangerous parts of the world, recovering and retiring stolen weaponry. Much

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more difficult was creating the virtual pop star Shoshona Biederbeck and making the world believe that she was a real person. Stark had written a program that analyzed the structures and progressions of all the major chart hits of the past half century, and then he'd churned out his own versions of the tunes, which were amalgamations of previous songs—close enough to sound familiar but removed enough to avoid copyright lawsuits. Shoshona's last few videos had exploded all over the Internet, and she had hits like “Bang Boom Pow,” “Girls Got the Power,” “Oops, What'd I Do?” and the obligatory message track “You Know You're Beautiful, Right?”

The trouble was Shoshona had grown so popular that a music label wanted to meet her, so Tony'd had to build a convincing Shoshona-bot. It was either that or his songstress would have to go into exile due to the pressures of the biz.

“There is such a thing as being too smart,” Friday often told him. It would have been far less complicated in every way to construct a hologram of a mysterious beauty, but Tony Stark enjoyed playing with the media, so he went the extra mile with Shoshona.

After dinner, Tony retired to his dressing room for a quick cleanup before the evening's party. A local rock band was throwing a launch bash in their city-center hotel, and Tony had promised to attend in the suit.

Everybody wants the suit, he thought. It was a double-edged sword. Sure, the Iron Man suit was a marvel of technology and a thing of total virtuosity, but sometimes it would be nice to be invited somewhere where the real reason for the invite was not just to get Iron Man to the shindig.

The lead singer, Graywolf, had been a total gent about it: “Hey, Tony, brother. Just bring yourself on Friday. No hardware necessary. After all, you have the big gig on Saturday.”

But Tony knew that the guests would be disappointed if he didn’t at least do a DJ set in the suit. Throw a little servo into the mix, as it were.

“Are you sure about this party, boss?” Friday had asked him. “After all, you’re speaking at the environmental summit on Saturday in front of some of the world’s most influential environmental ministers.”

“That’s why I’m going to the party,” Tony had replied. “I need some fresh happy memories before spending the day with government ministers.”

“I suppose so,” Friday had said. “Some of those ministers are complete Toborgs.”

But even so, he would not go full tilt on the partying, because the summit was important for the eco-future of the planet, and his keynote speech would ensure that the world’s news outlets took notice. Besides, he had quit drinking years before.

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So he would strap on the suit for both events.

But not the combat suit. There was zero chance he was taking that much firepower to any party. And there was less than zero chance that the security details of the various ministers would allow him into a conference wearing the equivalent of a tank on his back. So *that* suit had to stay behind. But not intact. There was no way he was leaving a combat suit on the yacht, even one with the *Tanngrisnir*'s security system. So he had a couple of jobs to do: (1) disassemble the combat suit and (2) print up a Party Pack.

But before that, it was time to go under the laser.

Tony lay very still on the table.

"Lie very still, boss," said Friday, operating two robot laser arms bearing down on his face.

"I *am* lying still, Friday. Very still."

"Stop talking, then."

"You stop talking to *me*. You know I need the last word."

"The last word could cost you. These arms are accurate to a dozen or so microns, but if you keep moving—"

"I'm not moving."

"Stop talking."

"You stop."

"I'm powering up now."

"You don't need to tell me that, I can see the power light. I designed the system."

"You really need to shut your face, Tony."

“You really need to stop being rude to your boss.”

“Here we go.”

“Go on, then.”

Two luminous red dots of concentrated heat appeared at the tips of the laser arms.

“Say another word,” said Friday. “I dare you.”

For once Tony Stark decided to forgo having the last word. He remained perfectly still while Friday shaped his famous goatee, shaving the bristles into straight geometric lines accurate to the nearest ten microns. And if the result was not perfectly symmetrical, it was only because Tony Stark’s face was not perfectly symmetrical.

The *Tanngrisnir*’s 3-D printer could print things that made objects printed by other 3-D printers look like they were fashioned by a caveman with a flint ax. Which is a long-winded way of saying that the Stark 3-D Red Special, named for Brian May’s famous homemade guitar, was light-years ahead of the competition. Or as Tony himself put it:

What competition?

Which became the most successful marketing slogan in the history of Stark Industries.

There were several things that set the Red Special apart from other printers. For one, it could print from a range of materials, which it could also separate from each other in its recycling smelters. It could print carbon-carbon

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composites, complex mechanics, liquids, microcircuits, prosthetics, nu-skin bandages, antiaging mud packs, and a very tasty pineapple-coconut flavor of Greek yogurt.

In short, Tony's 3-D printer was every bit the technological marvel that May's guitar had been at the time, and it even sported a similar mahogany trim.

He stood in front of the Red Special now, in the yacht's lab. The lab was concealed underneath the bottom of a swimming pool that could be raised or lowered depending on whether Tony was working or entertaining. Once upon a time, the WORK/PLAY needle would have been almost permanently pointed at PLAY. But then Tony spent a little time in an Afghani terrorist camp and his perspective underwent a polar shift. Tony Stark still liked to party, but it was more occasional and often as a cover for some more covert activity.

Tony stood before the Red Special and watched as Friday controlled the winch that lowered the long-range Iron Man suit into the printer's smelter vat.

"Farewell, faithful servant," he said, always a little maudlin about destroying a creation, even though it was unthinkable to leave a fully operational battle suit lying on the yacht while he went gallivanting around the mainland. He wouldn't have brought the suit at all had he not needed it for the extended flight. "It is a far, far greater thing you do now, and yada, yada, yada."

The suit slid into the large vat, which resembled nothing

more than a burger joint's deep fat fryer, and Friday, with her trademark impish humor, had the suit salute on the way down.

Tony laughed and then said, "I shouldn't be laughing. That suit was a part of me, Friday."

"Sorry, boss. Don't worry, he'll be up and about again in no time."

In fact, many of the suit's sections were up again almost immediately, as the vat's smart gel rejected them and they hung suspended in a servo field in the print matrix. The plates and components were not rejected due to obsolescence or defect but because they could be recycled; it would be an absurd waste of energy to melt down gear and workings just to refabricate identical parts.

While there were many variations on the Iron Man suit, for the past couple of years the basic skeleton had stayed the same. Components such as most of the helmet, many of the superlight nitinol body plates, and the entire spinal section could be reused, along with the propulsion system and jazzy chest light.

After that, things got radically dissimilar, as the Party Pack was a totally different animal than the Battle Suit. Where the Battle Suit had firepower, the Party Pack had bells and whistles. Where the Battle Suit could withstand a sustained barrage from heavy artillery, the Party Pack could withstand a sustained barrage from paparazzi while dazzling the crowd with a laser light show and directional fireworks.

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If the Battle Suit could be likened to a pilot's stealth jet fighter, then the Party Pack could be fairly compared to an entertainer's one-man-band equipment, with extra *ta-da!*

There were many advantages to the Party Pack: It was light compared with the Battle Suit. It was decidedly non-lethal, which was a considerable relief to the wearer. It could never hurt anyone, even if it fell into the wrong hands, as the tiny Vibranium battery built into its chest piece had a half-life of only twenty-four hours and the suit was coded to Tony's biorhythms, as were all his suits. It also had air-conditioning and gel packs to cool down Tony's "poor, traumatized pores" after intense dancing. Friday's words, not his.

"Okay, Big T," said Friday. "She's ready to par-tay."

"That all sounds so wrong in an Irish accent," said Tony, stepping onto a raised dais at the rear of the lab. "Never say any of that again. Especially the Big T part."

He raised his arms and allowed Friday to assemble the suit around him. The entire procedure took almost five minutes, as one of the boots was a little bit off and had to be recast.

"I need to realign the nodes," said Tony as Friday *manually* shaved the second boot.

"You could print new ones," said Friday.

"Which would also be off."

Friday laughed. "That was a joke, boss."

"I don't know, Friday," said Tony. "I think you're a little giddy. Big T? Jokes? You might need an upgrade yourself."

“That hurts,” said Friday. “I’m an AI; we have something approximating feelings. I’m not just some toaster who doesn’t take things personally.”

“Yeah,” said Tony. “Those toasters are heartless beasts.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Yes, I do,” said Tony, flexing his fingers inside the gauntlets, enjoying the power that the tiny servomotors bestowed upon him. “I wouldn’t change a thing about you.”

“Glad to hear it,” said Friday. “Now, calibration.”

Tony groaned. “My favorite.”

And for the next ten minutes he performed a number of increasingly complex actions in a set checklist to make certain that the fresh suit was accurately adjusted. To an observer it would seem as though Iron Man was trying to pass a particularly challenging drunk-driving test, which started off with a simple finger on the nose and ended with a triple tuck and roll in midair.

Once that was completed, Tony selected a shortcuts package from the display menu so he could command the suit to perform various maneuvers by making a simple gesture. His favorite Party Pack shortcut was a double finger click, which would set the suit moonwalking and blast disco classics through the speakers. Always brought the house down, and in a less destructive fashion than Iron Man usually brought houses down.

“Can we please go now?” he asked Friday. “Those turntables won’t turn themselves.”

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“That’s a roger, Big T,” said Friday. “We are good to embark on mission DJ.”

“What did I say about Big T?”

“You said to call you Big T at every opportunity?”

Tony smiled. Friday was way more fun than his previous OS had ever been. “Yeah, that was it. How could I forget?”

Friday opened the internal sea doors. “All set, boss. Could I recommend an early night? We have a long day tomorrow. Not that it matters to me; I’m immortal. You, on the other hand, are aging as we speak.”

“Early night it is,” said Tony, ducking into the air lock. “Three a.m. max. Four at the absolute most.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it,” said Friday, opening the external doors and flooding the chamber.

There was no need for a stealth exit, as Iron Man was expected on the mainland, but Tony had long before learned that it paid to be sneaky where the press was concerned. So he peeled away from the yacht underwater and ghosted the surface for a few hundred yards. A quick glance at the heads-up readouts told him that the internal temperature was a comfortable sixty-five degrees, but darned if the Party Pack didn’t always feel a little chilly underwater. He didn’t bother mentioning it to Friday, as she would undoubtedly tell him that it was all in his head.

Something else on the heads-up caught his attention: a

small screen that was constantly active, cycling through various input sources.

“What was that?”

“What was what?” asked Friday, with exaggerated innocence.

“Come on. You saw it before I did. There was an alert on the weapons scan. Not only that, but we’re in the area.”

“It’s possible, but we’re busy tonight, boss.”

“Cycle it back, Friday. I want to take a look.”

“I don’t recommend taking a look.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because of your borderline obsessive personality, boss. You can never just *take a look*.”

Tony’s voice took on a harder edge. “Take us to a thousand feet. Put the suit in a holding pattern over the city and give me a look at that report.”

Friday literally could not disobey Tony’s angry voice or even waffle a little, as its register was flagged as imperative in her systems. When the audio sensors picked up this tone, the suit went into battle mode—not that battle mode meant a whole lot in the Party Pack, which was armed with fireworks, Mentos, and a seltzer hose.

Nevertheless, Friday did as ordered and swung the Iron Man rig into a steep ascent, throttling back at one thousand feet. The city of Dublin twinkled below in a hazy network of summer lights, and a gentle wind made the suit’s plates hum.

“Show me,” said Tony, still no-nonsense.

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Friday enlarged the screen until it filled the entire display. She scrolled back to the clip highlighted by the screening program Tony had devised to sync with most of the earth's sat-cams and search for specific stolen armaments. The clip showed a small island less than eighty miles from their current position.

"Little Saltee," said Friday. "Two miles off the southeast coast of Ireland. Uninhabited for the past fifty years. Used to be a prison island in the Middle Ages. Nothing on it officially except the ruins of an old prison and a bird sanctuary. The island is a nature preserve for over forty types of gull. No humans allowed."

"No humans allowed officially. What about unofficially?"

"Unofficially, I can see a boat docked in the old harbor. There's a camouflage tarp draped over it, but the outline is clearly visible." Friday zoomed in on the bulky shape in the small harbor and traced a line between several sharp protruding points in the tarpaulin. "I am fifty percent certain from the profile that the boat is a Stark Poseidon U.S. Special Ops gunboat."

"Fifty percent?"

"Best I can do."

"Off the Irish coast? That's a heck of a long way off course. What's she packing?"

"She's rigged for machine guns, miniguns, grenade launchers, and fifty cal. That's a minimum. You could mount whatever you want on those gunwales."

"Is the source reliable?"

“It’s a weather satellite for a French station. I just picked up on the profile.”

“Well done, you,” said Tony. “Or rather, well done, me. Is the army missing a gunboat?”

“One was reported sunk during maneuvers in Guantanamo a few months ago, but the wreckage was never recovered.”

“And now it turns up here, a hundred miles from an environmental summit in a riverside center.”

“Maybe. Fifty percent, remember?”

“Can you get anything more on infrared?”

“Nope. Ran that already. Too cold.”

“Anyone on the island?”

“No hot bodies showing up, but I do see a craft moving down the coast on a rendezvous course. ETA thirty minutes.”

Tony Stark did not deliberate for long. “Okay. Change of plan. I need to decommission that gunboat.”

Friday disagreed. “No, boss, you don’t. Call it in. Let the coast guard handle it.”

“The Irish Coast Guard is not armed,” said Tony. “And even if it was, how far away is the nearest boat?”

Friday ran a quick scan of coast guard GPSs. “An hour at best.”

“By which time whoever is heading for that gunboat will be locked and loaded.”

“And what about you, boss? You’re locked and loaded with fireworks and disco music.”

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Tony didn't need to listen to Friday's arguments, but sometimes it was good to bounce his impetuous thoughts off the voice of reason.

"Friday, let's do a quick recon. If it is the gunboat, I will pull out the spark plugs and leave her dead in the water. Then I call it in. No firepower necessary. If it isn't the boat, then we continue on to the party with no egg on our faceplate. Either way, it's a twenty-minute diversion. Okay?"

"Okay, boss," said Friday, who knew that she wasn't really being asked. Tony Stark rarely passed up an opportunity for do-good adventuring.

In Tony Stark's considerable experience, the best tactic to employ in this kind of situation was the direct approach. More often than not, the mere sight of a grim-faced Iron Man descending from the sky like the hammer of justice was enough to send terrorists and bad guys scurrying, especially if they had seen YouTube footage of him smashing various weapons dumps and arms markets, which most of the world had. Often Tony would disengage the suit's mufflers and come in with every light blazing, whipping up more consternation than a troop carrier. But in this particular case, discretion was the wisest option, as there was a fifty-fifty chance that he would find nothing more sinister under the tarp than a trawler laid up for repairs.

A trawler laid up for repairs in the summer on an uninhabited island?

Okay, maybe that explanation didn't fly, but there were still a dozen reasons a boat could be hidden on an island that didn't include a raid on an environmental summit. In any case, there was no one on the island to stop him from taking a peek, so there was no need to wake the neighbors, even if they were only gulls.

A thought occurred to him. "Friday, there are no ecological factors here, are there? I don't want to knock over an egg and cause the extinction of some breed of seabird. I have enough on my conscience as it is."

"I think you're good, boss. You can always feed the chicks caviar in an emergency."

"Hilarious. Remind me why I pay you, again?"

"You don't pay me, boss. Unless the currency is the sheer joy of your company."

"Sarcasm now? You *are* evolving."

Tony cupped his hands and brought his fingertips close together, powering down his magneto plasma thrusters so the suit descended smoothly to fifty feet above sea level.

"Run the full spectrum," he instructed Friday. "I want to know if there's anything bigger than a small dog on that island."

On the helmet display he saw a laser grid draped over the island; thousands of red heartbeats popped up.

"Nothing but birds, bats, and rodents, boss. No humans anywhere on the island."

"What about surveillance?"

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“Amazingly, we are in a dark zone. Not a single eye in the sky. Even that French satellite has moved on. It’s not often you find a place like this.”

Tony frowned. “It all seems too safe.”

“Imagine that. A safe reconnaissance with no one shooting at us. How frustrating!”

Tony ignored this additional example of Friday’s evolution. “What kind of terrorist leaves a gunboat unguarded?”

“One who’s on the way here right now. Boss, I hate to quote Hollywood, but I’ve got a bad feeling about this. If you absolutely must investigate, let’s get it done before that boat gets any closer.”

“Can you see anything under the camouflage tarp?”

“No heartbeats, boss. But beyond that, nada. There might be a coating on the underside, or it might just be really old.”

Tony Stark did not like unknowns, but he knew that he had no choice but to investigate the craft. The boat was a mystery, and Tony’s entire career was built on solving mysteries. He could no more walk away from this one than Steve Rogers could pass a star-spangled banner without saluting.

“Okay,” he said. “Down we go.”

He reduced thrust by 15 percent, which took the suit out of hover mode and into a slow descent, with arms tight to the sides and hands and feet angled outward in a position that Friday referred to as “the penguin.”

Tony supposed that it might look a little ungainly, but at least doing the penguin allowed him to observe on the way down.

“Ten seconds to touchdown, Friday,” he said.

To which the onboard AI said, “I don’t think so, boss.”

There was something in the way she said *boss*, a new sneer in the tone that Tony didn’t care for. He was about to say something when things spiraled rapidly out of his control.

First, a flashing skull appeared on his display, accompanied by a deafening foghorn blast that threatened to burst Tony’s eardrums.

“Friday!” he called, though he could not hear his own voice. “Friday! Mute the speakers.”

The speakers did not mute; if anything, the volume increased, disorienting Tony completely. Initially, he blamed this disorientation for the sudden lurch in his stomach, the feeling that he was falling without control.

Then Tony thought, *Oh, crap. I am falling without control. Thrusters are not operational. What else can go wrong?*

The answer to that question was apparently: *Sensors. All of them.*

In addition to a crazy, deafening tumble, Tony Stark was suddenly completely blind.

Blind, deaf, and tumbling.

Surely top three on the Never Do This During an Operation list.

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He crashed into the tarpaulin and it wrapped about the armor like a net. Tony tried to thrash his way out, but the servomotors that allowed him to control the suit's limbs and digits were frozen. Tony had no choice but to lie as still as a statue while persons unknown, who were not supposed to be on the island, pounced on the Party Pack.

Inside the suit, Tony fought to regain some kind of control, but Friday was unresponsive and after a while he felt silly shouting "Reboot!" at the flashing skull on his screen.

This is bad, he thought. Extremely bad.

And it was. There was no way to spin whatever was happening as possibly a good thing.

Whatever was happening was as follows: Iron Man crashed into the tarpaulin, which had been draped over what looked like a common-variety fishing craft and not the missing U.S. gunboat. Friday had predicted that the shape might very well not be a gunboat, but what she had not told Tony about were the two men who were exposed when the tarp was dragged into the boat's hold. These men were armed with conventional sharp implements and automatic weapons but also with compact electromagnets, which they lobbed onto the swathed Iron Man before trussing him in more layers of tarpaulin. They were aware that Iron Man's armor would not be affected by magnetic pull, but the electromagnetic fields would hamper any of his attempts to regain control of the suit.

Once the electromagnets were clustered on the prone Tony Stark, the two men efficiently folded any loose flaps of tarp over Iron Man. One of them, a giant of an individual, actually hummed the tune of Black Sabbath's "Iron Man" as he worked. Cole Vanger, known as Pyro to his associates in the ecoterrorism world because of the twin shoulder-mounted flamethrowers he was rarely without, didn't even realize he was doing it. Vanger also didn't realize the incredible irony of someone claiming to love the environment using flamethrowers as his weapons of choice. In truth, Vanger was not a genuine ecoterrorist; he just pretended to be because he thought radical women would appreciate it.

Once Stark was cocooned in tarpaulin, the next step was to wrap the package in duct tape, which is an incredibly strong material—not strong enough to restrain a functioning Iron Man but certainly of sufficient resilience to hold the package together for the brief but punishing journey on which it was about to embark. The second man was charged with the duct-taping, and he had been practicing on Vanger for days. The unfortunate Pyro had spent hours with his limbs encased in plastic piping, thrashing weakly while his comrade trussed him up in tarp and tape. But this was not rehearsal; this was the real thing. And the man did his employer proud, mummifying Stark in under thirty seconds. Truly, the wielder of the tape was the duct-tape equivalent of a one-man Formula One pit crew.

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“*Allez!*” cried the duct-tape boss, who was a Frenchman named Freddie Leveque. “*Allez vite!*”

Leveque rapped three ringing knocks on an exposed inch of Iron Man’s visor to emphasize just how *vite* they should *allez*.

The next step was to lasso Iron Man with a thick rope that snaked from the boat across the sloped slipway. The rope disappeared into the belly of a bush that was big enough to hide a truck. But it did not hide a truck; what it hid was a tractor with a thick rope tethered to its tow bar. The woman driving the tractor was known to Interpol by various names, including Valentina Zhuk, Valeria Zucchero, Vasha V8, the Zhukster, Zhuky, Tailspin, and simply Spin, and she was accustomed to being behind the wheel of automobiles a whole lot faster than a tractor. Spin Zhuk was famous in certain nefarious circles for being the wheelwoman who won a grueling international rally race in a corporately sponsored experimental vehicle and then stole the vehicle.

At Leveque’s signal, Spin Zhuk cranked the diesel engine, which she had personally stripped and tuned until it ran smoother than a ten-thousand-dollar Swiss watch, and floored the accelerator, hammering the big tractor through the bush and up the old fishing lane toward the medieval prison ruins at the crest of the hill. The Iron Man tape-’n’-tarp package was dragged ignominiously behind, over a plank laid across the fishing boat’s gunwale,

and bounced jerkily along the slipway, obeying Murphy's Law by bashing into every possible obstacle on the short journey. Vanger and Leveque swarmed behind like urchin children, crying "*Olé!*" and punching the air after each impact. For the most part the impacts were cushioned by the wrapping, but often a crag or sharp corner of a brick penetrated the uneven cocoon, and the curve and purity of the metal made a bong ring across the small island.

"Ding-dong," called Cole Vanger. "Iron Man is dead!"

This was not strictly true, but it won him a laugh from the other man, and heaven knew there would be precious few laughs in the days ahead.

Spin Zhuk put the pedal to the metal as much as a person could in a Massey Ferguson tractor and swore in Ukrainian as the farm vehicle spluttered its way up the steep approach to the prison.

"You are a stupid metal pig," she told the tractor. "My grandfather runs faster than you, and he died fighting the Russians."

There were other words, too, more offensive even than *stupid* or *pig*, and if the tractor had been capable of taking offense, it might have considered stalling for a moment, before deciding that maybe it would try to squeeze out a little extra horsepower to avoid even more insults. In any event, sentient or no, the vehicle bucked and seemed to attack the incline with new vigor.

The macabre parade snaked up the rocky trail to the

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medieval ruins, with Leveque easily outpacing the other man, using the almost incredible obstacle-course skills he had picked up in the French Foreign Legion. Leveque scaled the outer wall and winched open a camouflage net that hung across a granite arch. The arch had once supported a studded door and portcullis, but it had since crumbled and now sagged like the mouth of a mournful giant. If this operation were being run according to union rules, then health and safety would surely have vetoed access through the leaning arch, but these particular soldiers were not members of any union, and it was pretty much taken for granted that their health and safety would be at risk during every second of the operation. As if to highlight this point, the arch collapsed completely due to the vibration of the heavy vehicle's passage, burying the Iron Man package in rubble. Spin Zhuk swore as the tractor jerked to a halt, then steered from left to right in a tight fan, wiggling Iron Man out from under the fallen stone. Freddie Leveque escaped injury by executing a neat sideways tumble, which drew another "Olé!" from Cole Vanger.

Once the package was free, Spin proceeded along the planned route, driving the tractor through a doorway they had widened earlier and down a braced wooden ramp, directly into the heart of the old prison. The jail had once housed hundreds of pirates, murderers, swindlers, smugglers, and political prisoners, but it was now to be home

to a single very special detainee. Down there the ceilings were low and oppressive, the air was dank and foul, and the huffing generator and banks of computer screens seemed thoroughly out of place.

A portly Asian man with hair and beard clipped to a uniform tennis ball length spun on his office chair to face the tractor that had just thundered into the subterranean chamber, literally shaking the foundations. With an expression of mild surprise on his face, like *Oh, is it that time already?* he clapped three times.

“Excellent, Miss Zhuk,” he said. “Wonderful, in fact. Let’s take a look, shall we, gentlemen?”

Vanger and Leveque trotted down the ramp and set to work with diverse blades, quickly stripping back the layers of tarpaulin to reveal the world-famous red-and-gold Iron Man armor, semisubmerged in electromagnets like a toy at the bottom of a cereal box.

The bearded man, who was known to his men simply as chef—in the *boss* sense of the word, not the *cook* sense—flexed his fingers like a concert pianist and turned back to his computer.

“Now, time to say hello to Mr. Stark.”

“No!” came a distant voice, accompanied by rapid footsteps down the spiral staircase that led into the chamber from the battlements. “Wait.”

But the chef had not heard or would not wait. He tapped a line of code into his keyboard and the Iron Man armor

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peeled away from Tony Stark, leaving him as defenseless as a clam without its shell.

Almost.

Inside the suit, Tony had quickly realized that there was nothing for him to do but ride out the concussive trip. The suit's assorted shock absorbers, gyros, and dampeners spared him a good portion of the impact, but he was still battered and bruised by the time the suit came to rest.

The foghorn faded in his earpieces, which was a blessed relief, and gave Tony a moment to gather his thoughts as he heard the first telltale *clink* that signaled the impending removal of the Iron Man suit.

Luckily, Tony Stark was a bona fide genius and could gather more thoughts in a moment than most people could assemble in one lifetime and several reincarnations.

His lightning assessment of the situation was as follows:

The suit has been somehow compromised, but no serious attempt has been made to damage it, which means that whoever is behind this wants it intact. Or perhaps they want me intact. Worst-case scenario: they want the suit alive but billionaire playboy dead. Unlikely. A rich genius is always more valuable alive than six feet under. So I have been lured here by someone who somehow stymied all my systems and therefore knows them intimately. Which narrows down the list of possible suspects considerably.

Actually, I am the only suspect on the list.

Was I manipulated somehow?

Was I drugged? Hypnotized?

Perhaps none of this is even happening, though it's probably best to proceed under the assumption that it is, because this suit is about to open and when it does there will be people waiting to, at the very least, make me do things I don't want to do.

Conclusion: this is not going to be as much fun as Graywolf's party.

Course of action: do not go down without a fight.

Tony Stark's startle reflex had always been somewhat exaggerated, or as Nick Fury had once put it: "Stark, you are jumpier than a sack of guilt." Never one to ignore a potential asset, Stark had worked on this one through meditation and training until he could act with the speed of a reflexive reaction. Simply put: when Tony Stark felt the need for speed, he could move as though someone had stuck a pin in his behind.

And Tony Stark felt that particular need right now.

When the Iron Man armor folded, slotted, and whirred back, Stark's captors were expecting to find a dazed industrialist who was soft and useless without his space-age armor. What they certainly were not expecting was a highly trained and motivated individual who flew out of the suit as though ejected.

Cole Vanger stood closest to the "package" and had the smug grin wiped off his face when Tony Stark did not plead for his life but instead seemed to analyze Vanger's

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armaments while flying toward him, preparing to turn them to his own advantage.

“What?” said Vanger, and then, “Huh?”

Then Stark’s head-butt had broken his nose and the industrialist’s thumbs were covering Vanger’s.

Don’t do that, Vanger might have said if pain had not filled his skull, displacing any rational thought. *You’ll ignite my flamethrowers.*

This, of course, was exactly what Tony Stark had in mind. Vanger’s flamethrower nozzles were mounted on his shoulders like the robotic parrots of a techno pirate, and at this angle they were pointed directly into the exposed guts of the Iron Man rig. Tony reasoned that if he couldn’t use the suit, then no one should be able to. All depended on the kind of fuel this guy had. Old-fashioned kerosene wouldn’t do much more than heat the plates a few degrees and maybe buckle a couple of them, but if he had something a little more gel-based in the tanks, then that could be it for the Party Pack.

Tony pressed down on Vanger’s thumbs and then drew the man close, as if they were doing the rhumba. They were not dancing; it was simply that Tony had no desire to get his ears burned off by the jets of flame shooting over both shoulders.

As it turned out, it didn’t matter what kind of fuel Cole “Pyro” Vanger was packing, because the flames had barely licked the suit’s innards when Freddie Leveque crashed into the pair, sending the jumble of limbs and trunks

rolling across the chamber, which had positive and negative results for both sides.

From Tony's point of view, it was a darn shame that the flames did not get a chance to damage the suit, as, like any inventor, he hated to give away tech. On the other hand, the flaming arc that continued to spurt from Vanger's flamethrowers did some considerable damage to his kidnappers' equipment, frying two monitors entirely and sending the remaining men scurrying for cover.

"Restrain him!" cried the chef, irritated. "What do I pay you *báichī* for?"

Tony held on to his presence of mind and located Leveque's head, which was jammed into Vanger's armpit. Fortunately, Tony's foot was also in that vicinity, so he clipped Leveque's forehead with the sole of one sneaker, wishing that he had opted to wear his hard leather loafers instead.

And people say fashion isn't important, he thought, scrambling over the stunned Leveque and assessing the building as he ran.

One obvious exit along the ramp . . . There may be more men up there. . . . They probably have orders not to kill me, but still, they might be a little disconcerted by the pyrotechnics. . . .

In Tony's experience, disconcerted triggermen tended to be a little happy on their triggers. So he discounted the ramp option almost immediately and veered left toward the shadows.

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Be a stairwell, he broadcast at the shadows. *Be a stairwell.*

And a stairwell there miraculously was. It was virtually unguarded, too, aside from the echoing smacks of footsteps descending from above, but Tony was already committed to that direction.

I would rather take my chances with mystery footsteps than a room full of bullets, flames, and angry men, Tony decided.

So upward it was. Tony raced up the spiral staircase two steps at a time, slipping more than once on the slick stone. Whoever was coming was coming down fast, and Tony decided he would take a breath and use the momentum of the mystery descender against him.

So he stopped suddenly and ducked, figuring the man would go tumbling over his hunched form. But just as suddenly, the footsteps halted, as though the hidden person had caught on to his plan.

There was no time for delay, as the other men had gathered themselves and were hustling in his direction; so Tony, having quickly considered his options, decided to keep going.

Stay down, he told himself. *Never be where you're supposed to be.*

On he went, rounding the corner at high speed, ready to roll the man across his back, sending him crashing into his comrades like a human bowling ball. That would surely buy Tony a few more seconds to figure a way out of this ruin.

But no one went tumbling over Tony Stark's dipped shoulders. Instead, Tony came nose to toe with a pair of green-laced, scuffed army boots. A bemused voice floated down to him.

"Never be where you're supposed to be, right?"

Tony looked up to see green eyes gazing down at him, framed by a mop of red curly hair.

"Hello, boss," said the girl.

Tony knew that voice well. It traveled with him everywhere.

"You sound like Friday," said Tony. He rapped experimentally on the steel toe cap of one boot. "But you're real. I don't understand."

"Wow," said Friday. "Tony Stark doesn't understand. I should take a photo."

And then she shot him in the neck with a trunk so big that Tony was knocked immediately back to the 1980s.

"Duran Duran, Dad," he mumbled. "They're a band. Hello."

He keeled over backward, tumbling down the stairs he had so craftily raced up.

Not craftily enough, it turned out.

The last thing Tony felt before he passed out was puzzlement, and that would be the first thing he felt when he woke up.

Well, technically the second thing. The first would be pain.