

ADVANCED IRON



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ARMOR WARS II

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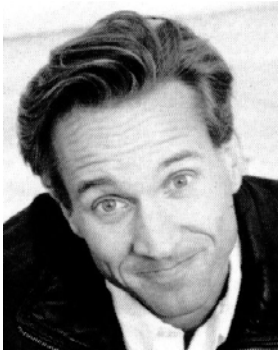
CAN SHELLHEAD'S NEW ARMOR SURVIVE AN
ASGARDIAN ASSAULT?

HUBE'S SHELLHEADS

IT'S SPRING TIME!!

A.I. has made contact with former **Iron Man** scribe **Len Kaminski** recently! This is actually a *re*-engagement as Len was one of the first comics professionals to ever maintain a dialogue with us. What has Len been up to lately? For that and more, be sure to check out Chris Frye's **Ferro Files** for an in-depth interview with the creator of **War Machine!**

US WAR MACHINE – UPDATE FROM CHUCK AUSTEN!



Speaking of War Machine, **US War Machine** scripter **Chuck Austen** was gracious enough to provide A.I. with the following info regarding the series' continuation:

"The plan is currently to release another weekly series, but this one will be in color, and it will be released when all the issues are finished. The art is also being handled by someone else this time, since I'm so busy writing other things."

The basic storyline picks up shortly after the last one left off. The War Machine group is on the trail of a group of terrorists who are trying to obtain the workings for a nuclear bomb. At a critical point in Rhodey's search, he and the others are interrupted by the sudden and very unexpected arrival of an angry Tony Stark and crew who have come to the SHIELD headquarters to retrieve Stark's stolen armor tech. And Stark is not willing to listen to reason.

What follows is an all out armor war that leaves very few left standing."

Read that last sentence again, folks. And again. Is this the "AW3" we have been waiting for.....?



-Hube

Ferro Files

He's probably best known as the creator of War Machine. Or the last writer that really had a good handle on the character, at least in the minds of many Iron Man fans. His stories reintroduced ferrophiles to a corporately conscious Tony Stark, introduced The Master's of Silence, the concept of the Modular Armor, and an veritable Iron Legion of armor wearers. He chronicled Shellhead's battles with a who's who of hot (at the time) Marvel characters; Venom, Night Thrasher, and Thunder Strike.

Sit back ferrophiles and enjoy a wild ride with former Iron Scribe-Len Kaminski!



Tell us a little about Len Kaminski, the person.

Um. Grew up in Manchester, New Hampshire, couldn't get away fast enough. Spent 17 years in near-rural suburbia, but I seem to have been intended for an environment of concrete and steel with an atmosphere primarily composed of hazardous gas. Arriving in Boston for the first time felt like finally coming home after a long exile. Hyperlexic; I can't see print and NOT read it. Been doing it as far back as my memory goes, starting with Dr. Seuss and comics, later SF, fantasy, the sciences, a fling with the occult/mystic/paranormal that left a permanent dash of Fox Mulder in me.

>gahhk<... "Tell us a little about Len Kaminski, the person." Impossible. The mathematician Kurt Godel proved that no system can contain a complete description of itself, and neither can I. Len Kaminski is a fictional character, like everybody else.

Eventually my interests got broad enough that nothing is off-limits, leaving me with a knowledge base that's wide but shallow; I know at least a little bit about a lot of stuff, but not even half of everything about any one subject. Convinced the human race could be both better and better off than it is, and pissed off that it isn't because too many of us are full of bad code, too lazy, too sociopath or just plain -- largely through no fault of their own -- too ignorant to do any better. What can you do when you literally don't know what you don't know?

How did you go about breaking into the field of comics?

By accident; I was visiting friends in NYC, went to a comics con, where one of them ran into an old acquaintance who, at that time, happened to be Jim Shooter's secretary. Through her, I ended up on staff, filing, gophering, and answering fan mail, while working on extracting paying work from editors; it all started as a lark, with me planning to go back to Boston in the fall and take yet another shot at college. The next thing I knew, those couple months had turned into eight years, having worked in practically every department in the company at one time or another -- most of it as assistant to traffic & production manager Virginia Romita, then assistant editor to Howard Mackie, later assistant to Ralph Macchio after Howard left staff -- and then out the door to freelance with IRON MAN and MORBIUS as parachutes.

Why comics?

They were there. And I found out the pay didn't suck.

As a writer/creator, what drew you to the character of Tony Stark?

I don't know if there was any single element of Stark's character I

"clicked" with, but I admired his adamant determination, his reliance on intelligence and reason as much as simple brawn, and his commitment to ethical behavior even though his status and wealth could buy him out of abuses of power -- the "real" world should have a few more billionaires like that. Also, when I sat down to do my research into his history, I discovered that despite being around for 30 years, virtually nothing of his life prior to becoming Iron Man had been presented. So his childhood and young adult life was a completely blank canvas to work on, allowing me the latitude to go back and set up things -- like his boyhood love of stories of King Arthur and Camelot -- that suddenly made the fact that he goes and creates a suit of armor instead of any number of alternative weapons to use against Wong-Chu make more sense if you figure the influence of his subconscious is at work there.

If you could only use three words to describe Tony Stark, what would they be?

Cool under pressure.

You helped define Iron Man for a generation of fans. Who, in your opinion, has made Iron Man/Tony Stark the character we ferrophiles know and love?

Behind me, Archie Goodwin defined the character, and David Michelinie refined him. I have to admit I haven't read much of the series since I left; it was a sore nerve for a while, and then it just became habit to skip it. I skimmed a few issues during Kurt Busiek's run and saw things I wish I'd thought of. It'll be interesting to see what Grell does with the character.

How about Iron Man? Many writers see the two as somewhat dichotomous characters.

First, he's the ultimate action figure. Michelinie blew me away with the first introduction of specialty armors, and I wanted

to try and top it. Second, he was always the most pragmatic of the Avengers, willing to kill the Molecule Man if that's what it takes to save the Earth. To me, THAT'S a real hero – someone who's willing to do the dirty work, and live with that burden for the rest of his days, if that's what it takes to protect and defend those who DON'T have the power to defend themselves.

And the three words that best describe Shellhead?

Built to last.

Who is your favorite supporting character?

Rhodes, no contest.

Favorite villain?

ULTIMO!!!!



Ok, Len. Let's touch on some of the high and low points of your time on Iron Man and with Marvel. You were the author that reintroduced cutting edge technology as an ancillary attribute of the book; created three new Iron Man armors (The Hulk-Buster Armor, The Tele-presence Unit (NTU-150) and The Modular Armor), not counting the War Machine Armor; and presented readers with a Tony Stark that was truly multi-dimensional.

Let's touch on Tony first. Your take on Tony showed him as a savvy businessman, even to the point of being somewhat cold and controlling; an aspect that you made a vital part of his flawed character, yet you always reminded the reader that Tony was a "hero," despite all of his flaws.

Thanks. I always had a hard time reconciling the idea of "superhero" with "billionaire businessman" -- try picturing Bill

Gates in tights -- and I worked hard to find ways to make it all fit together.

During a short period of your run, Tony was unable to wear the armor. Where did the idea for the Tele-presence Armor come from?

Real life; tele-presence is an actual technology in its early developing stages. I kid you not.

Several elements in your run on Iron Man included a realistic approach to scientific technology, like the modular armor and virtual reality simulations involving other Marvel characters. What resources did you use to stay on top of the technological aspects, as well as the corporate dimensions of Stark Enterprises?

I think the billion or so science fiction stories I've read over the years had an influence. Also, I was constantly trying to figure out what the next advance ought to be; Michelinie blew my mind when he introduced specialty armors, because it was so obvious in retrospect, and I wanted to come up with the next quantum leap beyond that. I just wish the art had reflected the idea better in places.

Business-wise, for the wrap-up of CRASH AND BURN I read a pile of books on the future of capitalism, business ethics, and so forth; apparently, there are entrepreneurs out there in the "real world" who agree with Tony Stark that profit, honesty, and public service are not mutually exclusive. Which is damned nice to know, if you ask me.



Another unexpected move on your part involved putting virtually every major supporting cast member into a suit of armor. What motivated you to put a woman (Bethany Cabe) into the armor?

I wanted to use every primary armor used in the series, and when I counted up guys who'd subbed for Stark, I came up one short. Plus, it seemed like a fun thing to do.

Was this a good idea or a bad one?

I think it worked okay.

Did you get any fan feedback on this and did he have any future plans for her (or for a team of Iron Men)?

I don't recall what kind of feedback we got; I only ever heard what the mail was like through Nel Yomtov, and I think there was some filter action going on there. I didn't have any plans for a team of Iron Men, though I had intended Bethany to have Stark call for Stark Enterprises to outfit her and her security forces with jumpsuits made of something like scaled-down armor material, on the basis that Stark employees deserve the very best.

Describe how you came up with the concept of War Machine.

I didn't, not exactly; it came to life spontaneously. I had the idea for a deliberately lower-than-usual-tech armor, with machine guns, missiles, etc., after seeing the HULK cover where the Hulk has this huge belt-fed machine gun in this Rambo shot, and I thought that'd be a good way of getting people's attention and getting them to notice that the creative team on IM had changed. "War Machine" was just my title for issue 282; it was Nel Yomtov's idea to scrawl that across a monochromatic cover, creating a real stunning effect. The next thing we knew, we were getting mail about the "War Machine armor", messages from Sales about a spin-off, and so forth.

My original plan was for Rhodes to get a blue and gold suit of his own, but I was given a mandate to put him in "the War Machine armor" while we developed the spin-off. And then Nel fell all over himself trying to keep continuity straight, but you still

ended up with Rhodes being called "War Machine" in **X-FORCE** when he was still "Iron Man". Unfortunately, the idea Scott Benson and I had planned for **WAR MACHINE** didn't suit what Sales and Editorial had in mind, which is why I left WM, and Scott was let go. Ironically, it was the sort of thing they'd love today, very much in line with books like **THE AUTHORITY**, but back then... having a new idea at Marvel was dangerous. >sigh<.

How well do think you handled the dichotomy between your high-tech concepts and low-tech approaches during your run? Specifically, you made use of the concepts of cryonics, telepresence, the Hulk-Buster armor, Tony's artificial nervous system (which he self programmed!), etc., yet had the War Machine rig and Iron Man armor use guns?

As well as I could, given that there's always been a huge gap between available technology -- teleportation, anti-gravity, force-fields, FTL drive-- and everyday tech in the Marvel Universe. I did try to establish a rationale on Stark's part at one point, introducing the idea that he has simulation programs constantly testing the impact of releasing radical new tech to the world, and above a certain level it always ends up crashing civilization. It's the only excuse I can think of for (Tony) keeping this stuff secret...

Any comments or thoughts about Chuck Austen's MAX title- U.S.War Machine?

Didn't read it. I've been told Kevin and I didn't get creator credit the way we're supposed to, though, which doesn't thrill me.

During your tenure writing Iron Man, an *Iron Renaissance* occurred. Iron Man appeared in an animated series, a toy line, and supported three spin-off comics: **WAR MACHINE, **FORCE WORKS**, and **THE MARVEL ACTION HOUR FEATURING IRON MAN**. What do you consider your absolute high point during this period?**

The scene in 291 where Rhodes says "Time to make the donuts". Seriously, I guess I'd have to say developing a past history for Stark that logically shaped the present, especially his boyhood obsession with King Arthur which suggested a sub-conscious reason for choosing to build a suit of armor in the origin.

Are there any elements to your storylines you would have changed if you could go back and do them again?

Oh, god, I'd re-write it all if I had the chance -- that's the curse of being a writer, you always want one more draft to get it just right...

I look back at my term on IM and see a lot of good intentions sabotaged by a combination of inexperience and constant editorial interference. My take is what sets IM apart from other characters in that Iron Man is the point at which humanity and technology collide; in Stark's case, in a very intimate, visceral, literal sense.

Let's talk about your departure from the title. It occurred right before The Crossing, a storyline which many Iron Man fans consider a major disservice to the character as well as an inexcusable blunder from which Iron Man has never seemed to truly recover from. How was "The Crossing" (Teen Tony Stark) presented to you?

Basically, I was rabbit-punched and held down while they tried to ram it down my throat. I believe it was sprung on Nel Yomtov by surprise as well, so please don't hold it against him. Those responsible know who they are and will have to live with themselves, which is punishment enough.

What was your response, as the writer of Iron Man, to The Crossing?

Basically, I thought it was a travesty and a betrayal of every IM fan who ever lived, and refused to be a part of it. And frankly, that wasn't cheap; I walked away from a big chunk of my income at the time, and earned myself a reputation for being a "troublemaker" at Marvel, which made it harder to get work up there for years. But I don't believe you can honestly write about characters making moral choices and standing on the line between right and wrong without walking the walk yourself. And I believed what they had planned was just plain wrong.

I left the book specifically because of the plans for IM in "The Crossing", which I was absolutely opposed to, and fought tooth and nail. As for what might have been, I often wonder the same myself; you can plan all you want, but storylines have a way of taking control of themselves and ending up places you never expected.

In your mind were there satisfying alternatives to what was being planned?

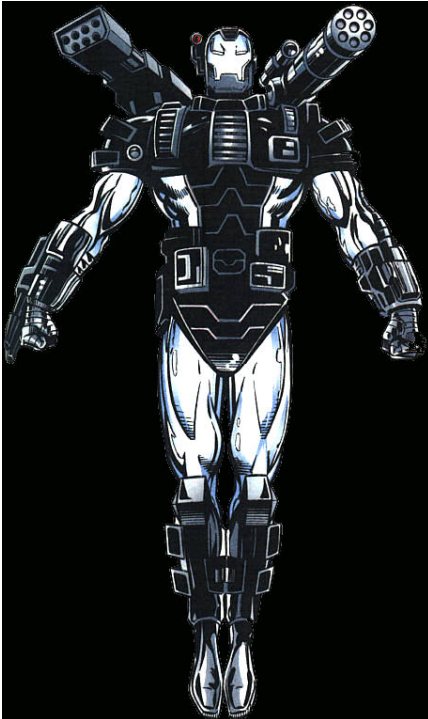
As for how The Crossing could've been done, I spent weeks pitching alternative ways of fitting IM into the larger storyline without violating 30 years of history, all of which was ignored; if I still had the various proposals, memos and etc. I wrote back then, I'd offer them up, but they're long gone. I don't really remember what all was in them now; I did too good a job of putting it all behind me once it became clear the only way I could refuse to participate was to quit the book.

As with any change in the creative team on a book, there are subplots that are never resolved or touched upon. In issue 318 of Iron Man there were some panels showing a new villain that was to be hired to take on Stark. He had a red beard and some sort of plugs attached to his head. Who was this mystery man and what did you have in store for him?

That would've been Mendel Mycroft, who had used technology to augment his intellect, as opposed to Stark, who

used it to augment himself physically- at the expense of his humanity. Basically, he was meant to be a "dark mirror image" sort of enemy for IM. All my best ideas for him went into "Simon Oreck" in **BLOODSHOT**, which I think came out much better in any case.

Any comments about your cohort, Kevin Hopgood? How closely did you two work together, especially in terms of armor designs?



I did a sketch of the War Machine model and had Nel send it to Kev, figuring he'd kick back a very different but improved concept. But he actually didn't change a thing!

Well, he did fix little things like the anatomy, perspective, and stuff... but there're way too many artists who'll change everything without improving anything, because they're the ARTIST, dammit! Kev wasn't one of those, though I didn't always get THAT level of exactitude. I don't know if I ever quite properly got the component system concept across to him. Ah, the English

and Americans, two people separated by a common language...

The only time there was anything like serious disagreement was when it came time to design the basic version of the armor for #300; Kev was really hot to go MUCH more advanced, to a smooth, almost Silver Surfer look which neither I nor Yomtov cared for at all, and would never have gotten past DeFalco in any case. I had a design I'd been working on for some time, which incorporated the "cable/ribbing" muscle look ala Deathlok or Colossus (or the present suit, for that matter), which Yomtov was absolutely against -- primarily, I suspect, because trying it'd only get him his ass chewed by DeFalco and the art redone). He and I

ended up roughing out ideas for a couple hours, until we literally took this element from one sketch and this other one from another, and built up the suit that went to press, and Nel sent a unified version to Kev and basically told him that **WAS** the new suit, period.



My contributions were the change in red/yellow color distribution (although my intent was that there was a gold undersuit, and the red parts went on over that, with alternate versions of the various elements as needed, etc. The present suit -- as of #50, anyway -- is a lot closer to what I would like to have had back then, but...) & the addition of as much additional detail as I could get.

Those yellow vent-like things on his gloves, thighs and etc. were supposed to be more complex circuit patterns where various attachments plugged in as necessary. I wanted the suit to be the most ultimately customizable thing anybody'd ever seen, but when editor, writer and artist are all pulling hard in three separate directions... well...

Actually, earlier than that, now that I think about it, I tried to talk Yomtov into having the "remote" IM be 12' tall and look like something from Gundam or Evangelion, something that'd **REALLY** get noticed. But he was having none of it...

How about your editor at the time, Nel Yomtov?

A terrific human being caught in what was an impossible editorial system in those days; it was widely known how conservative DeFalco was, and very few

editors dared make substantial changes too much of anything. He didn't do anything except his job as he had been told to it by his boss, and let me get away with more than he was ever quite comfortable with -- I think he always had a little knot of fear that DeFalco would appear and can his @\$\$ at any moment for some small alteration in any of his books, not just IM. He and I parted quite angrily over *The Crossing*, but when a close friend of his passed away a few years later I put pride aside and gave him a call -- by then he was in licensing over at DC -- and offered my condolences. Apologies were exchanged all around, and though I don't know where he's gotten to since he left DC, we'd at least traded several more phone conversations and repaired our friendship, for which I'll always be grateful.

The guy gave me my first monthly gig, after all, and times we butted heads were always when I was pushing for more change, and he was worried about keeping his job in order to support his family, under a superior who encouraged obedience through intimidation. To be fair to Tom, he didn't actually fire people for things like that all that often, and there had to be other transgressions involved -- but he liked to keep the office in line by promoting the fear that he MIGHT... He himself claimed to be a graduate of "The Mafia School Of Middle Management"... but enough about him...

Best "fly on the wall" moment or most hilarious experience while writing Iron Man?



Me, Nel Yomtov, Mark Gruenwald, and several others (were) all crammed in Nel's office debating -- why I have NO idea -- what Marvel book featured the first appearance of the second, black & white-suited Spider-Woman, who was in **WEST COAST AVENGERS** at the time, I think; the disagreement went on and on... and on... a good 20 minutes at least, without anybody settling the issue with a definitive answer; suddenly, Nel dropped his head to his desk and

slowly rocked it back and forth, forehead against the blotter. Everybody went silent, and we could hear Nel weakly crooning to himself in a despairing moan, "We're grown men... we're grown men..."

Why do you think the concept of a hero like Iron Man has endured for almost 40 years?

Regular upgrades are part of the premise; if I'd had my way, the component armor would've had obvious changes in subsystem configuration every 2-3 issues; improved gauntlets here, a sleeker helmet there, and so on until after a year or so if you compared the current armor to last year's model, you'd realize everything had been changed. And, of course, you can stretch that metaphor to include the supporting cast and so on...

What were some of your credits prior to working on Iron Man?

Hmmm...a half-dozen assorted issues of **SPIDER-MAN** for Jim Owsley (or Christopher Priest, if you prefer), mostly emergency rush jobs... an issue of **Fantastic Four**... various backups in diverse annuals... about eighteen godzillion trading cards and **Marvel Universe Handbook** entries... a **WEREWOLF BY NIGHT** serial in [**Marvel Comics**] **PRESENTS**, the virtually unknown super-hero/humor mini-series **THE AWESOME SLAPSTICK!**, which about 7 people actually read..., um... gad, it seems a little bit of everything at one time or another.

Also an **IRON MAN** Graphic Novel that I wrote about a year before I got the monthly series that Greg Capullo was supposed to pencil, teaming Stark Enterprises with the UN space agency **STARCORE**; I was shooting for something between **Marvel Cosmic** and hard **Science Fiction** ala Arthur C. Clarke. Greg did three, maybe four great starter pages, and then got offered **X-SOMETHING** [ed.-that would be **X-Force**], and it just kind of became a permanent resident of the bottom drawer. For an exciting 2-3 three days some time later, it almost turned into an

outright novel for Byron Preiuss, but they wanted it done so fast I'd've had to have quit all my comics work, and what they were offering to pay me would've been about HALF the pay. I just plain couldn't afford to do it on their terms... I've still got the original comics version on disc somewhere, and in the 21st Century, every day is "Anything can happen day."

Hell, maybe I should turn it into a screenplay and find someone to put it under Tom Cruise's pillow while he's jonesing to do an IM picture...

After Iron Man?

Concurrently over the years, **MORBIUS**, **DR. STRANGE**, **GHOST RIDER 2099**, & **WAR MACHINE**; for Malibu, **RUNE** and **SNAKE PLISSKEN**; for DC, **FATE**, then after, for DC, **SCARE TACTICS** and **THE CREEPER**. For Acclaim, **BLOODSHOT**; back at Marvel, the **2099: MANIFEST DESTINY**, **SQUADRON SUPREME** and at DC, **JLA: FOREIGN BODIES** one-shots.



Speaking of **Ghost Rider 2099** you seem to be a widely read individual, what stories and novels do you read, enjoy, and feel have influenced your own writings?

I'm a huge fan of the "Cyberpunk" authors, including William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, Neil Stephenson, among others, but **JOHN SHIRLEY** is the REAL \$#!+.

Read **JOHN SHIRLEY**, and your life will never be the same. Run out and grab his **ECLIPSE** trilogy right now (if you can find it; I think it just came back into print -- he's got a website on darkecho.com, you can always check there). Oh, and Vernor Vinge. Olaf Stapeldon. **GREG BEAR**... In places I deliberately -- with tongue firmly in cheek -- wrote **GR 2099** after the style of other novels or authors; I did impressions of Neil Stephenson, Hunter S. Thompson, Wm. Gibson, Wm. S. Burroughs, and John Shirley, among others, at one time or another.

Besides Iron Man, what character do you most closely associate yourself with, in terms of defining the character?

I wanna say "all of 'em", but I already used that one in a previous interview. Depending on what period of my life we're talking about, Zero Cochrane from **GR 99**, Burnsteel from **FATE**, and Snake Plissken, a primary role model since the first time I saw **ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK**. But above all, I'd have to say some tormented, and crazed combination of **Morbius** and **The Creeper**...

You have worked as a writer for a host of publishers, including Marvel, DC and Acclaim/Valiant. Care to comment on those experiences? Their similarities? Differences?

Yes. But listing and comparing them all would almost amount to a volume on corporate sociology. I do, in fact, find it fascinating how large organizations seem to develop a certain personality that persist over decades, despite the turnover of actual personnel. Marvel is extroverted, DC would vote Republican if it could, and Acclaim/Valiant had Fabian's swagger...

The mid-to-late 90's were abysmal times for the comic industry and witnessed the disappearance of many creators. What were you doing/where were you focusing your creative energies during this time?

I was beating my head against the Industry door, demanding to be let back in. My energies, meanwhile, were focused on survival.

And then [there] was my "Chaos! Comics Period", where I tucked my head in on their books, waiting for the industry collapse to sort itself out- **LADY DEATH**, **PURGATORI**, **CHASTITY**, **ARMAGEDDON**, a version of the screenplay for **EVIL ERNIE** that ain't gonna get used, and the ill-fated **COUNTERSTRIKE**. Then

some more **JLA** stuff. Most recently, a couple issues of **JLA ADVENTURES**.

Speaking of Chaos! Comics, it's known, at least via the comic's grapevine, that you are not to happy with your last employer. Care to air your grievances with Chaos Comics, to the Advanced Iron Community?

Ohhh, you tempt me, but to list them all would cause the demise of far too many trees for my conscience to bear (or crash your server, if you've gone entirely online). I'll simply say that my association with Chaos! began very pleasantly, and soured over time for reasons that have not been made known to me. My grievances, however, are not yet over; contractually, they owe me a set of **DARK ALLIANCE** action figures, but so far all I've gotten to my inquiries are excuses. My next move will be to discuss the situation with my lawyer, and find out if I end up taking them to Small Claims Court by interstate proxy, or we go after them for Breach of Contract...

What are you currently working on?

Honestly? My resume. The comics industry is a fickle &!+□h, and she seems to have lost my number. I've been fighting a losing battle against poverty since **THE CREEPER** was cancelled. I spent the better part of the last two years being screwed over by Chaos! Comics, finally parted company with them last year, and haven't been able to find regular work since. Unless something happens soon, I'm outta here.



Would you like to work on any other armored character (e.g. Steel, X-O Manowar, Hardware, Dr. Doom)?

I would've liked to do another IM/Dr. Doom story, and I loved working with **XO** in **BLOODSHOT**, but as a regular thing, **IM** and **WM** have pretty much satisfied my appetite for armored characters.

What do you do when you aren't writing (comics)?

Right now, I'm pretty much doing that full-time, which sure as hell wasn't my idea. The -- pardon the expression -- irony is, I managed to survive the absolute bottoming out of the industry crash, but now that the business is not only recovering but publishers are actively looking to do fresh material (there was a dark, dark period at Marvel where having a new idea could get you fired if the wrong person found out about it), that pushes the envelope -- I'm on the outside looking in. I'm planning one more all-out charge at the gates, and if there's still no room inside for me, sheer survival will demand my presence somewhere that'll keep me in food, rent and money for "Cool Stuff I Gotta Have."

Lately I've been trying to teach myself the kind of sculpture skills necessary to do Bowen-type busts, action figures, resin kits, etc.; got a Morbius right here that may not be perfect, and sure isn't quite done, but even I have to say ain't bad for a guy who hasn't worked with Sculpey in more years than I wanna think about.

Then there's this idea for an online business I've been kicking around... and the void in the current toy-market I noticed a while back and might try to get into... at least two, three other mad schemes I might take a shot at, and if any of them make me rich my next step would almost certainly be some form of self-publishing. Steven Grant and I have been kicking a new way to take a shot at that for years.

Most likely, it'll be some combination of some of those things and others I don't even know about yet. I suspect my future is going to involve a whole lot of multitasking...

What are the odds of you returning to Iron Man?

I'd love to take another crack at IM, but much like a vampire, I have to be invited first, and that hasn't happened.

If the offer was made, would you take it? And if so, what direction would you take the Golden Avenger?

A) absolutely, and B) a new one.

Wow! Thanks for a great issue Len. We at Advanced Iron appreciate the time you took and the energy that you put into answering all of our questions. We wish you all the best.

Well Ferrophiles, that's it for me until next time. Peace.





Bonjour and welcome to my good ol' column dedicated to Iron Man's guest appearances all over Marvel-dom. Let's travel back in time together, shall we? The year is 1993. Now what the heck was so special about that year? Well it marked the **beginning of Advanced Iron** for one thing. Oh yeah and I got admitted to university at the sweet age of 20. But something **BIG** was also happening in the Ironverse back then. Two words: **WAR** and **MACHINE**.

This time around, I'll be taking a look at three of Rhodey's coolest guest-appearances in other comics. There were quite a few so it was hard for me to choose only three. I finally settled on Excalibur #59-60, X-Force #20-21 and Thunderstrike #21. Maybe I'll review the others another time, if you ask real nice ;-).

* * *



EXCALIBUR #59-60

"Enter... the Panther!" – December 1992, January 1993

Story: Scott Lobdell

Penciler: Scott Kolins

Inkers: Holdredge and Kryssing



the story:

The British super-team

(comprising [Shadowcat](#), [Captain Britain](#) and [Meggan](#)) is in Africa, in the beautiful jungle paradise of **Wakanda** to be more specific. The trio is there on business in their civilian identities but they are not the only guests of **king T'Challa**. Also present are [Captain America](#) and **Iron Man** (Rhodey was still going by that name at this stage). Rhodey is representing **Stark Enterprises** at this international conference on the environment.

The problem with Wakanda is that there always seems to be some new lunatic waiting in the wings to attempt **another coup**

d'état against the king. This time is no exception, and soon the guests come under attack from a being apparently made of wood and calling himself "ICON". He's managed to turn several of the country's citizens into wooden zombies and uses them as his personal army. Will the heroes fight back against this innocent horde or will the Black Panther abdicate his throne?



what's cool:

The story is enjoyable and (as are many old Excalibur stories) it is also funny in a tongue-in-cheek kind of way. It's a comic that doesn't take itself too seriously and I find that very refreshing. It's also interesting to see Cap starting to guess that this new Iron Man truly may not be Tony Stark at all! And poor Rhodey is all confused when Meggan thinks she recognises him (she met Tony-Iron Man in Excalibur #37-39). That's one of the things I always loved most about Jim standing in as Iron Man. He feels awkward, he hesitates to be himself, he thinks he's meant to act like something he's not. That makes him truly, in my opinion, one of the most human and realistic characters in Marvel history.

As for the art, well, the character that is by far drawn a lot better than the others is War Machine. I've rarely seen this armor look so good in fact. I wouldn't be surprised if these artists were huge Bob Layton fans because I recognize some influences in the armor's reflections and shadows. All in all, two very entertaining books indeed.



WHAT'S BAAAAAD:

Don't get me wrong, War Machine DOES look great... but that's just about all he does. He basically spends the whole time standing around, barely uttering a word. That was a bit of a disappointment. Sounds to me like the people responsible for Excalibur decided to cash in on the new character's popularity by having him as part of the decor. But, to be fair, I must say that, at least, WM plays a part in ICON's final defeat!

Also, another disappointment for me was Rhodey's failure to recognise Kitty Pryde. I mean, she did phase through his armor in Uncanny X-Men annual #7, how many young girls with that kind of power has Rhodey come across since? Call me a continuity freak if you will, but sometimes I just think I know my Marvel history better than Marvel does...



Captain America thinks: "Iron Man imbibing? It adds credence to the theory that Tony Stark is no longer the man beneath he armor. But until this fellow does anything suspicious, I'm content with keeping an eye on him."

X-FORCE #20-21

“Assault on Graymalkin” – March, April 1993

Writer: Fabian Nicieza

Penciler: Greg Capullo

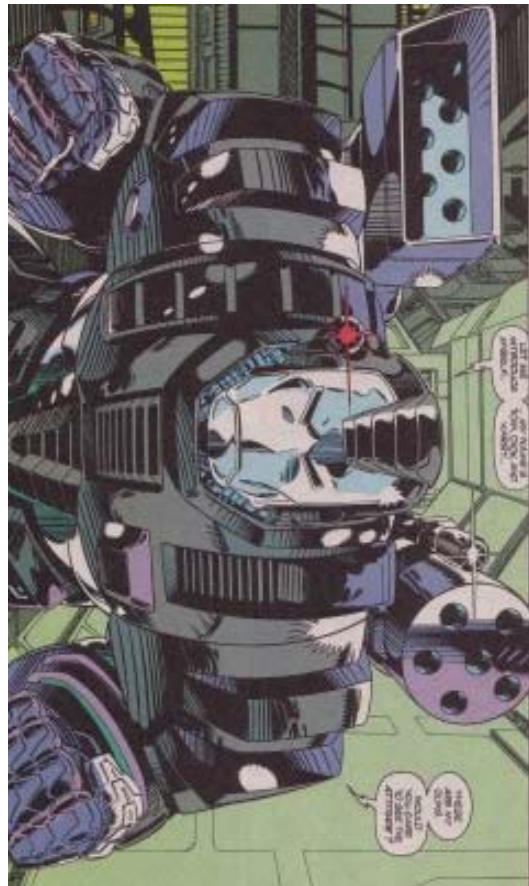
Inker: Harry Candelario



the story:

Cable is believed dead and his enormous intelligent spaceship (dubbed “Graymalkin”) has been found in orbit by the crew of a Stark shuttle. S.H.I.E.L.D. (read Nick Fury) wants to get his paws on that technology, Stark Enterprises (read Jim Rhodes) claims that it legally belongs to him since his people found it and finally, X-Force (read a bunch of young mutants) consider that, as Cable’s young protégés, their ex-leader’s legacy should be theirs. Now that the players are in place, the story can unfold.

The first to arrive on the scene are X-Force of course (it’s their book after all) closely followed by S.H.I.E.L.D. A battle ensues during which Fury and his people get their butts seriously handed to them. But just as it seems the kids have won the day, someone wearing black and silver armor shows up and he’s not happy.



what's cool:

If you’re a War Machine fan, if you liked that badass armor more than any other, if you want to see it at its peak, systematically taking X-Force apart one by one, then you want to get this book. The story is non-stop action (aside from when they start going on about X-Force supporting characters I know nothing about). The art is awesome, great stuff indeed. You can’t go wrong with this one. There is also a hilarious “Cheers” appearance in issue 21 that made me laugh my head off. Sam, Norm, Cliff... they’re all there. What a cool extra!



Shatterstar says: **“We better get outta here before every Tom, Dick an’ Harry with a SHIELD I.D., a gun an’ an attitude shows up ta bust our humps!”** to which War Machine answers: **“I’d say it’s a little too late for that, kid. Let me introduce myself... My name’s Tom, Dick and Harry... these are my guns. Would you like to see the attitude?”**

* * *

THUNDERSTRIKE #21

“Pacts of Vengeance!” – June 1995

Writer: Tom Defalco, Ron Frenz

Penciler: Ron Frenz

Inker: Al Milgrom



the story: Loki’s

back. After spending several months without a physical form to inhabit, the Norse god of mischief once more possesses a body to call his own, thanks to the serpent god **Seth**. And as always, he’s up to no good. His goal is **the death** of **Eric Masterson**, better known to the world at large as **Thunderstrike**. It just so happens that Loki’s hated enemy and **She-Hulk** are sitting in a restaurant, chatting and having lunch. Casting the illusion of one of her old enemies over the Everyman Avenger, Loki causes the **She-Hulk** to **punch** the shocked **Thunderstrike** through the restaurant’s front window!

As this unfolds, **Rhodey** is over at **Four Freedoms Plaza** paying a visit to his old buddy and **ex-Stark employee**, **Scott Lang (Ant-Man)**. When they hear the news that **Thunderstrike** and the **She-Hulk** are in the process of levelling downtown New York, both heroes take off to investigate. And once the spell is broken and **the heroes band together to confront Loki**, well... you need to have read **Avengers volume one #1** to really appreciate the irony!





what's cool:

Great comic! This is what a comic's like when creators have fun doing their thing. Have a look at the cover! Remind you of anything? You got it, **it's a tribute to the very first issue of the Avengers comic** from waaaaay back! And it's no coincidence, the whole issue seems to lead to the creation of a new team of super-heroes! The last few panels are almost identical to the ones from the end of AV #1!! **History repeating itself?** You have to read it to find out. I had a great laugh with the ending. As for the art, in my humble opinion, it's great. But I always liked **Ron Frenz** so I'm probably biased.



WHAT'S BAAAAAD:

The only bad thing about this one is that **it doesn't last longer**. Only the first half of the issue is used to tell the tale, the other half is something entirely different. You only end up **wishing that lil' jewel had lasted a bit longer!**



Loki screams: **"Oh... no! No! This can't happen! NOT AGAIN!"**

* * *

UPCOMING WANDERINGS:

Iron fans should keep their eyes on the Black Panther series for the next few months to see the king of Wakanda team up with the Golden Avenger and Wolverine! As for me, in my next column, I will be taking a look at the three OLDEST Iron Man guest-stars I have in my possession! These comics are older than me (believe it or not kids)! That's coming up in the pages of **Advanced Iron #56!!**

Many thanks to all those of you who have been sending their questions, comments, arguments, suggestions of issues they'd like to see reviewed and also to those who wrote simply to say **bonjour**. It's always a pleasure to hear from Iron fans from around the world. You can always send me a message at cousture@yahoo.com. And while I'm at it, I cordially invite you to visit **my Iron Man web site** at its **brand new address** which allows for easier access day or night:

<http://cousture.multimania.com>

Bonne lecture and catch you later mes amis!

TALES OF
SUSPENSE
STARRING
IRON-MAN



THE COLD WAR IS OVER...
BUT THE GHOSTS OF MOTHER RUSSIA LIVE ON

BEHIND THE IRON CURTAIN!



A quick follow-up. In **AI #54** I expounded upon several explanations of how and why the characters of **Professor Power** and **Shockwave** did not experience a personal visit from a fighting-mad **Iron Man** during the original **Armor Wars**. Well, a hawk-eyed AI reader and Iron Fan, one **Hugo V. Negron**, presented an interesting observation to me via e-mail...

Hello,

*I was reading your article in AI 54 concerning "the ones that got away"
-- Professor Power and Shockwave. Great catch! I didn't realize that myself.*

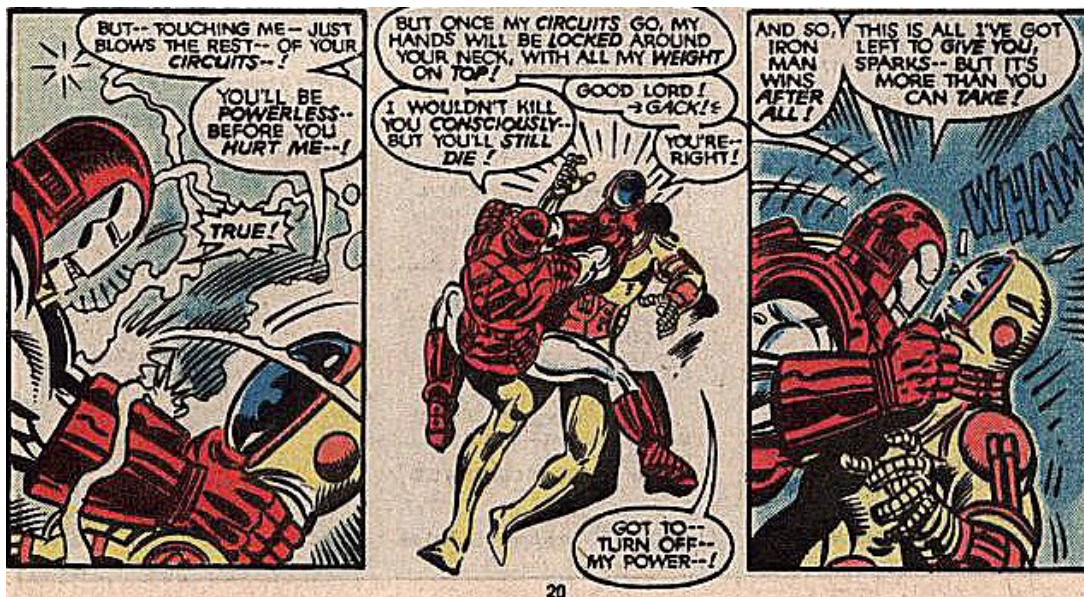


*I was wondering though -- I was looking over at Mile High Comics website, and saw an issue of **WEST COAST AVENGERS #11** [August 1986] which shows on the cover **Iron Man** in his **Silver Centurion** armor battling the aforementioned **Shockwave**! I will probably buy this one (in my never ending quest to backtrack for **IM** appearances in other mags) but I was curious if you had seen this one and how our favorite **Shellhead** may have done against this character?*

Thanks,
Hugo V. Negron

Uh-oh. So off to my favorite comic store I went and scored a copy of the above mentioned **WACOS #11** (written by **Steve Englehart**, art by **Al Milgrom** and **Joe Sinnott**). And sure enough, the cover sported a very cool standoff between **Shellhead** and **Shockwave**!

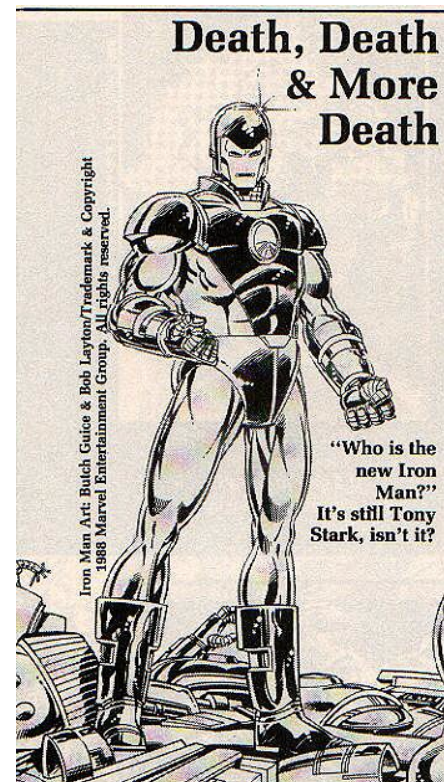
So how did **Iron Man** make out? Not well. Shockwave popped the armor's circuit's with little difficulty, forcing **IM** to take down his opponent with a wrestling move -- a good old American head butt! But as a consolation prize, the issue's best line come from our favorite **Armored Avenger**: "*Nobody ever*



gets the last bugs out of a [computer] system. After a while you call them 'features.'" Many thanks, Hugo.

First appearances are fun. Witness and enjoy the initial sneak peek at the **Iron Man #231** armor as seen in **COMICS SCENE #2** (1988)! My friend John Mlachnik, a comic collector, vendor, and advisor to the **OVERSTREET PRICE GUIDE**, pointed out the importance of character first appearances about a year ago. John, in fact, is heavily into collecting comics featuring first appearances and has a healthy accumulation of Golden Age and Silver Age books. John really drove home the notion that the first appearance of a character is often made outside of a character's own book. With that in mind, please notice that the **#231 Armor**, or, the **post-Armor Wars armor** (I love Heath McKnight's armor-naming convention of attaching the issue number in which the armor first appeared), not only made its debut in **COMICS SCENE** but also it was drawn by **Butch Guice** and **Bob Layton**, rather than **Mark Bright** and Layton, the fellows who presented the new suit within the guts of **IM #231!**

While researching some **Valiant comics** for an upcoming column, I noticed something interesting. **David Micheline** and **Bob Layton** had repeatedly used a phrase which I thought had to be more than mere coincidence. Remember how during the classic **Iron Man/Doctor Doom Camelot Trilogy** the duo had used "*Camelot. Camelot? Camelot!*" in **IRON MAN #150** and subsequently the parallel phrase "*The future. The future? The future!*" in





IRON MAN #250? Well, I found another phrase used three times, twice by David and once by Bob. The phrase is: *"That hurt? Good."* Personally, I think it's a dandy. Variations on this three-word masterpiece appear in **X-O MANOWAR #12** (January 1993), written by Bob; **HARD CORPS #6** (May 1993), written by David; and **IRON MAN: BAD BLOOD #3**, also by David. And to be honest, I found a *fourth* example, but it was an inexact match with the first three. Sample number four was discovered in **DOCTOR TOMORROW #3** (November 1997), written by Bob Layton. In this World War II-based issue, Doctor Tomorrow, the good guy, is attacked and subsequently tortured by the Teutonic Knight -- the Nazi X-O Manowar! *"Does it hurt, Herr Docktor?!"* asks the crazed goose-stepper in alien armor. *"I hope so."*

HOO HAW! I figured I was on to something, so I e-mailed Mr. Michelinie for a comment or two on my discovery. And like the true gentleman he is, David had an answer...

"Sorry, Mike, but there's no story behind the repeated use of the phrase, *'That hurt? Good.'* I've published over 550 comic book



stories, and if you were to go through all of them carefully I imagine that you'd find every phrase I've ever written used at least twice. There are only so many words in the English language, and only so many ways to string them together. And when so many stories have characters facing similar situations -- danger, surprise, revenge, etc. -- they're probably going to react in a similar fashion much of the time. I can't say why Bob used the phrase in **X-O**, or even why I used it in **H.A.R.D. CORPS** a few months later. Comics are produced with varying amounts of lead time, so there's an excellent chance that my H.A.R.D. CORPS script was turned in long before that issue of X-O even came out. It's therefore likely that I didn't even see it, let alone read it, before I wrote my script. It's just a matter of great minds thinking alike; or, to be less pretentious, simple coincidence. As far as using the phrase in **BAD BLOOD**, I guess that was just a case of trying to figure out what a character would say at a particular moment. And it just happened to be what another character had said seven years earlier. No Master Plan; just the writing process."



ARRGH! Shucks, I figured for sure that "That hurt? Good." had some significance associated with it.

By the way, I mentioned the **Iron Man/Doctor Doom Camelot TRILOGY** above because the **third installment** of this epic is yet to be published. So!

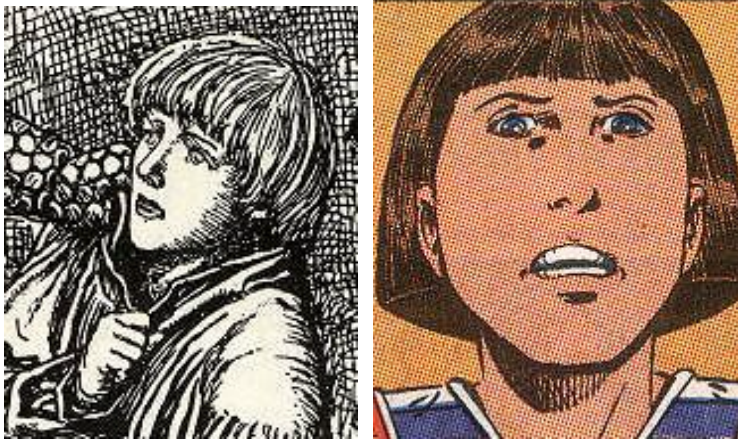
Write or e-mail to **Joe Quesada** at Marvel and ask for it by name! I did and I'm damned proud to have done so.



Illustration for *The Story of the Champions of the Round Table*, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905.

Bob Layton's artwork on the **Iron Man/Doctor Doom Camelot Trilogy** reminded me of the work of another famous artist, but I just could not think of who it was. For weeks it bothered me... Then after a quick check of Bob's website and another viewing of his **Batman: Dark Knight of the Round Table** cover piece, the answer roared into my head: **HOWARD PYLE!** Of course! Howard Pyle was an outstanding

painter and pen & ink artist who made a name for him self in the late 1800s and early 1900s with his Revolutionary War canvases and magazine and book illustrations. In addition, he wrote a number of famous children's books for which he supplied the artwork, particularly Robin Hood and... **King Arthur!** Perhaps to Iron Fans THE MOST interesting thing about Howard Pyle is his place of birth, the city he spend much of his career in: **WILMINGTON DELAWARE**, the home of Iron Editor **Dave Huber!** I e-mailed Bob Layton, asking him if Howard Pyle had been an influence.



And... **yes**, Bob replied, **he had!**

Take a look at the Layton and Pyle scans and see if you come to the same conclusion as I did. Certainly, the youngster from Pyle's **OTTO OF THE SILVER HAND** is a dead-ringer for the young King Arthur as seen in **IRON**

MAN #250. And likewise his Sir Lancelot illustration from **CHAMPIONS OF THE ROUND TABLE** is quite reminiscent from the **Johnny Romita, Jr./Layton** effort in **IRON MAN #150**.

If you dig the original **Armor Wars**, you absolutely **MUST** add a copy of **MARVEL AGE #55** (October 1987) to your collection. In addition to a sensational **Bright/Layton** cover illustration, this particular issue contains a number of **post-Armor Wars** armor sketches by **Bob Layton!** My personal favorite I affectionately call the **ASS ARMOR**, which is simple in design and, well, funky. See the illustration. And check out the ASS on it. Sheesh. Who, you're Asking, as I did, would wear ASS ARMOR, certainly not Tony Stark! So how about **Aric**, that barbarian dude, in the pages of **X-O MANOWAR?** Yep! Aric wears ASS ARMOR. The scan from **X-O #12** confirms it! And it ain't so bad. In other words, **ASS ARMOR KICKS ASS**. Or something like that... I **HIGHLY** recommend purchasing a copy of **X-O #12**, written by **Bob Layton** and illustrated by **Mike Leeke** and **Tom Ryder**. **BUY IT -- you will LOVE IT.**





What a dry spell. I hadn't had a letter printed in a comic book for a good long time... until recently, in **SONIC THE HEDGEHOG**, published by Archie Comics. HUH? Well, **SONIC #103** featured the story "Freedom Fighters of the Galaxy," a take-off on the **Guardians of the Galaxy**. And the story mentioned "The Shark" -- which are a parallel to **The Stark**, a savage alien race clad in **Iron Man armors**, from **GOTG!** When I read the story I had to write in! And my letter was published in **SONIC #107**. Here's the letter's text (scanning it from the comic was unsuccessful):

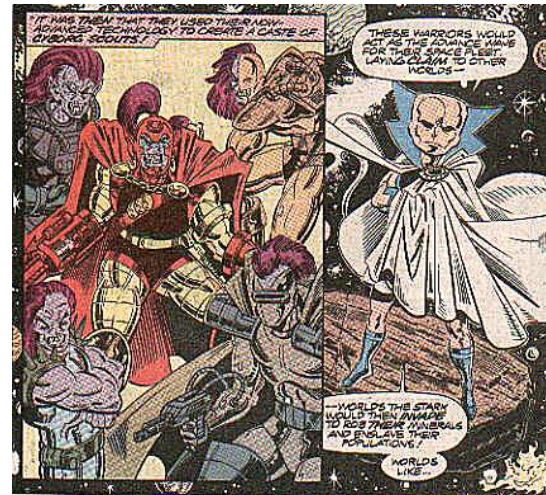
Hello!

*Being a HUGE fan of Jim Valentino's run on **GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY** for Marvel, I just had to pick up a copy of **SONIC THE HEDGEHOG #103**, featuring the GOTG swipe/tribute story "Freedom Fighters of the Galaxy."*

Back in 1998, I interviewed Mr. Valentino for

ADVANCED IRON, an Iron Man Fanzine. My interview focused upon the character of Taserface, a member of a race called "The Stark," who based their culture upon Tony Stark's greatest creation, the **Iron Man armor**. When I flipped through **SONIC #103** and noticed that "The Shark" were featured on page 14, I almost cheered aloud in the comic store! Thank you!

The character of Sonic as **Vance Astro/Major Victory** is terrific, and the creative team of Michael Gallagher, a notable GOTG writer himself; Valentino, Harvo, Vickie Williams, Stepahnie Vozzo, and Justin Gabrie made the first installment of "Freedom Fighters of the Galaxy" a fun and interesting read.



Now then, I URGE you acquire copies of **GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY**, issues **#1-4**, which feature and highlight **The Stark**. These books highlight some of Jim Valentino's best comic book work.

I'll conclude with some trading card scans from the 2001 Marvel Legends

series. First, a CUSTOM COVER **Justin Hammer** image by **Bob Layton**. Next, **Ant-Man** (a.k.a. Scott Lang -- another **Micheline** character creation) by **Kaare Andrews**. Third, **Iron Man** by **Gus Vazquez**.

Thanks for reading A.I.



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Main Event: Iron Man vs. Black Panther

By John B. Comerford

On Friday, March 15, I posted a thread to the **Iron Man** message board @ comicboards.com. The thread entailed a simple comment regarding **Iron Man's** recent appearance in **Black Panther's** *Enemy of the State* storyline. As all good "iron fans" know, **Iron Man** took a beating in part 2 of the story arc currently running in **Black Panther**.

What amazed me is the level of response this thread generated, showing that fans of the **Golden Avenger** are intellectual as well as passionate readers. The debate raged from the comparison of magnetic to energetic force fields, to **Iron Man's** ability to handle **Logan** (Wolverine of X-Men fame) in a one on one fight. The board was even graced with a response by *Enemy of the State* author, **Christopher Priest**.

What it boils down to though, is that the *Enemy of The State* storyline, although only in its second chapter (at the time of this writing) appears to be an intelligent and well written story, depicting a **Tony Stark** who appears to stay true to his roots. The thread generated support as well as bias regarding **Wolverine's** dismantling of the **Iron Man** armor, although under extraordinary conditions, but showed that **Iron Man** readers don't take the beating of their hero lightly.



Enemy of the State appears to be the **Black Panther's** own **Armor Wars**, which is a very complimentary comparison of the two characters considering the impact of, and how revered **Iron Man** Vol. 1 issues 225-231 are. This provides an interesting dichotomy considering the potential role **Iron Man** plays in the current storyline running through **Black Panther**.

Tony Stark is written well in that he feels an injustice has been done which he takes personally, when he discovers the **Black Panther** has infiltrated secret areas of his company, as well as the Avengers' mansion. Upon this revelation, **Stark** sets out as **Iron Man** to do a little avenging of his own, after formally requesting that the **Panther** be removed from the **Avengers**. These actions are from the same **Tony Stark** we all know and love from the early to mid days of volume one. In this, **Iron Man** readers should take solace that their character is being handled well and delicately. But again, who wants to see their hero go down? Certainly not myself, and certainly not many of the fans of ol' Shellhead. On the board, there was mention that people don't want an "omniscient hero" who can't lose; this was met with another poster stating that he wanted to see his heroes beat the guys whom they should easily be able to beat. And Iron fans



showed rational thought when it came to the disabled shields argument where even I argued:

«Iron Man has not always had "shields" the armor was tessellated and engineered as armor held together by magnetic fields. It is not a spaceship walking around with a shield generator.»

On occasion, a writer must do what he sees fit to elevate the story and the suspense to a higher level. Everyone seemed to agree, that **Iron Man** bursting through the vault door was cinematic and well played, the suspense on the following pages was carried well, you could almost feel the claws coming out of **Logan**'s wrists (ouch), and then it was over, in one panel.



Although we are passionate and discerning readers, what we should know is this:

1. *Stories are meant to be intriguing and entertaining.*
2. *Heroes are meant to fall on occasion.*
3. *Heroes always come back.*

So far, the first two statements have been met, and, via the message board, Mr. Priest has promised the third to us very soon stating:

«If it makes you feel any better, and it might not, he comes pretty darned quick.»

back off the mat

Enemy of the State seems to be playing out well and I, for one, am up for seeing **Iron Man** dismantle **Wolverine** in upcoming issues, and although, the idea of **Black Panther** disabling **Iron Man**'s shields so quickly is disheartening, I for one have no problem sticking with a writer who uses dialogue like this:

T'CHALLA to STARK: *«You obsess not over some vitiation of amity so much as hollow, jingoistic entitlement.»*

STARK to T'CHALLA: *«Well, let's just do something about that.»*

Enemy of the State is not just a great **Iron Man** appearance for an **Iron Man** collector, it appears to be a great story for a careful and intelligent reader, but we all still hope that **Iron Man** comes back off of the mat in the next round...

-John Comerford
Toastyj@hotmail.com

*Below: the Manhattan Brownstones
where Ling and Bethany live in West 70th Street*

THE WOMAN IN RED
CABE & MCPHERSON SECURITY SPECIALISTS

WELSHCAT © 2002

BETHANY CABE: **THE WOMAN IN RED**

By Welshcat © 2002

Synopsis: *Confusion abounds when a visiting Chinese Ambassador mistakes Bethany Cabe's security service for an escort agency! Meanwhile, Tony Stark faces a lawsuit for personal injury from Mrs Arbogast's sister!*



PART 1

CHAPTER 1: PAST PROLOGUE

JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER once wrote: *"Of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: It might have been!"* Poignant words of nostalgia indeed, bringing a sense of heartfelt longing. Though we may dare to dream of possibilities or "what ifs", in truth, the past is irrevocably behind us and cannot be changed. However, it doesn't hurt to reminisce once in a while.

These were the very thoughts running through Bethany Ann Cabe's mind as she lay silently in bed next to Tony Stark in his cliffside home off the Pacific Coast Highway in California. She could hear the distant crashing of the waves on the rocks as she felt a gentle sea breeze blow through the partially open shutters, providing some relief from the parched night-time California air.

Bethany was restless, her eyes were distant and unfocused as she contemplated her current situation: she had become intimate with Tony once again, and felt happy for the first time in a long time. However, this feeling of happiness was tinged with bittersweet memories as she recalled the days when the two of them had once been a couple. It was so long ago, yet Bethany remembered that picture-perfect place in time as clearly as though it were yesterday. She had helped Tony through his struggle with alcohol, and it brought them closer. For a while, they seemed like a match made in heaven.

Bethany used to wonder back then if marriage was in the cards, if she had finally found the happiness that had been so elusive in her earlier life. Unfortunately, that happiness was short-lived, when word leaked out that her former husband, Alexander Van Tilberg, long presumed dead, was alive and a prisoner in East Germany. Bethany made the hardest decision of her life to leave Tony and return to her husband's side. But perhaps that was a mistake in retrospect, for he relapsed into his destructive pattern of drug abuse, eventually dying of an overdose years later.

Bethany bit her bottom lip as she thought about these memories - memories tinged with regret which she would always carry around with her for the rest of her life. She felt

her heart well up with emotion, and her eyes water, but she held back her tears because she didn't want Tony to see her that way. Not right now, at least.

Unfortunately for her, he already had. He leaned over and whispered softly, showing concern: "Are you okay, Beth? You seem a little preoccupied right now."

"Oh, it's nothing" she lied, not wishing to reveal her true state of mind.

"Wasn't it...er... good for you?" he joked, moving in closer.

"Oh, of course it was, Tony," she assured him, "it was wonderful. It's just..." Bethany wet her lips, suggesting that she wanted to say something, but wasn't sure whether she should, or where to even begin.



"Bethany," Tony whispered, as he cradled her head tenderly and looked deeply into her eyes: "talk to me."

Bethany felt encouraged by his touch and let down her defenses: "Well at the risk of sounding like Barbara Streisand," she began, "this closeness I'm feeling to you right now brings all these memories flooding back of the way we were. I'm so happy at this moment, and yet I can't help but think of all the wasted time we've spent apart. If I hadn't gone back to my husband, we might've still been together, perhaps even married. Instead, I was chasing a dream that I thought was still alive when in reality it had died years before. I was just too blind and too codependent to realize that until it was too late."

"But you wouldn't have known at the time that he would go back to drugs. You were just being the faithful wife, since you were technically still married to him - just as you've always been faithful to everyone else you've cared about."

"I don't know," Bethany sighed, "after all, I wasn't there for you when you hit the bottle again, or when your technology was stolen or even when you were shot. Maybe all that wouldn't have happened if I hadn't left."

"Bethany, we can't go through life second guessing everything, wondering 'what if?' all the time. We have to live in the present and keep moving forward, learning from our mistakes."

"I guess you're right," Bethany replied, as she sat up on the bed. "Maybe I am being too angst-ridden instead of simply enjoying the beauty of the moment." She suddenly looked across the room intently as something on Tony's shelf caught her immediate attention. "Tony, what on earth is that?"

Tony looked round to where Bethany was pointing and grinned: "Oh, that." He got up and walked over to the shelf, returning immediately with a colorful looking book bearing a picture of Iron Man on the front.

Bethany took one look at the cover and shook her head: "Are you serious? A comic book based on the Invincible Iron Man?" She laughed: "Don't tell me you actually read this sort of stuff?"

"Not really," Tony explained, "but some little known comic company by the name of Marvel are trying to do a serialization of the adventures of Iron Man."

"And you've agreed to it?" Bethany quizzed him, looking rather bemused. She flicked through the pages of colorful panels, glancing intently to see what was contained within.

"Don't look so cynical, Beth" Tony gently chided her, "this kind of character merchandising is good publicity for Stark Enterprises. The comic's only a draft but it's for me to look at and approve, so I'm having Felix Alvarez handle this to ensure that Marvel doesn't infringe any Intellectual Property rights I own in the Iron Man armor and to deal with all the licensing agreements. Marvel, of course, will own the copyright as the authors of the literary and artistic work, but I own the trademark."

"Sorry, but I can't help but be skeptical of this," Bethany replied. "It seems this comic company has essentially distilled your adventures down to non-stop, wall-to-wall sci-fi action full of incomprehensible technobabble with the perennial clichéd premise of Iron Man having some life-threatening trouble with his armor. Then, in the inevitable denouement he auspiciously solves everything and rescues some ample-bosomed, helpless damsel in distress from the diabolical villain-of-the-week while simultaneously saving the world as we know it from total impending annihilation. It's the typical Hollywood *deus ex machina* ending, or in your case, *Stark ex machina*. That's so predictable and what everyone expects to hear, and not at all the essence of what your life is really about."

"And what, in your opinion, characterizes my life and makes a good Iron Man story?"

"Oh, I don't know I could really summarize it accurately."

"Try, Bethany," Tony gently encouraged her, "after all, you've piqued my curiosity."



"Okay, well how's this for a classic Iron Man?" she began, putting the book down and leaning forward: "You would of course need some resident recurring baddie like Justin Hammer or Obadiah Stane. Then you

might be going through some personal crisis like your battle with alcohol or the ethical dilemma you face with retrieving your armors - oh, and none of this constantly changing armors business - let's settle on the classic Red and Gold, my personal favorite. And let's not forget an emphasis on your jet-setting lifestyle with an attention to detail on all the high society haunts you frequent. But most of important of all, there should be a strong characterization and dynamic chemistry between you and your great supporting cast like Rhodey, Ling, Scott, Erica or Mrs Arbogast et al, and last and not least of all, your leading lady, who should be an intelligent Bond Girl type, not these other characterless girls you had a fling with in a moment of temporary insanity."

"Well that sounds vaguely right," Tony replied. However, his expression became puzzled: "I'm not sure though I'm reading you correctly. Are you in some way jealous of any of my previous relationships?"

"Heavens, no." Bethany gasped. "I'm way too old to be that emotionally insecure."

"You're not old at all, Beth." Tony laughed, as he looked at her beside him in her innocent state of undress.

Bethany was no longer in her twenties now, but she looked as young and vibrant as ever, and right now in her current mood, she was positively glowing. Her long, dark red hair with distinctive kiss curls that framed her near-perfect features tumbled exquisitely onto her shoulders. Her skin was impeccably unblemished, and she had a well-toned, statuesque body that promised never to grow fat or sloppy with age. She had always been tough as nails, resolute and self-confident, often going to great lengths to avoid depending on anyone physically, emotionally or financially. However, she could also be completely gentle, tender and coquettish in the next moment. Right now, however, as she sat there, she looked unmistakably vulnerable and fragile like a little girl.

"You're still young, and still incredibly beautiful." he assured her. "As beautiful, if not more so than when I first knew you. And most definitely the Bond Girl type."

Bethany blushed. "Thank you, Tony. You always were such a charmer - able to charm the pants off me literally, in more ways than one. But no, I'm not jealous, really I'm not. I was always happy for you, but every now and then I would be just a little envious."

"Just as I would be a little envious if you were with someone else now. It's natural. It shows that we still care about each other. And you know that I've always cared about you. That will always be true no matter what."

"Thank you," Bethany said, blushing again. "I've always cared about you too, despite the far-fetched plots."

Tony laughed. "Do you really think my life has been one far-fetched plot with one radical twist after another?"

"You mean like you getting shot at by a spurned lover, losing the use of both your legs, or your implant failing then being manipulated by an outside source so that your entire nervous system crashed, which, in any comic book would totally stretch the bounds of credibility? If you ask me, it sounds almost like a vain and obvious attempt by the writers of such material to boost their falling ratings, hoping that they will somehow keep their flagging readers coming back with a series of cliff-hangers, until soon everything that initially made the book what it was at its height of success is totally and utterly expunged."

"Sometimes reality is stranger than fiction," Tony laughed, "but despite those arguably questionable plots and sub-plots, it eventually had you coming back didn't it?"

"That's true," Bethany agreed, "but the downside is that your life is also like a really good TV show where there's a charismatic lead character and a wonderful supporting cast that fit like a glove, but then as the show progresses, some of the best supporting characters eventually leave. I guess sometimes it feels like, although it was partly my own choice, I was 'written out of the script' of your life."

"Well, if it's any consolation, I always felt that since we had such a good thing going in the past, you would always be the perennial 'one that got away'. You were undoubtedly my 'best supporting character' - you should've been like Lois Lane to my Clark Kent, with you as my leading lady."

"I thought you said you never used to read comic books."

"I lied. I only read ones about Men of Steel."

"Or Iron?" Bethany smiled. "But seriously, once Lois and Clark got paired off in the TV series, there was no more drama."

"True, it's always been the continual 'will-they, won't-they' tension between Superman and Lois Lane that made it interesting - their on-again, off-again relationship. But rather than Lois disappearing from the scene completely she was always an established part of the cast, knowing that there was always the possibility their relationship would be rekindled again some time in the future."

As Tony look intently into Bethany's eyes, he noticed her expression change to one of the keenest inquiry.

"You really wished I was there, even if we weren't having a relationship at the time, just to be your leading lady?" Her emerald eyes were large and alluring and she set them on him, waiting as if it were the most important question in the world.

"Yes," Tony replied. "But this isn't some comic book or TV show with an inherent need to maintain an underlying level of sexual frisson between the lead characters just to keep the drama interesting, so I wouldn't have even minded having you around permanently in my life back in the old days, as I did love you - just as I love you now."

"I didn't realize you felt that way," Bethany replied, "about wanting me around permanently, that is. I loved you too - and still do - part of me always will love you no matter where we are or whom we're with."

"Well, hopefully we'll remain together more permanently this time round," Tony assured her.

Bethany's tone lightened, becoming more playful: "But if I'm to be your leading lady, you could start by including me as a character in this comic book of yours. How come you get all the action?"

"Well, it is called *'The Invincible Iron Man'* after all."

"Well I had adventures too," Bethany assured him, "you don't think readers would like to hear stories about the glamorous exploits of Cabe & McPherson Security Specialists, bodyguards extraordinaire?"

"I'm sure they'd be charmed just to read about a couple of lovely non-super powered ladies like you."

"Now who's being cynical? You sound like you're doubtful people would."

"I didn't mean it that way," Tony clarified himself, "why don't you tell me one of your adventures right now? I would be genuinely interested."

"Now? Are you sure?"

"Why not? The night is still young."

"Well, don't say I didn't warn you," Bethany grinned. "Let me see..." Her eyes lost focus, taking on a faraway look as if remembering every detail, as she began to relate the story:

"It all began on that week just before we decided to go on vacation to the Bahamas," she explained. "I was babysitting a Chinese Ambassador at the Mae West Gala Tribute at the Lincoln Center in Manhattan, or so I was led to believe. Unfortunately, this Ambassador would end up misunderstanding my intentions completely. It would turn out to be one of the craziest couple of days I've ever had."

CHAPTER 2: SISTER ACT



BETHANY'S MIND skipped back several years prior, to the week in question, and to the thriving headquarters of Stark International on Long Island, New York, where its magnificent arch structure dominated the

skyline. Bethany had a few hours to spare and thus engaged in a vigorous tennis match with Tony Stark at his private tennis courts. Once the match had finished, the two of them returned to Tony's office, with Bethany still dressed in her white tennis outfit. She knew she should probably shower before going home, but unfortunately today, the water system at Stark International was not working properly.

Tony strolled into the office with Bethany, his gait steady and his eyes fixed with intent on the reception area where his secretary, Mrs Arbogast was sitting. Tony was greeted by Yvette Avril, the recently-appointed Vice-President of Stark International who had transferred from the Stark International branch in Paris.



Yvette was an attractive French girl who wore large round spectacles, and spoke with a strong French accent. She was often prone to switching between her English and French in mid sentence. Although it sometimes sounded unusual, Tony was perfectly fluent in both languages, as was Bethany, and so it posed no

problem for either of them. Tony would occasionally speak back to her in French simply to amuse her.

"Ah, Tony," Yvette smiled warmly as she saw him, "how was the game?"

"Just great thanks, Yvette," Tony replied, "although I kinda let Bethany win."

"You did not! I won that match fair and square," Bethany laughed.

"Well, every time you served me one of your looks, you left me in love, so what was I to do?" Tony replied.

Bethany turned her gaze towards Yvette with a bemused expression: "He just doesn't want to admit that I'm better at tennis than him."

"Oui. Men never do," Yvette agreed, "c'est toujours la même histoire! [*it's always the same story!*]"

"Men are always so competitive," Bethany continued. "At least we play by the rules!"

"Ah," Tony said slyly, "and that's why women will always be the fairer sex. Isn't that right Pithins?"

"Ulp... yes sir," Pithins agreed sheepishly, having just arrived when he heard the voices. "By the way, Ms Cabe, I wonder if I might have a word with you?"

"Oh?" Bethany was surprised, as Pithins had never spoken to her a great deal before. "Is it urgent? I'm about to say goodbye to Tony."

"It won't take a minute," Pithins assured her.

"Go ahead and speak to him," Tony suggested. "I'll see you in a minute. I need to discuss some things with Yvette."

Tony left Bethany for a moment in the reception area with Pithins, as he called her to one side.

Artemus Pithins was Tony's Head of Public Relations, and never wasted an opportunity to extol the virtues of his position. This time however, his business was of a more personal nature: "Ms Cabe," he began, "I was wondering if you might do me a favor? Actually, it's for my son, Gerrard."

"I never knew you had one," she replied, "but sure, what can I do for him?"

"He has an English project which I'm afraid he's left extremely late - it's on alternative means of law enforcement and it's due in next week."

"And you'd like to know if I can give him any information?"

"Oh no. Well, not quite. Gerrard needs to write a first hand account, and seeing as you're a body guard and security specialist, I thought he might be able to work shadow you over this weekend, if you wouldn't mind."

"Um... it's not that I wouldn't mind, it's that I'm not sure if it's really practical for him to follow me on an assignment..."

"Please, Ms Cabe," Pithins urged her, "I know it's somewhat inconvenient, but I said to him that I'd speak to you. He's quite desperate and doesn't know what else to do. Even if you could just give him some minor tasks, it would be of great help. And I'd be extremely grateful."

Bethany acquiesced. She knew how difficult school assignments could be from her own high school days. "Okay, Mr Pithins," she smiled, "you win. Sure, he can come and see me later today."

"Thank you" he beamed, "I promise you won't regret this."

Pithins left promptly to make the telephone call to his son, leaving Bethany standing alone in the reception area where Mrs Arbogast, Tony's secretary was busy working, Bethany smiled politely, and tried to fill the awkward silence with some conversation.

"Hey, Mrs Arbogast? What are you working on?" Bethany inquired curiously.

Mrs Arbogast peered over her spectacles. "I hope you're not trying to make small talk, dearie. My sister has come to visit again and I'm meeting her for lunch, so I've got a ton of work to do before then."

"Where are you taking her for lunch?" Bethany persisted.

"*Delaney's* in Hicksville," Mrs Arbogast replied impatiently, feeling that Bethany was beginning to pry. "It's full of traditional home-made steaks. Good steaks are rare these days..."

"Well then you shouldn't order yours well done!" Bethany giggled.

Mrs Arbogast frowned, obviously not amused. "Don't you have something else to do, like painting your toenails?" Her voice was terse and condescending.

Mrs Arbogast regarded Bethany as a frivolous young girl whose headstrong and unpredictable antics landed Stark as well as Bethany herself in more trouble than was necessary.



Bethany, on the other hand, felt Mrs Arbogast was a stuffy, irascible and indomitable old woman who could at times be overly protective of her office territory, and somewhat snappish. The two were frequent verbal sparring partners, both constantly engaging in a swordplay of words and wit, each trying to outdo the other. Nevertheless, despite the love-hate relationship they shared, they had an unspoken, albeit grudging respect for one another.

Yvette emerged from Tony's office with some documents in her hands. "Understood, Tony" Yvette assured him, as their conversation drew to a close.

"Well, bon voyage" Tony wished Yvette as he gave her a friendly peck on the cheek."

"I see I've been displaced in the pecking order by your Vice-President," Bethany joked, as she stood there akimbo, waiting to say goodbye to Tony herself.

Tony whipped around, smiling: "She's off on a business trip. It'll be your turn in a minute."

Bethany decided to tease him further. "Take all the time you want. I thought I'd already taught you the art of French kissing, but hey, if you need extra lessons from her..."

"Mon dieu!" Yvette exclaimed, blushing as she walked off back to her office, "tâchez d'être plus poli! [*keep a civil tongue in your head!*]"

"Now," Tony began, directing his attention towards Bethany. "Let's see how good I am with that French kiss, or whether I've just been paying you lip service all this time" He swooped her up in his arms as they embraced passionately.

"Mmmm" sighed Bethany dreamily.

Tony grinned, as their lips parted. "Now how was that?"

"What can I say?" Bethany replied, giggling as she sighed, "I'm definitely tongue-tied."

Mrs Arbogast looked up from her work and gasped, shaking her head disapprovingly at what she considered morally reprehensible behavior. She made it no secret that she frowned upon the playboy antics of her boss, and today was no exception. "A spectacle!" Mrs Arbogast muttered under her breath with contempt, as she began to type out a letter, "a complete spectacle!"

"Did you say something, Mrs Arbogast?" Tony quizzed her, having half caught what she had said.

"Oh, nothing, Mr Stark", Mrs Arbogast replied, biting her tongue. "I was just wondering whether I should get a new pair of spectacles or contact lenses."

"Well, Mrs A," Tony began as he headed for the door, "whatever you decide, just remember that it's the frames on women that men go for."

"Hmph!," Mrs Arbogast snorted, knowing her boss would often tease her with this sort of innuendo. Suddenly her face blanched as her expression changed from disdain to alarm. "Oh dear, Mr Stark... sir, watch out!"

As Tony was turning to leave, he had failed to notice the woman who had just walked into the reception area while he and Bethany were kissing. Thus, in his temporary distraction, he collided straight into her, sending her crashing to the floor.

"Oh, I am sorry ma'am" he began, thoroughly apologetic. Then saw who his victim was and became slightly embarrassed. "Oh, it's you... hello!"

Yes, it was HER! Mrs Arbogast's sister Uranus Bliss! Uranus had encountered Tony a few weeks ago at a staff party where she had experienced more of Tony's reckless behavior when he went to change into Iron Man. Prior to that, Tony had pulled her out of a lavatory on a 747 Jumbo Jet, and bowled her over in a casino in Atlantic City. On the last occasion at the party, Uranus was ready to retaliate, but Jarvis the butler restrained her. Although Tony had made it a point to apologize to her formally, she knew that she would have to watch out for him in future. This was one of those times.

"Yes, sonny!" came the scolding reply, "and don't you 'hello' me. I should've expected that a hobbledehoy like you would not be able to avoid your bull-in-a-China-shop technique of sweeping a lady off her feet!"



"I am terribly sorry," Tony assured her as he offered her a hand. "I didn't notice you. Here, let me help you up."

"No, thanks pinhead," Uranus hissed as she picked herself up, "after giving mouth to mouth

with 'red' over there, I think you've done your fair share of helping."

Mrs Arbogast attempted to placate the situation by reacquainting everyone again. "Uranus," she began, "you remember Mr Stark.. ahem, of course, and Ms Bethany Cabe, Mr Stark's... er... 'ladyfriend', from the office party. This is my sister, Mrs Uranus Bliss.

Uranus Bliss wore round spectacles and usually kept her hair in a severe bun. She also looked a few years older than Mrs Arbogast.

"Mrs Bliss?" Bethany replied politely, offering her hand to greet her. "Good to see you again. Pardon my sweaty appearance, but I've just been playing tennis, you see."

"Really?" Uranus muttered sarcastically. "I could've sworn it was tonsil tennis you were engaging in with that tall, Stark and handicapped lover boy of yours!"

Bethany blushed, then smiled sheepishly as she looked over at Mrs Arbogast, as if to seek some measure of approval from someone else. Mrs Arbogast did not comply. She had already drawn the same disapproving conclusion herself.

Bethany turned round to get Uranus a drink of water from the nearby fountain "Tony is awfully sorry about that little slip..." she apologized.

"Speaking of little slips," Uranus shrieked, as she scanned Bethany's tennis attire with a disapproving look, "yours is showing. From where I'm sitting I can practically see your butt and it's a shocking sight!"

Bethany quickly spun round, knowing that Uranus was referring to the thong-like underwear she was wearing under her short skirt. She couldn't resist responding to this comment. "Oh?" she retorted, with a slightly wicked smile, "it must be a real bummer then when you look in the mirror every day and see Uranus. How on earth do you cope?"

Uranus was incredulous, her face like thunder. "How dare you?" she flamed with rage, "such barefaced cheek! I will not be made the butt-end of your jokes. It's pronounced *Ur*-anus not *Ur-anus*! Emphasis on the first syllable, not the last two!"

"Now sis," Mrs Arbogast intervened, attempting to avoid an unnecessary confrontation, "calm down and tell us what brings you here today?" "We just saw each other a few weeks ago, and I didn't expect you back so soon."

"Well I wouldn't have been, Bambi, if it wasn't for that clodhopping boss of yours. I'm here to serve him with a claim for personal injury."

"What?" Tony was shocked. "B...But why? Whatever for?"

"As if you don't know well enough," Uranus vented vociferously. "After you knocked me into that bowl of punch a few weeks ago, I thought enough was enough. You want to play dirty? Well now I'm taking you to the cleaners. Here" she said, shoving a set of documents into Tony's hands. "And after your incident just now, it looks like you've already added enough insult to my injury."

TO BE CONTINUED...

BETHANY CABE: THE WOMAN IN RED PART 2

By Welshcat © 2002

The story so far: *When Marvel decides to serialize the adventures of Iron Man, Bethany Cabe reminisces about an untold escapade of her own from the past: In her flashback, Tony Stark faces a lawsuit from Uranus Bliss.*

CHAPTER 3: WORKING GIRLS

"Do not let the sun go down on your anger." (The Bible, The Epistle to the Ephesians 4:26).

AN HOUR HAD PASSED since Bethany left Tony embroiled in a sea of squabbling and flaring tempers, as she drove back along the Long Island Expressway towards her apartment in the Upper West Side of Manhattan. While this quote from the Bible was not particularly on Bethany's mind, it appeared that the sun was doing anything but going down.



The sweltering heat was soaring into the mid-nineties and it seemed that New York was experiencing another Indian Summer. This was not helped by the fact that the traffic seemed to be

building slowly on the freeway, with a hoard of frustrated drivers in yellow taxi cabs creating a cacophony of honking horns. It was at times like these that Bethany was glad she had swapped her previous Porsche 924 coupé for a convertible 944 turbo, so that she could enjoy the sun with the top down and the breeze rushing through her hair. She was also looking forward to getting out of her tennis outfit and taking a long shower to cool off from the scorching heat.

As she pulled up by the sidewalk in 70th Street outside the tree-shaded Manhattan brownstones that housed the offices of Cabe & McPherson Security Specialists, Bethany noticed a scruffy looking teenager waiting outside on the steps engrossed in a comic book.

The shiny blue door of Bethany's Porsche clicked open. The boy looked up from his book and watched in disbelief as a pair of long, slender legs emerged from the cockpit. He drooled silently to himself, perspiration forming on his mouth and forehead as the rest of the body gradually clambered out and walked over to him.

"Hello, I guess you must be Gerrard?" Bethany said.

"Yeah. Woah! And are you the bodyguard my Dad arranged for me to shadow? He never told me you were a babe! Hubba Hubba!"

Bethany blushed slightly from that comment. "I'm Bethany - Bethany Cabe. Why don't you come inside?" As she trotted up the steps she saw peered curiously at what Gerrard was reading, but decided not to comment.

The two of them went up to the second floor and entered a plush looking set of offices above their opulently furnished apartment. Upon their arrival, they were greeted by

Bethany's partner, Ling McPherson, looking rather black and blue following a Maggia attack a week or so ago.

"Woah! What's going on here?" Pithin's son exclaimed. "Has the security profession become so desperate that they've started recruiting models like you and Miss Babe?"

"I'm no model," Bethany smiled modestly. "A model's just an imitation of the real thing. And it's Cabe, not Babe!"

"You had me fooled!" came the flippant reply.

Bethany sighed, and wrote it off to immature raging hormones.

"Hey, Beth, " Ling exclaimed, "I didn't realize we'd have guests. What's up?"

Bethany wasted no time in making the necessary introductions, and then proceeded to determine what to do with Gerrard.

"Now I don't know what your Dad told you," Bethany began, "but I'm not sure how much you're going to get a chance to observe this weekend." She strode gracefully towards a plush sofa and sat herself down, pulling her long legs up with her.

"That's okay, Miss Babe. I'm content just to watch you."

"We're going to the park later," Ling informed him.

"Cool!" Gerrard exclaimed, "can I come along? I mean, I could ask you stuff about your work."

"Sure," Bethany agreed, "since that's what you're here for. But we're just going for a picnic and probably to sunbathe a bit before the sun goes down."

"Awesome! Will you both be sunbathing topless?"

"Nooo! Definitely not!!" Bethany exclaimed, as she sighed again in resignation at the sheer audacity of his statement. It was definitely a raging male hormone thing.

"By the way, Beth," Ling said, changing the subject, "While I've been stuck here recovering indoors with nothing to do, I decided to make a few changes to our marketing strategy. Tell me what you think."

Ling pointed Bethany to a draft of their advert which had been printed in the newspapers. It read:

CABE & McPHERSON SPECIAL SERVICES

We provide the foremost in personal escort services available today, whether your concerns are your company, yourself, your family or your event.

We are the most highly trained professionals and dependable private agents available in New York. Our wide range of services offer the ultimate in personal protection and confidentiality you demand, thereby creating the "peace of mind" you deserve.

If you are a celebrity, royal or diplomat in need of our expert skills, long term or for just one night, then call now to make a booking:

Phone Bethany or Ling on (212) 595 9535

Or alternatively, call in at our offices at:

1339 West 70th Street
New York
New York 10023

We are ready, willing and able!

"Hmmm," Bethany remarked. "It looks somewhat vaguer than it used to be. I see you've dropped the word 'security' from our job description and added the word 'escort'."

"Well," Ling replied, "I thought that this way would give a broader definition of what we do than just having 'security specialists', and 'escort' sounds more approachable."

"I guess so," Bethany nodded, slightly hesitantly. "Well, at least now we've made it clearer that we service only celebrities, royalty and diplomats, it will stop us from being inundated with so many calls."



ELSEWHERE, AS A SLEEK WHITE LIMOUSINE made its way through Mott Street towards the Confucius Plaza apartment complex in China Town, two oriental looking men

in business suits were discussing Bethany and Ling's very advert.

"Master Mee," the older man began, "you won't have to go alone to the Mae West Gala Tribute after all."

"What are you? The Fairy Godmother?" Mr Mee replied.

"No Master Mee, but I've found you an escort agency in the classified section of the papers. It says they offer a wide range of personal services and they are highly trained and extremely willing. Shall I approach them?"

"By all means, yes," Mee replied. "I must meet these lovely ladies for myself. Please arrange it today, Mr Wong!"

OVER ON THE WEST SIDE, it was close to four o'clock and the sunshine was unrelenting. There was no cooling breeze blowing in from the Hudson River, or if there was, it manifested itself as an occasional flutter of hot air that did little to ease the scorching heat.



Bethany showered and changed into a strapless summer dress and sandals, and headed out with Ling and Gerrard to Central Park. They found a spot in the popular sunbathing spot known as Sheep's Meadow to sit down and relax. The park was still bustling with energy and activity from the myriad of strollers, picnickers and rollerbladers, creating a

rainbow of color against the glorious greenery, while the infectious rhythm of a Latin Jazz band played gently in the background. Then, in one tantalizing moment which seemed to pass in slow motion, Bethany and Ling spread out their towels, stripped down to their bikinis, applied their sun cream and lay down.

Gerrard sat there transfixed, his mouth wide open, in an almost trance-like state, as he eyed Bethany's well-toned body lasciviously from head to toe.

Bethany gave him a long and marvelously direct look as she attempted to break the spell. "Hey! Have you quite finished staring?"

"Oh sorry, Miss Babe. It's just you look really hot in that G-string in this sun. But don't worry, I'm pretty cool myself."

"Well, you might just want to make sure by taking a cold shower," Bethany replied. "And it's Cabe, not Babe. And don't you have some questions you want to ask?"

"Yeah. Er... are those real?"

"Not those sort of questions! Questions related to my work."

"Er... right! Well, let's see... what kind of clients do you get?"

"Well, New York is one big melting pot, so we get every kind of person under the sun, but we try to keep it to royalty, diplomats and the occasional celebrity."

"Wow! Have you had anyone famous?"

"From time to time. There are quite a few even living in our neighborhood, so word gets around, especially since most are quite neurotic about stalkers and the like."

"John Lennon used to live in Dakota by 72nd Street," Ling pointed out, "but he never hired us. Then someone shot him."



IT WAS EARLY EVENING, and Gerrard Pithins had returned home for the night. Bethany was sitting languidly on the sofa in her apartment, painting her toenails a cool coral pink shade while

Ling was reading a novel. Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. Bethany leapt up and went to answer it in her bare feet.

There was a Chinese man standing outside, dressed in a business suit, and looking rather hot and uncomfortable.

"Hello," she said gently. "Can I help you?"

"Please," he began earnestly, "my name is Mr Wai Mai Wong. My master, Mr Mee, is the son of the Chairman of the National People's Congress for the People's Republic of China."

"Uh huh," Bethany replied, her face barely registering any expression as it was evident she had no idea what this position entailed. "Do come in and tell us more. I'm Bethany Babe... ah... Cabe... and this is my partner Ling McPherson."

"Thank you very kindly," Wong continued. "It is Master Mee's first time to the United States. He has already visited China Town here in New York and is most impressed. Master Mee will be attending the Film Society's Annual Gala Tribute for Mae West at the Lincoln Center tomorrow. With Mr Mee's high profile, he needs someone to be his 'chaperone' in public for that event, especially with all these celebrities there. We saw your advertisement in the paper today, and would like to employ your services."

"Yes, of course!" Bethany exclaimed, "but I must warn you that our fees are quite high, but also very competitive as we like to offer our clients the full VIP treatment."

"Money is not a problem," Wong replied. "My master will pay whatever you're charging for your services, and all additional charges for any extra personal attention."

Ling spoke up. "I'm sure we can work something out, Mr Wong."

"Excellent!" Mr Wong replied. "So will my master get both of you ladies at once?"

"No, not this time." Bethany replied. "Ling's still recovering from an assignment that got a bit rough a few weeks ago. Clients can be like that sometimes. It's all part of the job. So you'll just get me. Besides, you know what they say about three being a crowd..."

"Yes," Wong agreed, "better start off one to one first, and nothing too rough."

"Exactly," Bethany replied. "Now if you'd like to look over our contract and see if you agree with the terms, we can take it from there."

Wong perused the contract carefully, and then signed on the dotted line.

"Well, we won't keep you, Mr Wong," Ling said, "since I'm sure you'll be wanting to break the news to your master."

"I'm sure he's looking forward to it with great anticipation."

CHAPTER 4: SOMEONE TO WATCH OVER ME

THE AMERICAN ESSAYIST and playwright, Jean Kerr once wrote, "*You can't sleep until noon with the proper élan unless you have some legitimate reason for staying up until three (parties don't count).*" (Please Don't Eat the Daisies, 1957). Although it was not midday when Bethany arose from her slumber the next morning, she had nevertheless been tossing and turning until three. It had been a restless night as the heat was unrelenting, and the air was becoming scorched and stale. Today offered no comfort either. Bethany wandered into the living room where Ling was sitting, already up for hours.

"Morning, Beth. Hey, cute T-shirt!" Ling was referring to the teddy-bear design on the short nightie that Bethany was wearing.

"Good morning Ling," Bethany yawned dreamily. "What time is it?"

"It's 8.30 and you'd better hurry up. I have an appointment with Dr Erhmann to check over my injuries and Gerrard is going to be here any minute."

"Oh, not Gerrard!" Bethany moaned, as she thought of the prospect of him hitting on her all day. "I find it a bit disconcerting the way he keeps eyeing me up all the time."

"Well, I'm sure he'll get over this phase soon," Ling reassured her. "Gerrard's just a sixteen year old adolescent who doesn't know from one moment to the next whether he's a boy or a man. I spoke to him a bit yesterday and he seems to come from a dysfunctional family. He's quite introverted and socially alienated from other teens, with a low self-esteem, and finds it hard talking to girls his own age. So now he's met someone who's not only an extrovert, but who he thinks is probably the most beautiful girl he's laid eyes on and doesn't automatically freak out at the opposite sex, it's natural he'd be smitten. He's just trying hard to impress you because he wants you to like him. So go easy on him. I'd be kinda flattered if I were you."

"Hmm," Bethany mused. "You sound like you've been spending too much time around Jungian shrinks on the Upper West Side here with all this extrovert/ introvert analysis. But I don't mind him having a crush, it's just his proclivity for making inappropriate sexual remarks that I'm concerned about. I hate to shatter his silver screen image he's created of me, but I'm not some fantasy comic-book babe with impossibly exaggerated proportions that would look completely ridiculous in real life, and with a penchant for squeezing into spandex rubber two sizes too small. I'm a normal flesh-and-blood girl like you, with normal clothes, and an occasional tendency for bad hair days... like I'm having right now from not enough sleep."

"Well, you'd better go and shower quickly and remedy that. And don't pay too much attention to his comments, ok?"

"Ok, 'mom', I'll try," Bethany smiled.

ELSEWHERE, A MAJESTIC STREAK of red and gold began its destination from the Hawthorne Building in New York's Upper East Side, covering a great distance in a short amount of time. Within minutes, it was soaring rapidly above the cityscape of midtown Manhattan, towards the area nicknamed Hell's Kitchen in Midtown West.



"Look, it's Iron Man!" a young girl exclaimed, as the armored avenger swooped in low near the Warner Brothers Store in Fifth Avenue, "where do you think he going?"

"I'm sure he's probably just watching over the city or he's off to fight some battle I expect," her mother replied.

Indeed, this statement was at least partially accurate, as Iron Man's passed over the erstwhile Stark Mansion, now known as Avengers' Mansion, which was also located in Fifth Avenue. His destination was the block of buildings between 50th Street and Eighth Avenue, and the law firm of Murdock and Nelson, Attorneys at Law. It was to be a battle in the boardroom, as Tony was meeting with one Franklin 'Foggy' Nelson to attempt to settle the law suit with Uranus Bliss.

Inside the armor, Tony was feeling a sense of frustration as he grappled with the prospect of having to engage in litigation with his own secretary's sister. Mrs Arbogast would undoubtedly have a conflict of interests here, and this could prove awkward in their working relationship.

Tony sighed, and decided to make a quick call before he arrived. He could do with hearing a friendly voice right now. With the thought came the deed, as he triggered a cybernetic command activating his internal communications system, linking him to a phone located on the other side of town.



BACK AT BETHANY'S APARTMENT, the lithe redhead had just stepped into the shower. The water was refreshing and invigorating as she let it cascade over her, washing away her tiredness. She thought about the day ahead and knew it would prove to be long with her assignment later that evening.

While Bethany was in the shower, Gerrard had shown up just as Ling was halfway out the door for her therapy with Dr Erhmann. Ling allowed Gerrard to wait by himself, but being rather curious, he wandered into Bethany's bedroom, in search of her. He had knocked on the door, but there was no answer. As it was unlocked, he decided to enter anyway. He was intrigued by the various personal possessions in her bedroom, and so he looked around in complete fascination. There were a few items on her bed, but the stuffed purple cat caught his attention. He opened a drawer containing Bethany's underwear. He sniffed it briefly - it seemed to be scented with rich, expensive perfume. He decided to hold onto a pair of her panties for memorabilia, as he walked over to her closet to find a large selection of dresses and what looked like hundreds of shoes.

Suddenly, the phone on her bed rang like an intruder alarm waiting to catch him red-handed. Bethany had just finished her shower and had turned the water off when she heard the ringer sounding. She stepped onto the white rug, feeling the soft pile of fur under her slender feet. Outside, Gerrard could hear Bethany's gentle footsteps approaching. Not knowing what to do, he quickly hid inside her closet, hoping he could make his escape once the call had ended.



Gerrard watched through the slits in the closet, completely mesmerized as Bethany emerged, nymph-like, clad only in a white towel, her svelte body and long red hair still damp from the shower. She cradled the receiver in the hollow of her shoulder and sat down on the bed.

"Hello?" she whispered, in a characteristically dulcet tone of voice.

"Hi Beth." It was Tony on the other end.

"Hi Tony" she exclaimed cheerfully. "I didn't expect you to call. You sound like you're high up somewhere."

"Really? I was feeling kinda low actually."

"What's up?" Bethany replied, her voice showing concern as she brushed her hair out of her face.

"It's this lawsuit. It's not the money itself that concerns me, although given that I'm a multi-billionaire, the jury could award punitive damages in the millions. However, it's mainly the fact that it's Mrs Arbogast's sister, and I don't really need this sort of friction between Mrs A and myself right now."

"Well, I'm sure Mrs Arbogast will see that it was accidental and won't hold you responsible. Have you spoken to your attorney yet?"

"Yes. In fact I'm on my way to meet him right now. We're going to try to settle this thing as quickly as possible. But I'm sure you don't want to hear my problems..."

"No, it's okay Tony," Bethany assured him, "we can talk if you want."

"Well maybe I don't want to talk about them either. I just wanted to hear a friendly voice - your voice actually. So why don't we change the subject? How about dinner later tonight? There's a new Italian restaurant opening in Tribeca."

"Sorry, Tony," Bethany replied sadly, "as much as I'd love to, I'm guarding some Chinese Ambassador - the son of some Chairman of the National something or other - for this Mae West Gala Tribute at the Lincoln Center this evening."

"That's too bad. I was really hoping to see you."

"Well, I'd love to see you too, but...hey, maybe you could come! It shouldn't be too hard for you of all people to get a ticket."

"That sounds like an idea," Tony muttered. "But maybe we could still talk now... about something fun perhaps?."

"Like what?"

"Well let's see..." Tony thought about it for a moment, then whispered cheekily, "What are you wearing?"

"Just a towel," Bethany replied provocatively, "and a smile."

"Sounds inviting."

"Which one?" Bethany teased. Her voice was soft, sensuous and enticing.

"Both." Tony found himself relaxing within the shell of his armor. Bethany's sense of humor was extremely endearing and she brought a ray of light to the grimmest of situations simply by her presence.

Bethany giggled playfully, but feeling a sense of duty, decided that now would be a good time to end the call before she got too distracted. "Well, much as I'd like to stay and chat, I'd better get off the phone before your active imagination runs rampant and finish up here. I have Mr Pithins's son coming over to play twenty questions with me about my work, and I'm sure you have to fly. I'll speak to you soon, okay?"

Bethany hung up the receiver and then dropped her towel gingerly onto the bed, as she walked over to her closet for something to wear. She clicked open the door, only to find Gerrard hiding inside, his eyes and mouth wide open in disbelief as he saw his wildest dreams had just come true.

Bethany screamed in shock horror. "What are you doing in here?" she demanded, as she frantically attempted to cover up her immodesty. "Get out, you pervert!"



Gerrard tried to extricate himself: "I was just trying to see you..."

"Well it looks like you've seen plenty!" Bethany exclaimed, totally flabbergasted as she quickly wrapped her towel

around her body. "Get out of here. This isn't a peep show!"

Gerrard scrambled from the bedroom into the living room, with Bethany emerging a few minutes later now clad in a bathrobe. She was still rather flustered, and seething with exasperation as she drew in a deep, shuddering breath.

Gerrard tried to apologize: "I'm sorry Bethany, I..."

Bethany gasped again as she saw what Gerrard was holding in his hand: "I don't believe this! What are you doing with my

panties?" She quickly snatched it back as she continued: "Not only are you a voyeur, but a thief as well. Do you have some sick fetish or something?"

"I was going to put it back, but then I saw a bit of fluff..."

"Don't explain" she interrupted, rebuffing his attempts to remedy the situation. "I know you've been wanting to get your fanboy fix of testosterone-filled excitement since you got here, but this has just gone too far."

"But I didn't mean..."

"Please... just don't say anything. I don't think we can continue with this work shadowing thing, because you're obviously using it as an opportunity to alleviate your unbridled sexual fantasies involving me. I think you'd better leave."

Gerrard looked mortified, but said nothing. He bolted through the door of her apartment building like a scared rabbit, leaving Bethany shaking her head in frustration, still unable to believe that he could have seen her that way.

TO BE CONTINUED...

BETHANY CABE:
THE WOMAN IN RED
PART 3

By Welshcat © 2002

The story so far: *Bethany Cabe's latest assignment is a visiting Chinese Ambassador who thinks she is running an escort service. Meanwhile, she has also had to fend off the unwanted adolescent affections of Gerrard Pithins!*

CHAPTER 5: THE SETTLEMENT

"Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison." (The Bible, The Gospel According to Matthew Ch 5:25)



ALTHOUGH TONY STARK knew there was no possibility of literally ending up in prison, as this was merely a civil case, he was keen to settle matters as quickly as possible as there was much at stake here. Tony nevertheless felt imprisoned by the bind Uranus Bliss had left him in with regard to her sister and Tony's secretary, Mrs Bambi

Arbogast. Thus, with his armor feeling somewhat claustrophobic if not inappropriate for this meeting, Tony quickly changed into an expensive black Brioni suit and tie.

"Now, Tony," Foggy began, as Tony arrived in the reception of Murdock and Nelson, "we're due to be meeting the claimant in a moment, so just let me do the talking. I can make this go away."

"Hmm," Tony mused, "I've always felt you lawyers were just like magicians - you say a lot of words we don't understand and make things disappear."

"Well, if only I could make my own problems disappear as easily," Foggy shook his head sadly. "I think I need to see my therapist, but I'm worried because I can't stop thinking he'll conclude I'm either too neurotic or obsessive-compulsive."

"Well, I have complete confidence in you, Foggy."

Tony and Foggy went into a private conference room, where the other party were already seated. Tony was shocked to see Uranus Bliss in a neck brace and her arm in a sling.

Uranus's lawyer introduced himself. "Mr Schmuck, I'm Walter Lemelstrich, and no doubt you've already rubbed shoulders with my client, Mrs Bliss, on several occasions?"

"It's Stark actually," Tony replied, "and yes, we've bumped into each other once or twice before - metaphorically speaking, of course."

"You irresponsible half-wit," Uranus spoke up vehemently, "It's quite literally as well. You shouldn't be allowed out in public."

"Calm down, Mrs Bliss," Foggy interrupted in a conciliatory tone, his determination not dissolved by this rather adversarial start to the meeting, "Mr Lemelstrich, why don't we get straight to the main issues we wish to discuss?"

"Okay," Lemelstrich began, "my client claims that Mr Schmuck..."

"Stark!" Tony insisted.

"Stark, Schmuck, same difference," Lemelstrich dismissed him, "well, Mr 'Stark' here breached his general duty of care at a shindig two weeks ago through his negligent actions that resulted in the shoulder, neck and back injuries of my client. As a consequence, Mrs Blitz..."

"Bliss!" Uranus interrupted.

"Ah yes, sorry. Where was I? Oh yes, Mrs 'Bliss', has had to take time off work for medical treatment, and will continue to require medical assistance in the future. We are able to establish reasonable foreseeability and sufficient proximity as well as proof of causation..."

"Do you have a medical certificate?" Foggy asked. "My client has witnesses who can attest to the fact that Mrs Bliss was perfectly healthy yesterday when she served Mr Stark with her claim. Since this is only actionable upon proof of damage, I would question the veracity of your client's claim."

"What do you call these injuries?" Uranus shrieked, "you think I wear this paraphernalia for fun?"

"Mr Nelson," Lemelstrich continued, "my client can easily obtain a certificate. But Mr Schmuck, you seem to be a bit of a klutz - a tort waiting to happen. My client claims that she was recovering slowly, but your further negligence yesterday exacerbated her already existing injuries, so that this now becomes an action involving cumulative causes. In fact you bumped her on two separate occasions prior to the time in question, isn't that right? It seems, Mr Schmuck, that you've charged my client once too often."

"I thought that was what lawyers do," Tony joked.



"Now, Mr Schmuck, let's not get clever here," Lemelstrich frowned. "I've heard all the lawyer jokes before and someday I might even laugh at one. The fact is that Mrs Blitz claims she is more delicate and fragile than other women her age, and therefore likely to suffer more acutely as a result of her eggshell skull."

"Eggshell skull huh? She seems pretty hardboiled to me," Tony replied.

"Tony, please calm down and don't make cracks at her," Foggy advised him, attempting to mollify the situation, "you remember that we wanted a conciliatory result out of this meeting? You also agreed to let me do the talking, so let me finish negotiating a settlement. I promise we can get one in our favor."

"Well I was just getting to that part," Lemelstrich replied. "Mr Nelson, I believe Mrs Blitz has a strong case and that if she goes to court, the jury will decide that, given the abundant wealth of Mr Schmuck and the constant display of chutzpah he exhibits, she will receive far more in both compensatory and punitive damages than his current burnt offering. Now, I have spoken to my client and advised her that litigation is likely to take a lot of time and money, and we've discussed the initial offer your client has made. But my client is adamant that she wishes to pursue this claim rather than go for an out-of-court settlement."

Uranus burst in suddenly: "That's right! I don't want to settle. That man is a menace to society and deserves to be punished. I want my day in court, and for him to suffer as I've had to suffer, and the only way is by showing the jury what kind of a man he is!"

"Mr Lemelstrich," Foggy continued, ignoring the outburst, "my client wishes to maintain good working relations with your client's sister. Now he is completely prepared to compensate your client fully, but if need be, is also prepared to fight this."

"Well I've never understood why Bambi was working for a pinhead like you in the first place," Uranus snapped at Tony, "so I say she's better off without you. She can easily find work elsewhere."

"I'm sure she can," Foggy acknowledged her, "but Mr Stark tells me that he knows for a fact that she's very happy where she is right now. He's happy for her to stay, but realizes she might also feel awkward if you continue with these proceedings."

"Well, we have to weigh up the benefits and detriments to all parties," Lemelstrich replied, "and in my assessment even if my client goes through with the lawsuit, her sister will not be greatly disadvantaged if she were to find alternative employment. Your client however, is a rich man and the loss he will suffer from the punitive damages will only be a fraction of the earnings he makes in a year compared to both the pecuniary and non-pecuniary losses my client has suffered."

"That's right, pinhead," Uranus exclaimed, "we can't all be born with a silver spoon in our mouth! It gives me great pressure and no money to be here today."



"Silver spoon?" Tony exclaimed, "now just a minute, Uranus, before you start making accusations, if I could just butt in..."

"Butt in?" Uranus exploded. "I hope this isn't another unsubtle reference to my name! How many times do I have to tell you it's pronounced *Ur-anus* not *Ur-anus*!"

amus! Emphasis on the first syllable, not the last two!"

"Well, you say *Ur-anus*, he says *Ur-anus*," Foggy retorted, "let's call the whole thing off." Foggy realized the discussions were merely going in circles. "Mr Lemelstrich, we seem to have reached an impasse and are unable to make any headway here right now, particularly with everyone in this highly agitated state. I strongly advise your client to go away and think about the generous offer Mr Stark has made today. We can come back after the weekend and hopefully on Monday your client will be a little more open to negotiation."

"Well," Lemelstrich suggested in a desultory voice, "while we're all thinking about this, I'm going to be at the Annual Gala Tribute for Mae West at the Lincoln Center tonight, so if anyone needs to contact me... don't!"

"Actually, I was planning on being there myself." Tony replied. "I hear tickets are extremely pricey and selling like hotcakes, but I managed to pull a few strings and call in a few favors to get myself a last minute one."

"What?" Uranus shrieked. "I've had that booked in my diary for months, and now a pinhead like you decides to ruin my evening by showing up there too? This city isn't big enough for the two of us!"

"Don't worry," Tony assured her, "I'll stay well away from you at the gala tonight. You won't even know I'm there."

"YOU WERE PRETTY HARD ON HIM, Beth," Ling commented, having arrived home and listened to Bethany's complaint.

"Well, he was hiding in my wardrobe trying to get his jollies by spying on me while I was *au naturel*," Bethany replied, as she tried on a selection of dresses to wear for that evening.

"Did he get a good look or was it the bare minimum?"

"More like the bare essentials!" Bethany gasped.

"Well, as Mae West once said, "It's better to be looked over than overlooked.""

"Well," Bethany replied, as she undid her diaphanous aqua chiffon dress and dropped it to the floor, leaving her standing only in her panties, "if Mae West you like, and me undressed you like, then I guess anything goes."



"Well it is funny you know. You have to laugh."

"You wouldn't if it was you," Bethany remarked, trying on a red cheongsam which Ling had lent to her.

"Maybe not, but his pulse rate is bound to start soaring at the slightest glimpse of female flesh - especially yours. Let's face it, Beth, anyone would admit you're a very beautiful girl."

Bethany blushed at this comment, but said nothing.

"Remember how you were at that age," Ling continued, "and how you wouldn't have been able to control everything you did or said, and how you'd have felt if the guy you had a crush on suddenly didn't want to talk to you? Try to see it from his point of view."

"Well I was never like that and certainly didn't go round playing peek-a-boo in the boys' locker room."

"So Gerrard's seen you in the altogether, but you don't have to throw the baby out with the bath water - or in your case, after your shower. He said he was sorry didn't he? And if there's one thing about you that makes you as nice as you are, Beth, it's that you've always been sensitive to other people's feelings and will always be the first to reconcile, never allowing them to wallow in their own remorse and self-pity. That's part of why you're my best friend and why I love you. So go talk to him and sort things out."

"I guess I was pretty harsh, wasn't I?" Bethany admitted. "Okay, 'mom', I'll try to settle things later. Meanwhile, how do I look? Do you think I'll make a good impression with the Chinese Ambassador?"

"You look fabulous, Beth," Ling replied, "but then you would look good in a sack. The only problem is that you'll be far too hot in that thing in this weather, and you don't want to be too hot for him to handle!"

CHAPTER 6: PRETTY WOMAN



THE SUN SET upon another scorching day, and the glittering travertine towers and surrounding buildings comprising the magnificent fifteen acre complex of the Lincoln Center for Performing Arts sparkled like diamonds in the rich dusk blue sky. Below, the area between West 62nd and West 65th Streets off Broadway shone with

equal radiance with the arrival of a dazzling host of stars from the silver screen and music industry in a sea of limousines and expensive sports cars.

A few blocks away, Bethany left her West Side apartment garbed in a stunning shoulderless silver silk evening dress with high leg slits and a very low laced-up décolletage, and matching open-toed stilettos and handbag. Outside a sleek white stretch limousine with tinted windows was waiting like a golden carriage ready to take Cinderella to the ball. The chauffeur opened the door for her as she climbed into the back seat to find Mr Wong seated next to four other men. Wong promptly introduced her to her assignment for the evening, Mr Hu Chen Mee, the Chinese Ambassador from Beijing.

"Call me by my first name, Hu" Mr Mee insisted. "After all, we don't want to be too formal if we're going to get better acquainted this evening."

"And who are these?" Bethany inquired curiously.

"They're for security," Mee replied, "just in case."

How much protection does this man need this evening? Bethany thought to herself. Oh well, it didn't matter as she was being paid for her services.

AT THE LINCOLN CENTER, a tidal wave of celebrities, photographers and dignitaries were still pouring in through the main entrances on the north side of the main plaza facing a large fountain, each heading for the Avery Fisher Hall



where the Film Society's Annual Gala Tribute was to be held. The guest of honor was, of course, Mae West. It had been rumored

that the guest of honor was originally meant to be James Stewart, Barbara Stanwyck or Billy Wilder, but since West was close to death following a stroke, she was given the honorary position.

Bethany had made a quick but thorough reconnaissance of the immense complex, checking for emergency exits and other potential dangers. As she passed by the fountain, she could see the Metropolitan Opera House and the New York State Theater nearby. She ventured briefly inside the Avery Fisher Hall before the event had begun, and was overwhelmed at the immense interior highlighted by three tiers of comfortable, excellent sight-lines, and wood and glass baffles above the stage.

Outside in the multi-level glass-fronted lobby, she found Mr Mee surrounded by his security, in conversation with a number of celebrities and movie makers. Among them were

Martin Scorsese, Woody Allen and Diane Keaton. Walter Lemelstrich, Uranus Bliss's lawyer was also present. Mr Mee motioned to Bethany to come over. "I'd like to introduce you to my companion for the evening. This is Miss Bethany Cabe. Miss Cabe, I've been telling my colleagues here about your excellent working reputation."

"Oh, it's nothing" she blushed, slightly awestruck by the number of celebrities around her. "I like to think that I'm providing a valuable service to the community as a whole. We like to help people in all sorts of positions."

"I can picture that right now," Scorsese nodded. "So is it just you doing all the work? Or do you have other girls working for you?"

"No, it's just my partner Ling and myself at the moment," Bethany replied. "We might hire some more later, but right now we handle all the work personally. We are very fit and well-trained you know, and we manage to stay on top of our work."

"Wow," Woody Allen remarked, misreading her meaning, "I must say you look very capable. But doesn't it ever... you know... get a bit much?"

"Oh no, we've been in the business quite a while now," Bethany explained, naively unaware that her every response was being misconstrued as double entendre. "We are quite used to it all and we've built up a lot of stamina."

"Geez!" Woody Allen whispered to Mr Mee, "I've just about built up enough stamina for foreplay."

"Well, practice makes perfect," Mee answered him. He then focussed his attention back on Bethany: "So do you ever do big groups?"

"Oh yes, but then it gets a bit much for one of us, so the other will come and lend a hand."

"Goodness! You are both very active," Diane Keaton exclaimed.

"Goodness has nothing to do with it. It's all part of the job."

Bethany caught sight of Tony amid another group of celebrities near the bar. He was in conversation with Jim Rhodes, who had tagged along to ensure Tony kept well away from Uranus Bliss. "Would you mind?" she said, "I see some friends and I'd like to say hello."

"You weren't kidding that she's very keen." Lemelstrich said to Mr Mee as the both gazed longingly at Bethany's bare back. "I tried using one of those escort girls myself once but she thought that as a lawyer, I wasn't sexually active enough."

"But I thought you're both used to screwing clients, so what's the problem?"

"She said I spent my time just lying there."

BETHANY LEFT THE GATHERING as they traded anecdotes about the movie industry, their voices gradually trailing off into the background. However, as she sauntered through the crowd to the bar where Tony and Rhodney were conversing, this new group watched, every eye magnetized by her, as they gazed appreciatively at her long legs flashing through the slits in her dress as she walked.

"Hey strangers" Bethany said.

"Wow, Bethany" Tony exclaimed in amazement, "if I told you that you were a beautiful bodyguard, would you hold me against you?"



"Of course," Bethany grinned, as she embraced Tony.

"Hey why don't any of those lines ever work for me?" Rhodey inquired.

"Maybe you're throwing them to the wrong kind of fish?" Bethany speculated.

"Well how about you set me up with one of your girlfriends," Rhodey suggested, "say Ling for example?"

"Uh, I could try," Bethany replied hesitantly, "but I don't think she'd like me playing matchmaker right now while she's still recovering from her injuries."

"No problem," Rhodey responded, nodding his head.

"By the way, Tony" Bethany asked, "how was the meeting?"

"Uh, do you mind if we don't talk about it right now, Beth?"

"Sure," she agreed. "I thought you'd be tired after it though, and might not show tonight. If I didn't know better, I'd say you couldn't stay away from me."

"It must be to do with all those years I worked with reverse magnetism," Tony quipped. "I love your dress by the way, especially this lace bodice. It really brings out the bust in you."

"Thank you," Bethany smiled. "You know how I like to keep abreast of the latest fashions."

"Of course!" Tony replied, gazing appreciatively at her, wondering what would happen to her dress if he were to suddenly pull on the laces.

"By the way, where's Iron Man tonight?" Bethany inquired, interrupting his thoughts. "Isn't he supposed to be protecting you or is he off oiling his armor?"

"Oh, Iron Man had a pressing engagement. I'm sure we'll hear a squeak out of him sooner or later though. But who are you looking after tonight?"

"Oh, he's a Chinese Ambassador from Beijing - someone important I think. He seems fairly well guarded though, so I'm feeling slightly redundant this evening. Here let me introduce you."

"I'm gonna catch you in a bit, chief," Rhodey said, "I see some cute starlet over there who looks like she needs a bit of looking after herself."

"Okay, see you later Rhodey." Tony replied.

Bethany led Tony towards the group she had left earlier.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she began, "I'd like you to meet Tony Stark, a VERY good friend of mine."

"Ah, Mr Stark." Hu Chen Mee replied, "I'm glad to finally meet you in person."

"The pleasure's all mine. Bethany tells me you are a Chinese Ambassador?"

"You could say that. I'm the son of the Chairman of the National People's Congress. It's the highest legislation-making body in China with the power to appoint government ministers, approve legislation, and to oversee all affairs with foreign states."

"I'm somewhat familiar with the Chinese governmental system, having been there on several occasions," Tony replied.

"Excellent. Well, I won't waste anymore time explaining then."

"That's okay. But it's quite unusual for people in your position to be mixing in these social circles at this type of event."

"It's my first time to the States, and I want to experience every aspect of New York life, including the glitz and glamour. But enough about me. Why don't I introduce you to everyone else."

"Pleased to meet you all," Tony said as he shook everyone's hands. "And I believe I already know Mr Lemelstrich."

"In the meantime," Bethany interjected, "if you'll excuse me I'm going to use the ladies room. I'll be back in a minute."

As Bethany left, Mr Mee moved in to quiz Tony on a particular issue: "I notice that you seem to be very well acquainted with Miss Cabe."

"That's right. The two of us are seeing each other right now."

"Really? She's taken on double the workload this evening? She must have a hard night ahead of her."

"No, no, I'm not seeing her in a work capacity - it's purely a personal relationship."

"Ah, I see. And you don't mind her... you know, continuing her work on the side with all these other clients?"

"Of course not." Tony replied, thinking Mr Mee was referring to Bethany's work as a bodyguard, "I know she's extremely dedicated to her job and that's why she's the best - so I want to give her all the encouragement she can get."

"But doesn't it all get in the way of your relationship with Miss Cabe?"

"On the contrary," Tony disagreed, "I think it keeps it healthier, We have more to talk about, especially since we are working in two completely different areas."

"You mean she actually talks about her work to you?" Mr Mee seemed slightly shocked that Bethany could be so candid about her profession.

"Sure. She doesn't reveal anything confidential, but she often tells me about her different clients and the things she has to do with them."

"So she must sleep with a lot of people then?" Lemelstrich inquired.

Tony was slightly shocked: "Well, I think that's actually her business."

"Oh yes, of course." Lemelstrich nodded. "You're absolutely right. What was I thinking."

"That's okay."

"But I must say you are very open-minded about her work," Mee commended Tony. "Well, as long as you are happy..."
"It really doesn't bother me at all - not in the least."

Bethany returned to the group. "Well guys, the girl with the red hair is back. So what have you been talking about in my absence?"

"As a matter of fact," Mee replied, "Mr Stark has just been telling me how he completely approves of your work with Miss McPherson."

"Of course," Bethany teased, "he has to say that, otherwise Ling and I would rough him up personally later on."



THE EVENING WORE ON, with numerous movie clips and anecdotes from Mae West's career, together with various stars or directors she had worked with paying tribute to her. The star herself capped this memorable evening with an

entertaining and most gracious acceptance speech filled with her world-famous innuendo and double entendres as the auditorium gave her a standing ovation.

"Thank you," the movie star declared, "I am truly touched. But with my health, if you keep touching me I'll be sure to die of a stroke!"

AFTER THE TRIBUTE, a sumptuous meal followed in a grand dining hall. Once this had come to an end, the celebrities filed out of the hall and congregated outside in the moonlit, open air plaza where a tangle of photographers were still waiting, hoping to catch a shot of one of the stars for the arts section of the morning newspapers. The sound of hundreds of voices filled the air, with conversations ranging from the deep and meaningful to the trivial and downright bizarre:

"Mr Schmuck" Lemelstrich spoke, "I have a theory that your bodyguard, Iron Man is actually Jewish."

"Oh?" Tony replied, rather bemused. "Why do you say that?"

"Well, he is a Goldman, so perhaps that says something about him."

"Uh... I'll be sure to ask him one day," Tony replied.

ELSEWHERE, BETHANY was encountering some equally intriguing if not personal questions: "Excuse me, one photographer asked her, "weren't you in last month's Playboy?"

"Dream on," she replied. She thought about the implication of her statement for a moment, then retracted it: "On second thoughts, don't."

"She's with me," Mr Mee announced, walking over to her and placing his hand on her posterior.

"Mr Mee," Bethany remarked, "is that your hand I'm experiencing on my behind?"

"Yes," Mee replied, "tell me, how do you like it there?"

"I'd really appreciate you moving it, please."

"Of course. Would you prefer a firm massage or just a gentle caress?"

"I mean remove your hand from my ass!"

"But you're such a nubile young nymph and so lovely from top to bottom."

"Mr Mee, please..." Bethany shifted quickly away to avoid any unnecessary confrontation. After all, he was still her client and she had a job to protect him.

MEANWHILE, RHODEY was attempting to make his acquaintance with a stunning yet ditzzy blonde starlet named Madison, but was not experiencing a great deal of success.

"How would you like to star in my life?" Rhodey quipped.

"How would you like to get lost?" she retorted, "you're not my type."

"Ouch," Rhodey replied, "I didn't realize this was what it meant to be starstruck."

"Having a little difficulty?" came a voice from behind him. Rhodey turned around to see a friendly face. It was Tony.

"You could say that," he replied. "I must've spoken to at least a dozen actresses and starlets tonight and none of them showed the slightest bit of interest."

Tony smirked. "I've been watching you from time to time fluttering around the place like a socially obsessed butterfly. I think you're coming on a bit too strong. If you sound like you're feeding a girl a line they're bound to be a bit cautious."

"Well, how else am I gonna meet some ladies? I think they're being too damned stiff-necked, looking down on me just cause o' my color, or cause I'm a pilot and not some celebrity or wealthy socialite like you from the Upper East Side."

"Oh, I don't know," Tony shook his head, "in a melting pot like New York, every color makes up part of the rainbow. And the fact that there are so many Upper East Siders here at the West Side tonight challenges this whole paranoia of neighborhood snobbery. Besides, I would've thought some women would like a man in uniform."

"More like a straight jacket from what I've encountered. The only woman who showed any interest was some eccentric actress named Ffion who regularly dyes her own cat the color purple. Now what kind of looney bin did she escape from?"

"You just haven't met the right girl." Tony assured him. "I know just the woman for you who just happens to be right here tonight. Would you like me to introduce you?"



"After my luck, I'm open to trying anything - even going on the Ricki Lake show!"

"Well, hopefully it won't come to that," Tony assured him. He called

over to a sultry-looking titian brunette standing nearby who greeted him with a warm, congenial smile. "Kimberly, I'd like you to meet a good friend of mine."

Tony swiftly made the introductions. "Rhodey, this is Kimberly Quantelle, a fashion model and aspiring actress from Brooklyn Heights. Kimberly, this is Jim Rhodes, a very old friend of mine. He's an ex fighter pilot in the US Marines."

"How fascinating!" Kimberly beamed, fluttering her eyelashes. "I just love soldiers. - so strong and tough... such men of action."

"Well, I prefer to make love, not war. So call me the Love Machine!"

"Well, I'll leave you two to get acquainted," Tony smiled as he moved away to give them some privacy. Before he left, he whispered in Rhodey's ear: "Go easy on the lines with Kimberly okay? Just be yourself."

"Sure boss," he replied, turning his attention back to Kimberly: "Now a jet-setter like yourself must travel by Concorde - you look supersonic."

IN ANOTHER PART OF THE PLAZA, Bethany was having a little trouble fending off the unwanted attentions of an overly amorous admirer who was adhering to her like a leech.

"You're back, I see," Bethany remarked.

"Yes, and I see your back too," Mr Mee replied, "and it looks wonderful from this angle. You're not wearing a bra under there are you?"

"Shouldn't you be admiring something else instead," she insisted, "like a certain Mae West?"

"Oh no," Mee ignored her, "what you have on display is far more titillating."

Bethany sighed: "Mr Mee, surely this can't be the first time you ever came in contact with a woman like me?"

"If I can help it, it won't be the last" He reached out to put his hand around her waist.

"Mr Mee, I'm not that type of girl" Bethany gasped incredulously.

"I don't mind. You can be any type of girl you want to be tonight. I like a bit of role play myself."

"Now Mr Mee," Bethany insisted, attempting to rebuff his advances, "you must try to control yourself and give your libido a rest."

"Well why don't we both find a nice place to lie down and you can make me a star?"

"I'm not going to sleep with you, Mr Mee!" Bethany gasped.

"But you're such a sex object!"

"And that's why I'm objecting to sex! I never mix business with pleasure."

"I thought that's exactly what kind of business you did. A woman in red!"

"Whatever do you mean?"

"Aren't you a fille de joie? - a hooker?"

"What?" Bethany was dumbfounded. "I'll show you 'fille de joie'", she said, as she slapped his cheek, "take joy in this!"

"Ow, that hurt," Mee exclaimed, as he felt his face stinging. "You've obviously been dissatisfied with some customers before."

"Not like this! Whatever gave you the idea that I'm some cheap strumpet?"

"I never said you were cheap. I paid good money for you."

"Well you've obviously paid for the wrong type of services."

"But your advert... I thought you girls were some kind of courtesans marketing your wares."

"What?" Bethany thought back to the somewhat ambiguous wording in the advert Ling had recently amended. She sighed with frustration, knowing Ling had a lot to answer for later tonight. In the meantime, she had to deal with the matter at hand: "Mr Mee, don't you think I look a bit too well dressed to be a prostitute?"

"Well, so was Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*, so I'm not complaining. Besides, your friend Tony confirmed it when he said he completely approved of you sleeping around. He said it was your very business."

"He said what?" Bethany was flabbergasted.

Bethany pushed Mee to one side and made her way over to Tony, grabbing his arm to draw him from his circle of conversation.

"I want a word with you, Tony," she muttered, clenching her teeth.

"Sure, Beth, what is it? You seem kinda upset, but have I ever told you you're beautiful when you're ..."

"Don't you give me the silver tongue," came the tense reply. "What's this I hear that you've been telling people I'm some kind of hooker?"

"What? Where did you get such a notion from?"

"Oh, a little bird-brain told me - Mr Mee said that you told him prostitution was my business in front of all these celebrities."



"What? Now Bethany, I think there's been a slight case of Chinese Whispers at work here."

Before Bethany could answer, at that moment a group of heavily armed commandos stormed into the plaza outside the Avery Fisher Hall, their guns trained upon the hapless guests who were gasping in terror.

"Greetings," a voice spoke. "Well aren't you going to roll out the red carpet?"

TO BE CONTINUED...

BETHANY CABE:
THE WOMAN IN RED
PART 4

By Welshcat © 2002

The story so far: *Uranus Bliss refuses to settle the lawsuit with Tony Stark. Meanwhile, at the Lincoln Center, Bethany discovers that her assignment believes she is a prostitute, just as the place is stormed by a group of armed soldiers!*

CHAPTER 7: BIG TROUBLE IN LITTLE CHINA

"An absolute silence leads to sadness: it is the image of death." (Rousseau, Reveries of a Solitary Walker, 1782).

A SERENE HUSH HUNG IN THE AIR, as the leader of the group strode forward, a deathly specter of a man: gaunt, yet dour in appearance, with piercing, sunken eyes and a graying beard. "Allow me to introduce myself," he said. "I am Milton Metaxis." His voice was cold and authoritative and he spoke very deliberately.



"Oh, that's clever," Jim Rhodes exclaimed, "why don't you tell us your name so the cops can trace you."

"Silence that cretin!" Metaxis barked. A dull, metallic thud was heard

as the butt of a machine gun cracked against the back of Rhodey's skull, sending him reeling to the floor in pain.

"Next time, it will be a bullet!" Metaxis assured the crowd.

"I've heard of you," Tony spoke up, "you're that shipping magnate of the Metaxis Maritime Consortium with several business ventures in the Far East."

"Ah yes, and you must be the renowned Tony Stark, the billionaire industrialist who some compare to Howard Hughes... or is it Errol Flynn?"

"Well, there does seem to be a general theme of old movie stars here at the Lincoln Center tonight."

"But my quarrel is not with you. All I want is Hu Chen Mee, the son of the Chairman of the National People's Congress of China. Now Mr Mee, the sooner you step forward, the sooner we can get this over with. In the meantime, my men will be relieving the rest of you kind people of your personal possessions, just in case."

The place was silent, as all the guests stood deathly still, waiting to see whether Hu Chen Mee would show himself. At the same time, the commandos began circling around the plaza, gathering each of the celebrities' belongings, and relieving Mee's bodyguards of their weapons. "Nobody move," they insisted, "no-one's going to get hurt if you all just stay calm."

I have to get out of here somehow and change into Iron Man, Tony thought to himself. Got to create some kind of diversion.

Meanwhile, Bethany was thinking along those same lines. *Tony's gonna get himself killed trying to get out and change. I stand a far better chance against those creeps than he does without his armor, so I guess it's up to me to stop them.*

One of the commandos came over to Bethany and stood there lingering, his eyes lasciviously toying with the deep shadow of her cleavage behind her laced décolletage. "We'd better frisk you several times to be on the safe side, Miss," he muttered, "I see a couple of luscious diamonds under there."

"Hands off, you pervert!" Bethany gasped, as she twisted the man's hand as he tried to grab at her breast. She swung her long leg in the air and kicked him in the face, sending him reeling in pain.

Immediately, the other commandos focussed their weapons on Bethany. Tony took this as an opportunity to make his escape, and took off at a run.

"Get after him!" Metaxis ordered. "Don't let him escape."

A couple of commandos followed Tony as he skidded towards an old lady and attempted to brush past her. It was Uranus Bliss.

"You again!" she grimaced. "One lawsuit isn't enough for you? Well, you're not going to get away with it this time you plebeian!" She burst into a tantrum and began clubbing him with her handbag.

"Sorry ma'am, but I'll deal with you later." Tony managed to move her aside without knocking her over this time as he made off quickly. Unfortunately, the commandos were carving a path through the crowd as they shoved several photographers and celebrities out of their way. When they came to Uranus Bliss, they simply knocked her over into the fountain, causing a loud splash.

"You'll pay for this, you... Neanderthals!" she raged, as she shook an angry fist at them.

Tony made it out of the lobby and into the moonlit open air plaza drawing a breath of relief. He mused about his dilemma along the way. "I really don't like leaving Bethany alone like that," he said to himself, "even though I know she's expertly trained in combat. She could've gotten herself killed just there. I've got to find a place to change quickly and bring things under control."

Tony whirled and ran through the plaza, his eyes darting around for a means of escape in this labyrinth of travertine architecture. He could hear the pounding footsteps behind, gaining on him fast, despite the fact that a piece of music by Verdi was emanating from the nearby Metropolitan Opera House. As he raced towards the New York State Theater, he caught sight of the Reflecting Pool shimmering in the moonlight. As he entered the building, he noticed a man exiting simultaneously. He brushed past them, pushing them out the way as he darted down one of the darkened corridors, pushing his legs to the limit.



The commandos grabbed the man standing outside by the front of his shirt. "Which way did he go?"

The man jerked one finger out and stammered a response in absolute terror. "T... That way."

"Quick," one of them shouted, "we can catch up with him."

A frantic rush ensued as the two commandos hurried through the corridors after their prey. Meanwhile, sweat was pouring down Tony's brow in buckets, his legs were beginning to feel like rubber beneath him, and his lungs felt

like they were about to burst. It wasn't that he unfit, but in this sweltering humidity, there was so little oxygen left in the air that every step he took was an effort.

Suddenly, Tony saw what looked like a light at the end of a tunnel for him. It was an elevator, and the doors were open. He made a supreme effort to reach it and leapt inside, the doors closing just in time as the two commandos closed in.

The commandos raced up the nearby stairwell following the elevator as it ascended floor by floor. As the elevator finally ground to a halt, the men trained their weapons at the door ready to shoot as they approached it stealthily. The bell sounded and the door slid open.

Suddenly a familiar figure of red and gold shot out like a bullet. It was the armored avenger known as the Invincible Iron Man.

"Going down, gentlemen?" he said.

"Aw geez! We're done for!" both of the commandos cried, as Iron Man flew towards them and cracked the two men's skulls against each other.

"Sorry, but this situation's just come to a head," Iron Man quipped.

BACK IN THE PLAZA, outside the Avery Fisher Hall, Metaxis had pulled Bethany to one side. "That was a stupid stunt, young lady," he declared, "we wouldn't want to see such a lovely young thing like you be put to waste now would we?"

"So why am I speaking to trash like you then?"

"I suggest you tame your tongue my dear before making a judgment. I'm not some one-dimensional villain with delusions of grandeur and world domination. On the contrary, my motives are strictly of a personal nature."

"Well you seem quite villainous to me."

"Feisty little thing aren't you? But we've already had enough people tonight trying to play hero. With any luck, my men will have disposed of Tony Stark trying to escape."

"You creep!" Bethany hissed.



"Leave her alone!" a voice declared from behind Metaxis. "I am Hu Chen Mee. What do you want from me?"

"Ah, Mr Mee!" Metaxis exclaimed, turning around to face his enemy, "we finally have the pleasure of meeting face to face. You are a brave man coming forward like this, and for your courage, I will give you the

satisfaction of learning the precise nature of my contention with you."

"I've never met you before!" Mee protested.

"Of course not. But I am quite familiar with your father and the outdated politics of your country. Your government is holding my son prisoner and I wish his return. Does the name Myron Metaxis mean anything to you?"

"Not really. Should it?"

"As Chairman of the National People's Congress, your father has ultimate authority over a group of fishermen on

board the vessel, *the Mephistopheles*, recently imprisoned while attempting to pass through your waters off the port of Tianjin. Perhaps you know the one? They had the right of innocent passage as a foreign merchant ship under the *Convention on the Territorial Sea 1958*."



"I've heard about that ship!" Mee declared. "It's said to be bad luck! The crew were hardly innocent - they were carrying munitions on board, and article 14 of that same Convention you

just cited specifically states that 'passage ceases to be innocent where it is prejudicial to the peace, good order or security of the coastal state.'"

"Such clichéd words," Metaxis gloated. "You've obviously memorized them like a mindless automaton programmed to follow in your father's footsteps. If you must know, the firearms my son's crew possessed were merely to protect them against the pirates operating in your country known as the Red Guards, which your government has done practically nothing about. Instead of adopting a zero tolerance policy, your crime rate with regard to terrorism has increased by up to forty percent, and now your government has the cheek to imprison innocent civilians who were simply attempting to defend themselves?"

"That's your side of the story. My father has various pieces of evidence proving they were guilty of these very acts of piracy you report. Since terrorism is a capital offence, your son will be tried under our own legal system."

"Oh, I am thoroughly familiar with the Chinese judicial system and its lack of a presumption of innocence. And your Congress are too timid to oppose the decisions of the State Council as though you were little more than a pathetic set of 'yes-men' waiting to approve proposals with their rubber stamps. But it bothers you little that once Myron is sentenced, he will be executed within a week."

"If he is repentant, then he will be shown mercy."

"Yes, I've heard the Chinese legal motto before," Metaxis dismissed him: "*leniency for those who confess, severity for those who resist*". But you see, Mr Mee, your country's legal system is both corrupt and unfair and hopelessly bound up in the past, with little or no awareness of the various Human Rights conventions operating in both America and Europe. I find that unacceptable. Therefore, I am taking you hostage in exchange for my son. Perhaps this will give you ample time to ponder upon those words, 'severity for those who resist.'"

"But I do not even hold any authority in government," Mee protested, "so how will that help you?"



"Your father is the third most powerful person in China. As Chairman of the National People's Congress, he is subordinate only to the President and Prime Minister, but with the responsibility

for electing them both. Now given that you are his eldest son, I am sure it would not be an understatement to say that he would be keen to see you returned. That of course comes with a price - that he uses his influence in state affairs to

assist in my son's liberation in exchange for you. You could call it poetic justice - one son in exchange for another!"

"You don't have to do it this way." Bethany intervened. "That's why we have diplomats."

"Unfortunately my dear," Metaxis explained, "the US Embassy in Beijing are merely a bunch of boot-licking bureaucrats tied up in endless red tape. By the time they have finished sorting through their political mess it will be too late for Myron. No, the only way to make any headway here is through a coup d'état."

"Then you're no better than those terrorists or pirates you claim to oppose," Bethany exclaimed. "You won't get away with this!"

"And who's to stop me? You?" Metaxis let out a diabolical laugh as if to suggest he did not consider this lissome young girl before him a serious threat.

Bethany said nothing as Metaxis motioned to one of the commandos to move her to one side. As the soldier did so, he pulled her handbag away from her, dropping it onto the ground. The contents of it fell out, revealing her handgun inside. Bethany bit her bottom lip, her expression changing to one of guilt as she realized she had been discovered.

"What's this?" Metaxis inquired, picking up the gun to examine it closely. "A Smith & Wesson three fifty-seven Magnum? I would've speculated you were a cop, but they only carry standard issue thirty eight revolvers."

"Well, size does matter," Bethany replied.

"So just who are you?" Metaxis pressed her.

"I'm Mr Mee's bodyguard," Bethany confessed, "so if you want him, you'll have to get through me."

"You're a bodyguard?" Mr Mee gasped in complete surprise, "but I already have my own men!"



Metaxis chuckled as he gazed intently at Bethany, attempting to comprehend the apparent contradiction of this extremely pretty girl and the fact that she was a top level security

specialist. "My dear," he said mockingly, "I must congratulate you - *Bravo!* I would never have guessed. I must admit you really are quite lovely for someone in your profession. But I'm afraid you are quite expendable too. I will take Mr Mee even if it means over your dead and rather beautiful body."

Metaxis cocked the hammer on his pistol and aimed it directly at Bethany's face, his forefinger slowly applying pressure to the trigger. The red-headed bodyguard was left staring down the barrel of the gun as she appeared to face certain death.

"Well young lady," he taunted her, "are you ready to bite the bullet?"

CHAPTER 8: THE BODYGUARD

"It is possible to provide security against other ills, but as far as death is concerned, we men all live in a city without walls." (Epicurus, Vatican Sayings, 3rd c. BC)

AS A SECURITY SPECIALIST, Bethany Cabe had guarded against it, prepared for it. She had even tasted it indirectly with the loss of those she loved. However, now that she looked death in the face herself, she could not help but feel the fear of it as a drop of sweat trickled slowly down her spine. Nevertheless, she retained her composure and did not flinch as she waited for the impending explosion to occur.

Tonight, however, was to not be the appointed hour of her demise, as a terrific flash of blinding repulsor rays blasted onto the marbled floor beside Metaxis, knocking him aside. Bethany's knight in shining crimson and gold armor descended into the plaza like a shooting star, causing everyone to step back in amazement.

Metaxis was momentarily disorientated, and so Bethany took the opportunity to subdue him with a punch to his mouth. She then grabbed her Magnum and leapt out of the way for cover.

"I hate to crash the party," an electronic voice announced, "but I just had to drop in."

"It's Iron Man!" one of the commandos declared.

"Blast that tin-plated walking academy award!" Metaxis barked, as he wiped the blood from his bottom lip. "Get him, you fools or he'll ruin everything!"

"Ladies and gentlemen," Iron Man announced through his internal speaker system as the commandos trained their weapons at him, "get down. I repeat, get down... now!"

The frightened and screaming guests huddled for safety on the ground like a mass of corpses as a flurry of armor-piercing bullets let loose in the direction of the golden avenger like a swarm of killer bees. The Plexiglas shields on Iron Man's eye and mouth slits lowered immediately, as the bullets simply whined and ricocheted off his armor, unable to stop this invincible juggernaut in his tracks.

This could be dangerous for all the innocent bystanders here, Iron Man thought. If one of those bullets connect, they'll be killed or seriously wounded. I have to act quickly.



"Had enough playing with those peashooters?" Iron Man inquired, as the commandos stood there in disbelief as they realized their weapons were ineffective against his impenetrable

transistorized armor.

"Aw geez!" one of the commandos cried, "these armor-piercing bullets... they don't pierce!"

"Well I won't let that get to me," Iron Man continued. "Now give it up. None of you stand a chance. We can do this the hard way or..."

Iron Man's words were interrupted as another staccato of bullets fired upon him. Again, they failed to make any

impact. "I guess it's the hard way then," he remarked. "Some villains never learn."

Iron Man fired with a narrow-angled repulsor ray blast aimed carefully at the machine guns of two of the commandos, shattering their weapons. The commandos were momentarily stunned in surprise, as the avenger released another burst of tremendous energy, causing the ground beneath them to explode instantly into hundreds of small fiery fragments which came crashing down upon them like a landslide.

MEANWHILE, RHODEY seized the commando who had struck him earlier, his eyes seeking revenge. "C'mere you sucker!" he swore, "you wanna mess with my head? I'll give you one helluva headache that'll put you on aspirin for the rest o' your life!"

ELSEWHERE, BETHANY fired her pistol at the nearest soldier. The deafening shots of the Magnum rang out as two slugs were fired. The soldier flinched and stumbled backwards, momentarily concussed, but did not appear to be adversely affected. Bethany realized that he was probably wearing Kevlar. The soldiers had obviously prepared for this coup.

The commando returned fire in Bethany's direction as she leapt for safety. The screams of the crowd could be heard loudly as the swarm of bullets narrowly missed them. Bethany thought frantically, realizing she had to disarm this soldier immediately before he eventually killed someone. She aimed carefully and fired another shot at the soldier's weapon.

The force of the bullet tore into his hand, causing him to drop his machine gun. Bethany leapt up, seizing her opportunity while the soldier was momentarily disorientated to put him permanently out of action.

Bethany was a superb gymnast and athlete, and sprang herself from her feet onto her hands as she launched into a sudden walkover. The heels of her stilettos dug into the soldier's face as he howled in pain.

Bethany landed on her feet, but the heel on her shoe broke, causing her to lose balance. The soldier, whose face was still bleeding, used this opportunity to fling Bethany to one side in one quick flip of the arm. Bethany stared as she suddenly became aware of the size of her opponent. She was confronted by a burly-looking gunman, powerfully built and standing over six feet five inches tall.

IRON MAN, IN THE MEANTIME, was repeating his earlier strategy of blasting the ground from under the soldiers' feet. It had proved a somewhat effective, albeit risky maneuver, but there was precious little time to formulate a safer plan.

The commandos, realizing that the armored avenger far outgunned them with his awesome firepower, began to take flight. At the same time, the distant howl of police sirens could be heard, edging closer. Iron Man had already alerted the New York Police Department from his internal communication system, and the place would soon be swarming with a mass of blue uniforms.

BETHANY QUICKLY PICKED HERSELF UP and scrambled to her feet. The gunman cocked a right and left fly. She ducked swiftly, the blow narrowly missing her. The gunman bore in again, sledging at Bethany with massive fists, but she caught him with a jab to the head. The gunman roared, her considerably smaller hands proving to be merely a minor irritation like a mosquito, as he lunged at his opponent.

Bethany decided she wouldn't try that again. She didn't want to hurt her hands. Besides, her opponent's bull strength far exceeded hers. However, he no skill, whereas Bethany was agile and athletic and easily side-stepped him as he charged furiously like a steam train. Bethany used her opponent's own weight and momentum together with a well-placed kick from behind to send him flying in the direction he was already travelling, and crashing heavily into the nearby fountain.

The gunman stayed down as Bethany breathed a sigh of relief. She looked around quickly to see Mr Mee huddled next to a group of startled onlookers. "Are you alright?" she inquired.

"That was magnificent!" Mee replied. "Where did you learn to fight like that?"

"Let's just say I've watched a lot of Chop-Socky movies," Bethany answered him, as a sea of black and blue washed into the moonlit plaza, bringing the police force into the action. Suddenly, an alarming thought flashed across Bethany's mind. Where was Metaxis?

The enigmatic shipping magnate was nearby, and had grabbed the first person nearest to him as a hostage as collateral for his intended means of escape. It was Uranus Bliss.

"Unhand me, you heathen!" she shrieked brusquely.

"Silence!" Metaxis ordered, placing a gun to her head.

Uranus froze suddenly, her whole body rigid with terror as her nerves sang with fear. "Please don't hurt me," she pleaded as he ran swiftly with her, heading for the Metropolitan Opera House.

"Rhodey, stay here with Mr Mee," Bethany ordered as she threw off her shoes and darted towards the Opera House, pursuing Metaxis in her bare feet.

THE GOLDEN AVENGER had finished rounding up most of the commandos, but since the police could adequately manage with the rest of them, he flew back towards the crowd, landing where Rhodey was sitting, still clutching his bleeding head as he kept an eye on Mr Mee.

"Rhodey," Iron Man urged him, "where's Bethany?"

"Shellhead," Rhodey answered, "she's gone after Metaxis. You've got to stop him - he's got Mrs Arbogast's sister and they're heading for the Metropolitan Opera."

Iron Man did not need to be told twice. He soared upwards towards the magnificent Opera House, sighing with frustration on the way there. He thought back to his own skirmish in Atlantic City, and how Bethany had severely reprimanded him for his cavalier attitude, instead of protecting Tony Stark. Now it appeared that Bethany had adopted that same headstrong approach, leaving her own assignment in the hands of another while heading off to play heroine. Who was guarding who?



Inside, Bethany raced through the rich red and gold interior of the palatial travertine building. She could hear the orchestra were still innocently playing as the music had drowned out all surrounding sounds. Bethany ran gracefully

like a gazelle, pursuing her prey as she saw that Metaxis was heading towards the roof. She followed suit.



Some moments later, Iron Man espied Metaxis tearing across the rooftop with Uranus, while Bethany followed some distance behind. He swooped down as he heard gunshots fired back and

forth, but held back once he saw that the lithe red head appeared to have the matter under control. Bethany was likely to resent Iron Man's sudden interference, and things were already up in the air with regard to her reputation after an unfortunate misunderstanding with the Chinese Ambassador this evening.

Bethany chased Metaxis to the edge of the building, as they drew to an abrupt halt.

"Metaxis," Bethany urged him, "let her go. Whatever your grievance is here with Mr Mee, it's not worth taking the life of an innocent civilian over."

"Really?" Metaxis replied, "there seems to be some debate over the meaning of 'innocent civilian' these days. The Chinese legal system has no trouble in ignoring the concept of a presumption of innocence when it comes to my son."

"I don't know your son's situation fully," Bethany continued, "but you've already done enough here today to constitute acts of terrorism. If you kill this woman now in cold blood, how will that help your son? She's not even involved in any of this."

"I fully understand that, and in truth, I have no intention of killing her. My real bargaining chip was to be Hu Chen Mee until you decided to interfere. It seems I've underestimated you as an opponent. Your obviously innocent girlish appeal is quite disarming to would-be assassins. Who would've thought a bit of skirt like yourself would be so dangerous?"

"That's the general idea," Bethany replied. "But bargaining with one prisoner for another won't help you. Tony Stark can get you the best legal counsel around, but you've got to stop this madness right now and surrender yourself. Let her go."



"I'm sorry, but I cannot turn myself in, and I will not rely on Stark either. There is too much at stake here."

"Then I have no choice but to stop you," Bethany replied, pointing her Magnum at Metaxis as she cocked the hammer.

"You won't shoot," Metaxis taunted her.

"Don't bet on it," Bethany responded. "I'm an expert markswoman and I can take you out even if you have a hostage in front of you. So now, are *you* ready to bite the bullet?" Bethany wasn't entirely sure she could hit her target, but she thought it sounded tough, and might give Metaxis food for thought. If it came to it though, she probably wouldn't pull the trigger without Uranus safely out of the line of fire.

Suddenly, Bethany looked up as she heard the cacophonous noise of helicopter blades whirring somewhere overhead, rapidly closing in on their position. At the same time, Iron Man soared in to intercept it.

"It's Iron Man!" the helicopter pilot exclaimed. "We're trapped!"

"Decisions, decisions." Metaxis muttered as he saw the avenger swoop in towards the front of the cockpit. "You don't think I had an escape plan as a back up? The way I see it, you can only catch one of us. So if you want this lady, come and get her."

In one unexpected motion, Metaxis tossed Uranus aside over the top of the Opera House leaving Bethany momentarily stunned with disbelief. In that split second, Metaxis leapt forward, catching hold of the rope ladder that was hanging from the helicopter as it hovered next to the building. Without thinking before she acted, Bethany followed suit, as she took a running leap off the building into the unknown.

Iron Man saw Uranus Bliss plunge headlong towards the ground. He knew what he had to do. Leaving the helicopter behind, he plummeted downwards into the night sky in one starburst of crimson and gold towards the terrified woman.

Damn! Iron Man thought. *Beth's gone and done something extremely dangerous. But the first priority is Uranus Bliss. Got to apply maximum thrusters. Despite her being a recent thorn in my side, she is still Mrs A's sister.*

As the golden avenger soared downwards, Metaxis clambered into the chopper. He looked down beneath him as he saw the daring girl attempt to pursue him.

"Get us out of here, you fool!" Metaxis barked, as the pilot jerked forward and accelerated suddenly, almost causing Bethany to lose her grip. She felt as though her arms would be ripped from their sockets, but clasped the rungs tightly in her hands. She thought about how quickly it could end if she suddenly slipped or lost her footing. She tried not to think about it. Keep calm, she told herself. You can do it.

Below, Iron Man overtook Uranus Bliss as her arms were flailing everywhere and caught her from underneath. "Don't worry, ma'am," he assured her. "You're safe now."

"You idiot!" Uranus declared, "you hurt my arm. Couldn't you be more gentle?"

"You're welcome," Iron Man replied, as he set her down on the ground, knowing that his efforts would probably always be unappreciated when it came to Uranus Bliss. Immediately, he took off again, with the danger to Bethany still present.

Bethany was on the top rung of the ladder and had almost made her way into the open chopper as it began to gain speed, leaving the Opera House growing more distant each second. Metaxis fired his gun at her, hoping to be finally rid of his enemy. The bullets whined past Bethany as she tucked her head in and held herself closely to the rungs. Suddenly, Bethany realized that Metaxis was out of ammunition. That fact was enough to give her the strength she needed. Mustering every last bit of will and determination, she seized this opportunity and frantically scrambled upwards into the helicopter where she began wrestling with Metaxis.

Metaxis attempted to fend her off by pushing her towards the door. Bethany retaliated with a kick to his face. However, Metaxis had the upper hand since he was firmly

seated in the chopper while Bethany was still halfway out. Metaxis noticed the armored avenger closing in on them, knowing that if he were to intercept them, there would be no means of escape. Metaxis ordered the pilot to accelerate as he made one final assault on Bethany. He gave one sudden almighty kick with both feet. It was a tremendous clash which momentarily stunned the redhead, causing her to lose her grip as she was flung backwards out of the open helicopter.

She was falling, helpless, her head spinning. However she did not scream. Perhaps it was a sense of child-like faith that her knight in shining armor would somehow rescue her.

No! Beth! Iron Man thought. He felt like a knife had just been plunged through this heart. *He could not bear the thought of losing the woman he loved. Not now. Not like this.*

In a blinding flash, the armored avenger accelerated like a heat-seeking missile as he watched Bethany plummet like a discarded rag doll. Meanwhile the helicopter sped away, but Iron Man did not care - all he was concerned about was his precious Bethany. Fortunately, having just executed this maneuver moments earlier, he was able to catch her in time, cradling her in his arms like a baby as if he never wanted to let go. Bethany noticed the way that Iron Man was holding her so dearly - a manner which would seem unusual with any other civilian. However, since she had already guessed



his secret identity weeks before, it did not surprise her.

Iron Man took Bethany gently to the ground. "Are you okay, Beth?" he quizzed her, his voice showing extreme concern.

"I'm fine, Shellhead," she smiled. Her legs were weak and rubbery beneath her, and she needed his help to stand. "Thank you for saving me," she said gratefully. Her voice quickly changed to one of playfulness, deciding to toy with the fact that she knew his identity but couldn't reveal it: "Say, if I didn't know better, I'd almost think you couldn't bear to lose me, the way you held me back then, or said my name like that. You must really care about me."

Of course he cared. What kind of a comment was that? She was the love of his life, and he didn't know what he'd do if he ever lost her. He wouldn't be able to live with himself. He wanted to cradle her in his arms there and then. To hold her forever and tell her how much she meant to him.

However, her words probed just a little too closely for comfort. If he were to answer it truthfully, it would too easily betray his identity. Although he was clad in impenetrable armor, this man of Iron wore his heart on his sleeve and right now he felt quite vulnerable. "I care about all of Mr Stark's friends, Miss Cabe," came the cold response, as he turned his back to avoid her gaze, and took off into the midnight sky.

THE POLICE WERE SWARMING EVERYWHERE, as Bethany arrived back outside the Avery Fisher Hall. She sauntered over to where Jim Rhodes was sitting, with his new lady friend, Kimberly Quantelle nursing the back of his head.

"Where's Mr Mee gone?" Bethany inquired.

"He had to take off. He went with his bodyguards."

"Oh great!" Bethany sighed. "Are you okay?"

"Other than a dozen bells chiming out through my brain, I'll be fine," Rhodey groaned, as he snapped his head to the side.

"He's quite the action man," Kimberly remarked. "I'll make sure he gets home safely... my home!"

"Ow mama! I'm comin' already!" Rhodey exclaimed.

Suddenly a familiar voice sounded from behind. It was Tony:

"Is everyone okay here?"

"Let me guess," Bethany chided him, knowing full well that Tony would offer his standard excuse, "you ran off to call Iron Man?"

"Uh... actually yeah. You know me too well. I just saw him right now and he said that Metaxis has escaped."

"Yeah, unfortunately," Bethany replied. She decided to change the subject as she whispered to him: "Tony, please tell Shellhead next time you see him that I'm sorry if I embarrassed him earlier. I know he was just doing his job."

"Uh, I'll be sure to pass on the message, Beth," Tony replied.

"It's ironic," Bethany continued, "but the very evil that Metaxis sought to oppose was the very thing that he ended up becoming through his actions here today."

"Well, luckily no-one was seriously hurt." Tony replied.

"Well you could've been killed back there trying to run away like that!"

"And you could also have died falling out of the helicopter," Tony countered her. "You were taking an awful risk."

"Thanks for the concern, Tony," Bethany said, "but someone had to stop him, and I had to act quickly."

"Well at least it's all over now," Tony added, breathing a sigh of relief.

"Uh, excuse me for bringing this up," Bethany disagreed, "but there's still the matter of my reputation which, after your careless words here tonight, has been thoroughly tarnished."

"Well surely it can't be that bad? We can fix things."

"I don't know," Bethany sighed. "I can't think about that just at this moment. I'm tired and I'm going home as I'd like to be alone right now."

"Well can I at least give you a lift?"

"No thanks," she replied. "I'm not in the mood. Just call me a cab. If there's two things in life that are certain, it's death and taxis."

Just then, a voice sounded above the cacophony. "Who's going to pay for all the damage done here tonight?"

"Just send the bill to Stark International" Uranus Bliss suddenly piped up. "After all, Stark's already footing the cost of my medical expenses."

TO BE CONTINUED...

BETHANY CABE:
THE WOMAN IN RED
PART 5

By Welshcat © 2002

The story so far: *After a tense battle at the Lincoln Center with a group of terrorists, Bethany returns home, her reputation in ruins.*

CHAPTER 9: RISQUÉ BUSINESS

It has been said that "*Life's errors cry for the merciful beauty that can modulate their isolation into a harmony with the whole*" (Rabin-Dranath Tagore, *Fireflies*, 1928). From the catalogue of errors and misunderstandings that had occurred tonight, it was not unfathomable that each mistaken person would hope that Bethany Cabe would prove to be one such merciful beauty.



BETHANY ARRIVED BACK at her offices feeling rather frustrated and worn out. She tossed her broken stilettos to one corner as she sighed: "Oh my poor, aching feet."

She suddenly became aware of someone else in the room. She looked up to see Mr Pithins waiting there to see her. He went straight to the point: "Ms Cabe, your partner let me in before she went to sleep. I'm here to see you about my son."

"I guessed you might be," she replied.

At that moment, Tony arrived at the door. "Pithins, what on earth are you doing here?" he exclaimed.

"Ulp, Mr Stark. This is a surprise. I'm here to see Ms Cabe."

"Sorry Pithins," Tony replied, "but I have to pull rank on you - I need to speak to Bethany urgently."

"Now hang on a minute" Bethany replied, "I'm not in a mood to speak to anyone right now."

Suddenly, Hu Chen Mee entered the scene: "Miss Cabe, there's been a terrible misunderstanding..."

"Are you still on my tail?" Bethany demanded. "How could it not occur to you all this time that we weren't an escort service? What did you think it meant in our advertisement when it said "we provide the ultimate personal protection"?"

"I thought it referred to some special female contraceptive device you developed."

Then, as if there weren't enough people already, Uranus Bliss burst in, her temper flaring: "Stark! We must talk now!"

"What is this?" Bethany gasped, "Does everyone think we have an open house here?"

"I thought you did," Mee interjected.

"What's going on?" Ling asked, entering the office in a dressing gown, having been woken by all the commotion.



"What's going on?" Bethany replied, "I'll tell you what's going on. Your harebrained idea to change our advert gave Mr Mee here the wrong impression that I've been out on a special assignment for him all evening as his call girl."

"Huh!" Uranus scoffed, "After cavorting around dishabille tonight, I can't imagine why anyone would think that."

"Excuse me, but what is wrong with what I'm wearing?" Bethany replied.

"Nothing, I suppose" Uranus berated her, "if you don't mind looking like a salad without dressing parading about in that glorified facecloth. You should be arrested for indecent exposure."

"Look, Mrs Bliss, I realize we got off on the wrong foot earlier, but I tried to make it up to you. However, you seem to be very critical of everything and everyone, nit-picking this and that. Honestly, Uranus, I've never known anyone so anally-retentive in my life!"

"I hope my name isn't being made the butt-end of your jokes again, young lady!" Uranus cried, "you seem to be very tart-tongued for someone who claims they're not a woman in red!"

Before Bethany could answer that, suddenly, two policemen who had been outside surveying the apartment arrived.

"Okay you schmucks, what seems to be the problem here?" the older cop inquired.

"What do the cops want?" Ling asked.

"I'm Sergeant Daniel Herzkovic," the older cop replied, and this is Officer Mario Farissi."

"What are you, part of the fashion police with a name like that?" Bethany muttered as she made eye contact with the younger officer.



"Okay, that's enough, Miss," Herzkovic stopped her. "Now who are the owners of this joint?" Herzkovic was a big, shambling man in his late forties, slightly overweight and sporting a thick moustache. He immediately looked like an aging, harried and overworked cop.

"I'm Bethany Cabe and this is my partner, Ling McPherson," Bethany replied. "We're the proprietors, officer."

"Now, Miss Cabe, we've had complaints from various neighbors of illicit activities going on here."

"What?" Bethany exclaimed, "Doesn't anyone think we're running a legitimate business here?"

"Now, Miss," Herzkovic replied, "I understand you have to make a living, and in this day and age we're sometimes tempted to resort to all kinds of chutzpah just to earn a buck, but I'd hardly call prostitution legit. Two nice young ladies like yourselves - couldn't you find something better to do?"

"It's not what you think, officer. We're not running a brothel." Ling replied.

"Well, call it what you like these days. But I know how your type sets up shop for undercover business."

"But we don't conduct any of our business under the covers," Bethany replied.

"Then why are all these people here at this Swing Club?"

"We've just come from the Mae West Gala at the Lincoln Center." Tony replied.

"Oh yeah? And who are you? Mr McGimp?"

"I'm Tony Stark, officer," he explained.

"Mr Stark. We've heard of you before, you schlemiel! You should be ashamed of yourself taking advantage of these girls like this."

"I'm not. It's just Ms Cabe I'm seeing at the moment."

"Well, whether it's just one of them or both, there's still something immoral going on."

"Officer," Hu Chen Mee began, "I employed their services."



"And who are you?"

"I'm am Hu."

"That's right - you are who?"

"Yes, that's me."

"Yes, but who are you?"

"I am Hu."

"What are you? Some kind of parrot? What's your name?"

"Hu. Hu Mee."

"No, me. What's my name?" Herzkovic replied sarcastically.

"I don't know your name. But I am Mee."

"Yes, yes, we know that already - you are you, and I am me."

"No, no, I am Mee, but who are you?"

"Now look here, are you trying to be funny? Let us ask the questions, you just give us a straight answer. Who are you?"

"Hu Mee - that's who."

"Look, what kind of cockamamie double talk is this?" Herzkovic inquired, completely baffled. "This doesn't seem to be getting us anywhere. Can't you just tell us your name."

"But I just did. I told you my name is Mee. Hu Mee."

"That's right, officer," Ling explained, realizing this conversation was going round in circles, "his name is Mr Hu Chen Mee, he's a visiting Chinese Ambassador from Beijing."

"Well, why didn't you say so before?" Herzkovic sighed.

"I did." Hu replied.

"Okay, if you say so," Herzkovic sighed. "Well Mr Mee, you said something about using these girls' services."

"Yes, I hired Miss Cabe for the evening."

"That's not quite true." Bethany said.

"Oh, so it was for longer?"

"No, no, it was just the evening."

"You want to run this by me again? Did you or did you not hire yourself out?" Herzkovic persisted.

"Yes... I mean no... I mean yes..." Bethany tried to explain, "but not in the way you think."



"You had the rest of us fooled" Uranus chimed in, "you shameless hussies!"

"And who might you be?"

"No, I am Hu." Mr Mee said.

"Now let's not start this whole shemozzle again!" Herzkovic replied. "You've had your chance to speak, now let me question this lady."

"The name's Mrs Bliss," Uranus informed him.

"Mrs Bliss, huh?" Herzkovic seemed doubtful. "So you go by a fancy stage name? What do these other girls call themselves? Miss Rapture and Miss Happiness?"

"How dare you!" Uranus hissed. Her tone was vitriolic. "You Philistine! My name is Uranus Bliss. I have nothing to do with these harlots here in this birdcage."

"It's true," Tony assured Herzkovic. "She works for herself."

"Oh, then you're a freelancer? No offence Grams, I know it's the oldest profession, but aren't you're a little bit over the hill to be still in this business?"

"You dare insult me?" Uranus shrieked. "I will not be disparaged. My only business here is with that reprobate Stark, not with these scarlet ladies."

"What? Is that true Stark?" Herzkovic inquired. "You have some strange fetish for ancient artifacts like Grams over here? What are you, an archaeologist?"

"You troglodyte!" Uranus raged, "if you don't watch out you'll need an archaeologist yourself to dig you out of the grave I'll put you in."



"Officer," Tony interrupted, "she's suing me for personal injury."

"What? You injured this Broadway broad? Things got a bit rough I see?"

"It's a long story, officer." Tony replied. "I can explain..."

"Wait, don't finish that sentence. You'll have a long enough one to explain everything where you're all going."

"But what about me? I've done nothing wrong." Pithins pleaded. "I'm a law-abiding citizen: I pay my taxes, never speed and I always stop at a red light!"

"You're using these shady ladies' services too huh?" Herzkovic said, scratching his head. "Now who are you?"

"M...M...Me?" Pithins replied.

"Oh, not you as well. How many people are called Mee around here? What are you all brothers?"

"Excuse me," Hu Chen Mee interrupted, "but he is not Mee. I am. And he's not my brother."

"My name is Artemus Pithins," Pithins explained, "Head of Mr Stark's Public Relations."

"PR huh? Well, if I may say, you're not doing a very good job, making a public scandal out of these sorts of sexual proclivities here."

"He's not here to make anything public," Bethany explained.

"Now Miss, whether it's public relations or private relations, you can't set up your service station in this neighborhood. We don't operate like that here in New York. And you, sir should know better than to get involved in this hanky panky."

"I am not" Pithins explained, "I'm here to talk about Gerrard with Ms Cabe."

"And who is Gerrard?"

"He's my sixteen year old son."

"Now, I don't quite follow?" Herzkovic frowned, "how does your son fit into this?"

"He's been following Ms Cabe around for his high school assignment."

"Following? What kind of sick syllabus are they teaching the kids in school these days? And you as his father have been allowing your own son to get mixed up in this whole shebang? You should be locked up after all!"

"Excuse me, but I will not have you questioning my parenting skills. I have enough trouble from Gerrard in that area. He came home earlier quite upset and shut himself in his room. He wouldn't come out when I went to see what was wrong. Would you care to get something off your chest, Ms Cabe?"

"Well, it's kind of embarrassing - he saw me naked in my bedroom."



"What?" Pithins was shocked. "Is there anything more you'd like to reveal, Ms Cabe? Come on, make a clean breast of it - it was all too much to bear for him wasn't it?"

"Now hang on a minute," Bethany replied, "I can explain."

"Yes, this should be interesting Bethany," Tony interjected. "Were you giving him a private showing?"

"I was not!" Bethany replied. "You know that I only give you private showings."

"Oh, so you do admit there are immoral activities going on around here?" Herzkovic snorted.

"I never said that. If you'd just let me explain. I had finished taking a shower and I went to get dressed and then Gerrard came out the closet."

"You mean he's gay?"

"My son is not gay!" Pithins exclaimed. "Is he, Ms Cabe?"

"Oh no," Bethany assured him, "from the way he's been leering at me, I can say he's 100% hetero."

"So what's this about him coming out the closet?" Herzkovic inquired.

"He was hiding in there spying on me," Bethany explained. "I told him that he just can't go round doing things like that - it's just not proper. And so I said I didn't think it was a good idea to work shadow me anymore. He became upset and ran off."

"Now, Miss Cabe," Herzkovic said, "I don't see why someone in your profession would be so self conscious. I admit Gerrard is a minor, but still, you must appear in the flesh several times a week."



"Now what are you insinuating? Why does everyone seem to think we're prostitutes here? Would it help if I gave you my number?"

"No thanks. I'm not open to taking favors as bribes."

"I meant my security clearance number. It's J-792. Ling and I are top level bodyguards and we hire ourselves out to people for their safety, not for their pleasure!"

"Bodyguards?" Herzkovic looked puzzled. "Well, why didn't you say so before? We could've avoided all this mess."

"That's what I thought," Hu Chen Mee remarked.

"We were trying to tell you," Bethany replied, "but you wouldn't let us speak."

"You want to speak huh?" Herzkovic snorted. "Well, go ahead and speak Missy, so we can clear up this midsummer madness once and for all. My wife's expecting me home, and when I have to deal with schmucks like you, I end up in everyone else's home but my own."

"Okay, fine." Bethany replied. She turned to each person there in turn. "Now Mr Pithins, I apologize if I upset your son. I will talk to him tomorrow, so can we please drop the matter?"

"Ulp, yes, agreed" Pithins muttered.

"Ling, I think you'd better change that advert so that it's perfectly clear we are bodyguards and not any other kind of ladies of pleasure."

"Sure thing 'mom'. " Ling responded, "I'll get right on it tomorrow."

"Mr Mee," Bethany began, "it looks like I did end up watching your ass after all. Just stop watching mine, okay?"

"You ought to sue those hookers for misrepresentation!" Uranus interrupted. "Mr Lemelstrich is handling my case right now and he'd be happy to take you on."

"But we didn't misrepresent anything!" Bethany gasped.

"Don't worry," Mee assured Bethany, "I won't be suing anyone. I know exactly what you girls do now, and I got what I paid for in the end. It's Mr Wong's fault that we entered into the contract, and my own stupidity on top of that. Wong can't get anything right, that idiot!"

"What about me?" Uranus Bliss shrieked. "I've been manhandled and shoved about and taken hostage this evening. This is intolerable!"

"Mrs Bliss," Bethany replied, "Tony isn't some low life despite what you might think. From what I gather, he's offered you more than reasonable compensation, and his bodyguard, Iron Man saved your butt... er your life this evening. Surely that must count for something?"

"Hmph! I guess so. Okay Stark, I'm willing to settle."

"Good," Tony replied. "I'm glad."

"Well," said Herzkovic, "I think I can safely leave you all, but I'll be watching you. Just remember that even Mae West herself did time for obscenity, so if turns out that this establishment isn't kosher, I'll be back to put the kibosh on this whole schtick - lock, schlock and barrel! And this time you will really be out on the street! Capeesh?"

"We understand officer," Bethany assured him.

As the rest of the group began to clear out, Tony remained behind. As Uranus Bliss passed him, he smiled: "Well, Uranus, it looks like your problems are all behind you now."

"I heard that, you Philistine!!" Uranus replied, as she swung a fist at Tony and knocked him straight to the floor.

SOME FEW MINUTES LATER, Tony felt the first stages of consciousness returning, as well as a dull ache in his jaw. His head was also slightly pounding, but it appeared to be resting on some kind of cushion that was firm yet yielding. He also thought he could smell the faint but distinct hint of Chanel No.5 in his nostrils.

"How's your jaw?" a soft feminine voice spoke from somewhere above him, as the source of that voice held a cold ice pack over his bruised face.

"Ow, I'll live." Tony replied, as his eyes flickered open to see the soft outline of Bethany's face. "I guess I had it coming didn't I?"

"I'm not going to disagree with you there," Bethany teased him. "You hit the floor quite hard, you wimp!"

Tony could feel her warm breath from each word as she was bending over him, and realized it was her lap that was serving as a pillow. "Hey, that woman has one hell of a right hook" he told her.

"Just be glad that it wasn't me that hit you, or you'd be out cold for the rest of the night."

"I believe you. Anyhow, I heard how you defended me back there with Uranus Bliss. Does that mean I'm forgiven?"

"Hmm. I don't know yet," Bethany replied coyly. "I haven't decided yet."

"Well, I have said I'm sorry - isn't that enough or must I keep trying to dig myself out of this hole?"

"I'll let you know," Bethany giggled. "Keep digging!."

"You like to torture me don't you."

"Of course," Bethany teased. "That's what you get for giving people the wrong idea about me, so until I think of something..."

"You're going to rub my nose in it aren't you? Isn't there something I could do to make it up to you?"

"Well..." Bethany began, "speaking of rubbing, my feet are killing me, so you could start by massaging them."

"It'll be my pleasure," Tony replied. "After all, I wouldn't want to rub you up the wrong way."



Tony sat up and cradled Bethany's slender feet in his hands, massaging them firmly but gently. She was quite ticklish and flinched a few times, letting

out the occasional giggle. However, she always enjoyed this service, especially after a long day walking in her stilettos and running around the Lincoln Center in her bare feet, and thus she gladly let Tony continue, as she sighed inaudibly with pleasure.

"Well, how about I make it up to you by taking both you and Ling on a week's holiday to the Bahamas?" Tony suggested. "That way we can all leave our problems firmly behind?"

"Are you serious?" Bethany gasped, "the Bahamas?"

"Sure. Don't you want to go there?"

"Tony, I'd love to go, " Bethany squealed with delight, as she leaned over to give him a kiss.

"We'd both love to, Tony" Ling added. "Thank you for your kind offer."

"How soon can we go?" Bethany said excitedly.

"As soon as you want. But it's on condition that I get to have my own private showings from you."

"Well, not from both of us," Ling said, making sure to qualify that statement.

"Uh, of course not," Tony replied, "unless you really want to?"

"You are impossible, you know that?" Bethany exclaimed.

"So I've been told. But why let that spoil an otherwise perfect evening? After all, I'm hoping it could still go out with a bang!"

CHAPTER 10: HOLDING OUT FOR A HERO

"A hero is a man who does what he can." (Romain Rolland, 'L'Adolescent', Jean Christophe, 1904-12)

BACK IN THE PRESENT, Tony looked intently at Bethany and smiled. "That was some story, Beth - and we did always make a formidable team - the perfect compliment of your red-headed guardian to my golden armored avenger."

"Thanks," Bethany grinned, "although I would've thought you'd say my red hot looks to your golden boy charm!"

"Yes, well, that works for me too. Although I'm intrigued why you told this particular one out of all the stories you could've told. Surely you had many more adventures than that?"

"Well, I could've told you about my adventures in Eastern Europe and behind the Iron Curtain, but I wanted to tell you something light-hearted and not too serious - no tales of suspense or anything overly dramatic. At least not this time anyway."

"Fair enough. But I still have a few questions about this story," Tony continued.

"Oh? And what's that?"

"Well, for starters, I thought it was a strictly PG-rated story, so why the obligatory gratuitous nudity scene with you coming out the shower? - not that I'm objecting personally."

"Well, just cause it's PG doesn't mean I won't do the normal everyday things I normally do like taking a bath. Besides, you and I both know we've often thought about the day when we'd finally see Bethany Stark, so I've given people their wish, in an indirect sort of way. And if this were a comic it would definitely please the fanboys wouldn't it? You're telling me the writers would omit a scene like that if they had the choice?"

"I guess it depends who the character is, how much they like her, and also the audience they're addressing," Tony muttered. "With someone like you, I guess they wouldn't."

"Well whoever the audience," Bethany replied, "you can just bet that if I were a comic book heroine, the artists would almost certainly draw me as a 38DD or something ridiculous. I mean... can you imagine that?" Bethany waited for a response as Tony simply sat there looking at her body intently for a few seconds, evidently attempting to picture that very thought. "Hey, stop that," she scowled playfully.

"Sorry. But, what about your criticism of the Hollywood *deus ex machina*? As I recall from this incident, I ended up saving your butt when you were about to be shot, or being there to catch you in the nick of time."

"Well, sometimes things happen that way, so I can't help it. But I am grateful for all the times you did save my butt."

"It's a nice butt worth saving."

"Thanks," Bethany replied, smiling a dreamy half-smile. "So do you think anyone would really be interested in stories about me than just about the Invincible Iron Man?"

"Well, out of all the loves I've had, you've always possessed the most potential to spin off into a comic book of your own. No one else can lay claim to that. Can you imagine a comic book about Veronica Benning, Rae LaCoste or Kathy Dare for example?"

"No, but then there's always Madame Masque isn't there?"

"True, but she was always more of a resident recurring baddie, and besides, you're much more fun. You've always held your own superbly, even without super powers." Tony looked at her with intense eyes, realizing just how strong she was. He reached out and stroked her cheek softly with the back of his hand. Bethany smiled.

"Well, who needs super powers when you've got courage, guts and determination?" Bethany added, pushing her hair out of her face with a gentle brush of her hand. "I'd much rather be an ordinary girl than a superheroine."

"There's nothing ordinary about you, Bethany," Tony assured her, "you're undeniably extraordinary."

"I know," Bethany giggled. "But a hero is the person within not the powers they have without. That's what makes Tony Stark a hero - you don't need iron armor to be one, you already are - you're just someone who did whatever he could to help those around him - and that's part of the reason I fell in love with you before and why I still love you now."

"You were pretty heroic yourself when you wore the Iron Man armor against Ultimo."

"Yes, but it was extremely painful and constricting, especially around my breasts."

"Believe me, I know all about booby traps," Tony quipped.

Bethany laughed: "And that's why I'm reminded of a quote by F Scott Fitzgerald, just like all fictional characters seem to remember extremely profound quotes off the top of their head at the most appropriate moments, because they're all, of course, carefully scripted for them."



"And what's that?"

"Well, he wrote '*Show me a hero and I will write you a tragedy.*' However, with you, it's the reverse."

"What do you mean?"

"Your booby trap," Bethany exclaimed: "your sudden blast of shrapnel that gave birth to the Invincible Iron Man. In your case it was: '*Show me a tragedy, and I'll write you a hero.*' Sometimes it's in the times of adversity and trial that the true heroes emerge - just like in the World Trade Center disaster. They were the every day men and women who gave their lives for others in that tragedy without relying on any super powers for assistance. Such acts of bravery would go down as heroism in my book. So I do hope Marvel remembers to take into account the hero that you are within the armor when they write your adventures and not just the shell suit outside. I'd expect nothing less if someone were to write a story about me."

THE END

METAL HEAD

Marvel Gets Lucky

Hey, kids, Marvel is so lucky, it's not funny. When **Jennifer Connelly** and **Halle Berry** won Oscars, they have bragging rights to say they have two Oscar winners working on the cheap. Halle Berry signed for two **X-Mens** for a low price. But **X-Men 3** may be costly. Also, **Hugh Jackman** (**Wolverine**, and has been in some pansy movies of late, KATE AND LEOPOLD, anyone?) is a huge star now and was hired REALLY cheap for two X-Men. **X-MEN 2**, aka X², opens May 2, 2003 (like **SPIDEY** will this year).



Where's McKnight?

Ang Lee was signed to direct **HULK** before he won an Oscar for CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON. **Jennifer Connelly** plays **Betty Ross** in the **HULK**. To round it out, **Eric Bana** (BLACK HAWK DOWN) plays **Bruce Banner** and a **12 foot tall CGI character** plays the **Hulk!** RAHR! HULK SMASH! It opens June 20, 2003.



Heath's my pal.

DAREDEVIL, starring **Ben Affleck** as DD, **Colin Farrell** as **Bullseye**, **Michael Clarke Duncan** (huh, no offense, but isn't the **Kingpin** supposed to really fat and white? That would be like casting Drew Carrey as the Black Panther!) as The Kingpin; **Jennifer Garner** (the chick from that Alias TV show) as **Elektra**. It comes out first or second quarter 2003.

T3, which stars **Ahnuld**, **Nick Stahl** as John Connor (huh?) and **Kristanna Loken** as "TX" (a new, **female Terminator**). The plot is exactly like T2, one robot to kill John Connor, a T-800 (Ahnuld) to protect him. It's called THE RISE OF THE MACHINES, so maybe there will more originality...It's directed by Jonathan Mostow (U-571) and opens July 4, 2003.

Nothing new with **IRON MAN**, other than maybe 2004, maybe **Joss** (TOY STORY, BUFFY TV and movie) **Whedon** will write and direct.

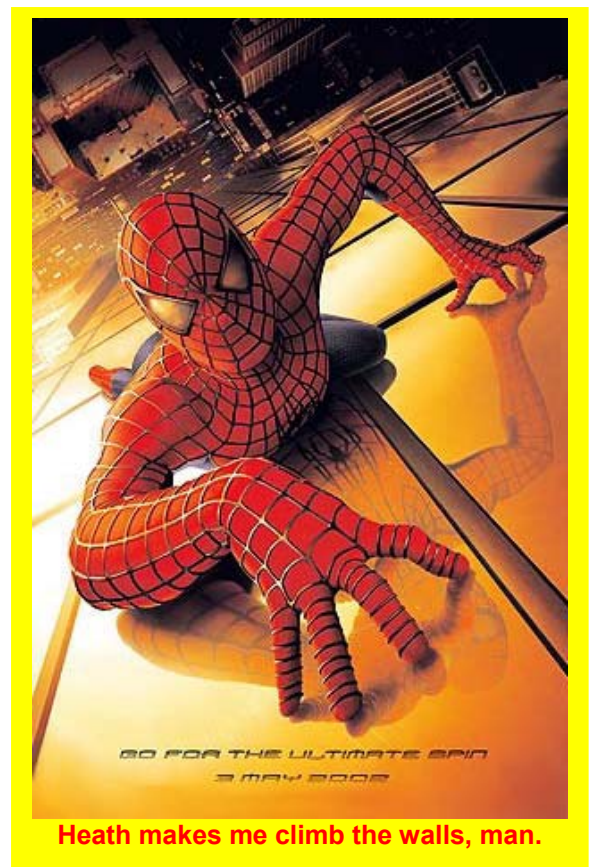
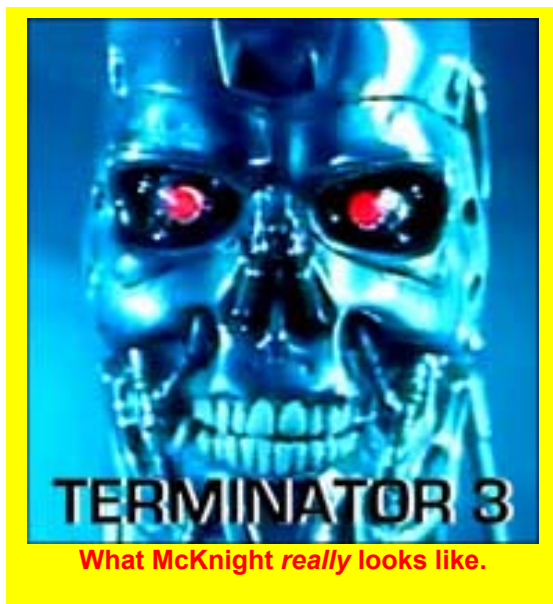
Spidey 2 is rumored to start Jan. 2003 to open in 2004, like they did with

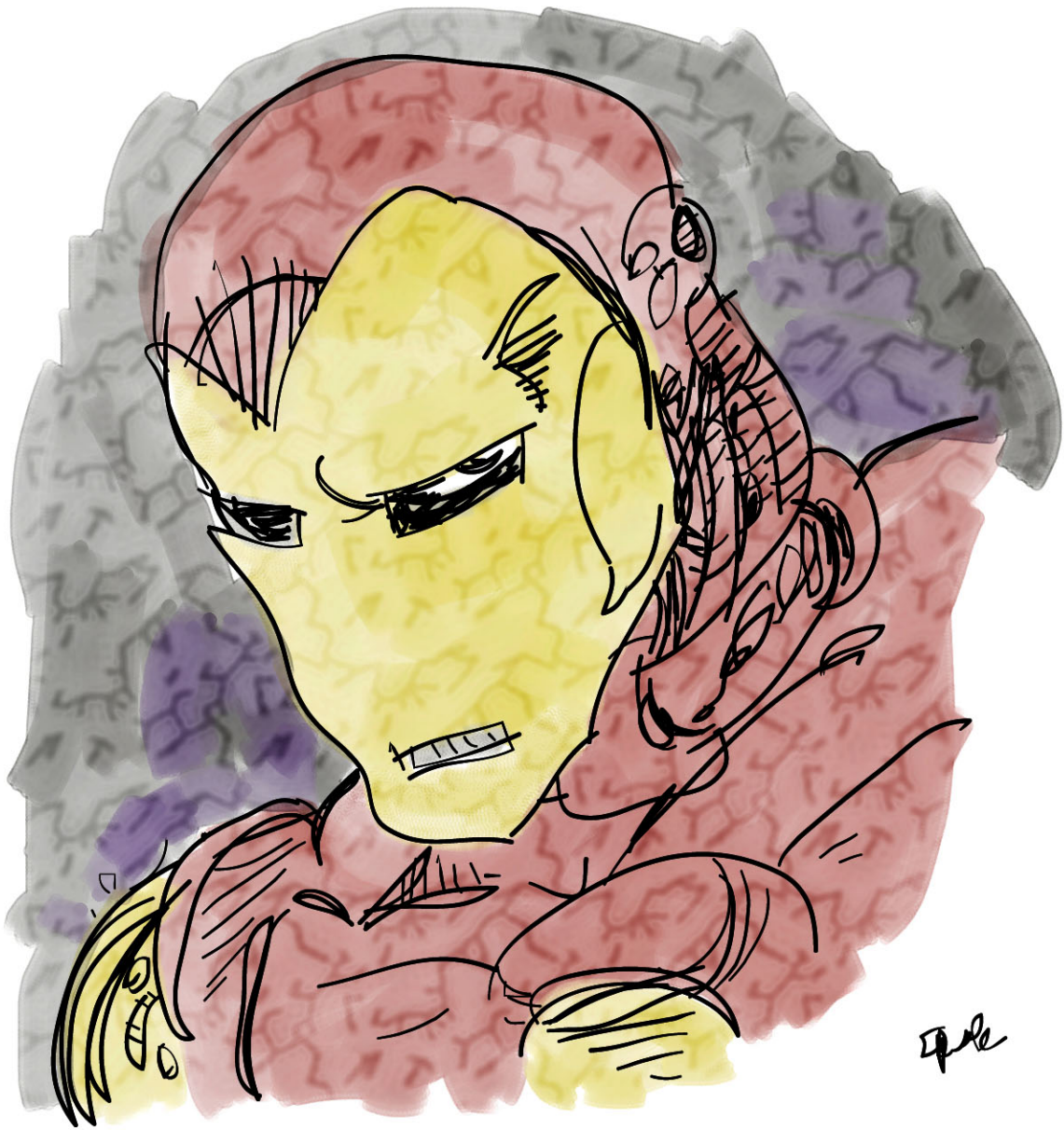
Spidey 1.

That's all for now. Visit our new site at www.mpsdigital.com as we change our name and re-focus on films! **MPS Digital Studios!**

I remain,

heath@mpsdigital.com





epc

BEST OF THE BEST

BY HUBER & COUTURE

Welcome back to the third edition of **BEST OF THE BEST**, the column where Dave and Pat, your two favorite fanzine editors, debate about the greatest (and not so great) aspects of Iron Man. After looking at his best battles and debating his best and worst love interests, we'll now take a step back and look at the books from an outside point of view... and what's the very first thing you see from any comic book? You got it, **it's the cover.**

TOP 5 BEST IRON MAN COVERS OF ALL TIME

Pat says: What a tough assignment! Choosing only five covers out of a pool of nearly 400 proved to be very difficult for me. One of the challenges is that I tend to associate the cover with the story that's inside. For example, issue #225 is clearly one of my favorite IM stories of all time, so it's one of the first covers that came to my mind. But when you forget about the contents and simply look at the cover (level of detail, slogan, choice of colors, etc.)... well, is it really top 5 material? I don't think so. In my opinion, the best covers must be chosen for their capacity to catch your eye and the level of craving they generate for the story inside. With that in mind, on with the top five.

Dave says: Nothing really to add here, except that **it's Pat's turn to go first** – and then I'll be responding with my choices after his selections!

THE WINNAH: IRON MAN VOL.1 #232 (July 1988)

What can I say? This one has it all. **Iron Man**, unconscious and helmet missing, hanging in darkness from electric wires, his **Silver Centurion** armor badly damaged and the exposed circuitry sizzling and popping. No slogan, not a single word... heck, what your eyes can see says it all! This is one image that is worth a thousand words or more. The art is absolutely exquisite and we'd expect no less



from one of the greatest American comic book artists of his generation: **Barry Windsor-Smith!** The dark purple background is a good match with the color composition of this piece and puts all the emphasis on the central figure. I remember very well the first time I saw that cover... my jaw dropped. Nothing was gonna keep me from looking inside to find out what that was all about. As I look at it again today, it still has the same effect on me... excuse me while I read this book again, will ya?

Dave says: I'm a big fan of "static" covers that seem to have taken a lot of time (and thought) to draw and put together. As such, my first choice is

IRON MAN #282, which is Pat's 5th pick. But so as not to diminish Pat's well thought-out judgments on that ish, I'll save my comments for the ish until then!

SECOND ALL-TIME BEST: IRON MAN VOL.1 #17 (September 1969)

Is it just me, or do these old covers from the '60s have a sense for the dramatic that's been largely lost in most recent works? This is a beautiful example of the best this era had to offer, a spectacular cover that catches your eye, captures your imagination and stimulates your curiosity. Stark is lying on the ground, unconscious, clothes ripped. Looming high over him is the menacing figure of... **Iron Man???** And floating around the **Golden Avenger**, the short but dramatic slogan «**THE BEGINNING OF THE END!**» perfectly enhances the cover's overall effect. The background (Stark's office) is kept in the shadows to better emphasize the two characters. The angle chosen is also particularly



interesting, we see the scene as if we were lying on the ground by Stark's side, looking up at **Iron Man**. In one word: WOW! This beautiful piece by **George Tuska** (if I'm not mistaken) is well-deserving of the silver medal.



Dave says: Great pick there, Pat! My second pick – and keeping with my motif of "static" poses – is **IRON MAN #100** by **Jim Starlin**. OK, the pose isn't *that* static, but it's a simple, albeit brawny, **Shellhead**. Standing in front of a granite "100," **Iron Man** is plainly standing with both arms up and flexed, snapping a steel

girder in half! The grin on his facemask conveys a “don’t mess with me” attitude that gets your head nodding in approval! And the shards of girder being broken right above **IM’s** head communicate a huge “SNAP” without a sound effect being written.

THIRD ALL-TIME BEST COVER: IRON MAN VOL.1 #215 (February 1987)



As you have probably guessed by now, I’m not a fan of covers that have too much text on them. A good cover doesn’t need to be explained, it just does the job with the first glance. This can certainly be said of this piece. On the forefront, two **Iron Men** (one clad in the new **Silver Centurion** model, the other wearing the classic red and gold armor) fly towards the reader. The armors are beautifully rendered, gleaming and shining, just the way we like ‘em. Behind them: the **Stark space station** and the vast emptiness of space with its millions of distant stars. Under them, the distant Earth, dimly shining in the darkness. The slogan is very discreet on this cover, it’s the last thing you see, but it adds an efficient finishing touch to the piece: «**BEGINNING – A NEW ERA OF**

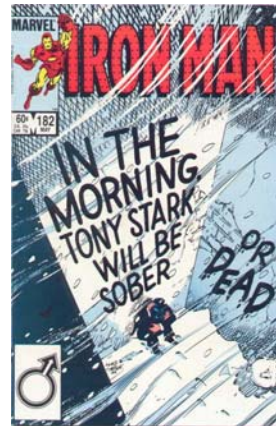
GREATNESS!» Truly one of my all-time favorites, signed by the masters: **Mark Bright** and **Bob Layton**. It’s a shame color is missing from **IM’s** forearms though.

Dave says: Agreement!! What a great thing! Pat nails it with a nigh-perfect description of this stupendous cover. I admit when I saw the “BEGINNING – A NEW ERA OF GREATNESS” on the cover, and seeing *two Iron Men* in two different armors flying towards me, my thoughts were, “Cool! Stark and Rhodey acting are now a team!” Well, it didn’t work out that way, but I’m sure I wasn’t the only one “tricked” into that line of thinking! (Hey – isn’t a cover *supposed* to nab readers like that, anyway?) The actual “greatness” behind this issue was obviously the return of **Bob Layton & David Michelinie** – and how! (Not sure what Pat was referring to about the missing color, though – my cover is colored fine.)

FOURTH ALL-TIME BEST COVER: IRON MAN VOL.3 #51 (April 2002)

If we had written this column a few months ago, my fourth position would have probably been **IM vol.1 #238**. I always loved that cover. It featured **IM** battling the **Rhino** in the middle of a blazing inferno. Not only was it a great piece of art, the color enhanced it beautifully. The reds and yellows almost made you feel the heat, even the title was scarlet red, like an iron being taken out of the fire. I never thought this **Guice/Layton** cover could be outdone. I am forced to admit I was wrong. As I write this, the latest **IM** cover has managed to do it. Thanks to new color techniques and computer generated enhancements, this blazing inferno is even more realistic and vivid than its predecessor. On the foreground, **Iron Man** wearing his breathtaking new armor, holding up pieces of a wall threatening to collapse on three firemen. The three men on the background at slightly paler, thus giving you a true sense of distance. The flames look so real, you half expect to get burned by holding this book too long. This cover deserves to be framed on a wall! Great work **Mr. Ryan**, please keep 'em coming!

Dave says: My fourth pick is **IRON MAN #182**. Not only is the story one of my faves, but the cover simply and succinctly says it all: **"IN THE MORNING TONY STARK WILL BE SOBER...OR DEAD."** This is written on the wall behind Stark, who is sitting alone with his head buried in his arms. Snow is swirling all around him. One's first thoughts upon scoping this cover may be "My God – no way!" You'd be hard-pressed not to pick up the ish just to see what happens! What a great cover is all about.



FIFTH ALL-TIME BEST COVER: IRON MAN VOL.1 #282 (July 1992)



Ten years... doesn't feel like it was that long ago, was it? And yet... ten years ago, this cover came out, introducing a new armor of unparalleled destructive power: the **WAR MACHINE**. This is probably the darkest **IM** cover of them all. Standing tall, fearsome, filling the cover with his massive armor, **War Machine** faces the reader, forearm and shoulder cannons discharging thundering firepower. The only colors used for the character are black and white, and the effect is quite spectacular. The dark blue background is simply composed of numerous lines that expand from behind **War Machine's** back, adding to the effect of explosion, making the art leap off the

page. The only warm color on the entire page is the slogan, scrawled in vivid pink across the dark title like a graffiti, it simply reads: «**WAR MACHINE**». Now there's an offbeat cover that you don't soon forget. If that doesn't make you crave what's inside this book, then I don't know what will! An instant classic by **Kev Hopgood**. Sigh... I feel like I'm leaving out so many great others!

Dave says: Right on, brother Pat! I couldn't have it better. "Instant classic" is indeed an apt portrayal of this **Kev Hopgood** offering. Just like what I noted in my 4th pick, you'd be hard-pressed *not* to nab this issue off the comic shop shelf based on the cover alone. And look what has happened – **War Machine** has endured as a Marvel character for a decade now (and this, of course, has A LOT to do with the creative prowess of one **Len Kaminski!**).

My 5th pick, like Pat's 4th choice, is a recent one: **IRON MAN VOL. 3 #52**. So far, I've been unimpressed by both Grell's stories and Ryan's (interior) art, but this cover made me say "Oh, YEAH!" when I pulled it from my comic box at my local shop. It features the new armor in a semi-crouch...just standing there. But the imposing ambience and shadow effect creates what could be **THE Iron Man** cover of the first decade of the 21st century!

TOP 5 WORSE IRON MAN COVERS OF ALL TIME

Just like a great cover is supposed to make you crave a book, a bad one makes you want to run as far away from it as you can. It must be unattractive or downright ugly, boring and be of no interest whatsoever. Sadly, we have been treated to some of that in the past.

FIRST RUNNER-DOWN: IRON MAN VOL.1 #184 (July 1984)



This is a cover that is not only unattractive, it's even confusing. On the foreground, you see a red truck driving in Stark's gigantic face, along with the heads of **Rhodey** and the **Erwins**. I don't know about you, Dave, but I really hate the concept of «floating heads». This cover is a perfect example of it. The background is simply weird. Looming in yellow is the shape of the state of California and the shadow of a bridge, through which falls a car. The ripped asphalt looks like rubber and the car's angle is completely wrong unless it was driving on the bridge sideways. The slogan, written in huge unsophisticated letters is: «California here we come (if we're lucky!)» Not very exciting, to say the least! Even the choice of colors is bad, that ugly bluish green that takes up most of the cover is just plain ugly. I really love **[Luke]**

McDonnell and **[Steve] Mitchell** as artists, but that's one cover they must have done in a hurry. Happens to the best of them...

Dave says: **TALES OF SUSPENSE #44.** OK, sure it's easy to pick on these early **IM** tales, but it still shouldn't excuse a lame cover – especially if you're trying to attract new readers to a new character!

The Golden Armor in a goofy flying pose, is carrying Egypt's own **Cleopatra** over the desert. **[Jack] Kirby's Iron Man**, in this case, is too "rounded" (of course the *head* is round, but the fingers, legs and feet are too!). And oooooh – "Cleopatra – Siren of the Nile!" How "enticing!" Not. (The **ESSENTIAL IRON MAN's TOS #44** and the **TOS** cover depicted here show different expressions on Cleopatra's face and different description blurbs! I was unaware of this!)



SECOND WORST COVER: **IRON MAN VOL.1 #262 (November 1990)**



Did you ever wonder what **Iron Man's** armor would look like... in brown? Neither did I. Sadly, this cover gives us the sad answer to that question. Makes you wonder if Tony fell in manure or something. Behind him, in a purple and pink background, my all-time favorites: floating heads! No slogan to sort this mess out, aside from the «**Armor Wars II**» logo. Ech... what a disaster. Not one of **[John] Romita Jr's** proudest moments.

Dave says: Are you ready? Can you "challenge the

Great Mister Doll"?? **TALES OF SUSPENSE #48** is where this "threatening" exclamation comes from! Not only would you laugh yourself silly at the prospect of such a "battle," but this is first ish featuring **IM's** red and gold armor. This, of course, isn't a bad thing, but **IM** is shown way in the background busting through a wall, and the blurb stating "See the New Iron Man!" is as big as **IM** himself! A dramatically different armor should be the prominent focus of the cover, not a "villain" as pathetic as Mr. Doll! (The **ESSENTIAL IRON MAN** compilation has a cool note about Mr. Doll – his original moniker was to be "**Mr. Pain,**" but the Comics Code Authority deemed that name "too violent.")



THIRD WORST COVER: IRON MAN VOL.2 #4 (February 1994)



I think this issue was published with two different covers... I dunno what the second one was, but the one I got stinks! It features Stark, with a ridiculous goofy look on his face, holding a Christmas crown (that's what we call it in French anyway) and a plastic Santa Claus in his hands. He seems to be wearing his armor under his bathrobe, which might explain for his ridiculously huge shoulders. The background is a Christmas tree and what I suppose is a chimney. What an incredibly boring cover! No action, no suspense, not even a funny slogan to save the day! An absolutely terrible piece signed by Portacio.

Dave says: Pat is be correct about **IM vol. 2 #4** having two covers. Mine is pretty cool, actually – the new **Living Laser** in the foreground with a “shocked”-looking **IM** to the left gazing at the villain.

My 3rd pick is **IRON MAN (vol. 1) #42** – “The Wail of Demon Queen!” Yeesh. I love **George Tuska’s Iron Man** work, but this cover sure ain’t one of `em. Despite the highlighted circled “Still only 15 cents” at the top, you wouldn’t want to put out a *penny* for this ish after gazing at this pitiable cover. An apparition-like **Demon Queen** is affecting **Iron Man**....*somehow* causing **IM** to... flail his arms about...*somehow*. Oh, and don’t forget the “scary” flying demons scattered around the cover’s periphery!



FOURTH WORSE COVER: IRON MAN VOL.3 #31 (August 2000)



Speaking of exciting covers... here’s another pathetic example. Zoom in on Stark’s new artificial heart, dangling in white nothingness from a bunch of wires. I actually had to read the comic before I could figure out what that was supposed to be... not that I was in any hurry to do so. No interesting slogan, no suspense and no interest whatsoever. A completely white or black cover would have had more effect, I think. An incredibly unmemorable piece by **Mr. [Joe] Quesada**.

Dave says: **IRON MAN #298**. You actually have to

look hard at this cover to see if **Iron Man** is even *in* it! Oh – *there* he is – in the grasp of this big hand! I suppose this could have been quite a bit better, but the coloring job is dreadful. The [**Earth-Mover's**] huge hand and the engulfed **Iron Man** share exactly the same hues, hence the difficulty of detecting just where the **Golden Avenger** is. Besides this oversight, the "Earth-Mover...Heart of Stone!" blurbs are not exactly tantalizing!

FIFTH WORSE COVER: IRON MAN VOL.1 #163 (October 1982)



It's very simple -- this one is plain ugly. **Iron Man**, suspended in mid-air in an impossible position, is being attacked by one of those silly **Chessmen**, stiffly sitting on his metal horsey. The background, you ask? None. Must have saved money on ink with this one. The slogan is just as exciting, which is not much: «**THE CHALLENGE OF... THE CHESSMEN!**» Considering the lack of work that went in the art, you'd think they'd have taken the time to at least find an interesting slogan, or at least write it in cool letters... Sloppy boring work.

Dave says: I'm back with another **TALES OF SUSPENSE** cover! In this case, it's **#50** – featuring the debut of **IM's** greatest villain ever, the **Mandarin!** OK, maybe **Kirby** and [**Stan**] **Lee** had no idea Mandy would turn out to be **Shellhead's** supreme baddie, but even so – neither Mandy or **Iron Man** are prominent on the cover! Mandy's plopped on his throne (his chair is bigger than he is) and he's using one of his rings to activate a heavy door to trap [a diminutively-drawn] **IM**. You have to look hard to see what Mandy is firing at, and when you notice it's just the door, you have to look again as to *why* he's zapping it. Chinese troops occupy the foreground and background, whereas they *should* just appear in the latter to make this cover better.



.....

And there you have it, Iron Folk! Drop Pat and/or Dave a line and let them know what your fave/lamest covers are!

cousture@yahoo.com
ironhube@aol.com

THE IRON MAN

screenplay

by

Jeff Vintar

story

by

Jeff Vintar and Stan Lee

MARVEL STUDIOS
10880 Wilshire Boulevard, #1400
Los Angeles, California 90024

SECOND DRAFT
AUGUST 1997

EXTREME CLOSE-UP OF AN IRON MASK

Two pleading human eyes stare out through a set of narrow rectangular eye slits. The ends of the slits are turned down just enough to suggest sadness. No mouth slit is in view. Just two human eyes staring out of an iron mask.

There is BREATHING. Desperate pained muffled BREATHING.

TONY STARK (V.O.)

I'm going to die in here.

The eyes look around. As if searching, wildly. Trapped.

TONY STARK (V.O.)

They will find my body encased in a coffin of my own design. A coffin made of iron. My name is Tony Stark, and I was the "Invincible Iron Man."

The eyes stop moving. Staring at us now. Not blinking.

TONY STARK (V.O.)

Not so invincible.

ROLL TITLE AND CREDITS

INT--A BURNING BUILDING--NIGHT

The tenement is an inferno. Walls and ceiling engulfed in flames. The smoke thick. THE FIRE IS DEAFENING. And nearly lost amid the roar of the blaze is one weak MOAN.

There is a MAN on the floor, like a new soul just dropped off in hell. His face hidden from view. As if he was trapped and finally overcome by smoke. He does not move.

There is a new sound now, very faint, but getting louder. DOOM. Something is coming. DOOM. Something is visible through the smoke. DOOM. It is like a man, but not like a man. There is a piercing WHINE OF MECHANIZED JOINTS as the REDEEMER RESCUE ARMOR steps through the wall of fire.

The Redeemer Armor is impressive, without being inviting. The industrial-looking exterior is harsh: all angles, joints, plates, and exhaust ports. It looks frightening.

The Redeemer steps across the room with a DOOM DOOM DOOM and stands over the figure, the unconscious man reflected and distorted in its metallic surface. The armor HUMMS.

With a WHINE, the front of the REDEEMER OPENS REVEALING A BRIGHT HIGH-TECH INNER CAVITY designed to accept a human

form. Through the smoke and flame, and with a SCREECH OF STRAINING GEARS, the armor crouches and ENCASES THE MAN.

EXT--A BURNING BUILDING--NIGHT

The tenement is spewing smoke and flame from its windows. The building is lost. Suddenly the EXTERIOR WALL BURSTS OPEN and the REDEEMER EMERGES like some mechanized hero.

The rescue armor steps closer, each foot settling, with a DOOM. Methodical. Like a machine. DOOM. DOOM. DOOM. The armor stops, plants its feet, and stands up straight.

THE REDEEMER OPENS REVEALING THE VICTIM INSIDE. Covered with soot. He looks like he needs to get to a hospital.

The man steps out of the rescue armor...and takes a bow.

HANDS ARE CLAPPING. Dozens of them. The hands belong to FIREFIGHTERS, DOCTORS, POLICE OFFICERS, and POLITICIANS. They look like they've just seen the best show in town.

The flames engulfing the tenement EXTINGUISH THEMSELVES, and CEILING LIGHTS reveal that the "burning building" was nothing but a fake facade on a stage in an auditorium....

INT--THE LARGE AUDITORIUM--DAY

TWO SHAPELY HOSTESSES step on either side of the supposed "victim" and PULL OFF HIS FILTHY CLOTHING--clearly they were made to just fall away--revealing the EXPENSIVE SUIT beneath: TONY STARK flashes a confident showman's grin.

The AUDIENCE CLAPS LOUDER. Tony is handed a MICROPHONE by a THIRD HOSTESS, and a TOWEL by the FOURTH. He wipes his face clean as he raises the microphone to his mouth:

TONY

Welcome...to Stark Industries.

The AUDIENCE CLAPS BRIEFLY LOUDER before the sound falls away as Tony steps toward them and they take their seats.

TONY

The Redeemer Rescue Armor will swim beneath the ocean to save stranded divers. It will rocket into orbit to bring back lost astronauts. It will enter a burning building, and carry out the wounded--just as you saw here today--keeping the victims alive inside of its medical cocoon.

Tony stops, and takes a moment to look over the audience. As if wanting each and every one of them to feel welcome.

TONY

Now, I enjoy putting on a good show.
And as you may have already guessed,
I can't resist a dramatic entrance.

There is CHUCKLING. Tony waits a moment for it to pass, and when he begins again, his expression is quite sober:

TONY

I take the time and effort to put
on a good show because I've already
spent the better part of the decade
trying make this dream a reality.

Short pause. Tony appears nearly overcome with emotion.

TONY

It is my dream. I hope you'll make
it yours as well. Now please enjoy
your day here, and accept my thanks.

The AUDIENCE CLAPS LOUDLY, and Tony Stark smiles. Wide.

INT--A DARK CONFERENCE ROOM--DAY

A screen is displaying the events that transpired above. It suddenly BLIPS OFF, and JEREMY BLAND steps into view holding the REMOTE CONTROL. He appears to scan the room.

BLAND

Gentlemen, what you have just seen
is the civilian "rescue" prototype.

Bland dramatically KLIKS the remote and behind him IMAGES OF THE REDEEMER RESCUE ARMOR appear. But it is not the armor we saw before: the screens are playing SIMULATIONS OF MILITARY BATTLEFIELD ARMOR. Bland steps to one side.

CAMERA MOVES, past IMAGES OF ENORMOUS WEAPONS moving into position on the armor's shoulders and arms and legs. The Rescue Armor re-thought and re-cast as a walking one-man infantry division. Now the rockets and the flamethrowers and the rifles FIRE IN UNISON. It is horrifying imagery.

BLAND (O.S.)

The Redeemer Battlefield Armor will
come equipped with a full arsenal of
anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles,
flame-throwers, and the usual assort-
ment of automatic soft-target rifles.

CAMERA MOVES, past images displaying HIGH-TECH VIEWSCREEN READOUTS. What any soldier wearing the armor might see.

BLAND (O.S.)

Of course, every suit of armor will feature the Stark Satellite Tracking System, enabling each and every one of your infantrymen to pinpoint his exact location on the surface of the globe. And the already very successful Stark Battlefield Sensor Array will detect far-off enemies, as well as chemical and biological weapons, land mines and booby traps.

CAMERA MOVES, past images displaying a HIGH-TECH INTERIOR WITH AUTOMATIC MEDICAL INSTRUMENTS that work on soldiers repairing damaged tissue. Like having a computer surgeon built right in. SCALPELS AND NEEDLES pierce the wounds.

BLAND (O.S.)

The medical capabilities of the suit make mobile hospital units obsolete, since wounded soldiers will receive medical treatment while still inside of the armor--and while still on the field of battle--after which a series of stimulant injections returns the wounded soldier to "fighting status."

CAMERA MOVES, over FIERY APOCALYPTIC IMAGES OF AN ARMY OF ARMOR-CLAD SOLDIERS MARCHING OVER A BOMBED-OUT LANDSCAPE.

BLAND (O.S.)

Gentlemen. Stark Industries has always been proud to meet your needs in advanced weapon systems.

At the far end of a long CONFERENCE TABLE, nearly lost in shadow, are a ROW OF STIFF AND GRIM-LOOKING MILITARY MEN. Bland leans over the table. He is a consummate salesman:

BLAND

Now we're pleased to give you the 21st Century Fighting Man...today.

INT--EXECUTIVE MEETING ROOM--DAY

TONY STARK sits at the head of a table surrounded by his EXECUTIVE STAFF. The STARK LOGO on the wall behind him.

TONY

No.



An Avengers 2000 special issue written especially for **ADVANCED IRON**
By Thomas Deja

[NOTE TO ALL AI READERS:](#)

As a long-time **Iron Man** fan, I was very happy to take over writing the **Avengers 2000** version (at <http://ironrod.dingojunction.com/Avengers2000>) of ol' Shellhead with its 16th issue. **Avengers 2000** is a web site which uses as a divergence point April 2000 issues of Marvel books—which means the last mainstream Marvel Universe adventure was the **War Machine** trilogy. Since the first issue hit the web site, **Tony** has tackled a new **Melter**; put the threat of **Justin Hammer** behind him; confronted **Teen Tony** (in this version of the MU a corrupt, hedonistic monster); become involved in an underground sport involving combat between homemade suits of powered armor; and helped save Seattle from the clutches of **Hydra** and **System Crash**.

The following story is within the **Avengers 2000** continuity, and occurs after the 21st issue of the series. It's part of a larger arc called "*The Rules of the Game*" but you do not need to have knowledge of that story to understand this one. I hope you'll enjoy it and that you'll come take a look at the Av2K web site for more adventures of **Iron Man** and all your Marvel favorites!

—Thomas Deja

She took her first breath of free air and tried to pinpoint why it tasted so sour.

She looked very different from when she entered prison. Her long platinum blonde locks were now cropped short to prevent any attackers hoping to make her the catch of the day from pulling on it. Her artificial eye, once a marvel of cybernetic engineering, was gone—replaced by a simple black eye-patch. Her beautiful unlined face, the face of a model, now bore the deep grooves that came with hard living and age.

It had been a long time since Iron Man, in one of his earliest cases, had brought the Saboteur down. And not a day had passed when she had not thought about payback.

The Saboteur looked both ways as the chill wind outside Rikers bit into her. Considering how long she was locked away, she expected that her career was ruined. No one would want to hire her after she was thrashed by the Golden Avenger (especially considering that she was thrashed by one of his earliest, most primitive versions of the armor; if she seriously proposed to tackle Iron Man now, she's be laughed out of any meeting). Luckily, she had managed to put some of her money away before society put *her* away, and she had instructed her lawyer to maintain one of her safehouses in the city, but still...

She was a master spy; somehow, the prospect of asking, 'do you want fries with that?' depressed her.

The Saboteur was not looking forward to life in the outside world again. Which was why, when she saw the limousine pull up a few minutes later, the chauffeur bearing a letter of introduction for her, she got right in.

* * * * *

The Spymaster coughed up blood as the golden man paced in front of him.

"The problem with you, sir, is that you did not live up to your illustrious name."

Even in the darkened confines of the room, the Spymaster's captor gleamed. As he moved in and out of the shadows cast by the ionic columns and the statues of Greek gods, his skin shined and shifted like molten metal. "The original man to take the name Spymaster, sir, was not a partisan. He gave all of us who needed his services a fair chance to gain them, and when he was in your employ, he gave one hundred percent. In contrast, you became a lackey of that suffering, sniveling syncophant, Justin Hammer."

The Spymaster's head lolled on bruised shoulders. There was a sharp pain in his chest he feared was a broken rib. Every breath caused him shuddering pain. On either side of him, the golden man's burly 'associates' held his arms straight, propping him up.

It was amazing, he thought in one of his more lucid thoughts, how much damage fists of solid gold could do.

The golden man turned to face the Spymaster. "You chose to become a toady, sir. And now that your master is no longer amongst the living*, you are revealed for what you truly are."

**--Justin Hammer was killed in IRON MAN #15 (Av2k version)*

A golden hand reached out to pull the tattered remains of the Spymaster's mask from his face. The network of bumps, bruises and contusions was not a pretty sight to behold. "You, sir, are offal unfit to carry on the good name."

"Luckily," the golden man said as he pulled his solid gold fist for the killing blow, "I have the perfect successor in mind."

* * * * *

Tony Stark touched the glass of sparkling water to the scotch-and-soda of the woman sitting opposite her and sat back in his limo.

She was a very attractive woman; her short blonde hair was cut in a simple wedge that worked surprisingly well with the horn-rimmed glasses that seemed a throwback to another era. Her expertly

tailored evening gown accentuated her athletic body (she worked out two and a half-hours a day, apparently, before office hours), and her smile was sly and playful. There was a lot to like, Tony thought, about Karyn Celeste. She was sexy, funny and intelligent as all get out.

If only she didn't insist on talking business on their way to the ballet recital.

"Your WebVoyager would be perfect for our new operating system,"

"Well, Karyn," Tony replied as he sipped his refreshment, "You really should be speaking to Stark/Fujikawa about that."

"Yeah, I could do that," Karyn said, gracing Tony with a dazzling smile. "But do I really want to be stuck talking with a bunch of Pacific Rim suits? You're the guy who interests me, Tony. You've always been a maverick. You've always been ahead of the curve and when it looked like you couldn't get more out there, you decided to become some kind of, I don't know, proactive samurai. You're the guy I was thinking of when I founded Celestine, and you're the guy I want to do business with."

"Flattery, Ms. Celeste?" Tony said with a chuckle. "You'll turn my head."

Karyn leaned closer to him. The scent of the scotch in her drink made it to Tony's nostrils. Once again, the old hungers rose and he struggled to tamp them down. "Your head? Wait until after the ballet and I may let you turn a few things of mine."

That didn't make any sense at all, Tony thought to himself. He met her gaze, moved closer. It had been a long while since he dated regularly*; the fact was that he had spent a long time recovering from Rumiko. It was nice relaxing with a beautiful woman like Karyn, and even nicer feeling the easy rapport he was feeling.

**--The last date we've seen was in IRON MAN #1 (Av2k version)*

"I will say this much," Tony said with a hint of mirth, "you certainly are...unique."

Karyn moved even closer, and her lips were on his. She tasted lightly of nutmeg. Tony relaxed into her kiss.

It could've led to something promising if the roof of the limo hadn't suddenly been torn open.

"What in the--?" Before Karyn could say anything further, the limo was buffeted back and forth, sending both her and Tony sprawling.

Tony Stark had spent so much time in the center of the storm, both in his own identity and as Iron Man, that his first thought was that the attack was directed toward him. Keeping one eye on the roof, he called out to Karyn, "Get out of the car and take cover. I'll call Iron..."

Two steel cables shot through the sundered roof, wrapping themselves around Karyn's bare arms. It was to her credit that the scream she let out was relatively brief as she was lifted out of the car. Tony peered out of the ripped open roof to see his date being carried off by a female figure balancing on what seemed to be two circular plates in mid air.

"Sorry about this, Ms. Celeste," the other figure said, "But your company has something my employer wants...and he needs leverage."

Tony slapped the partition that separated him from the driver. “Pop the trunk! Pop the trunk!”

Without even waiting for confirmation, Tony pressed a secret stud on his watch. A green light just to the left of the ‘12’ blinked twice before a confirming beep was heard. Tony climbed out of the car, feeling the adrenaline pumping through his veins. The module was already there to meet him, slowly unfolding to accept Tony inside.

Within seconds, Tony Stark was gone, but Iron Man was taking off in pursuit.

* * * * *

“Nothing personal,” the woman flying through the air on two metallic discs told her captive, “but this is something of a deal maker for me.”

Karyn Celeste struggled against the cables holding her fast. “Boy, you are in trouble. You know who my date is?”

The assailant smiled beneath the blue and yellow full-head mask. “Oh, yeah...that’s why I chose tonight to strike. I mean, I could have just infiltrated your offices and extracted the Gerimander program...”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Karyn said. Her eyes were cast downward. They were very high up.

“I wonder what your new pal Stark would think if he found out your people were developing software to alter real time polling...would work pretty well if you wanted to stuff some poor backwater nation’s ballot boxes. Maybe that chucklehead in the White House tested it out?”

Karyn saw a red and gold figure rapidly approaching. “Oh, you’re in trouble now!”

“Of course,” the captor replied. She flicked open a small compartment on one of her shoulder pads, releasing a number of small circular objects. “He’s why I waited until you were necking with his boss.”

* * * * *

As Tony closed distance, he recognized the costume; save for an enlarged set of pads protecting the shoulder, it was near identical to that worn by one of his oldest foes. What he didn’t recognize was the sex of the wearer.

Had sex reassignment surgery, Spymaster? Tony asked himself. He ran his weapons systems through preliminary diagnostics just in case.

A series of round spheres sped toward Tony. The on-board computer locked onto each individual target. The spheres revolved slowly and a visor opened up on each one. High intensity lasers emitted from the spheres, raking his armor.

The woman in the Spymaster costume banked around and started closing distance. She reached for a sidearm at her hip. “I’ve been looking forward to this for a long time, tin man,” she hissed.

The laser barrage continued. The armor’s refractory coating managed to deflect the beams, but Tony still realized what the woman’s strategy was; the beams were so intensely bright that it interfered with his

targeting computer's visual overlay. "So you're, what, the third, fourth junior airman who's taken over the Spymaster identity, Miss?"

"I'm the last," the Spymaster (*Spymistress?*, Tony wondered) stated simply. She fired the gun. He found himself thrown back by a concussive shellburst.

Have to be careful, Tony reminded himself. *This...Spymistress is still trailing Karyn behind her like a toy*. He flew upwards to gain altitude. Some of the spheres shut down and he flew out of range, but others continued firing. He fired off a snapshot repulsor ray and knocked the gun out of the woman's hand.

"Is that all you got?"

"Of course not," the Spymistress replied. She reached for what appeared to be nodules on her belt, detaching them and tossing them in Tony's way. Using his chin toggle, Tony switched to polarized lenses, but the lens flare caused by the laser spheres was still interfering with his aim. He shot a series of repulsor blasts and managed to shatter one of the approaching saucer-shaped nodules. The explosion briefly deafened him.

Tony's boot jets kicked into overdrive as the second explosive nodule came spinning toward him. He twisted in flight and headed toward the laser sphere, flying right up to them and swerving at the last minute. The saucer impacted with the spheres; the resulting explosion wiped out both threats. The HUD slowly started clearing up. Tony turned to face the Spymistress—

Just in time for one of the saucers to attach to his chest. Tony rapidly toggled over to activate his EMP field, but the saucer exploded just as the object unhinged. He went end over end, the onboard computer screaming in his ear.

<-Uni-Beam Infrastructure Damaged. Repulsor Intensity Reduced by 10% to Allow For Optimal Internal Repairs->

There's something familiar about this woman's combat style, Tony said to himself. Internal gyroscopes in the suit steadied him just as the Spymistress closed in and hit him with the edge of one of her flying discs. The sparks that flew upon impact alarmed him—but not nearly as much as the scratch that remained on his armor.

"You like, tin man? They're honed to razor sharpness," the Spymistress offered before landing a glancing blow on Tony's helmet with a pair of electrified nunchukas.

"Now that I recognized," Tony replied, launching a quick strike that would hopefully wind the Spymistress. But the woman anticipated his move and blocked it before sommersaulting and hitting him with the sharpened edges of the flight discs.

All the while, Karyn Celeste screamed and struggled, the cables to which she was attached to the Spymistress dragging her in every direction.

The Spymistress continued her assault, spinning in place and hitting Tony with a series of open handed blows that drove him backwards. A vibratory pulse in her gloves shook the point of impact. She laughed and told the Golden Avenger, "I've been waiting *years* to crack open that shell of yours."

Tony caught her arm under his shoulder with the last blow. “Do I know you?” He hit the Spymistress with an uppercut that snapped her head back. The woman only laughed more and brought her knees up under her—evidentially for another strike with the bladed flight discs.

“Oh wouldn’t you like to know?” she purred as she brought her feet up—just at the moment when Tony released her arm and flew back away from her. No longer tethered by his hold on her, she found herself tumbling. Tony snapped off a pair of repulsor blasts. One hit the Spymistress’ left flight disc; the other severed the cable that kept Karyn Celeste attached to her.

Tony put his boot jets into overdrive. He flew past the Spymistress and grabbed hold of the cable before Karyn found herself in freefall. Tony dragged her to the rooftop of a nearby hotel and freed her with a surgical precision repulsor blast. “I took Mr. Stark to safety. Stay here and he will come to get you.”

Tony took off after the Spymistress. She was now wobbling in the air and listing decidedly to the left. Tony launched a volley of warning blasts and said, “It looks like it’s over, miss.”

The Spymistress looked over her shoulder. “It wasn’t over on Long Island, and it isn’t over here.” She flicked open another compartment on the oversized shoulder pads. A half dozen spheres came screaming out of the night at him. Tony locked onto the targets and fired his repulsors.

The spheres split apart, and thick black smoke billowed out, obscuring Tony’s vision. He quickly toggled through his set of specialty lenses, but by the time he found one that cut through the smoke, the Spymistress was gone.

* * * * *

Tony luckily didn’t have any bruises that would be visible to Karyn when he came to pick her up from the hotel roof. She was a mess now; her evening gown was torn, her skin smudged with the dust and soot of an urban night sky. She had long ago lost her glasses, and squinted when he talked to her.

“I’m guessing,” he said with a nervous chuckle, “that we’ve missed the curtain.”

“Good guess,” Karyn replied. “I’m so sorry, Tony. I was so looking forward to this.”

“Me too,” he admitted sheepishly. “I don’t meet attractive women as smart as you every day, Karyn.”

She stumbled to her feet. One shoe was missing. “Well, we’ll have to do it again sometime.”

“And again,” Tony added. He smiled; the fact that she was keeping her dignity even after what had just happened had made her even more attractive to him.

Karyn returned his smile. “And again...” She paused, dusted herself off, and added, “Is it like this all the time?”

“What?”

“Your life.” She hobbled over to him. “I’ve read a lot about you, Tony, and, well—you have a super-hero for a bodyguard. I saw how you reacted when that bitch ripped through the car. Is your life always attack after attack, your life constantly in danger?”

“Not necessarily,” Tony replied. “Sometimes there’s cake.”

Karyn looked him straight in the eye and broke out laughing. "I have no idea what you just meant."

"Look," Tony said, "I'd understand if you ran away from me now..."

Karyn shook her head. "Oh, no, Mr. Stark. Remember, girlfriend was after me. I just wanted to know what I was getting into."

* * * * *

"So you failed, madam."

The woman who was once the Saboteur pulled off the Spymistress' mask. "In that I didn't get the girl? Yeah, but that's no great loss. I'll just break into the R&D wing of her company later in the week and lift Gerimander for you myself."

Golden fingers clacked on the marble of the man's armrest. "Perhaps, madam, you should have done that in the first place."

"Well if I had done that," The Spymistress replied, digging into a pouch on her belt and tossing a small object the size of a PDA at her employer, "We wouldn't have that."

"And this is...?"

"A receiver for the nanotech I planted on Iron Man," she said with a smirk. Even now, they're building a suite of microscopic sensors utilizing his own armor's resources. Anything he sees, anything he experiences, we'll experience as well. You are looking, Mr. Midas, at StarkCam. Consider it my signing bonus to you."

Gold lips pulled back from gold teeth in something approximating a smile. The man who found himself transformed into the thing he once most desired thanks to Iron Man leaned forward on his throne and met the Spymistress' gaze.

"Yes, madam," Midas told her, "I think we can term the inaugural assignment on your contract a success."

* * * * *

The Spymistress will continue to cause trouble for Shellhead as "*The Rules of the Game*" continues, available only at the [Avengers 2000](#) website!

ADVANCED BROOD

#55

