

Marvel Manifestor

Chapter 251 - 251 – Hyperactive Happy

"Let's drop that for now," Tony said, turning to Rhodey.

"Tell me about that so-called Mandarin. Who is he?"

This was what Tony cared about most.

"That's classified, Tony," Rhodey replied.

Tony continued to stare at him without blinking.

"...Fine," Rhodey sighed.

"From the beginning until now, there have been nine bombing incidents in total. The public only knows about three of them."

"As expected—excellent information control," Tony said sarcastically, mocking Rhodey—or rather, the authorities behind him.

Rhodey rolled his eyes and continued.

"The most critical point is this: no explosives or suspected explosive devices were found at any of the scenes. Not even fragments or blast marks."

"You know I can help you investigate," Tony suddenly said with a grin.

"Just ask."

Tony knew the limits of police investigations very well. Some of their equipment was even manufactured by Stark Industries. Naturally, their investigative capabilities were nowhere near his.

"I've got plenty of high-tech toys," Tony continued smugly.

"I even have a dedicated navigation suit and the latest bomb-disposal equipment. I can contain explosions within an extremely small range."

He looked at Rhodey expectantly, clearly waiting for him to beg.

Before Rhodey could respond, two children walked up holding crayon drawings, asking Tony for his autograph. The drawings depicted Iron Man saving the world.

"No problem. What's your name?" Tony asked warmly.

"Allen~"

Tony not only signed the drawing, but also added a few strokes of his own—turning it into a scene where the little girl was rescuing Iron Man instead. He signed his name beneath it.

The two kids left happily. Only then did Rhodey continue.

"Tony, the Senate is in a state of panic right now. Ever since the New York incident, the credibility of the military and the government has dropped to an unimaginable low. They desperately need to restore their image and prove their strength."

"So stopping the Mandarin is their top priority," Rhodey said, then paused.

"But—"

"But it has nothing to do with superheroes, right?" Tony interrupted, shrugging.

"They don't want superheroes overshadowing them. I get it."

The military wanted public confidence to return to them, not to so-called superheroes.

"Exactly," Rhodey said helplessly.

"That's the Senate's position. So you really can't get involved in this."

In truth, the matter would be easy for Tony and the other heroes. As Tony said, with satellite triangulation and his navigation armor, locating the terrorists' base wouldn't take long.

But Rhodey was only a colonel. His opinion carried little weight. And the higher-ups were determined to exclude the New York heroes entirely, hoping to prove that the military was no less capable than these so-called superheroes.

At the same time, Happy was inspecting the security systems in Stark Tower.

Ever since the building switched to arc reactor power, the electrical systems required little maintenance. But other security measures still needed careful oversight, and Happy took his responsibilities seriously.

After Tony acquired the nanotech armor, Happy officially became Stark Industries' head of security, responsible for the tower's overall safety—a genuine executive position.

He could easily sit in an office and issue orders, but he was the kind of person who simply couldn't sit still. Whenever possible, he still preferred to handle things personally.

Happy brought a document to Pepper for her signature. It was a security proposal.

Tony had previously built a large number of cleaning robots, which were now sitting idle in the basement.

"After Tony made them, he just dumped them in the basement," Happy said.

"He even dressed them up as cartoon characters."

The document clearly stated that these robots had been collecting dust for years.

"We should put these robots to use. Leaving them idle is a waste—might as well melt them down otherwise."

"You're seriously suggesting replacing all security personnel with robots?"

Pepper stared at him in disbelief.

"These are company assets," Happy said earnestly.

"I've identified a major vulnerability—our staff structure is too large and too complex. Human Resources, in particular, is a critical point. I plan to—"

"Happy," Pepper interrupted, completely stunned.

"Are you serious? Firing the entire HR department and replacing them with robots?"

She genuinely wondered if Happy had lost his mind.

"Happy, I'm very happy for you—really," Pepper said carefully.

"You became Stark Industries' head of security, and no one could do that job better than you."

"Oh—thank you," Happy said, perking up.

"However," Pepper continued,

"since you took this position, employee complaints have tripled. And almost all of them are about you."

She was exhausted. Over the past few days alone, she had received more than a dozen complaints—all targeting Happy.

"Happy, I think you're too tense," Pepper said calmly.

"Stark Industries isn't nearly as dangerous as you imagine. This is Stark Industries—who could just barge in here? And even if they did, Tony's armors would handle it in no time."

Happy froze.

Then... what was the point of his position?

"Happy," Pepper said honestly,

"Tony didn't want you constantly on edge. He gave you this role so you could enjoy life."

Tony's real intention had been to promote Happy into a cushy executive role—good pay, minimal stress—so he could finally relax, date, and live a normal life.

"Oh... I hadn't thought of it that way," Happy admitted.

"But you know me. I'm not the kind of person who can just sit around doing nothing."

He was already used to this pace of life. Letting him suddenly relax made him feel uncomfortable all over. Not everyone could be like Lucas—lying flat all day without a care in the world.

"Ms. Potts, the visitor scheduled for three o'clock has arrived,"

the secretary said as she approached.

"Alright, I'll be right there," Pepper replied.

She turned back to Happy.

"Relax, Happy. You're a company executive now. You don't need to handle everything personally. Enjoying life is important too."

Then her tone shifted slightly.

"But the person I'm about to meet—I'll need you to come with me."

"What's wrong? Is this person dangerous?"

Happy immediately straightened up, alert.

Finally—his moment to shine.

Ever since Natasha had effortlessly thrown him over her shoulder before, Happy had been training hard in combat and mixed martial arts. Now, at last, it might pay off.

"No," Pepper said.

"I used to work with him. He keeps trying to ask me out, but you know—I'm with Tony now."

She hesitated slightly.

"So it might be awkward. If he's here strictly for business, that's fine. But if he shows any inappropriate intentions..."

Happy immediately understood.

In other words, if it was business, great.

If not—Happy would be escorting someone out the door.

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Chapter 252 - 252 – Killian

Now that Pepper and Tony's relationship had been firmly established—and was going extremely well—Pepper didn't want Tony to have any unnecessary doubts.

As the glass door opened, a handsome man in a dark-patterned suit slowly turned around. The tailoring was impeccable, the cufflinks refined, the accessories understated yet elegant. Paired with a mature, striking face, he was, objectively speaking, the embodiment of a high-quality man. Even Happy had to admit that, in this department, Tony fell just a little short compared to this guy.

"Hey~ Pepper~"

His voice was rich and magnetic, so pleasant it almost seemed to resonate in the ears.

"Long time no see, Killian~"

Pepper smiled in response, but her smile was purely polite—there was no trace of deeper emotion.

"You're still as beautiful as ever today."

Killian set the book in his hand aside and looked Pepper up and down.

"Thank you. You look well too."

Standing beside her, Happy suddenly sensed danger. He felt that Tony was in trouble—this man was practically the textbook definition of an elite male specimen, leagues ahead of Tony in sheer presentation.

"What have you been doing all these years?" Pepper asked, surprised.

"You've changed so much. You're like a completely different person."

"I suppose you could call it a successful startup," Killian replied casually as he stepped closer to her.

"Sir, do you have a visitor access badge?" Happy interjected, subtly positioning himself between Killian and Pepper.

"Happy, let us talk alone," Pepper said suddenly, turning to him.

"It's fine."

Happy froze.

Wait—you were the one who asked me to come play the bad guy. And now, before I've even done anything, you're already telling me to leave? What kind of plot twist is this?!

"Y-You're sure it's fine?" Happy asked weakly.

"It's fine, Happy. You can go," Pepper said again, reassuring him.

Happy nodded, shot Killian a warning glare, then turned and walked out. But after rounding the corner, he quietly sneaked back, crouching behind a wall to secretly observe the situation inside. It wasn't that he didn't trust Pepper—he was worried that this Killian guy might try something inappropriate. If Pepper couldn't handle him physically, she'd be at a disadvantage.

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"Have a seat. It really has been a long time," Pepper said as they sat down.

"So... what kind of company are you running now?"

In the Stark Industries lobby, a man in a suit—with his tie crooked and messy—sat in the visitor waiting area. His eyes darted back and forth as if he were anxiously waiting for someone.

By coincidence, Happy noticed him when he turned around. The man's behavior struck him as suspicious—he didn't look like someone here on business, more like someone casing the place. Happy approached, intending to question him.

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Inside the office, Killian continued speaking.

"I now own a biotechnology company," he said.

"We're focused on developing a solution that could free humanity from the suffering of disease. After years of work, my team has finally made a breakthrough."

He took out a small box containing three marble-sized spheres. Pepper immediately recognized them as projection devices.

"We discovered a virus," Killian said.

"I call it the Extremis Virus."

He attached a small metal piece behind his ear, then turned off the lights with a remote.

A projection of a human brain's neural network appeared. Blue neural pathways filled the air, threaded with streams of golden light flowing through them like blood.

"And this," Killian said, pointing,

"is what I want to show you."

He zoomed in on a synapse. A golden energy-like substance emerged clearly.

"The Extremis Virus unlocks our biological potential," Killian explained.

"And here—"

He magnified another section. A neuron resembling a miniature black hole expanded endlessly.

"This state indicates that our brains—and even our genes—are being upgraded. Human cognition itself is destined to evolve."

Pepper watched in amazement. She didn't fully understand what the Extremis Virus was, but she grasped some of what Killian was saying. After all, her background was finance and management, not biotechnology.

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In the lobby, Happy was still watching the suspicious man when his phone suddenly rang. It was Tony.

"Hey~ enjoying your life yet?" Tony teased.

"Tony, I've got serious business right now."

"Flirting with company employees?" Tony joked.

"Cut it out. I really do have something important going on."

"Oh? Tell me about it."

Tony was already back home, sitting on his couch with a glass of orange juice. JARVIS was overseeing the repainting of a new suit, leaving Tony unusually free.

"Alright," Happy said seriously.

"Pepper is meeting a scientist—apparently a former colleague of hers. He's very handsome, dresses well. I didn't recognize him at first, but I looked him up afterward."

"You know who he is?" Happy continued.

"Aldrich Killian. We've met him before—at a scientific symposium in Switzerland."

Tony paused.

"Hmm... I don't remember him."

"Of course you don't," Happy shot back.

"What can you remember besides beautiful women?"

Then he continued.

"At first I didn't think much of it, but now something feels off."

On Tony's end, JARVIS had already pulled up all of Killian's information, which Tony was scrolling through.

"Honestly, Tony, I don't trust this guy," Happy said.

"I think he has ulterior motives. And there's another sketchy person who came with him—I've got a bad feeling about that guy."

Happy kept his eyes locked on the suspicious man, who was sprawled lazily on the couch, one leg propped on the armrest, flipping through a magazine.

"Relax, Happy," Tony said.

"What you need is to unwind. Go to a nearby bar, have a drink, meet a few women, and take them home for the night. Don't fixate on some random guy."

With a swipe, Tony routed the call to his home speakers.

"Tony, you should be feeling threatened right now," Happy snapped.

"Pepper is your girlfriend. She's alone in a room with a man who might as well be her ex. And what are you doing? Sitting at home playing with your oversized action figures. You're wasting a gift, do you know that?"

Happy grew more agitated, then switched the call to video and aimed the camera at Pepper and Killian's office.

"Look at them. The atmosphere is like a nightclub at midnight. And do you see those projections around them? That's a brain. I don't know what it means, but it doesn't feel right."

Happy waved his phone around, trying to capture every angle for Tony.

"I'm going to check Killian's license plate," Happy declared.

"If he so much as lays a finger on Pepper, I'll snap his neck."

"Alright, Happy," Tony said calmly.

"That's Pepper we're talking about. I trust her. She wouldn't have any interest in some so-called Killian."

Then he added smugly,

"She's only interested in me."

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Seeing that Happy still refused to give up, Tony sighed helplessly and tried to talk him down.

"I suggest you go meet some of the new interns at the company. They're all young and pretty girls. Oh right—except for Gwen Stacy. If you try flirting with her, Carl might literally eat you alive. And trust me, I wouldn't be able to stop him. You know how he is—he can suddenly get really big."

Inside the office, Killian had just finished presenting his research.

"Just imagine it, Pepper," he said. "If you could enter the neural core of any living organism and then reorganize its genes—"

"That would be extraordinary," Pepper replied, pausing briefly before continuing.

"But unfortunately, this kind of technology could easily be weaponized. For example, it could be used in the military—to create super soldiers or private security forces. Tony has already explicitly forbidden that kind of application—"

"Oh~~ Tony~~ Tony~~~"

Killian interrupted her, turning his gaze directly toward her.

"Did you know that years ago, I once invited him to join our company, A.I.M.? He rejected it without hesitation. But now, Stark Industries is no longer truly controlled by Tony Stark. It's run by another genius—a brilliant, charming genius. I believe this genius doesn't need to report to Tony, nor does she possess his innate arrogance and sense of superiority. Don't you agree?"

Pepper fell silent for a moment, then looked up at Killian.

"My answer is no, Killian. We are not a biotechnology company, and at this stage, we have no intention of entering that field. So... I'm sorry."

Although she said "sorry," there was no regret on Pepper's face. She and Tony were firmly on the same side. Killian's words had already crossed her bottom line. She wouldn't give him any opportunity—not even a business one.

"I see," Killian said calmly. "Honestly, I am a bit disappointed."

The two of them left the reception room and walked out of Stark Tower together.

"But that's alright, Pepper," Killian said. "I believe we'll meet again."

He leaned in and kissed her on the cheek, then turned and left. He departed alone—the man who had accompanied him earlier was nowhere to be seen.

At that moment, Happy suddenly appeared beside Pepper.

"The car you asked for is ready. Are we leaving now?" he asked.

As he spoke, Happy snapped a photo of the car Killian had taken, making sure the license plate was clearly visible.

Pepper nodded and got into her car, driving off on her own. She was heading home to have dinner with Tony—something they had already planned that morning.

When she returned to the villa and opened the door, Pepper was greeted by the sight of a red-and-gold Iron Man suit sitting on the sofa with one leg crossed over the other, gently swaying to the music.

"Tony, what is this?" Pepper asked in disbelief.

"Now you're wearing your armor inside the house? Aren't you afraid you'll accidentally wreck the place?"

She was genuinely shocked. Tony's obsession with his "action figures" had apparently reached a new level. Wandering around the house in full armor—at this rate, she half-expected him to wear it to the bathroom in a few days.

"Well, everyone has hobbies," the armored figure replied.

"This is my newly developed suit. Handsome, right?"

The armor stood up and slowly walked a circle around her.

"Do you really have to parade your hobby around the house like this?"

"Not just parade," the armor said. "It can do more than that."

It moved behind Pepper and began massaging her shoulders.

"Honestly, getting a massage through the armor feels pretty good."

Pepper closed her eyes, clearly enjoying it.

At that moment, Tony himself walked up from the underground lab, sat down across from Pepper, and poured wine for both of them.

"Wha—Tony?!"

Pepper opened her eyes, saw Tony's face, and screamed in surprise.

"So? The latest upgraded Sentry Mode," Tony said proudly.

"It can patrol and do a lot of other things."

Pepper's face darkened instantly. She had thought Tony was wearing the armor and chatting with her the whole time—never imagining she'd been talking to an empty shell.

"You are unbelievably bored, Tony," she said flatly, pushing the armor away and turning to him.

"Sorry," Tony said quickly. "I was just testing its performance. Don't be mad. I've already arranged a lavish dinner—we've just been waiting for you to come back."

He led Pepper into the dining room. Sure enough, a table full of exquisite dishes was laid out, all still hot, as if they had just been served.

"Well?" Tony said smugly.

"All of this was finished five minutes before you walked in. I hired over a dozen top-tier chefs. And this—"

He took out a bottle of red wine. The label was yellowed with age, bearing an eagle in flight and the year 1992 printed beneath it.

Pepper recognized it immediately. A 1992 Screaming Eagle Cabernet—one of the most expensive red wines in the world, worth several hundred thousand dollars a bottle.

"Well... for the sake of this wine," Pepper said with a smile.

She took her seat, Tony uncorked the bottle, and the two enjoyed a rare candlelit dinner together.

In the original timeline, Tony's paranoia had already been quite severe by this point. He wore his armor constantly, hid in his basement, delegated social interactions to automated suits, and believed he was only safe inside the armor. All of it stemmed from the Battle of New York.

But now, Tony showed none of those symptoms. His nanotech armor had been developed years ahead of time, fully integrated with vibranium. He hadn't suffered any post-battle trauma during the New York invasion. The current Tony Stark had nothing to fear—spending his days tinkering with satellites and armor, or happily orbiting around Pepper.

"So, what's the deal with that Killian guy?" Tony asked, eating without the slightest trace of upper-class restraint.

"Killian?" Pepper paused. "Happy told you?"

She immediately understood. It had to be that old fool Happy—she'd almost like to fire him tomorrow.

Tony nodded. "Yeah. Happy says the guy's dangerous. He even claimed I've met him before, but I honestly don't remember."

Just as Happy had said, Tony remembered beautiful women—not random men.

"You've met him before?" Pepper asked, surprised.

"How come I didn't know?"

"I don't remember," Tony shrugged. "Happy said it was at some tech symposium. I've been to so many conferences—how am I supposed to remember everyone?"

Pepper found that perfectly reasonable. Tony couldn't even memorize his own ID number; expecting him to remember Killian would be absurd.

"JARVIS," Tony said casually,

"put on something romantic."

Night had fallen. The bustling plaza was still packed with people, as if nightlife were only just beginning.

In the shadows, Happy was sneaking along behind a man—the very same person who had accompanied Killian to Stark Industries earlier that day.

With nothing better to do, Happy had actually followed him all the way until nightfall.

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Chapter 254 - 254 – Happy Is Attacked

At that moment, the man arrived in front of a scruffily dressed figure who was nervously fiddling with the dog tags around his neck.

"Have you made your decision?" the man asked.

"Yes. I've decided," the scruffy man replied.

Happy pretended to be just passing by and hid nearby to observe. The more he watched, the more suspicious he felt.

The man set the case he was carrying down beside the scruffy figure.

"This is good stuff," he said coolly. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

With that, he turned and left, leaving the scruffy man clutching the case.

Happy saw everything clearly. He immediately approached the scruffy man and deliberately bumped into him as if by accident. The case slipped from the man's hands and fell to the ground, scattering a pile of miscellaneous components.

"Sorry, buddy," Happy said at once, crouching down to help pick them up.

While the man wasn't paying attention, Happy discreetly pocketed one of the components. What he failed to notice, however, was that the scruffy man's eyes suddenly began to glow red.

Happy stood up and walked away as if nothing had happened—but just then, Killian's subordinate returned and bumped into him in exactly the same way.

"Hey, pal," the man said. "You here by yourself? Planning to buy something?"

Clearly, he had already recognized Happy.

"Oh, I'm buying a gift for my girlfriend," Happy shot back without hesitation.

"Today's our anniversary."

"That thing in your hand doesn't belong to you," Killian's man said, dropping all pretense as he grabbed Happy's wrist.

Happy threw a punch immediately, but the man dodged with ease. Happy followed up with five or six rapid punches, all of which were effortlessly avoided.

Breaking free from the grip, Happy landed a heavy punch squarely on the man's face. The blow was brutal—his nose was visibly smashed out of place.

A flash of red light flickered across the man's face. In the next instant, his broken nose snapped back into position, completely restored, without even a scratch remaining.

Happy froze. He instantly realized how serious the situation was.

The man gave him no time to react. Grabbing Happy by the arm, he hurled him six or seven meters through the air. Happy crashed into several vendor stalls before finally hitting the ground.

At the same time, the scruffy man had finished assembling the components into a device resembling an asthma inhaler. Without hesitation, he raised it to his mouth and inhaled deeply.

Immediately, his body began to glow red. Streams of crimson light flowed visibly through his limbs, as if molten lava were coursing through his veins.

"Help me...! Someone help me...!"

The man staggered toward Killian's subordinate, reaching out desperately.

But the subordinate merely glanced at him before hurriedly retreating, as if avoiding imminent danger.

The glow inside the scruffy man intensified. People around the plaza began to notice what was happening. Soon, orange-red light burst from his eyes, ears, nose, and mouth.

"Gaaah—!!!"

His entire body radiated blinding orange light, shining outward like a living beacon.

BOOM—!

The entire plaza erupted in a massive explosion.

The shockwave shattered every window in the surrounding area. Towering flames engulfed the square, and passing vehicles were overturned by the blast. In an instant, the once-crowded plaza was reduced to ruins.

Amid the wreckage, Happy lay on the ground, soaked in blood. His body was riddled with injuries from the explosion, his face covered in crimson.

Because Happy had taken cover behind a fountain at the moment of detonation, he hadn't been hit directly. Others were not so fortunate. Aside from Happy, every person in the plaza had been reduced to ash. The ground was littered with black, human-shaped silhouettes—nothing else remained.

Fighting to stay conscious, Happy felt around and found a metal tag—the dog tag that had once hung around the scruffy man's neck. He clenched it tightly in his hand before finally losing consciousness.

At the edge of the plaza, a shattered figure emerged from the ruins. His entire body glowed like molten magma, his clothes reduced to tattered remnants of what looked like a suit. It was Killian's subordinate.

He hadn't escaped the blast, but the molten energy within him was rapidly healing his wounds.

After surveying the devastation, he staggered away from the plaza.

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The television continued to broadcast news of terrorist activity. Their methods were growing increasingly brutal—not only executing hostages, but even attacking a U.S. military base in the Middle East.

The screen showed the base completely leveled, reduced to rubble. Yet rescue teams found no bodies, no identifiable explosives—only scorched black ash covering the ground.

Carl watched the report, frowning. He knew this scene all too well.

"This is Extremis," he muttered.

"Who?" Skye asked, sitting beside him and eating fruit. "Carl, what did you say?"

"Nothing," Carl replied. "Just be careful when you go out lately. These terrorists could trigger an explosion at any time."

He was worried about Skye. While her shockwave abilities could easily neutralize an explosion, being caught completely off guard could still put her in danger.

"Relax," Skye shrugged. "I've got a huge job right now—can't even find time to go out if I wanted to. A financial firm's system got hacked, and they hired me to fix it."

"That's good," Carl said with a nod.

He then took out his phone and called Gwen.

Gwen and Peter had already seen the news and understood the situation. They reassured Carl not to worry.

Compared to Skye, Gwen was even safer. Her spider-sense allowed her to foresee danger in advance—an almost broken ability. It would be extremely difficult for an explosion to catch her off guard.

After thinking for a moment, Carl tried calling Tony. Killian was clearly targeting him—Tony needed to be warned to keep his nanotech armor active at all times.

But the call wouldn't go through.

For a moment, Carl even wondered if Tony's house had already been blown up. Without hesitation, he decided to go check in person.

"Skye, watch the place," Carl said as he stood up.

Skye waved him off without looking up, already focused on her fruit again.

Carl's cloak unfurled as he rose into the air, flying straight toward Tony's villa.

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Meanwhile, Tony had already received a call from the hospital.

Happy was critically injured and unconscious, admitted to intensive care.

Nanotech armor instantly surged over Tony's body, and he rocketed into the sky.

Inside the ICU, Happy lay covered in bandages, hooked up to a ventilator. Tony sat silently beside his bed.

A nurse finished checking Happy's vitals and reached for the remote to turn off the television.

"Please don't turn it off," Tony said quietly.

"It's his favorite show."

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Chapter 255 - 255 – Making a Threat

"Please don't turn off the TV. It's his favorite show."

The nurse nodded, though she still lowered the volume slightly.

Tony stood up and asked, "How is he now?"

The nurse finished the last note in the medical chart before replying.

"Everything is stable for the moment. His external injuries aren't severe—the main issue is a concussion caused by the blast, which led to the coma. Once

the brain scan results are out, our neurology specialists will personally take over."

Tony nodded. This hospital was owned by Stark Industries and staffed with the world's top experts. If even they couldn't help, then aside from the almost absurdly advanced Wakanda, there was nowhere else on Earth that could save Happy.

Outside the hospital, reporters had already gathered in force. They swarmed in at the slightest hint of news. A Stark Industries executive had been injured in an explosion—and Tony Stark himself had shown up. There was no way they would miss a story like this.

The moment Tony stepped outside, the reporters surged forward, surrounding him tightly.

"Mr. Stark! Mr. Stark!" one reporter shouted into her microphone.

"There are claims that this explosion was another terrorist attack carried out by the so-called Mandarin. Do you have any comment?"

Tony ignored them completely and continued walking, his expression cold and unreadable.

"Mr. Stark," the reporter pressed on when he didn't answer, "this man is a terrorist. As Iron Man, when do you plan to deal with him?"

This time, she directly invoked his identity as Iron Man.

Tony suddenly stopped and turned to look at her.

"That's what you want to ask?" he said.

The reporter nodded eagerly. She didn't care about casualties—only about headlines. The more explosive the news, the better.

Tony paused. As someone who had once dominated front pages across the world, he knew reporters like these all too well. They thrived on chaos.

"Then tell that so-called Mandarin this," Tony said flatly.

"I, Tony Stark, will find you, you coward, rip out your intestines, and wrap them around your neck. And if you want to come find me instead, even better. Remember my address—Malibu. I'll be waiting."

With that, he grabbed the camera from the reporter's hands and slammed it against the wall. It shattered instantly.

"Go to Stark Industries," Tony added coldly. "They'll compensate you."

Nanotech armor surged over his body, and in the next instant, Tony blasted into the sky and left the hospital behind.

Mid-flight, JARVIS spoke up.

"Sir, Mr. Norman is waiting for you in the living room."

The helmet display showed Carl sitting casually on Tony's sofa, munching on an apple while watching TV. On the screen was the very footage of Tony's furious statement outside the hospital.

By the time Tony got home, Carl had finished his apple.

"Not bad," Carl said cheerfully.

"Especially the part where you smashed the camera."

He tossed another apple to Tony.

Tony had no appetite, but he still caught it.

"JARVIS," Tony said grimly, "pull up everything we have on the Mandarin."

At once, holographic screens lit up as JARVIS searched global databases, including S.H.I.E.L.D. and FBI networks.

"Split the screen. Reconstruct the explosion site."

JARVIS complied, recreating the blast using police data and nearby surveillance footage.

The result matched reality perfectly—the source of the explosion was a person.

"Analyze him," Tony said, pointing at the scruffy man.

"I want to know what kind of explosive could cause that level of destruction."

"Sir," JARVIS replied, "there were no explosives found on his body. Or rather—he himself was the explosive."

The simulation replayed the moment the man detonated. The strange radiating light couldn't be fully reproduced, but the violent bodily explosion was clear.

"So the explosive was inside him?" Tony muttered.

"The human body has very limited space. Aside from organs, there's nowhere to store enough material to level an entire plaza. Even TNT would require a volume comparable to a human lung. It just doesn't add up."

He replayed the simulation again and again, trying to identify the mechanism.

Carl watched for a moment, then spoke.

"Stop overthinking it, Tony. I came here to tell you who's really behind this."

Tony looked up sharply.

"You already know?"

Carl nodded.

"Yes. The mastermind is Aldrich Killian from Advanced Idea Mechanics."

Tony's expression hardened.

"Killian? That Killian again?"

He immediately pulled up the photo Happy had sent him earlier.

"This guy?"

Carl glanced at the image. Though he didn't look exactly like the man from Carl's previous life, the behavior matched perfectly—the meeting with Pepper, the demonstration of his research.

"That's him," Carl confirmed.

"He developed a virus called Extremis. It was originally meant to cure diseases, but once he realized it could enhance the human body, he shifted to using it to create super-soldiers."

"And the Mandarin?" Tony asked.

"Just a puppet," Carl replied calmly.

"A front. The 'Mandarin' is nothing more than a hired actor."

Tony's eyes widened slightly at that.

"Actually," Carl continued, "you bear some responsibility for how Killian turned out."

Tony blinked.

"Me? What does this have to do with me?"

"At a science conference years ago," Carl explained,

"Killian approached you. He idolized you. Back then, he was already researching Extremis and wanted to invite you to join him. But you were busy chasing women, so you lied and told him to wait for you on the rooftop. He waited there all night."

Even Carl felt that the old Tony had been a real jerk. If he wasn't interested, he should have just said so. Giving someone hope and then abandoning them like that could shatter a person.

Tony frowned, trying hard to remember.

"I honestly don't remember him."

"JARVIS," Tony said, "bring up Killian's full profile."

The data appeared instantly, but no matter how much Tony reviewed it, the memory still wouldn't surface.

Then JARVIS spoke again.

"Sir, a vehicle has stopped outside the gate."

The security feed showed a black sedan parked at the entrance. A woman stepped out.

"And why are there so many helicopters outside?" Tony asked.

Outside the villa, no fewer than five helicopters were circling overhead.

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"Sir, you were the one who gave your address to reporters all over the world."

"Fuck—!"

Tony cursed under his breath.

The woman had already reached the front door and knocked on the glass.
The door slid open automatically.

She glanced around before stepping inside. The moment she crossed the threshold, a laser scanned her from head to toe, and a suit of Iron Man armor walked up to her.

"Don't move. Who are you?"

Tony's voice came from the armor as it raised an arm, aiming directly at her.

The woman studied the armor with curiosity.

"You don't remember me? Honestly, I'm not surprised at all~~~"

She pouted slightly, but didn't seem offended.

"Don't take it personally. I don't even remember what I had for breakfast."

"You had protein waffles with fried eggs this morning, sir," JARVIS chimed in.

"Thank you. That reminder was unnecessary."

The woman shook her head.

"I need to speak with you alone. It's urgent."

"Normally I wouldn't mind," Tony replied, "but I have a girlfriend now, Dr. Maya Hansen."

"You... remember me?"

Maya froze. She clearly hadn't expected Tony Stark to actually say her name.

"Of course. Beautiful women are hard to forget."

Tony suddenly paused, then added cautiously,

"Don't tell me I have a ten-year-old kid waiting for me in your car."

"He's twelve."

The words landed like a bomb. The air seemed to freeze, and the room fell completely silent.

"...Please don't joke like that, Tony," Maya said helplessly.

"I really do need your help."

After a moment of silence, Tony finally spoke.

"Fine. Come with me."

Maya followed the armor into the living room—where she immediately saw Tony sitting on the couch with Carl.

She froze, looking back and forth between Tony and the Iron Man suit.

"You just now...?"

She pointed at Tony, then at the armor, her brain clearly struggling to keep up.

"Just a little trick," Tony said casually. "Don't worry about it."

The armor stepped aside on its own.

Before Maya could say anything, the TV screen suddenly changed. A white trail streaked straight toward the villa.

"Sir, a missile has been detected inbound. Evade immediately."

JARVIS issued the warning—but it was already too late.

Boom—!

The missile smashed through the windows and detonated. The shockwave obliterated everything inside the villa. Maya was thrown violently backward. Tony's nanotech armor deployed instantly, encasing his body, while Carl was shielded by his cloak.

"Fuck—! They blew up my house?!"

Tony blasted apart the slab of stone in front of him with a repulsor and looked out toward the sea.

In the distance, three military helicopters were approaching. Their side hatches opened, and three more missiles launched.

"You've got to be kidding me!"

Tony fired repulsor blasts, detonating the missiles midair, then shot straight up toward the helicopters.

Carl's cloak unfurled, carrying him safely to Maya. Though she had been caught in the blast, she was unharmed—the Iron Man armor had shielded her from debris and shockwaves.

"We're leaving. Now," Carl said.

He scooped Maya up, and with a sweep of the cloak, they shot out of the ruins.

Meanwhile, Tony reached the helicopters. One repulsor blast reduced the first helicopter to scrap. His shoulder-mounted drones deployed, firing energy beams at the remaining two.

One helicopter was sliced cleanly in half, erupting into twin fireballs.

The last helicopter narrowly dodged the beams. Inside the cockpit was the same Extremis-enhanced operative—the one who had put Happy in a coma.

Tony saw him instantly. His rage became almost tangible.

"JARVIS, divert all power to the arc reactor. I want him erased."

"Target locked, sir."

The arc reactor flared with blinding blue light as energy surged to critical levels.

Humm—!

A beam as thick as a bowl erupted forward, warping the air around it. It struck the helicopter directly.

In a flash of intense blue light, the helicopter vanished—completely erased, without even wreckage left behind.

"Sir, armor energy at seventy percent."

One shot had consumed nearly a third of the suit's power.

Tony said nothing. He hovered in the air, staring out at the ocean. The sun was setting, golden light spilling across the endless sea, the waves shimmering like the scales of a colossal dragon.

Tony's villa was now nothing but rubble.

At the moment, Tony, Pepper, and Maya were all at Carl's agency. Until a new villa could be built, Tony and Pepper moved into an apartment they'd long rented but barely used.

"You said you had something important to tell Tony," Pepper said.

"What is it?"

Pepper and Maya now knew each other—and she'd already learned about Maya's past, including what happened ten years ago.

Carl, Gwen, and Skye sat off to the side, watching quietly and mentally preparing Tony for the inevitable punishment—possibly involving kneeling on durians.

"I'm part of a four-person think tank," Maya said.

"My superior is Aldrich Killian."

"Killian is your boss?!"

Pepper froze.

"Yes. And he's insane. His research is even worse."

Maya shuddered slightly. What frightened her wasn't the research itself, but Killian's extremism.

"Our original goal was to cure diseases—to help wounded soldiers regain normal lives. But Killian's ambitions went too far. He wants to use the virus to build a super-soldier army. He's completely abandoned the original purpose."

Everyone frowned. Killian truly was a madman.

Suddenly, the TV signal cut out. Static filled the screen, then a symbol appeared: two crossed blades surrounded by ten rings.

The image switched to footage of terrorist attacks—then to a bearded man seated in a chair.

"Mr. President of the United States," the man said calmly,

"I am the Mandarin. I know you're watching."

Across the entire country, every broadcast was hijacked.

Inside the Oval Office, the most powerful people in the nation sat frozen. At the center was the President himself, staring at a phone message containing a string of numbers.

His back went cold.

No more than five people knew his private number—and all five were sitting in this very room.

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Chapter 257 - 257 – The Truth Behind AIM

"Silence!"

The President slammed his hand on the desk. The Oval Office fell instantly quiet. All arguments ceased, and every pair of eyes turned toward him.

"We cannot bow to terrorists, Mr. President. The United States does not negotiate with terrorists," the Secretary of State said immediately.

"I have to make this call."

"I strongly object, Mr. President."

"I cannot stand by and watch people die."

With a dismissive wave, the President dialed the number.

Ring—ring—ring—!

On the other side of the broadcast, the phone beside the Mandarin suddenly began to ring. The shrill sound was clearly audible to everyone watching television.

The Mandarin's expression did not change. He did not answer the phone. Instead, he stared directly into the camera and slowly pulled out a handgun.

Bang!

The gunshot rang out. The hostage's head exploded like a watermelon.

Everyone—those in the Oval Office and those watching from their homes—froze in shock. The President stood there, phone still in hand, completely stunned.

"Final lesson, Mr. President," the Mandarin said coldly.

"Take your family and children and run. No one can save you—not your army, not your agents, not even that red, white, and blue tin can of yours. You know I have the power to do this."

He tossed the gun aside, his expression still eerily calm.

"We'll meet again very soon, Mr. President."

The broadcast abruptly cut out, every television screen dissolving into static.

"Get Colonel Rhodes on this immediately. Find that madman," the President ordered, turning to the Secretary of Defense.

"Mr. President, we've traced the signal. It originated in the southeastern Middle East. The Iron Patriot has already been dispatched," an aide reported after taking a call.

"Send Rhodes now."

The President took a deep breath, trying to steady himself. His mind kept returning to the Mandarin's words—and to the terrifying question of how his private number had been obtained.

---

After receiving his orders, Rhodes suited up and took off for the Middle East. Intelligence indicated that the signal source was a terrorist base. The Iron Patriot cruised at roughly Mach 3; it would take several hours to reach the destination.

Upon arrival, Rhodes plowed straight through the compound. Under his overwhelming firepower, the terrorists were caught completely off guard. Within minutes, the base was wiped clean—no survivors.

Boom!

Rhodes smashed open the entrance to a mountain cave with a single punch. Inside were more than a dozen terrorists, unarmed. A small missile launcher deployed from his arm, locking onto all of them at once.

Suddenly, his comm crackled to life. Tony Stark's face appeared on the HUD.

"Hey—Rhodey. Where are you?"

At Carl's agency, Tony was on the line.

"I'm in the Middle East, visiting a few friends. Why are you calling now?"  
Rhodes replied.

He lowered his arm slightly. His external speakers were still on, so the terrorists heard every word of the conversation loud and clear.

"That red, white, and blue suit of yours—was it redesigned by AIM?"

"Yes. They upgraded the weapons systems, though the operating system stayed the same."

Rhodes didn't understand where Tony was going with this, but he answered honestly.

"Didn't I make it crystal clear that no one was allowed to touch my armor?"  
Tony snapped.

"Did the Hammer Industries fiasco teach the military nothing? Or are they just determined to get played again?"

Tony was livid. Other people learned from their mistakes—apparently, the U.S. military preferred arrogance and repetition.

"Listen, Rhodey. I need your military clearance. I need to look up a few people."

Rhodes paused.

"My clearance? You've been hacking my account daily for years. Why are you asking now?"

He was genuinely baffled.

"You don't know? My house just got blown to hell by Killian—the AIM CEO who redesigned your armor. I'm at Carl's place right now. JARVIS's servers were wiped out in the blast."

Tony's anger flared again at the mention of AIM and Killian.

A guy he couldn't even remember had just leveled his villa—one he'd renovated not long ago. Even he couldn't burn money that casually.

"Well, looks like that 'Ann' guy really made an impression," Rhodes muttered.

"Congratulations. He finally got your attention."

"Damn it—just give me the login."

Tony gritted his teeth. This was an expensive way to remember someone. He'd prefer normal friendships in the future.

"The account's the same as always. You know it—WarMachine68."

"Got it. Password?"

"You seriously don't know? Then how have you been hacking my account all this time?"

"JARVIS did it. Why would I know your password?"

Tony sighed. Normally, all he had to do was talk and JARVIS handled the rest. Now that a missile had wiped out the servers, JARVIS was limited to suit support only.

"That bastard Killian..."

"Pepper, remind me to rebuild JARVIS's servers after this. I'm putting them in space this time. Let's see who can blow them up then."

Pepper rolled her eyes. Putting them in orbit was feasible—just another satellite—but it meant the tech teams would be pulling overtime again. Conveniently, Tony wasn't the one who had to explain that.

"The password—WarMachinelsAwesome—capital letters."

The moment Rhodes said it, Tony burst out laughing. Even the terrorists inside the cave couldn't help but laugh along.

Click—click.

The heavy Gatling gun deployed from Rhodes's back, aiming directly at the laughing terrorists. The laughter died instantly. The cave fell dead silent.

"Haha—still better than 'Iron Patriot,' though," Tony said smugly.

"Anything else?" Rhodes asked flatly.

"I still have guests to deal with here."

Tony ended the call.

---

On the other side, Skye was already at work. She breached the Pentagon's systems using Rhodes's credentials.

"Skye, pull up all records related to AIM's wounded-veteran aid programs," Tony instructed, standing beside her.

He removed a bead from his wrist and tossed it onto the table. Instantly, it projected Skye's desktop into the air—the Wakandan tech Shuri had given him.

Soon, a long list of names filled the screen. Every one of them was a retired, disabled soldier who had received aid from AIM.

Skye opened the first file. A video played, showing a young blond soldier.

"State your name," a man's voice asked from behind the camera.

"My name is Allen," the soldier replied. "Allen, sir."

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Chapter 258 - 258 – Target Coordinates

"My name is Allen. Allen, sir."

The young soldier spoke calmly. It was obvious that he had lost his left arm.

"Very well, Allen," a voice said. "You will receive regular injections. During this period, you must not drink alcohol or take drugs, and you must maintain a disciplined, regular lifestyle."

The camera shifted, and Killian's face appeared on screen. Tony clenched his fists, resisting the urge to punch straight through the projection.

"Anyone who lacks self-discipline will be removed from the program," Killian continued coldly.

"Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir. I understand," the young soldier replied immediately.

"Next one, Skye," Tony said.

Skye opened the second file. The content was largely the same. There were fifty names on the list in total—all of them disabled veterans who had volunteered for Killian's project in hopes of regaining their bodies after being broken by war.

"Skye, search for keywords related to the Extremis virus," Tony instructed, eyes fixed on the screen.

Skye typed in the term. Almost instantly, a new file appeared: Extremis Virus Injection Test.

The video showed all the volunteer soldiers being escorted into an underground facility. They were strapped to humanoid restraint frames and injected with an unknown liquid.

Soon, the first soldier reacted. His skin and muscles glowed like molten lava, and—miraculously—his severed arm began to regenerate. But before long, large areas of his body started emitting an intense red glow. The same thing began happening to the other soldiers.

In the footage, Killian urgently ordered all researchers to evacuate. The camera shook violently, then switched to a security feed inside the lab. One by one, the soldiers' mouths and noses began to emit red light.

The next second—

Boom.

The soldiers exploded. The video ended abruptly.

"So this is what you've been researching all this time?" Pepper said, turning to Maya Hansen in shock.

"Were you trying to save people—or kill them?"

Maya lowered her head, guilt written all over her face.

"Our original goal was to develop a treatment—to help injured soldiers regenerate damaged tissue and return to normal life," she said softly.

"But as you saw, Killian went insane. He turned them into bombs."

Killian was the mastermind, but in an avalanche, no snowflake is truly innocent. As one of the researchers, Maya could not escape responsibility.

Meanwhile, Rhodes had already swept through several terrorist bases without finding the Mandarin. This was the final location indicated by the signal trace.

A repulsor blast blew open the door as Rhodes entered the building. Inside, he found rows of women wrapped head to toe, sitting in front of sewing machines. Fabric was piled everywhere—it looked like a garment factory.

At Rhodes's entrance, the women recoiled in fear. A scan confirmed that none of them were armed.

"Iron Patriot reporting," Rhodes said dryly.

"Unless the Mandarin plans to attack the United States with cheap tracksuits next time, you've got the wrong location again. This is just a clothing factory."

He waved his hand, signaling that they were free to go. The women rushed forward, thanking him profusely. Some grabbed his hands, crying as they expressed their gratitude.

One woman stepped up, clutching his hand and speaking rapidly in a language Rhodes didn't understand.

"No need to thank me," Rhodes replied politely. "Just doing my job."

Suddenly, the woman's hand turned molten red. Searing heat surged straight through the Iron Patriot's armor.

The system instantly shut down.

With the power disabled, the immense weight of the armor collapsed onto Rhodes, slamming him to the ground.

"I've secured the Iron Patriot armor," the woman said calmly.

She pulled back her headscarf, revealing blonde hair and blue eyes—a white woman, not a Middle Eastern civilian at all. Rhodes immediately realized he'd been set up.

"If you want this armor," Rhodes growled, "you'll have to kill me first and pry me out of it."

"I was planning to," the woman replied coldly.

"Colonel Rhodes."

Back at Carl's agency, Skye had successfully hacked into satellite systems and was triangulating the Mandarin's broadcast signal—far more efficiently than the so-called military experts.

"I've got his location," Skye said, eyes widening slightly. "You'll never guess where he is."

"Where?" Tony asked. "North Africa? The Middle East? Eastern Europe?"

"None of those," Skye replied.

"The signal is coming from inside the United States—Miami."

With a tap, the coordinates were projected from the bead onto the screen, pinpointing a location in Miami.

"Miami?!" Pepper exclaimed.

"These people are insane—running terrorist operations right inside the country!"

"Send me the coordinates. I'm leaving now," Tony said.

He tapped the glowing arc reactor on his chest. The red-and-gold nanotech armor instantly enveloped him, and he strode out of the agency without hesitation.

Everyone turned to Carl.

"You're not going with him?" Skye asked.

"Do I need to?" Carl paused.

"Of course," Pepper said, watching as Tony shot into the sky.

"He's lost his cool."

"Great. As usual, I'm the one cleaning up after him," Carl muttered.

He stepped outside. Tony was already gone.

With a sigh, Carl unfurled his cloak and launched into the air.

"Skye, send me the coordinates—actually, just tell me which direction to fly," Carl said, pulling out his phone.

On Skye's screen, a red dot appeared—Carl's position.

Tony reached the target location: a massive private estate. A quick scan revealed dozens of armed guards on site.

"JARVIS, tag all hostiles. Highlight Killian," Tony said coldly.

He was done playing games. Killian was going to pay for leveling his home.

"Understood, sir. All targets marked."

Tony's vision filled with dense clusters of red indicators—every one of them an armed guard, now firmly in his sights.

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Chapter 259 - 259 – The Actor Mandarin

At that moment, Carl silently flew up beside Tony. Unlike Tony's repulsors, Carl's cloak allowed him to fly without making a sound.

"What are you looking at?"

Carl's sudden voice made Tony jump. His repulsor instantly snapped up, aimed straight at Carl, about to fire.

Carl dodged at once.

"Damn it! Are you trying to murder me?!"

Carl grabbed Tony's wrist, and only then did Tony realize who it was.

"Damn—can't you make some noise next time, or at least warn me first?" Tony snapped irritably. "You almost made me blast you! Do you have any idea how scary it is to hear someone speak out of nowhere in midair?!"

"You think I wanted to come?" Carl rolled his eyes. "Pepper was worried sick about you."

Tony snorted and looked down toward the ground.

"So, what's the plan?" Carl asked. "Follow procedure, or go in loud?"

By "procedure," he meant infiltrating quietly. For both Tony and Carl, sneaking in unnoticed was trivial. One of vibranium's defining traits was sound absorption—silent movement was practically standard.

"Let's just go full rampage," Tony said. "I don't feel like sneaking around."

He dove straight down. Carl followed closely behind.

"Hey, what's that?" one guard in the compound shouted, pointing at the sky.

Something with a blazing trail was plummeting straight toward them.

"Enemy incoming!"

Before the warning even finished—

Boom!

Tony's armor smashed into the ground. A powerful shockwave exploded outward from him, instantly sending nearby guards flying, blood streaming from their ears and noses.

"Not bad, right?" Tony said as he stood up. "Picked that up from your Skye. Didn't realize shockwaves were this useful."

The guards in the garden were cleared out in a single move, all knocked unconscious.

"Decent," Carl said casually, pointing around. "But the power's a bit low. Look—none of the buildings collapsed."

Flowers and hedges had been pulverized, but fountains and decorative structures remained intact.

"That's called precision control," Tony snorted. "You wouldn't understand."

He strode up to the front door of the villa, tore it off its hinges, and walked straight inside.

Rat-a-tat-tat-tat—

The moment Tony crossed the threshold, gunfire erupted from all directions. Bullets slammed into his armor, clanging like music, but not a single one left even a scratch.

Tony raised his hand. A repulsor blast fired, and several drone cannons unfolded from his back, opening fire at minimum power.

Even at the lowest setting, the drone cannons punched finger-thick holes straight through bodies, leaving charred edges around the wounds.

With automated targeting, the drones were ruthlessly efficient. In moments, every guard inside was dead—fragile as paper.

Once no hostiles remained, the drones retracted and seamlessly merged back into the armor. That was the beauty of nanotechnology: every weapon integrated perfectly into the main suit.

Carl followed behind leisurely. There was no need for him to act at all—Tony had everything under control. At this point, he was basically just here to watch.

They made their way to a bedroom. The bedcovers were noticeably raised—someone was clearly hiding underneath.

Tony stepped forward without hesitation, yanked back the covers, and aimed his repulsor.

"Ahhh—!!"

Two piercing screams rang out.

Under the covers were two stunning women in revealing lingerie, staring at Tony in sheer terror.

Tony lowered his arm. At that moment, the sound of a toilet flushing came from the bathroom.

Tony gestured for the women to stay quiet and turned toward the sound.

The two women immediately bolted, fleeing silently without even stopping to grab their clothes.

Moments later, a bearded man stepped out of the bathroom.

Tony recognized him instantly—the Mandarin from the broadcasts.

The man raised both hands at once. He knew exactly what he was facing. Iron Man—who didn't know him?

"Move one inch—"

The repulsor hummed to life.

"Understood! I'm not moving!" the man said quickly, freezing in place.

"You're the Mandarin?" Tony sneered. "Why are you such a coward?"

He looked utterly unimpressed. He had never seen a terrorist this pathetic.

"I'm just an actor!" the man blurted out. "I don't know anything!"

He pointed at the sofa. "Can I sit down? This pose is killing me."

Without waiting for permission, he dropped onto the couch.

"Alright," he said, spreading his hands. "My name's Trevor. I'm just a Hollywood actor. The 'Mandarin' doesn't exist—he's completely fictional."

"Who told you to play the Mandarin?" Tony demanded. "Killian?"

"Yes—Killian," Trevor said hastily. "He made up the Mandarin and hired me to play him."

"And he had me act like a serial-killer lunatic," Trevor continued, talking faster and faster. "Using people's stereotypes about terrorists. Middle Eastern look, threatening speeches—all of it was an act."

"You were just acting?" Tony said coldly. "Then what about the people you 'executed' on TV?"

Trevor pointed to the side.

Tony followed his finger and saw a massive green screen. Instantly, he understood.

"So those executions were all CGI."

"Alright," Tony said. "Then where are those people now?"

"Underground," Trevor replied immediately. "They have some kind of lab down there."

He pointed outside, toward a separate building.

"The entrance is there."

---

At the same time, deep underground, the Iron Patriot armor was suspended by heavy chains. Several technicians were using cutting wheels, trying to pry it open.

Inside the armor, Rhodes remained calm.

As if these tools could ever cut through it.

Killian stepped forward, waving the technicians away.

"Good afternoon, Colonel Rhodes," Killian said pleasantly. "Comfortable enough?"

"Not bad," Rhodes replied flatly. "Your men are just a bit noisy."

With the armor's systems disabled, Rhodes couldn't get out—and they couldn't get in. He was oddly unconcerned.

"My apologies," Killian said smoothly. "I've had them leave. I think a face-to-face conversation would be better. Don't you agree?"

As he spoke, Killian placed both hands on the armor's waist.

His hands began to glow, red-hot—like molten lava flowing beneath his skin.

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Inside the armor, Rhodes suddenly felt an intense heat rising from his abdomen, the temperature climbing rapidly. The suit's alarm system immediately activated, flashing warnings that the abdominal plating had exceeded safe thermal limits.

"Don't be nervous, Colonel," Killian said with a smile. Red veins were already spreading across his face. "I'll help you out very soon. Then we can talk face to face."

Beep—beep—beep—

The alarms grew more urgent. Emergency protocols appeared on Rhodes's HUD: in cases of overheating or critical failure, the armor would automatically open to allow the pilot to evacuate.

"Cancel protocol! Do not open—abort emergency procedures!"

Rhodes barked the command at once. But the protocol was hard-coded into the system, a mandatory failsafe.

The armor split open.

Rhodes lunged forward the instant he was free, driving a punch straight into Killian's face.

Killian didn't even bother to dodge. He took the blow head-on—and nothing happened. Not even a scratch.

Killian's eyes burned crimson. He opened his mouth, and a jet of fire erupted outward. If Rhodes hadn't reacted instantly, the flames would have burned straight through him. Even so, the metal railing behind him melted in seconds.

"You... you can breathe fire too?!" Rhodes exclaimed in shock.

Before he could recover, Killian's subordinate struck him down with a single punch.

"Proceed with the next phase," Killian said calmly.

"Tony Stark has already found this place," the subordinate replied, holding up a tablet displaying the villa's security feed.

"Prepare to withdraw," Killian ordered. "Activate the timed explosives."

The subordinate tapped the screen, triggering the bombs planted throughout the villa.

"Sir," JARVIS reported, "multiple timed explosives have been activated. Would you like me to mark their locations?"

At that moment, a red-white-and-blue armored figure shot into the sky. Tony looked up just in time to see the Iron Patriot flying away.

"Rhodey's here?" Tony muttered, confused.

His comms suddenly chimed—an unfamiliar number.

"Tony, where are you?" Rhodes's voice came through.

"Rhodey, that armor just now—was that you?"

"No!" Rhodes snapped. "That bastard Killian stole my suit!"

Tony clenched his jaw. "Damn it. Doesn't the armor have biometric authorization? How could anyone else use it?"

"The military researchers removed it," Rhodes said bitterly. "They said it would make modifications easier."

"Damn those idiots," Tony growled. "When this is over, I'm taking back that so-called Iron Patriot. I'll melt it down and turn it into a toilet."

He was furious. That suit was still his property. He'd only lent it to Rhodes to keep the military off his back—and now they'd butchered it beyond recognition. Tony couldn't fathom how people that stupid ever became generals or scientists.

Rhodes said nothing. He'd long since grown tired of watching useless researchers tamper with his armor, but he had never had the authority to stop them. Now, at least, the real owner was furious. After this, if the military wanted an armored suit, they'd have to build one themselves—and even with a hundred years, Rhodes doubted they could.

"Rhodey," Tony said sharply, "go to the main villa and secure everyone inside."

He cut the connection and headed back toward the main building where Trevor was being held.

"Carl? You're here too?"

Rhodes arrived at the main villa and froze at the sight before him.

Carl was sitting on the sofa with Trevor, the two of them casually drinking soda while watching two women play table tennis nearby. The ball bounced back and forth in a hypnotic rhythm—surprisingly mesmerizing.

"Yeah," Carl replied lazily. "Came with Tony. Haven't had any chance to do anything."

He took a sip of cola and gestured to Trevor.

"Trevor, this is Colonel Rhodes. Rhodes, this is Trevor—veteran Hollywood actor."

Rhodes nodded, then, inexplicably, sat down as well, joining them in watching the game.

When Tony walked in, he saw three grown men sprawled on the couch, drinks in hand, calmly enjoying the view while two women played ping-pong.

"I'm outside risking my life defusing bombs," Tony snapped, "and you idiots are relaxing in here watching a match?"

He looked like he was one second away from firing a repulsor.

"Tell me everything you know about Killian's plan," Tony said sharply, sitting down as well. "Don't leave out a single word."

"Well," Trevor said, eyes still glued to the game, "I know it involves a big ship. Somewhere in the Atlantic, south of Miami. Don't know the exact location."

"Anything else?"

"I heard something about the Vice President," Trevor added. "They mentioned him a few times."

Carl frowned, suddenly remembering something.

"The Vice President is probably compromised. He's likely working with Killian."

"An insider?" Rhodes said, startled. "The Vice President is involved?"

"Not completely sure," Carl replied, "but it's very likely. You should secure him—and his family—immediately."

Rhodes pulled out his phone and made a call. After more than ten minutes, he returned, his expression grim.

"I've passed on the warning," he said. "And there's worse news. The President has been taken by Killian."

The words hit like a bomb.

Everyone except Carl stared at Rhodes in disbelief—Tony, Trevor, and even the two women.

While Tony was busy dismantling explosives, the White House airfield was already in motion. Air Force One stood ready for departure as the presidential motorcade arrived.

"Has Colonel Rhodes arrived yet?" the President asked as he stepped out of the car. Soldiers on both sides snapped to attention.

A streak of flame cut through the sky. The Iron Patriot landed directly in front of the President.

The President smiled in relief. With the Iron Patriot here, there was nothing to fear from terrorists.

"Colonel Rhodes," he said politely, saluting, "I'll be counting on you."

The Iron Patriot returned the salute—without a word.

Moments later, both boarded Air Force One, and the aircraft lifted smoothly into the sky.

High above the clouds, the Iron Patriot dragged two unconscious presidential bodyguards into a cramped storage compartment. Using the intense heat generated by the Extremis virus, the armor melted the door handle shut, sealing them inside.

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