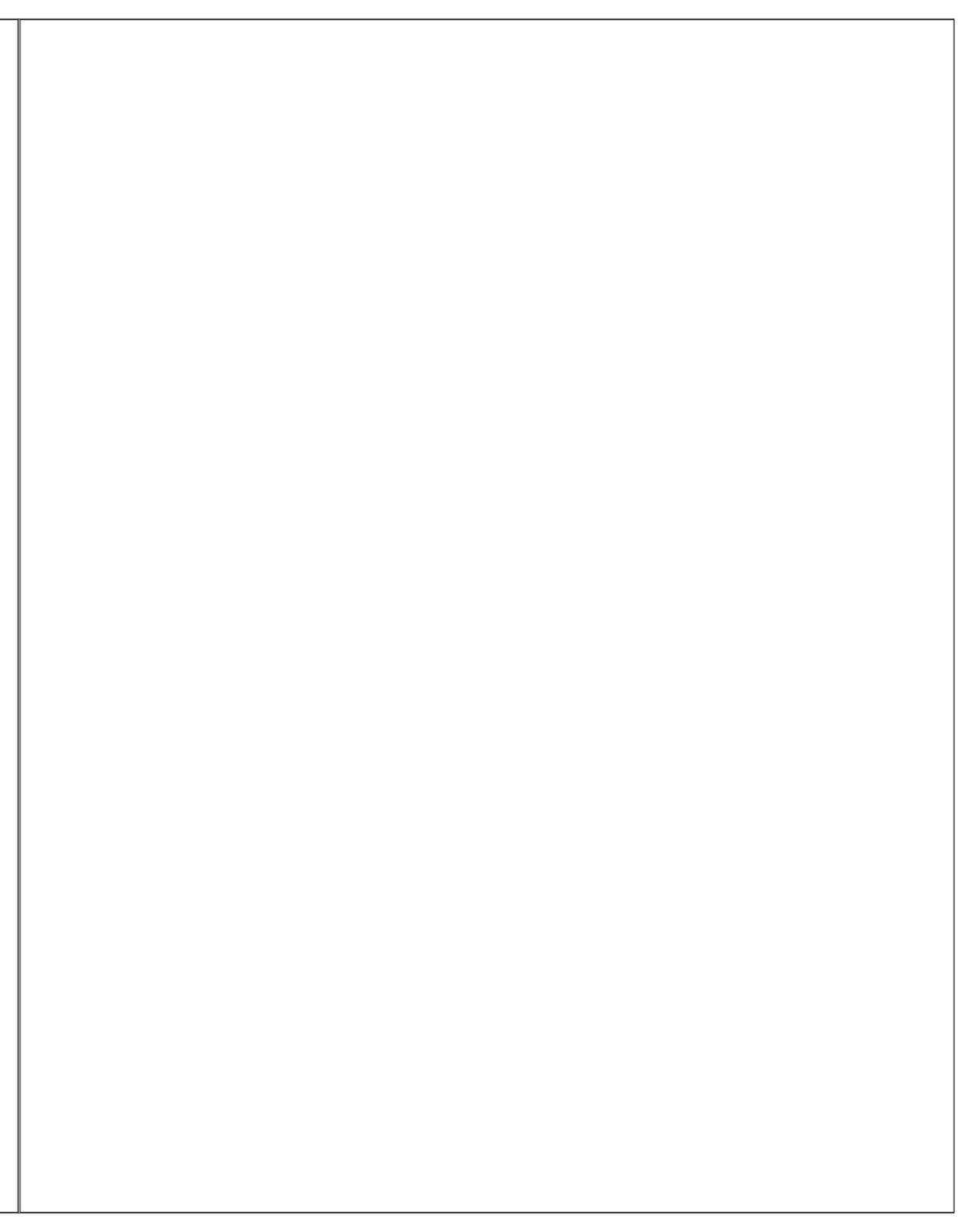




PART ONE

LAST GLEAMING



O N E

ENERGY tingled across his skin, dancing along the millimeter-thick sheath covering his body. Wireless sensors reached out, touched matching circuits on boots, chestplate, leggings. Microprocessors winked to life, each one faster than the last. Armor plates snapped open, seeking out his body, locking into place, completing each circuit in turn. Gloves clicked onto fingers, one two three four-five-ten.

The helmet came last, wafting easily into his hands. He lifted it onto his head and snapped the faceplate down.

With the first light of dawn, Tony Stark rose up into the Manhattan sky.

Avengers Tower dropped away below. Tony looked down, executed a vertical half-turn. The Manhattan skyline spiraled into view, majestic and sprawling. To the north, Central Park lay like a green blanket on a bed of gray. Southward, the tall, tapering maze of Wall Street narrowed to a sharp point in the water.

New York was home, and Tony loved it. But today he was restless.

A dozen indicator lights clamored for Tony's attention, but he ignored them. *Where*, he wondered, *should I go for breakfast this morning? The Cloisters? Quick jaunt to the Vineyard? Or maybe a longer hop, down to*

Boca? Serena would just be setting up for the day at the Delray Hyatt—she'd be stunned to see him again.

No, he realized. Today he was restless. Today would be different.

With a quick mental command, he dialed Pepper Potts. The call went straight to voice mail.

“Cancel my morning,” he said. “Thanks, doll.”

Pepper was never off duty. The voice mail meant she was deliberately ignoring him. No matter; she'd be acting on his instructions within minutes.

Tony banked sideways, cast a quick glance down at Central Park. Then he fired up his boot-jets—and the invincible Iron Man shot out across the city, over the East River.

The phone-messages light was winking, but Tony couldn't deal with that yet. He clicked the autopilot on, making sure the special FAA notification beacon was activated. He soared over the Guardia Airport, banked left, and blinked twice at the RSS feed. Before his eyes, a menu of headlines appeared.

More economic trouble in the European Union; he'd have to double-check his holdings later. Another Mideast war looked ready to break out, maybe as soon as today. Pepper had flagged a magazine feature on the Mexican subsidiary of Stark Enterprises too. Tony would have to make sure Nuñez, that division's COO, remembered the company's strict no-munitions policy.

And the Senate Metahumans Investigations Committee was in the news again. That reminded Tony of another duty, so he clicked over to email. Scanned a couple hundred messages: charities, contracts, old friends, old supposed friends who wanted money, invitations, Avengers business, financial statements...

...there it was. Confirmation of his own testimony before the Metahumans Committee, next week. That was an important one—there'd be

no long-distance flight to blow off steam that day.

The Committee had been formed to investigate abuses of superhuman power, and to recommend standards and regulations to govern the actions of metahumans. Like many Congressional committees, it served largely to score political points for its members. But Tony had to admit that, as the world had grown more dangerous, super-powered beings had become less and less popular among civilians. As the highest profile Avenger with a publicly known identity, Tony felt a special obligation to make sure both sides of the issue were heard.

Below, a passenger ship was just pulling into Pelham Bay. Tony waved down at them, and a few tourists waved back. Then he soared up and out, over the wide expanse of the Atlantic Ocean.

Scattered ships below, at first. Then just waves: massive, rolling, a pure, endless display of natural power. The sight calmed Tony, focused him. Slowly, the real source of his anxiety rose to the surface of his mind.

Thor.

The messenger from Asgard, home of the Norse gods, had appeared suddenly. Twelve feet tall, massive and stern, hovering in a mist of smoky fog above Avengers Tower. Tony had greeted the messenger on the roof, with Carol Danvers—the Avenger called Ms. Marvel—hovering just above. She floated tall and graceful, her body lithe and strong in flowing blue and red. Captain America stood with them, in full uniform, alongside Tigra, the orange-furred cat-woman.

For a moment, the messenger said nothing. Then he unfurled a parchment scroll, yellowed with age, and began to read.

“RAGNAROK HAS COME,” he said. “I AM SENT TO NOTIFY YOU OF THE THUNDER GOD’S FATE. YOU WILL SEE HIM NO MORE.”

Tigra’s eyes went wide with alarm. Captain America, teeth gritted,

stepped forward. “We’re ready. Tell us where to go.”

“NO. IT IS DONE. RAGNAROK HAS COME AND PASSED, LAYING WASTE TO ALL ASGARD.”

Tony flew up into the air, confronting the messenger directly. “Look,” he began.

“THOR HAS FALLEN IN BATTLE. HE IS NO MORE.”

At those words, a terrible, sunken feeling had taken hold of Tony. He felt dizzy, almost tumbled out of the sky.

“I AM HERE OUT OF RESPECT FOR WHAT HE MEANT TO YOU. BUT HEAR ME: THIS IS FATHER ODIN’S FINAL MESSAGE. FROM THIS DAY, THERE WILL BE NO FURTHER CONTACT BETWEEN MIDGARD AND ASGARD, BETWEEN YOUR REALM AND OURS.

“THOR IS DEAD. THE AGE OF GODS IS DONE.”

And with a peal of dull, echoing thunder, the messenger was gone.

That was four weeks ago. Now, soaring out over the ocean, Tony heard the words again in his head: THE AGE OF GODS IS DONE.

Well, he thought. *Maybe. Maybe not.*

Tony had grieved for Thor, this past month. The Avengers had discussed their sorrow and also their frustration: After dozens, hundreds of battles together, their friend and comrade had apparently died alone, in a war fought far away, on some other plane of existence entirely. Not only had the Avengers been powerless to help their friend, but they probably couldn’t even have *perceived* the battle that took his life.

Now, though, Tony began to realize that something else was nagging at him. Thor hadn’t just been his friend; the thunder god had been the linchpin, the very center of the Avengers. Tony and Cap were both strong-willed men, each with his own strengths and flaws: Cap was ruled by heart and instinct, Tony by a faith in the power of industry and tech-

nology. Several times since the founding of the team, they'd almost come to blows over some matter of strategy or sacrifice. And each time, Thor had spoken up with that booming voice that left no room for argument. He'd remind them of their duties or laugh at their folly, and his gigantic mirth always brought them together. Or else he would just walk up behind and clap both men both on the back, so hard it nearly fused Tony's armor to his skin.

Tony had tried to reach out to Cap, but the super-soldier had been very quiet these past weeks. Tony had a terrible feeling that Thor's death had driven some permanent wedge through the heart of the Avengers.

Otherwise, things were going well. Stark Enterprises was flush with Homeland Security contracts, and if there was no one special woman in Tony's life right now, there were four or five incredibly hot ones. Overall, the last few years had been a very good time to be Tony Stark.

And yet, he couldn't shake this dread. The feeling, deep in his metal-sheathed heart, that something profoundly horrible was about to happen.

Another light winked on. Happy Hogan, Tony's chauffeur.

"Morning, Hap."

"Mister Stark. You need me to pick you up?"

Something loomed up ahead, bobbing on the choppy water, barely visible through the cloud layer. Tony peered at it, briefly distracted.

"Mister Stark?"

"Uh, not this morning, Happy. I don't think you could bring the car around where I am."

"Another hotel room? Who is she this time?"

Tony dipped below the clouds, banked around in an arc—and spotted a small, 24-foot fishing vessel. Probably Portuguese, but a *long* way out from home port. It was listing, taking in water over the choppy sea. Crewmen struggled on deck, trying to bail out water with buckets, but

they were losing ground.

“Ring you later, Hap.”

Tony swooped in toward the ship. A massive wave swelled beneath it, tipping it up on its side. The crewmen grabbed frantically for masts, supports. But the wave pushed relentlessly. The ship was about to capsize.

As Tony dove, he called up a web listing for 24-foot ships. Weight would be somewhere between 3400 and 4200 pounds, not counting crewmen or cargo. A strain, but with the new microcontrollers on his shoulder-muscle augmenters, it should be doable. The ship’s stern rose up before him, pointing almost straight up into the air now. He grabbed hold of the stern, kicked in the microcontrollers with a mental command, and pushed.

To his shock, the boat continued to press against him, forcing him downward toward the sea. His armor, he realized, had stalled; the controllers had failed to engage. Four thousand pounds of fishing boat pushed down now against Tony’s normal, human muscles.

Just then a call rang through—an Avengers Tower priority number. Tony swore; he couldn’t take it now. With half a thought, he activated the auto-text reply: *Will call back.*

Below him, fishermen hung from the masts, crying out in panic. They’d be underwater in seconds.

Tony couldn’t fire repulsor rays; at this range, they’d shatter the boat to splinters. He forced himself to breathe and executed a force-reboot of the microcontrollers. Lights danced before his eyes...and then, this time, the controllers engaged. Energy flowed into his metallic exoskeleton. Tony pushed, too hard at first, and grabbed at the boat to correct its course. Then he eased it back down, settling it gently into the water.

The sea had calmed, temporarily. Tony called up an internal translation memo, chose PORTUGUESE.

“You’d better head back to port,” he said. The armor translated his words seamlessly, amplifying them to the fishermen below.

A relieved, soaked captain smiled sheepishly back up at him. His mouth formed words in Portuguese, and Tony heard the armor’s metallic voice: “Thank you, Mister Anthony Stark.”

Hub, Tony thought. *They even know me in Portugal.*

He swooped upward, high enough to make out the coastlines of Portugal and Spain. The water seemed calm enough for safe passage, so he waved farewell to the ship and shot off toward the shore.

Those microcontrollers were trouble. Tony had always had trouble with microcircuitry; the smaller his work got, the more likely it was to misfire. He should consult someone about it...maybe Bill Foster? Before he’d become the hero called Goliath, Foster had specialized in miniaturization.

“Memo,” Tony said aloud. “Call Bill Foster tomorrow.”

Spain’s beach-dotted coastline loomed, tempting him. Did he dare stop for tapas? No. Not today. He pulled up the phone menu and selected CALL BACK LAST NUMBER. An option popped up: VIDEO? He selected YES.

A nightmare apparition appeared before Tony, filling his field of vision. A glistening, insect-like creature, gleaming metallic gold and red, slim arms and legs crackling with electric power. Elongated gold lenses hid its eyes, lending it an air of inhuman malice. Its shape was vaguely human—except for the four additional, metallic tentacles sprouting from its back, flicking back and forth in random, jerky motions.

Tony tumbled in midair, quickly righted himself. He’d passed clear over Spain now, heading over the Tyrrhenian Sea toward Italy.

“Tony? You there?”

The voice was friendly, medium-pitched and familiar. Tony laughed.

“Peter Parker,” he said.

“Gave you a heart attack, huh? Sorry, not funny.”

“That’s okay, Peter.” Tony shifted south, away from Bosnia, to swing around the tip of Greece. “I should recognize that suit...I built it, after all. Just never seen anyone actually wearing it before.”

On Tony’s video feed, Peter Parker—the amazing Spider-Man—leapt up onto a table, all grace and speed. “Well.” He vamped, adopting a comical “Vogue” pose, metallic tentacles framing his face. “What do you think?”

“It’s you, baby.”

Tony double-checked the call-origination info; it was Avengers Tower, all right. That explained the video capability. It also gave him a good sense of why Peter had called.

“Seriously, Tony...and you know me, I don’t say ‘seriously’ very often. This costume is Da. Bomb.”

“If I were you, I wouldn’t say that very often either.”

Spider-Man tapped at the gold lenses. “What’s in these things, anyway?”

“Infrared and ultraviolet filters. The earpiece has built-in fire, police, and emergency scanners.” Tony smiled; he loved explaining his own work. “The mouth covering has carbon filters to keep out toxins, and there’s a full GPS system built into the chestplate.”

“Whew! I’ll never get lost in the West Village again. What’s with those diagonal cross streets, anyway?”

“Well, you...hang on a minute, Peter...”

Jordan loomed up ahead, with Saudi Arabia just beyond. Tony kicked in his armor’s stealth field, felt the familiar tingling throughout his entire frame. Now he was invisible to radar, satellites, and the naked eye at any range past forty feet.

“...you never know where you’ll find yourself.” He called up a detailed dossier on Peter, scanned it quickly. “How’s your aunt?”

“Better, thanks. That heart attack turned out to be minor.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“Tony, I’m grateful as hell to you. You know I am. That old cloth suit I sewed when I was fifteen...it was looking pretty ragged.”

“I’ve also incorporated mesh webbing that should let you glide for short distances,” Tony said.

“Tony...”

“The whole thing is made of heat-resistant Kevlar microfiber. Anything less than a medium-caliber shell won’t even penetrate it.”

“Tony, I’m not sure if I can accept.”

Tony frowned, kicked in his afterburners. The desert sped by, a blur of brown hills under the unforgiving sun.

“The suit is a gift, Peter.”

“I know. I mean the other thing.”

Peter’s back tentacles twitched. *He hasn’t gotten used to the mental controls yet*, Tony realized.

“I need you, Peter.”

“I’m flattered. Believe me, I haven’t heard that from too many *chicas* lately.”

“I might be able to help with that, too.”

“Tony, I just don’t think I can replace a god.”

So that’s it.

Tony paused, gathered his thoughts. These next few moments, he realized, were critical. They could set the course for the rest of his life, and of Peter’s too.

Peter added: “I’ve never been much of a joiner, either. I’m just a friendly neighborhood Spider-Man. You guys operate on a whole other level.”

Tony notched up the sensitivity level on his microphone. When he spoke again, his voice had a subtly greater resonance to it.

“Peter,” he began, “there’s a lot going on right now. Have you heard of the Senate Metahumans Investigations Committee?”

“No, but I already want to party with them.”

“They’re mulling over a number of measures that will have profound effects on the way you and I live our lives. The age of the lone wolf is ending, Peter. The whole *world* is your neighborhood now.

“If you plan to continue—if you want to carry on saving lives, helping people, using your gifts for the betterment of mankind—you’re going to need a support structure.”

Spider-Man said nothing. His expression was unreadable, behind the metal-mesh façade.

“I have a strong team in the Avengers,” Tony continued. “Cap, Tigra, Ms. Marvel, Hawkeye, the Falcon, Goliath. Even Luke Cage is starting to fit in. But there’s no one else who *thinks* the way I do—who understands science and technology, and who always has one eye on the future.”

“Ha! All I do these days is worry about the future.”

“Peter, I’m not asking you to *replace* Thor. No one could do that. But I need your raw strength, and I need your sharp mind. You’re a crucial part of Project Avenger now.”

Spider-Man leapt up, scuttled nervously across the ceiling of the Tower conference room. His tentacles flashed and whipped around. He looked more like a spider than ever before.

India whizzed by below, then Thailand. Indonesia.

“Full medical?” Spidey asked.

“Better than that Obamacare you’re on now.”

“Then I’m in.”

“Excellent.” The gray bulk of Australia loomed ahead. “I’ll be home in three hours. Celebratory drink at the Tower, say two PM?”

“Club soda, of course.”

“You know me well.” Tony paused. “Peter, I’m having a little satellite trouble. See you this afternoon.”

“Satellite trouble? Where are you, anyway?”

“You wouldn’t believe me.”

“Everything okay?”

“Little trouble with the new microcontrollers in my armor...never mind. I’m fine.”

“Good. Well, uh, thanks. Again.”

“We’re going to do great things, Peter. Thank *you*.”

Tony severed the connection.

He glanced down just as New Zealand slid by. He kicked left, banked north, and slammed on the afterburners full blast. The first sonic boom barely penetrated his armor; the second one rattled his ears slightly.

Tony had grown bored with the flight. He was eager to get home, to return to work. To set the next phase of his life into motion.

Enlisting Peter into the Avengers had been a top priority. Tony genuinely liked the young man, and he hadn’t been lying when he’d flattered Peter’s scientific ability and quick mind. He found himself looking forward to mentoring Peter.

But there was another factor he hadn’t brought up. Tony wasn’t just interested in Peter Parker, science prodigy. As Spider-Man, Peter was one of the most powerful metahumans currently roaming the planet. That made him a resource to be tapped...and a potential danger to be watched, too.

Better to keep him close.

Tony glanced down at the Pacific Ocean, watching as the tiny islands of Hawaii appeared. He slowed briefly, picturing himself on a hotel deck with a Virgin Colada in hand. Beautiful women glistening as they splashed and strode from the water.

No. Not today.

By the time Tony reached California, he had eight voice mails from Pepper. Appointments, calls, contracts. With each successive message, her voice grew just a tiny notch angrier.

Well, Tony thought. She's waited this long...

The salt flats of Utah rushed by, then the beautiful snowcapped Colorado mountains. The bare plains of Kansas, the lush forests of Missouri.

So beautiful. All of it.

When the Appalachian Mountains rose into view, he dialed Happy.

“Gonna need a pickup, Hap.”

“You still in the hotel room, boss?” Happy chuckled. “Whatever’s in your veins, they oughta bottle it an’ sell it like *Viagrrrrrrrrr*”

A rush of lights and alarms assaulted him, blocking out Happy’s voice. Tony blinked, wobbled over Pittsburgh, and cleared all notifications with a mental command.

“Still there, Happy?”

“Yeah, boss.”

“Stand by.”

Tony called up the RSS feed; it loaded slowly. He flipped through the cable news channels. The incoming reports all seemed very confused, even panicked. Something about hundreds dead...a huge crater, right in the middle of...

He could make out Avengers Tower now, jutting up above the Manhattan skyline ahead. “Meet me at the Tower, Happy,” he said. “Fast as you...”

Then his optical sensors picked up a column of smoke rising up into the air, over to the left. Couple miles north. No...farther away than that, past the city limits. Forty miles, at least.

A big column of smoke.

Something horrible had happened.

“Change of plans, Hap—stand by for instructions. I’m changing course now, to...”

He paused, locked GPS on to that thick, rising plume of black smoke.

“...Stamford, Connecticut.”

