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Chapter 1
Origins: Mongers and Monsters

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In the beginning — 2008, to be exact — there wasn't really a Marvel Cinematic Universe. Not yet.

Sure, we'd all seen movies starring Marvel characters. But the brain trust behind Marvel Studios thought there was potential to be tapped in the long-running Marvel (comics) Universe. They decided to begin with the Avengers family of characters: Captain America, Thor, Iron Man, the Black Panther, Hawkeye, Black Widow, and a large bench of supporting characters.

And so, on the second day of May 2008, a quirky action film, called simply *Iron Man*, arrived in theaters. Most of the public wasn't familiar with the title character, whose non-comics appearances had been limited to a few short segments in a 1960s cartoon series. That was about to change.

Learning to Fly: Iron Man

Iron Man

U.S. Release Date: May 2, 2008

Director: Jon Favreau

Screenplay: Mark Fergus & Hawk Ostby and Art Marcum & Matt Holloway

Starring: Robert Downey Jr., Terrence Howard, Jeff Bridges, Gwyneth Paltrow, Leslie Bibb, Shaun Toub, Faran Tahir, Clark Gregg, Bill Smitrovich, Sayed Badreya

If moviegoers thought they knew what to expect from a Super Hero movie, *Iron Man* was the surprise of the 21st century. Director Jon Favreau and star Robert Downey Jr. combined fast action, a powerful redemption story, and a heaping dose of character comedy into a film that took the world by storm.

Iron Man — the comic book character — had first appeared in an anthology comic called *Tales of Suspense #39*, way back in December 1962. That first story, by writers Stan Lee and (his brother) Larry Lieber and artist Don Heck, told the story of Tony Stark, a wealthy industrialist who, while held captive in Vietnam, is forced to build a modern-day suit of armor to save his life.

Iron Man — the film — drew on that version of the story, along with several later contributions by a variety of writers and artists. (See Figure 1-1 for the result.) In this section, I'll run through the film carefully, paying close attention to what made it work, and why.

Hitting the ground . . . running?

As you might expect, the first film in the MCU begins not with a whimper, but with a bang — specifically, the explosive impact of a military Humvee being struck by hostile fire in the desert of Afghanistan.

Aboard that vehicle is Tony Stark, a wealthy American munitions manufacturer on a demonstration tour of his company's new Jericho missile. The film flashes back to show us the two sides of Tony: the arrogant billionaire and the brilliant, obsessive inventor.



FIGURE 1-1: Iron Man in full effect, striding proudly through the newly formed MCU.

Three characters guide Tony through his life, making his work possible. Obadiah Stane, played with just the right note of condescension by Jeff Bridges, once worked with Tony's father; he handles the business end of Stark Industries. Gwyneth Paltrow contributes a complex performance as Pepper Potts, Tony's personal assistant, who keeps his schedule and cleans up after his many personal and professional messes. Tony's loyal chauffeur, Happy Hogan, is played by director Jon Favreau himself.

But when Tony hits the ground in Afghanistan, he's all alone. Members of a group called the Ten Rings find him unconscious, his body riddled with shrapnel. They carry him to a remote cave and demand a ransom from Stark Industries. Then they order Tony to build them their very own Jericho missile.

That all sounds very grim and serious, doesn't it? The movie definitely taps into post-9/11 fears of terrorism, and the flashbacks lay out Tony's personal failings in sometimes uncomfortable detail. But a strong current of humor runs through the proceedings, enlivened by Robert Downey Jr.'s sharp-witted, magnetic presence. And as we'll soon see, that cave in Afghanistan is not the end of Tony's journey. In fact, it's barely the start.

"Your loyal customers, sir"

In the cave, Tony meets fellow prisoner Dr. Ho Yinsen, who saves the young American's life by building a crude "repulsor" unit to keep embedded shrapnel away from Tony's heart.

"Who are these people?" Tony asks, inquiring about their captors. "They are your loyal customers, sir," Yinsen replies. At that moment, Tony can no longer deny what he's already seen: His company sells weapons to anyone willing to pay, effectively arming both sides of a war taking place halfway across the world from his lush Malibu home.

Tony concocts a dangerous plan. While pretending to build a missile for the terrorists, he will actually construct a weapon to help him and Yinsen escape. The montage showing this process takes place within the cold, deadly confines of the cave.


TIP

Throughout this sequence, Robert Downey Jr. projects an amazing combination of fear, anger, quick thinking, and the confidence that comes from a life of privilege. Watching him, you just know that this guy has never had to worry about anything for a single day of his life. Until now.

"Don't waste your life"

When Tony Stark first shows Yinsen the crude prototype drawing of an Iron Man suit, a chill runs up the audience's spines. But as the Ten Rings grows impatient with his progress, Tony's secret project turns into a race against time. "Button me up!" he implores Yinsen, as soldiers begin to converge on them. Tony watches the progress bar as the armor powers up — too slowly!

Yinsen sacrifices himself to buy Tony time. Then, as the soldiers enter Tony's chamber, his metallic fingers begin to twitch. . . .


TIP

Tony's initial suit resembles the one from the very first Iron Man comics, designed by artist Jack Kirby: bulky, unpainted, a barrel-shaped metal weapon with vaguely human contours. Ryan Meinerding, head of Visual Development at Marvel Studios, said in *The Art of Iron Man:* "The design idea was to go for simplicity. It was all based on the reality of having to build it in the cave, using the Stark technology being stockpiled by the terrorists. Bits and pieces of [Stark's] weapons were to be visible in the design."

The armor's first field test, in the cave, is messy and dark, with the soldiers fighting a monster they don't understand and Tony struggling to control his brand-new invention. He prevails, defeating them, only to come upon the dying Yinsen, lying on the cave floor.

Tony thanks Yinsen for his sacrifice. "Don't waste it," the scientist gasps, with his last breath. "Don't waste your life."

Outside, Tony sets all the remaining Stark-manufactured weaponry on fire. This act, we understand, is as important to him as getting out alive.

"I had my eyes opened"

Once Tony returns home, the film moves fast. He announces that Stark Industries will no longer manufacture munitions. "I had my eyes opened," he explains.


TIP

The Tony Stark of the first part of the movie is inspired by the character from the early issues of the comic book: a proud, patriotic, postwar arms manufacturer. Later writers brought different philosophies to the comic, leading to Tony's change of heart regarding munitions. The movie combines these various portrayals into a very personal, gut-wrenching story.

Tony's decision angers Stane, his business partner. "We're iron mongers," Stane tells him. "We make weapons!" But Tony stands firm: He will refocus the company on Arc Reactor technology, a small version of which powers the Iron Man armor itself.



REMEMBER

In the comics, Stane is known as Iron Monger. His line here is a little hint as to where the movie is headed.

Pepper Potts meets Agent Phil Coulson, a good-natured representative of a government agency with a long, awkward name. Meanwhile, Tony works obsessively to improve his armor (see Figure 1-2).



FIGURE 1-2: Inside that metal shell lives a very real, very determined man.

Sometimes those improvements come at great risk. When Tony asks Pepper to help him change out his Arc Reactor — thrusting her hand deep inside his chest — they both know that one mistake could kill him. The scene is tense, funny, and intimate.

Tony's lab, filled with three-dimensional imaging equipment, thrusts us right into his world. His insults to his robotic helper are hilarious: "If you douse me again, and I'm not on fire," he tells it, "I am donating you to a city college." When he finally puts on the helmet, powering up the new, sleek suit, we're as thrilled as he is.

Tony's first flight with the new suit is nothing short of exhilarating. Then he flies too high, and his suit freezes up in the thin atmosphere! There's no villain here, no enemy to fight, just Tony pushing his tech too hard, nearly dying, and then pulling out of an uncontrolled dive. He crashes back into the Malibu house, destroying a luxury sports car . . .

. . . and then the robot sprays him again.


TIP

A good Super Hero movie puts you inside the character's head as they learn to use their powers. The twist here is that Tony is *inventing* those powers while he's learning. Everything Iron Man is, everything he can do, comes straight from the brilliant mind of Tony Stark.

"Who, if anyone, will help them?"

Stane tries to freeze Tony out of the company's activities, but Tony defies him, crashing a charity event. When Pepper reluctantly accepts his invitation to dance, she's uncomfortable. "I could fire you," he quips, "if that'd take the edge off." "I actually don't think that you could tie your shoes without me," she replies. "I'd make it a week," he offers.

But it's another woman who stings his conscience, prodding him into action: reporter Christine Everhart, with whom Tony was briefly involved (very briefly). Christine shows him photos of a desert town devastated — just yesterday — with Stark weapons. Later, tinkering with a wrist gauntlet, he watches a news report on the atrocity. The refugees, the announcer says, "can only wonder who, if anyone, will help them."

As Tony smashes the glass wall of his house with a newly built repulsor beam, we learn the answer. He travels to Afghanistan and takes out the Ten Rings organization, brutally and efficiently. In that battle, for the first time, he truly becomes Iron Man.


TIP

Whenever Tony sees action in the suit, we're privy to his expressions through closeups showing him interacting with the HUD (Heads-Up Display) inside his helmet. These shots become a staple of Iron Man's portrayal throughout the Infinity Saga.

On his way home, a squadron of U.S. Air Force planes attacks Iron Man in mid-flight. In a tense cell-phone conversation, Tony is forced to reveal to James Rhodes, his friend and military liaison, that he's built the object the planes are firing on. Not only that: "It's me," Tony cries. "I'm *in* it!"

This scene punches up the change that Tony has undergone: He no longer sits on the sidelines, ignoring the moral consequences while other people fight his battles. He *is* the weapon now.

Rhodes calls off the attack. Back home, Pepper interrupts Tony at an awkward moment, as robotic arms help him remove the damaged suit from his body. "Let's face it," he says, "this is *not* the worst thing you've caught me doing." "Are those *bullet holes*?" she asks.

"Just because you have an idea"

The true villain of the film reveals himself when Obadiah Stane meets with the Ten Rings. Not only is Stane in league with them, he also arranged for them to capture Tony in the first place — and to kill him, which they failed to do. The leader offers Stane the prototype Iron Man armor, left behind when Tony fled the cave, in exchange for a fleet of "iron soldiers." Stane takes the armor, then "repays" his partners by gunning them all down.

Meanwhile, Pepper tells Tony she's concerned. She doesn't want to help him get himself killed. "I just finally know what I have to do," he says, "and I know in my heart that it's right." She replies, "You're all I have too, you know."

And then, to help him, she steals Stane's secret files, including the evidence of his collusion with the Rings. Stane almost catches her in the act; in a chilling scene, Pepper escapes with the aid of Agent Coulson.

From that point on, Stane's rampage accelerates. When a scientist fails to duplicate the miniaturized Arc Reactor technology, Stane screams at him, "*Tony Stark* was able to build this in a *cave!* With a *bunch of scraps!*"

"I'm sorry," the hapless scientist replies. "I'm not Tony Stark."

So Stane goes right to the source: Tony himself. He paralyzes his erstwhile partner, wrenches the Arc Reactor right out of Tony's chest, and snarls, "Do you really think that just because you have an idea, it belongs to you?"

As he leaves, Stane threatens to kill Pepper. That gives Tony the strength of will to drag himself, half-paralyzed, into his lab, where he reinstalls his original Arc Reactor — the one Pepper had encased in Lucite as a souvenir, after she pulled it from his heart with her bare hands.



REMEMBER

James Rhodes arrives in time to help Tony take off. When we see Rhodes turn to another prototype suit of armor, he vows, "Next time, baby." Comic fans already knew that Rhodey was destined to become War Machine, the MCU's second armored hero (see Chapter 2 for more on that).

"Not the hero type"

Then Tony faces off against Stane, who's built himself a much larger, more powerful suit of armor using the prototype technology. Unfortunately for Tony, his own suit begins losing its charge as soon as the fight begins. J.A.R.V.I.S., the AI built into the armor, informs him that the old chest reactor was never meant to power this more sophisticated version of the armor.

The film's climactic battle leads the viewer through a thrilling series of ups and downs, at one point literally, when Tony tricks Stane into flying high enough that his armor ices up (remember that?). In the end, Tony calls on Pepper to blow up the company's large Arc Reactor, and together they take out Stane.

After the battle, Tony holds a hurried press conference to explain away the battle. Despite coaching from Pepper and Agent Coulson, he's clearly dubious about the story he's supposed to repeat.



TIP

This final — or almost-final — scene is full of Easter eggs for fans. The cover story, that Iron Man is Tony Stark's bodyguard, was the original explanation for his dual identity in the comics. In the film, Tony remarks, "That's kind of flimsy, don't you think?" Also, Agent Coulson unveils the new shorthand name for his agency: S.H.I.E.L.D., which comic readers recognized as an international espionage organization with tendrils reaching across the world.

The press conference veers off the rails immediately as Christine Everhart, sitting in the front row, challenges Tony's story. Flustered, he consults his index cards: "I'm just not the hero type. Clearly. With this laundry list of character defects, the mistakes I've made, largely public . . . the truth is . . ."

Then he pauses, lowers the index card, and — with the barest hint of a smile — delivers the line that will define his life from this point forward.

". . . I am Iron Man."

The closing credits roll, accompanied, in part, by the classic Black Sabbath song "Iron Man." The MCU has fired its initial shot; now it's time to go home.

Well, almost . . .

"A bigger universe"

Upon the release of *Iron Man*, moviegoers were warned to stay in their seats for a bonus that would become a trademark of the MCU: the after-credits scene.

Tony Stark returns home to find a shadowy figure waiting for him: Nick Fury, director of S.H.I.E.L.D. From the start, we can see that this intruder, played by Samuel L. Jackson, has been through a few wars. His single eye glares out at Tony, the other socket covered by a black eyepatch.

"You've become part of a bigger universe," Fury tells the puzzled Tony, "you just don't know it yet." And then, setting up a score of movies to come: "I'm here to talk to you about the Avenger Initiative."

A successful launch

"*Iron Man* was a life-changing experience," director Jon Favreau recalled in *The Art of Iron Man.* "The best way to describe it would be that we were building the hot rod *while* we were racing it. . . . You plan and scheme. Some things work out, many don't. In the end, the movie either works or it doesn't, and you are never even aware of where that tipping point is when you pass it."

One thing's for sure: In the end, *Iron Man* worked. The general public may not have been familiar with the character before the release of this film, but they responded quickly and enthusiastically. Reviewers hailed the edgy, comedic tone and, in particular, the performances of the main cast. Audiences, enthralled by the vivid characters and gripping action scenes, found themselves returning to see the movie again and again.

Equally important: Everyone seemed to understand what Marvel Studios was trying to do. *Iron Man* tells a complete story, the tale of a man who, forced to face the deadly consequences of his life's work, decides to make a difference in the world instead. At the same time, the film hints at a whole world of super-powered heroes and villains — some of them known to the public, others buried beneath layers of governmental secrecy.

Just as Tony Stark had succeeded in launching himself into the skies, Marvel Studios had also pulled off its maiden flight. The public waited to see what would come next, but they wouldn't have to wait long.

NICK FURY: THE ART OF WAR

From the very first MCU film, one mysterious figure has stood in the shadows: Nick Fury, director of S.H.I.E.L.D. This master spy, clad in his trademark eyepatch, is played to gritty perfection by Samuel L. Jackson, as seen in this grim headshot.



In 1995, an encounter with expatriate Earthwoman Carol Danvers — soon to be known as Captain Marvel — awakens Fury to the threat of extraterrestrial invasion. From that point on, his goal becomes clear: to defend our world against forces that cannot be fought by conventional means. Years later, he sets out to recruit heroes — including Thor of distant Asgard — for his Avengers Initiative. The newly formed team must repel the invading Chitauri, an army led by Thor's trickster brother, Loki. (See Chapter 3.)

Throughout the various films, Fury masterminds schemes within schemes, often influencing his operatives. In the battle against Loki, he lies to the Avengers in order to rouse them to action (Chapter 3 again). When he's targeted by assassins from within the U.S. government, Fury fakes his own death in order to deal with the Winter Soldier affair in complete secrecy. (That one's in Chapter 5.)

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"A full-bird colonel turned spy turned S.H.I.E.L.D. agent," Carol Danvers observes, upon first meeting him. "Must have pretty high security clearance." Almost two decades later, when the assembled heroes fail to stop the murderous schemes of Thanos, Fury has just enough time to summon Danvers back to Earth before he crumbles to dust.

Is he really dead this time? And what *did* happen to that eye? Fury isn't telling. But for some hints and answers — and much more on Captain Marvel — see Chapter 9.

Enter the Monster: The Incredible Hulk

The Incredible Hulk

U.S. Release Date: June 13, 2008

Director: Louis Leterrier

Screen Story and Screenplay: Zak Penn

Starring: Edward Norton, Liv Tyler, Tim Roth, William Hurt, Tim Blake Nelson, Ty Burrell, Christina Cabot

Just six weeks after the release of *Iron Man*, a second Marvel Studios film arrived in cinemas nationwide. This one featured a character somewhat better known to the moviegoing public: Bruce Banner, the genius scientist whose experiments have transformed him into a monster called the Incredible Hulk (see Figure 1-3).



FIGURE 1-3: Feel the fury of the Incredible Hulk!

The Hulk began his decades-long rampage in the first issue of his own self-titled magazine, back in May of 1962, the very same year that Iron Man made his debut. Stan Lee and Jack Kirby crafted that first tale of the Hulk, whose comic-book adventures continue to this day. The character starred in a 1977–1981 TV series, a few sequel TV movies, a 1996–1997 animated series, and a 2003 feature film.

This new version of *The Incredible Hulk* built on all those portrayals — in comic book, television, and movie form — to create a classic monster movie set squarely in the middle of the newly formed MCU.

"Days without incident: 158"

The film wastes no time getting into the action. A tense, silent sequence efficiently recaps the character's origin, accompanied by music and opening credits. This retelling also sets up the movie's supporting players: General Thunderbolt Ross, overseer of Banner's project, and an associate named Betty. She clearly means a lot to Bruce, but her relationship to Ross is not yet known. (Unless you've read the comics!)

"It was important not to make it an origin story," said director Louis Leterrier, in commentary for the home-video release. "I wanted to do something a little different. And everybody around the world, around the planet, whether you're in America, in France or Senegal or Japan — people know what the Hulk is, that it's a guy that turns green because he's angry. What's really interesting is the struggle within."


TIP

In the aftermath of Banner's experiment, a computer screen shows General Ross requisitioning equipment from Stark Industries. This immediately establishes a link between this film and *Iron Man*, showing that we're already watching a cohesive cinematic universe.

We then cut to Rio de Janeiro, as Banner struggles to learn how to control the monster inside him. A screen display tells us it's been 158 days since he became the Hulk. The Rio scenes are jagged and effective, plunging us into a world where Banner, a fugitive, barely even speaks the language.


TIP

The Rio scenes are also full of references to the 1970s Hulk TV series. Between sessions in self-control, Banner clicks past a sitcom starring Bill Bixby, the actor who brought the TV version to life. While saving a local woman from bullies, he echoes Bixby's Hulk's signature line "You wouldn't like me when I'm angry." But *this* Banner's Portuguese isn't up to the job, so it comes out "when I'm hungry" instead!

Banner remains painfully aware of the danger he poses to others. His one hope is a mysterious internet contact called Mister Blue. (What's Banner's codename? Mister Green, of course.) Blue implores him, "Send me a blood sample." Banner does, to an address in New York.

"A whole new level of weird"

General Ross, played by veteran actor William Hurt, tracks Banner to Rio. Of Hurt, director Leterrier said, "I needed an actor that has demons haunting him. And he's very good at pulling that back onto the surface."


TIP

Ross's appearance was strongly inspired by the comic-book version of the character, who debuted alongside Bruce Banner way back in *The Incredible Hulk #1*. "The wig, the mustache, the bushy eyebrows," Leterrier continued. "We wanted to be as close to the source material as possible."

Among the forces Ross brings along: Emil Blonsky, a Russian-born soldier on loan from the British military. "Don't wait to see if he's a fighter," Ross orders his team, referring to Banner. "Tranq him and bring him back."

We follow the edgy Blonsky, played to the hilt by Tim Roth, as the special forces close in on Banner's apartment. With the aid of Martina, the woman he helped earlier, Banner escapes, running over the uneven roofs and gaps between the buildings. Ross's forces have him outgunned, but Banner knows the terrain. They don't.

Unfortunately, Banner runs into the bullies again at the bottling plant. As they beat him up, Banner gasps out, "Me angry . . . very bad." His eyes begin to turn green, and we cut to Ross, watching with his squadron from the shadows. As a terrifying roar rises up, Ross declares, "That is the target. Use every tranq you've got. Do it now!"

Our first clear glimpse of the "target" is from Blonsky's point of view: a closeup of the gigantic, snarling Hulk, practically spitting in his face! The Hulk flees, but the special forces recover Banner's suitcase. Ross tells Blonsky that the monster is Banner, but refuses to explain any further. Later, Blonsky tells him, "This is a whole new level of weird. I don't feel inclined to step away from it. So if you're taking another crack at him, I want in."

When we see Banner in the wilderness, holding up his torn clothes, a familiar caption tells us: DAYS WITHOUT INCIDENT and then it counts down to 1. In Chiapas, Mexico, he tries to buy new pants at a bazaar. "*Tienes mas* stretchy?" he asks.



TIP

More references: The closeup on Banner's eyes, as the change begins, was a recurring motif in the 1970s TV series. And when Banner arrives in Mexico, a familiar piece of music plays: the "Lonely Man" theme, which, in many episodes of the series, accompanied a final shot of Banner wandering down the road alone.

"He wants to make it a weapon"

Ross reluctantly fills in Blonsky on the background of the Banner project. In World War II, the military began work on something called "biotech force enhancement." "A super soldier," Blonsky says. "Yes," Ross admits.



REMEMBER

Remember that phrase: "super soldier." You'll hear a lot about it soon, or just flip to Chapter 3, if you can't wait!

Returning to his old university, Banner stares at a telltale sign reading ELIZABETH ROSS. He seeks out Betty, his former associate and girlfriend (played with smart sensitivity by Liv Tyler), but finds her involved with someone else. Posing as a pizza delivery man, Banner bribes a guard to let him into his old lab. A message from Mister Blue sends him on the run, but before he can get far, he runs into Betty again.

He tries to hide from her, but she pursues him in the driving rain, pleading to him not to leave again. He embraces her, clinging to her like a lifeline. They compare notes about General Ross's plans for Banner's blood. "He told me what he wants to do," Banner says. "He wants to make it a weapon."



TIP

That pizza-loving guard? He's played by Lou Ferrigno, the TV series' very own Incredible Hulk! Just another reference for old fans.

"I know you're in there"

Blonsky volunteers for a low-dose but painful version of the super soldier treatment. Meanwhile, Banner and Betty rekindle their relationship, but Ross's soldiers soon track them down. Blonsky goes rogue, defying Ross's orders, in order to attack first. Banner runs inside a library while, outside, Betty blocks the advance of a tank with Ross inside it. "I know you're in there," she cries. "General, please. DAD!"



TIP

And with that line, the true nature of the Betty/Ross relationship is revealed. (Longtime Hulk fans and sharp-eyed viewers knew it already.)

The soldiers fire gas canisters at Banner, transforming him into the Hulk. Blonsky leaps around wildly, lashing out, holding the monster at bay as he leads him toward Ross's high-powered sonic cannons. The cannons weaken the Hulk, but in a head-to-head confrontation, the Hulk kicks Blonsky across a field, breaking most of his bones.

Ross's aerial backup arrives, firing at the Hulk — with Betty right in the line of fire. "NO!" General Ross screams. But the Hulk shields her from harm, carrying her safely out of the flaming wreckage.


TIP

One final reference: The battle is caught on cell-phone camera by "campus reporter Jack McGee" — the name of the crusty veteran reporter who pursued the Hulk throughout the 1970s series.

Later, when they're alone, Betty calms the Hulk, who reverts to human form in his sleep. Meanwhile, Blonsky makes a miraculous recovery. "How do you feel?" Ross asks. "Pissed off and ready for round three," Blonsky replies.

"Like a monster"

Throughout this film, Edward Norton crafts a visceral portrait of a man haunted by fragmented memories of the damage he causes as the Hulk. "It's like someone's poured a liter of acid into my brain," he tells Betty. "I don't want to control it. I want to get rid of it."

They travel to New York City and find the enigmatic Mister Blue, an eccentric scientist. Blue tells them he may have a cure for Bruce, but it might not be a true cure, just an "antidote" to a single Hulk flare-up. It could also kill him. They decide to take the risk, and in a tense scene, Betty calms Bruce while his violent transformation is arrested in mid-change.

Meanwhile, Blonsky takes another dose of serum, preparing for the battle to come. As his spine starts to bulge, a soldier asks him: "How do you feel, man?" "Like a monster," Blonsky snarls.

As Ross's forces close in, Mister Blue reveals that he's been duplicating Banner's irradiated blood, hoping to "unlock hundreds of cures . . . make humans impervious to disease." Banner, horrified, demands that he destroy the blood instead. But their argument is interrupted by Blonsky, who — in defiance of Ross's orders — drugs Bruce and takes the group into custody.

Furious, Betty tells Ross, "Don't ever speak to me as your daughter again." "It's only because you're my daughter," he sneers, "that you're not in handcuffs too."

Blonsky goes rogue (again) and intimidates Mister Blue into enhancing him with some of Banner's blood. Blue tells him he doesn't know what kind of abomination may result, but Blonsky insists. The treatment turns him into a true Abomination, a misshapen creature even larger — and maybe even more powerful — than the Hulk.


TIP

In the Hulk comics, the Abomination has battled the title character many times, beginning in 1967's *Tales to Astonish #90,* in a story by Stan Lee and Gil Kane. Samuel Sterns, aka Mister Blue, is *also* from the comics, where he too winds up monstrously mutated by gamma radiation into The Leader.

Driven crazy by the change, the Abomination runs wild in the streets, where people mistake him for the Hulk! "Give me a real fight!" he growls.

Watching from a military helicopter, Betty demands of her father, "What have you done?" Bruce tells them both, "It has to be me. . . . We made this thing. All of us. Please." This exchange truly brings the three of them together, in the face of a larger threat. At that moment, as they see the Abomination running wild, they all realize what their combined folly has created.

"Any last words?"

Over Betty's protests, Bruce leaps out of the copter, assuming that the shock of falling to his death will trigger his transformation. At first he appears serene, but as he nears the ground, his eyes widen in panic: Has Mister Blue's formula banished the Hulk forever? He strikes the pavement with a massive impact, smashing a hole in the ground. A huge green fist rises up through the dust, followed by — well, the Abomination says it best: "HUUUULK."

Then the Hulk takes on the Abomination in a savage throwdown. They tear up the streets of Manhattan, sending people fleeing, as cars burst into flame all around. Ross opens fire on Blonsky from above, enraging the creature, who leaps from the top of a building to attack the copter.

The crowd reacts in terror, fleeing the scene, and then it's just monster vs monster. While the Hulk is distracted by Betty's peril, Abomination hits him with a gigantic metal chain: "Any last words?" Enraged beyond belief, the Hulk utters his signature line: "Hulk . . . SMASH!" He grabs the chain, wraps it around Blonsky, drags him across the roof, stabs him, and chokes him, nearly killing him.

Finally, Betty implores the Hulk to stop. Standing over his fallen enemy, the monster roars to the heavens, turns, and flees. The soldiers try to follow him, shining spotlights, as he leaps from building to building, rooftop to fire escape. But inevitably, the Hulk vanishes in the night.

Finally we see Bruce alone again, meditating, in British Columbia this time. DAYS WITHOUT INCIDENT: 31. His eyes open, turning green, and the counter flashes down: 30 . . . 29 . . . 28 . . . ending finally on zero. And he *smiles*.

"He's in control," Leterrier confirmed, "and you know he's gonna transform but *in control,* and you see the smirk. . . . Is he a good guy, is he a bad guy? I love that duality."

"An unusual problem"

Hold on — we're not quite through with *The Incredible Hulk*. There's one more scene to go.

We cut to General Ross drinking hard, telling a bartender over and over again to "reload." Ross barely looks up as a familiar, silhouetted figure enters the bar. "Mmm, smell of stale beer and defeat," Tony Stark observes. "I hate to say I told you so, general, but that Super Soldier Program was put on ice for a reason."

"Do you always wear such nice suits?" Ross taunts, referring indirectly to Tony's escapades as Iron Man. "Touché," Tony replies, then adds, "I hear you have an unusual problem . . . what if I told you we were putting a team together?"

"Who's we?" Ross asks.

And with that, this film firmly establishes the Hulk as a power player in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. As for General Ross's parting question — and the Avenger Initiative, Tony's enigmatic "team" — the answers will have to wait for the next group of films, covered in Chapters 2 and 3.