

## The Iron Man's Challenge

There was no time to be wasted. The Iron Man allowed himself to be taken to pieces, arms, legs, body, head, all separate, so each part could be flown to Australia on a different airliner. He was too big to be flown out in one piece.

At the same time a ship sailed from China, loaded with great iron girders, and another ship sailed from Japan loaded with fuel oil. The Iron Man had ordered these. The girders and the oil and a team of engineers were unloaded on the beach of Northern Australia, near the space-bat-angel-dragon's neck. Then the Iron Man's parts were landed at the same spot, and the engineers fitted him together. He stood up on the beach and shouted his challenge.

"Sit up," he roared. "Sit up and take notice, you great space-lizard."

The space-bat-angel-dragon sat up slowly. He had never noticed the fussing of the boats and aeroplanes down there on the beach near his neck. Now he gazed in surprise at the Iron Man, who seemed very tiny to him, though his voice was big enough.

The Iron Man spoke again.

"I challenge you," he shouted, "to a test of strength."

A test of strength? The space-bat-angel-dragon couldn't believe his ears. A tiny little creature like the Iron Man challenging him to a test of strength? He simply laughed. Loud and long. Then he peered down again at the Iron Man, while the echo of his laugh was still rolling round the earth. He peered down out of the sky at this odd little thing on the beach, with the even tinier men scuttling around it.

"And if I can prove myself stronger than you are, then you must promise to become my slave," cried the Iron Man.

The dragon smiled. Aircraft flew around, watching this amazing conversation between the space-bat-angel-dragon and the Iron Man. Ships out at sea watched through telescopes.

"And if you don't accept my challenge," shouted the Iron Man, "then you're a miserable cowardly reptile, not fit to bother with."

The space-bat-angel-dragon was so astounded that he agreed. Why, he thought, when this silly little creature has finished his antics, I'll just lick him up. So the monster agreed, and watched to see what the test of strength was to be. After all, if he wanted, he could flatten the Iron Man with one eyelash.

The engineers had fastened all the girders together in the shape of a grid, a huge iron bed the size of a house. Under this they had made a steel lined pit. Now they poured fuel oil into the pit. The space-bat-angel-dragon watched.

Now they lit the fuel oil and the flames roared up fiercely through the bars of the grid.

And now the space-bat-angel-dragon got his first shock. The Iron Man was stretching himself out on his back, on the grid, among the flames, his ankles crossed, his hands folded behind his head – just as if he were in bed, while the flames raged under and around him.

The monster stared down, and the Iron Man smiled up out of the midst of the flames.

The flames became fiercer. The grid became red-hot. The Iron Man's hair and elbows and toes became red-hot. His body became first blue, then black, then began to glow dully. He was getting red-hot. Still he smiled up at the monster, and still the flames grew fiercer.

And now the Iron Man was entirely red-hot. Pretty soon, he was almost white-hot. And still he smiled, out of white-hot eyes and with white-hot lips. And all the time the space-bat-angel-dragon stared down in astonishment.

But now the fuel oil was all burned away. Suddenly the flames died, flickered and went out. The white-hot Iron Man sat up, stood up, got stiffly off his glowing bed and began to walk to and fro on the sand, cooling. He cooled slowly. He went from white to orange, from orange to red, red to black, as he walked, coolly swinging his arms.

Now at last he spoke to the monster.

"If you can't bear to be made red-hot like me, then you are weaker than I am, and I have won, and you are my slave."

The monster began to laugh.

"All right," he roared. "Build the fire, and I'll lie on it."

He laughed again. He knew the Iron Man couldn't build a fire the size of Australia. But then his laugh stopped. The Iron Man was pointing upwards, at the sun.

“There is the fire for you,” he shouted. “You go and lie there. Go and lie on the sun till you are red-hot.”

The monster gazed up at the sun. He felt strangely cold suddenly. But how could he refuse? All right! And he set off.

With slow giant wingbeats, he lifted his immense body off the earth, and flew slowly up towards the sun, while the whole earth watched...

Slowly he covered the distance, getting smaller and smaller as he went. At last he landed, a ragged black shape sprawled across the sun. Everybody watched. And now they saw the monster begin to glow. Blue at first, then red, then orange. Finally, his shape was invisible, the same blazing white as the sun itself. The monster was white-hot on the sun.

Then they saw him returning, a blazing shape tearing itself off the sun. This shape became red as it flew. It was writhing and growing larger. Slowly once more it became the black bat-winged shape of the dragon flying back to earth, down and down, bigger and bigger, cooling as he came, until

**BUMP!!!!**

He landed – this time much more heavily than before, on Australia. He landed so heavily that all over the world bells tumbled out of church towers and bird-eggs were jarred out of their nests. The monster stared down at the Iron Man.

But it was hardly the same monster! His horns drooped, his face was wizened and black, his claws were scorched blunt, his crest flopped over limply and great ragged holes were burned in his wings. It had been terrible for him on the fires of the sun. But he had done it, and here he was. The fires of the sun are far, far hotter than any fires here on earth can ever be.

“There,” he roared. “I’ve done it.”

The Iron Man nodded. But his answer was to signal to the engineers. Once more they poured oil into the trough under the grid. Once more they lit it. Once more the flames roared up and the black smoke billowed up into the clear blue. And once more the Iron Man stretched himself out on the grid of the raging furnace.

The space-bat-angel-dragon watched in horror. He knew what this meant for him. He would have to go once more into the sun’s flames.

And now the Iron Man’s hair and toes and elbows were red-hot. He lay back in the flames, smiling up at the dragon. And his whole body was becoming red-hot, then orange, and finally, white, like the blazing wire inside an electric bulb.

At this point, the Iron Man was terribly afraid. For what would happen if the flames went on getting fiercer and fiercer? He would melt. He would melt and drip into the flames like so much treacle and that would be the end of him. So even though he grinned up at the dragon as though he were enjoying the flames, he was not enjoying them at all, and he was very very frightened.

Even the engineers, who were hiding behind thick asbestos screens over a mile away along the beach, felt the hair singeing on their heads, and they too thought it was the end of the Iron Man. Perhaps they had poured in just a bit too much fuel oil.

But at that very moment, and the very second that the edge of the Iron Man's ear started to melt, the fuel was used up and the flames died. The engineers came running down the beach. They saw the red-hot Iron Man getting off his fearful bed, and they saw him moving to and fro on the sand, cooling off.

At last, the Iron man looked up at the dragon. He could hardly speak after his ordeal in the flames. Instead, he simply pointed towards the sun, and jabbed his finger towards the sun, as he gazed up at the monster.

"That's twice," he managed to say. "Now it's your turn."

The monster did not laugh. He set off, up from the earth, beating his colossal wings, writhing his long ponderous body up into the sky towards the sun. Now it was his turn. And he did not laugh. Last time had been too dreadful. But he went. He couldn't let the Iron Man win. He couldn't let the Iron Man of the earth beat him in this terrible contest.

And so all the telescopes and cameras of the world watched him flying into the sun. They saw him land among the flames, as before. As before, they saw his great ragged shape like an ink-blot sprawled over the center of the sun. They saw him begin to glow red, then orange. And at last they could no longer see him. He and the sun were one blinding whiteness.

He had done it again! But was the sun burning him up? Had he melted in the sun? Where was he?

No, there he was, here he came. Slowly, slowly, down through space. Much more slowly than before. His white-hot flying body cooled slowly to red as he came, and as he grew larger, coming nearer, he finally became once more black. And the great black shape flagged its way down through space until

**BUMP!!!!!!**

Heavier than ever, he landed on Australia. This time the bump was so heavy, it knocked down certain sky-scrapers, sent tidal waves sweeping into harbours, and threw herds of cows on to their backs. All over the world, anybody who happened to be riding a bicycle at that moment instantly fell off. The space-bat-angel-dragon landed so ponderously because he was exhausted. And now he was a very changed monster. The fires of the sun had worked on him in a way that was awful to see. His wings were only rags of what they had been. His skin was crisped. And all his fatness had been changed by the fires of the sun into precious stones – jewels, emeralds, rubies, turquoises, and substances that had never been found on earth. And when he landed, with such a jolt, these loads of precious gems burst through the holes scorched in his skin and scattered down on to the Australian desert beach.

But the Iron Man could not allow himself to pity the space-bat-angel-dragon. He signaled to the engineers.

“Round there,” he shouted.

And the engineers began to pour in the oil. But what was this? An enormous woofing sound. A booming, wheezing, sneezing sound. The space-bat-angel-dragon was weeping. If the Iron Man got on to his furnace again, it would mean that he, the monster, would have to take another roasting in the sun – and he could not stand another.

“Enough, enough, enough!” he roared.

“No, no,” replied the Iron Man. “I feel like going on. We’ve only had two each.”

“It’s enough,” cried the dragon. “It’s too much. I can’t stand another. The fires of the sun are too terrible for me. I submit.”

“Then I’ve won,” shouted the Iron Man. “Because I’m quite ready to roast myself red-hot again. If you daren’t, then I’ve won.”

“You’ve won, yes, you’ve won, and I am your slave,” cried the space-bat-angel dragon. “I’ll do anything you like, but not the sun again.”

And he plunged his chin in the Pacific, to cool it.

“Very well,” said the Iron Man. “From now on you are the slave of the earth. What can you do?”

“Alas,” said the space-bat-angel-dragon, “I am useless. Utterly useless. All we do in space is fly, or make music.”

“Make music?” asked the Iron Man. “How? What sort of music?”

“Haven’t you heard of the music of the spheres?” asked the dragon. “It’s the music that space makes to itself. All the spirits inside all the stars are singing. I’m a star spirit. I sing too. The music of the spheres is what makes space so peaceful.”

“Then whatever made you want to eat up the earth?” asked the Iron Man. “If you’re all so peaceful up there, how did you get such greedy and cruel ideas?”

The dragon was silent for a long time after this question. And at last he said: “It just came over me. I don’t know why. It just came over me, listening to the battling shouts and the warcries of the earth – I got excited, I wanted to join in.”

“Well, you can sing for us instead,” said the Iron Man. “It’s a long time since anybody here on earth heard the music of the spheres. It might do us all good.”

And so it was fixed. The space-bat-angel-dragon was to send his star back into the constellation of Orion, and he was to live inside the moon. And every night he was to fly around the earth, through the heavens, singing.

So his fearful shape, slowly swimming through the night sky, didn’t frighten people, because it was dark and he couldn’t be seen. But the whole world could hear him, a strange soft music that seemed to fill the whole of space, a deep weird singing, like millions of voices singing together.

Meanwhile the Iron Man was the world’s hero. He went back to his scrap-yard. But now everybody in the world sent him a present. Some only sent him an old car. One rich man even sent him an ocean liner. He sprawled there in his yard, chewing away, with his one ear slightly drooped where the white heat of that last roasting had slightly melted it. As he chewed, he hummed in harmony to the singing of this tremendous slave in heaven.

And the space-bat-angel’s singing had the most unexpected effect. Suddenly the world became wonderfully peaceful. The singing got inside everybody and made them as peaceful as starry space, and blissfully above all their earlier little squabbles. The strange soft eerie space-music began to alter all the people of the world. They stopped making weapons. The countries began to think how they could live pleasantly alongside each other, rather than how to get rid of each other. All they wanted to do was to have peace to enjoy this strange, wild, blissful music from the giant singer in space.

*The End*