

## Metal and Magic

### Chapter 20

Harry woke to the sound of his phone. It buzzed in the pocket of his jeans. He leaned over the side of the bed and reached for it blindly. Natasha's hair was in his face, and her entire torso was draped over him. Her body was soft and warm, and all he wanted was to fall back asleep and continue using her as a blanket. He fumbled for the phone, finally got it, and saw Tony's name on the screen. Harry groaned.

He tried to slide out from under Natasha, but she had him pinned. He moved carefully, shifting her arms and legs one at a time. He did it slowly, keeping his breathing shallow, so he didn't wake her. The light from the phone made her skin look extra pale. She mumbled, rolled to her side, and immediately burrowed into the blanket, still half on top of him. Harry rested his head on an elbow, flipped open the phone, and answered.

"Yeah," he whispered, his voice dry and scratchy.

"Get your ass home," Tony said. "We have a situation."

Harry sat up and rubbed his eyes. "What kind of situation?"

"The kind where you and I are the only people who can deal with it. A bus full of college kids has gone missing. It's a cartel thing. I've got the details, so just get here."

Harry glanced at Natasha. She hadn't moved. He took a slow breath. "I'll be there in a minute," he said.

"Got it," Tony said, and then hung up.

Harry lowered the phone and stared at the wall for a second. He felt bad, leaving Natasha like this. She looked peaceful, curled up in the sheets. He didn't want her to wake up and realize he was gone while his car was still parked out front. He was sure that would lead to questioning, and a girl like Natasha would immediately know that his excuse was complete bullshit.

He held out his hand, and the Elder Wand appeared in his palm. It felt familiar and comforting. He pointed it at Natasha and whispered, "Somnus." Her breathing slowed even more. She looked dead to the world, except for the pink in her cheeks and the little tremble in her lips every time she exhaled.

Harry stood, careful not to make a sound. He found his pants and shirt and put them on in the dark. He double-checked that his phone was still in his pocket. He looked back at Natasha one last time. She hadn't moved. He suddenly had the urge to bend over her and brush away a

bundle of hair that was lying over her face, but he didn't. That was way too cheesy for a world-class ladies' man like him.

He walked into the living room, shoes in hand. He put them on, tied them tight, and stood up, stretching. Sure that Natasha would stay asleep for at least a few hours, he turned on the spot and vanished.

He reappeared in his bedroom, next to the glass-lined wall. It was dark inside and out. The house was dead quiet, and Harry moved through the hall and into the living room. Tony was in the kitchen, drinking an espresso and watching the sun bleed over the horizon.

"You look like hell," Tony said without turning around. "You had a good night?"

"Natasha was very energetic. What's the job?" Harry grunted.

Tony handed him a glass of water, and Harry drank half in one go. The espresso machine hissed, and Tony refilled his own cup. "Six hours ago, a bus of American college kids got taken outside Mexicali. The whole group, consisting of the nineteen students, one driver, and the local guide, is now in the hands of some locals who think ransom is a viable business model."

Harry set the glass down. "How much time do we have?"

Tony shrugged. "It depends on whether they want to make a statement or if they're just in it for the money. Jarvis says we probably have at least three hours before they start mailing back fingers."

"My calculation is based on similar incidents involving this particular cartel," Jarvis explained his reasoning. Harry nodded.

Tony sipped his coffee. They were among the few alive who could be nonchalant about threats of dismemberment. "Are you up for a cross-border operation?" Tony asked.

Harry nodded. "What's the plan?"

Tony's eyes glinted. "Now you're speaking my language." They walked down into the workshop and found the two suits, side by side. They were both gleaming from a fresh coat of paint.

"We go in, get the kids, and get out. I'll admit, it's not much of a plan, but that's all I can come up with without knowing the specifics," Tony said. "You want to do it loud or quiet?"

Harry considered. "Loud," he said.

Tony smiled. "I figured you'd say that. Suit up!"

They both suited up in silence, except for the clicking of servos and the whir of the automated armor assemblies. Harry stood still and let the mechanical arms click pieces of armor into place. The suit felt heavier since he was tired, but it still fit perfectly.

Jarvis piped in. "Flight plan uploaded, gentlemen. There is a heavy tailwind over the border."

Tony closed his faceplate. "Let's not keep the kids waiting."

Harry fired the suit's thrusters, and they left the house in a two-man streak of color, rising up and banking south before the sun had fully cleared the ocean. The city fell away below them, and the lights grew dimmer as they gained height. Tony led the way, flying just above the clouds. Harry followed, matching his speed as the adrenaline burned off the last traces of sleepiness.

Tony's voice crackled in the comm. "By the way, I hope you told the Russian spy you wouldn't be home for breakfast."

Harry smiled despite himself. "She's fine," he said. "She won't be waking up any time soon."

"You've been spending a lot of time with those two SHIELD broads. Don't tell me you're getting mushy on me."

Harry snorted. "Who do you think you're talking to? I'm god's gift to women, and it would be a travesty if the sexy ladies of LA were denied access to my supreme manliness. Besides, I'm just pumping them for information. In fact, when I get back, I may do a little more pumping."

Tony banked right, dropping lower. "That's the spirit. Save the romance for after the heroics."

Below them, the border came into view. There was a fence that separated American farmland from the Mexican city. They followed the gray highway that stretched south into the dust. Harry felt the old thrill build up in his chest. It was the same every time. He felt anticipation as the minutes passed, and he steeled his nerves.

Tony slowed, letting Harry pull up next to him. "You ready?" he asked.

Harry checked the HUD as Jarvis ran his scans to make sure the suit was battle-ready. He nodded. "You know it."

They angled down together as the city of Mexicali sprawled out below them. The sun had barely risen, and the city was just coming to life.

## **Metal and Magic**

Harry and Tony hovered fifty feet above the cantina at Jarvis's waypoint. Below, the cantina looked like a square of concrete and peeling stucco, sandwiched between a tire shop and a

small store. A few battered pickups were parked in front, and the only signs of life were three dogs sleeping under one of the trucks and a kid on an old bike, circling the lot in slow, lazy figure eights.

Tony adjusted his hover and peered straight down. "Are you sure this is the place?"

Jarvis answered without hesitation. "This is where the last phone signal originated. I triangulated the signal to this point, sir."

Harry rolled his neck, then scanned the parking lot. The bus was nowhere to be seen. "Do you think they took the bus as well?" Harry asked him. He ignored the kid on the bike, who looked up at them with wide, excited eyes.

"Probably. That's a lot of people to move. They were likely forced to hand over their phones, and they were turned off after being collected." Tony twisted, the servos in his suit whining with the motion. "It's not a great way to start your weekend."

Harry turned in midair, his visor mapping out the nearest roads and alleys. The whole town was a grid of small buildings, shops, and houses. The nearest road out of the city was a pot-holed, two-lane blacktop that ran south, then vanished into the mountains. "If you were a cartel, and you wanted to disappear a bus full of drunken idiots, how would you do it?" Harry asked.

Tony didn't even think about it. "As fast and with as little drama as possible. They'd stay off the main highway, avoid checkpoints, and keep it quiet."

Harry eyed the empty parking lot. "So, you think they planned it?"

"Very likely, sir," Jarvis replied. "They've likely committed similar acts before."

"I have a feeling they went down that road," Harry said, pointing. "It's close to the cantina, and it's the quickest and easiest way out of town. It's not easy to hide a bus in the city."

"Let's follow it and check it out," Tony said, and they began to fly slowly over the two-lane road.

They drifted higher as Jarvis ran his scan. The sky above was cloudless, and the early morning wind jerked his suit on occasion. Harry tried to picture the missing college kids. They were likely hungover, sunburned, and probably still in last night's clothes. He could practically see everything that happened. They had been packed tight onto the tourist bus and suddenly ambushed by men with guns. This type of thing wasn't new for the area. He'd read too many stories like this in the LA Times. There were even travel warnings to dissuade Americans from coming here.

They left the city behind and continued down the road. They had traveled for some time, and Harry was just about to suggest going back when Jarvis interrupted his thought. "There," Jarvis

announced, and the HUD painted a bright yellow path down the highway and then off onto a rutted dirt track.

“There were two other vehicles in pursuit,” Jarvis said. “Based on tire pattern analysis, the bus exited first, followed by two trucks.”

“Are you sure, Jarvis?” Tony asked.

“Yes, sir. The size and width of the tire tracks indicate that it was likely made by a bus. The tracks are fresh.”

Harry was already angling west along the dirt track. He gunned his thrusters and pointed down the length of the dirt road, which ran like a scar through the desert. “Let’s follow the path and see where it goes.”

Tony kept pace. “You want to take point, or should I?”

“Let me,” Harry said. He rolled forward and dropped his altitude to one hundred feet, following the road.

The desert outside the city looked very inhospitable. Everything except the mountains was flat, brown, and crumbling. Even the cactuses looked like they were dying of thirst. The dirt road was dead-straight, and for twenty miles, there was nothing but scrub and the occasional chunk of shredded tire. Harry’s suit cut through the heavy wind with a low whistle, and the visor auto-adjusted for the sharp glare.

The tire track was easy to spot. The bus had left the dirt road at a shallow angle, and the twin sets of ruts were deep and fresh. The tire tracks ran parallel for a bit, then turned southwest, into a sea of dry brush and brown, rocky dirt.

Tony dropped next to Harry, close enough that their shoulders were almost touching. They slowed to a hover, just above the track. Jarvis flagged a spot ahead, where the brush was flattened in a wide arc. “The vehicles stopped here, sir. I am detecting traces of blood and several fresh footprints leading away from the tire marks.”

Harry landed and scanned the ground. There was a red rag, two spent casings, and several large stains that looked dark and sticky. “Someone got shot,” he muttered.

“That’s not a good sign. We need to find them fast,” Tony told him.

Harry knelt down for a closer look. “It looks like there may have been two. There are two drag marks in the dirt, but they only go for like ten feet or so.”

Tony fired his thrusters. “Let’s get above and scan.”

They went up together, following the tire tracks as they continued down the trail. After two miles, the track led over a low hill, then dipped into a valley. Harry's HUD painted a red outline around a single bus parked in the shadow of an abandoned factory. A truck was parked next to it, and two men stood guard by the rear hatch. Both were armed.

Tony's quiet voice came through his comms. "There's our prize."

Harry checked the rest of the valley. There were only two buildings left standing, both crumbling shells. Nothing moved except the two men and a mangy, stray dog limping down the road.

"Any sign of the kids?" Harry asked.

Jarvis zoomed in. "They are inside the bus. I detect nineteen live signatures. The remainder may be inside the building, or ... otherwise accounted for."

Harry didn't want to dwell on "otherwise." He looked at Tony. "Tell me when."

Tony cracked his knuckles, which made the suit pop and creak. "When."

Harry nodded. "Alright. Let's go."

He dove first, dropping like a missile toward the parked bus. The guards heard the whine of the suit at the last second and looked up, shielding their eyes from the sun. Harry hit the ground in a sliding tackle, catching both men in the back of the knees. They crumpled and went down. Tony landed behind him, stepped on the first guy's hand, and crushed the pistol flat with his boot. The man howled.

Harry took the second guard by the throat and lifted him. "Where are the other two?" he demanded. The man spat onto his visor, so Harry slammed him into the side of the bus, denting the metal. The guard was immediately knocked unconscious.

Tony pulled the bus hatch open. Inside, the college kids were huddled on the floor. They were scared and shaking, but all of them were alive. Tony said, "Stay in here and stay down."

Harry threw the guard onto the ground, where he lay, unmoving. Tony turned to those in the bus and asked, "Do any of you know what happened to the other two?"

One girl in a Stanford sweatshirt raised her trembling hand. "They shot our driver and guide. They threw the bodies into the back of a truck and drove it away."

Tony sighed and nodded. Sadly, it seemed that not everyone would be going home safe. Harry checked the building. Several more armed men stood inside, arguing over the bags and money they had stolen from the group. They hadn't seen the commotion outside.

"I'll go deal with them," Harry told Tony.

Tony nodded. "Be careful."

Harry crept toward the building. His suit's stealth mode wasn't silent, but it dulled the sound of his footsteps. He pressed against the ruined wall, then peeked through the gap. One of the men was pacing and muttering. Another was laughing and shaking his head while three more dug through purses and backpacks. Harry smiled, then used the suit's external mic. "Hey, fellas," he called out.

The closest two spun, guns up. Harry grinned and blew through the wall with a powerful burst of his thrusters. The cinderblock crumbled, and two of the men tumbled back. One tried to fire, but Harry caught his arm and twisted until it snapped. The gun tumbled to the ground while he held his ruined arm and screamed. The second guy pointed his gun right at Harry's head, but Harry's hand struck quicker than a flash. Harry grabbed the handgun and crushed it into scrap, right along with the man's trigger finger. As he screamed, Harry kicked him right in the knee, and he heard a sickening pop. The guy dropped like a sack of potatoes.

By then, the other three were on their feet. Their guns swung up, and Harry's wand appeared in his hand. With a flick of his wand, the three guns turned into rattlesnakes. The men's eyes went comically wide, and they squealed like scared girls, dropping the snakes. Harry flicked his wand again, and the snakes vanished. He then swirled his wand, and the three men rocketed up into the air. Their heads crunched hard against the rotting ceiling, and Harry swung his wand to the side. Their bodies followed the swing of his wand.

Tony was patiently waiting when he heard a loud crash of glass. Suddenly, three men landed near the back of the bus, unconscious, bleeding, and covered in glass. He chuckled and shook his head. A minute later, Harry came walking out carrying two dozen bags and purses. He tossed the bags into the back of the bus, then went back inside. He returned, dragging two unconscious men by their ankles, and dumped them on the dirt. "We'll drop them off at the border with the rest of them," Harry said. He then did some fancy wand work.

"Good thinking," Tony said as he watched all seven men levitate into the air, line up side by side, and then be securely wrapped in ropes with their arms by their sides. All seven dropped like a sack of dirt.

Tony amusedly shook his head and loaded the unconscious men into the bus. He pointed at the driver's seat. "You drive, I'll follow from above," Tony said.

Harry looked at the bus. The windshield was shot out, but it would still move. He went to the driver's seat, turned the key, and fired up the engine. The battered bus shuddered to life.

He hit Tony up over the comms. "Let's get them home."

They took the dirt track with Harry leading in the bus and Tony trailing from above. The sun was fully over the horizon now, and the desert looked bright and endless. Harry watched the road for any sign of trouble, but there was nothing but dust blowing in the hot wind.

As they rolled back into the city, Tony pulled up over the bus and sat on the roof with his legs dangling over the broken windshield. Harry chuckled. "Move your legs, idiot! I can't see!"

They dropped the kids and cartel members at the border, made sure the authorities had them, and then headed home, flying north over the highway. Harry felt the adrenaline fade, replaced by the satisfaction of another successful mission.

"Nice work, Harry," Tony said over the comm. "In celebration of our heroism, I say we hit up the strip club tonight. I'm sure the girls miss us."

Harry laughed, let Jarvis autopilot the suit. "That sounds like a plan."

## **Metal and Magic**

Harry apparated into Natasha's house, carrying a white paper bag and a cup of coffee, and peeked into the bedroom. Natasha lay facedown across her mattress, her hair spilled across the pillow, and the sheet was twisted around her bare legs. He set the bag and cup on her dresser.

Harry's wand appeared in his hand. Her skin showed faint red pressure marks from the sheets, and she was breathing slowly and steadily. He pointed his wand at her and whispered, "Finite." His wand then disappeared from his hand. She twitched, jerked, then went limp again. After a few seconds, her breath caught, then she groaned. Her eyes fluttered open, and she yawned.

"Mmm. Why are you out of bed and dressed?" she tiredly asked.

Harry smiled at her and showed her his offerings. "I got you donuts and coffee," he told her. He heard her stomach rumble.

"Coffee?"

"Yep," he said easily, and she flopped onto her back, her naked breasts stretching upward when she placed both hands behind her head. She really knew how to tempt him.

Harry grabbed the bag and the coffee cup and brought them to the bed, careful not to spill. Natasha sat up, letting the sheet fall to her lap, and not bothering to cover herself. She took the cup, sipped, then leaned back on the pillows with the cup balanced on her stomach.

He sat down on the edge of the bed. "Donut?" he asked, shaking the bag.

She reached for the bag. "What kind?"

"Cinnamon twist and chocolate. I also got you a croissant, but it's not very good."

"You know what I like," she said, tearing the cinnamon twist in half and handing the larger piece to him. He ate it in silence, while happily checking out her curvy form.

Natasha stared at the ceiling, chewing slowly. Her eyes looked tired, but he could tell that she was still as sharp as ever.

"Are you still tired?" he asked her, and Natasha shook her head while chewing. "I guess I just wore you out last night," he teased.

She swallowed, took a drink of her coffee, and stuck her tongue out at him. She then got out of bed, placed her coffee on the dresser, and padded naked across the hardwood floor to the bathroom. He heard the clatter of her toothbrush and the tap water running. The bathroom door was left open.

Harry brushed her crumbs from the bed sheets while waiting for her to finish. The water stopped, and Natasha came out, rubbing her face with a towel. She sexily sauntered up to him, her bare breasts bouncing and swaying with every step. She slid her arms around his neck and kissed him. He rested his hands at the small of her back and slid them down, squeezing her bare ass. She murmured into his ear, "I have to go to work soon, but you can fuck me in the shower if you're fast."

He kissed her collarbone, and when she pulled away, she left the towel around his neck. She disappeared into the bathroom, and he suddenly heard water splattering hard into the tub. He followed her in, still holding the towel, and kicked the door shut behind him.