

## **Metal and Magic**

### **Chapter 17**

The floor of the bottling plant vibrated as the buzz of a hundred synchronized pumps rattled through the soles of Harry's shoes, up his shins, and straight into his brain. He checked his state-of-the-art Stark Industries phone again. It was eight forty-seven in the morning. He had been up since five, making sure everything was set and ready to go.

The foreman, a big bald man in a zip-up fleece, shouted, "Ready on tanks!" His voice echoed across the polished concrete. Everyone in the plant wore the same vest in a shade of highlighter yellow. The color was supposed to help with safety, but all it did was hurt his eyes after staring at it for so long.

"Alright ... Do it!" Harry yelled. He tried to sound authoritative, but his voice cracked on the 'do.'

A woman in safety goggles hit a large green button. The tanks in the corner, each one the size of a small bus, gave a wet sucking sound and then a gurgle as the first batch of Harry & Tony's Hangover Cure dumped into the holding vats. The workers checked the pressure and temperature gauges as it sloshed through a series of clear pipes, gathering velocity as it went.

Harry held his breath and waited for something to explode. It would be just his luck to die in an industrial sized potion accident. Snape would have loved it. Instead, nothing happened except the gentle purr of electric motors and the faint tinkle of glass bottles rattling in their crates. The workers checked the gauges again, and then they checked the hoses. They ran hands along every inch looking for leaks, then gave Harry the thumbs up.

Harry grinned, happy and relieved. He pumped his fist in the air. "Okay! Start the bottling!"

The next stage was louder. A rack of twelve nozzles lined up over a conveyor belt. The bottles moved like soldiers on parade, each stopping for an exact second beneath the nozzle. Each nozzle squirted exactly 50 mL into each bottle, no more and no less. Harry had tested the exact amount needed to handle the worst possible hangover. Fifty milliliters proved to be the perfect amount. The plant had gotten a great deal on German bottling equipment, which, according to Tony, was the only kind worth owning.

Harry watched the bottles snake down the line. A worker grabbed a bottle and examined it. She held it up to the light, rolled it in her palm, then smirked and flashed Harry a sly thumbs up. He felt a wave of pride and a smaller feeling of embarrassment. There was something absurd about seeing your name and yours and your friend's face on ten thousand bottles of magical liquid.

Harry's and Tony's smirking, winking faces were front and center on the bottle label. They were clinking martini glasses together like two posh idiots. Underneath, in a font that cost several thousand dollars to commission, it read ... Harry & Tony's Hangover Cure "Trust Us, It Works."

Harry's own face was next to Tony's, and he looked slightly less like he was about to violate your sister. The design was entirely Tony's doing. Harry still wasn't sure if he was the one in charge or if he was the sidekick in his own company.

Bottles zipped through the line, spun, and were capped with a plastic lid. They rolled forward another ten feet, where a large machine boxed them into colorful packs of twenty-five. They were then sealed with a hard click from the wrapping machine. A robotic arm picked up the boxes and loaded them into shipping cartons. A man with a barcode scanner shot each box, then gave the conveyor a little slap, like a coach congratulating his players.

The whole thing moved with the efficiency of a military drill. Harry felt the tickle of anxiety fade into actual pride. He did a slow walk down the line, nodding to the workers. He gave the foreman a slap on the shoulder. The man nodded back with approval, then returned to his clipboard, checking something off with the focus of a man who had been doing this a long time.

Harry made a point to stop at the end of the line and grab a finished pack. The bottles were still warm since the liquid didn't need to be cooled before being bottled. The labels were nice and straight. He shook them, and the liquid wobbled inside. It was slightly thick but not syrupy. He cracked one open, sniffed, and took a sip.

It was better than it had any right to be. The taste was sharp and citrusy, with a weird aftertaste that reminded him of sucking on an old penny. Still, it was a hundred times better than having to deal with a hangover. The stuff actually worked, too. Harry and Tony had personally tested the test batch after the plant was set up and ready to go. The new stuff was just as good as all the others he had made. He turned to the foreman, who was watching him with the wary respect reserved for the people who signed his paychecks. "You want to try it?" Harry asked, holding out the bottle.

The foreman shrugged. "Why not?" He took a slug, winced, and then smacked his lips. "Not bad," he admitted. "It sort of tastes like green Gatorade if you poured vodka in it."

"Thanks," Harry said, and for a second, he felt a twinge of what Tony must have felt every time someone praised one of his inventions.

At the far end of the plant, another team was mixing the next batch. Big bags of ingredients lined the wall. Each ingredient was measured, poured, and blended with filtered water. He watched as a worker hoisted a fifty-pound sack and dumped it into the tank. A puff of dust went up, and for a moment, the entire corner of the plant smelled like a salad bar. Another worker poured in a smaller sack. They then repeated the process with the remaining mixing tanks. Harry watched the readouts climb on the digital control panel. The whole thing felt more dangerous than it actually was. He fought the urge to pace. Instead, he texted Tony. "First batch down. Nobody's dead yet."

Tony replied two seconds later. “Don’t worry. The day’s still young. I’m sure you won’t disappoint.”

Harry chuckled and slipped his phone back in his pocket. He wandered the perimeter of the plant, taking in the scale of it all. The ceilings were twenty feet high, and the machines were so loud that everyone had to wear hearing protection. The smell of sanitizer was so thick it burned his nose, but underneath, he could smell the sharp tang of his Hangover Cure.

In the office at the plant’s far side, Maria was already on the phone. She looked up, waved him in, then immediately went back to shouting at someone about “fulfillment pipelines” and “SKU tracking.” Harry lingered in the doorway, watching her. She had a way of glaring at the phone as if it were a disorderly employee. Her voice was sharp and clipped, and every word was perfectly clear, even through the office door. She made a note, stabbed the notepad with her pen, then paused to shoot Harry a smile.

He gave her a thumbs-up, then wandered back to the bottling floor. The first pallets were already stacked and shrink-wrapped, ready for shipment. A forklift beeped as it scooped a stack and shuttled it to the loading bay.

It was a ridiculous thing, but Harry found himself standing in front of the finished product, arms folded, just watching the boxes pile up. He was strangely proud of getting this all done within such a short amount of time. A bottle clattered to the floor and bounced, but did not break. The worker bent down, picked it up, and chucked it into a bucket labeled “QC FAIL.”

He took another lap of the line, then checked his phone again. It was only nine-thirty. He had a long day ahead. Harry felt the tingle of pride grow a little brighter. He could get used to this feeling. Of course, he wasn’t planning on being here most days. He had more important things to do with his precious time.

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Maria’s office was large and crammed full of computers, phones, fax machines, printers, coffee and espresso machines, and everything else she would need to keep this place running. Maria herself was behind her desk, headset on, and typing so hard that Harry was surprised she hadn’t injured a finger already. Harry could tell by the way her jaw was set that this was an important call.

He waited by the door and tried not to interrupt. He looked at the glass wall. Outside, the parking lot was already full. The plant manager had asked Harry to reserve a spot for the local news van, in case any media wanted to pop in. Harry said yes, but only if the news reporter was a hot blonde.

Maria finished her call with a sharp, "We'll circle back before noon," and ripped the headset off like it was a bloodsucking leech. She massaged her temples, then groaned and slumped back in her chair. The tension in her shoulders was visible from across the room.

Harry slid in behind her. He put his hands on her shoulders and pressed gently. Maria's eyes closed, and she made a small, involuntary sound. The muscles in her neck felt knotted. He kneaded his fingers in small, hard circles. Maria made another noise ... this one more like a purr.

"That feels really good," she said through a moan.

Harry smiled. "I live to serve."

"Keep going," she demanded, so he did. He worked down along the sides of her neck, then up and over the ridge of her scapula. Her blouse was soft, and it slid easily under his palms. He wondered if she was even aware she was pushing back into his hands, arching her back to get better leverage. After a minute, Maria sighed. "I just closed a deal with LFO Events," she said.

Harry raised an eyebrow. "What's LFO Events?"

Maria snorted. "Live Festival Operations. They do all the big music festivals, plus county fairs, trade shows, you name it. Basically, anywhere people are likely to get wasted in public, they're the ones herding the livestock."

Harry let that sink in. "So, what kind of deal?"

Maria rolled her head, exposing her throat. "Every festival, concert, or whatever, they run a beverage tent. Now, they're adding a tent for our Hangover Cure. Free samples at every event. It's not cheap, but if it works, every college kid on the planet will be chugging this stuff by summer break."

Harry paused. He slid his fingers down the top buttons of Maria's blouse. The first three were undone, and from his angle, her cleavage was deep and inviting. He ran a knuckle along the edge of her bra, teasing the skin. Maria shuddered. "Careful," she said, but it didn't sound like a warning.

He leaned over her, lips grazing her ear. "Should we celebrate?"

She turned in her chair and looked up at him. Her cheeks were pink. "You're the boss," she said, and even though it was a joke, Harry felt a real surge of authority. He actually enjoyed being in charge of it all. He bent down and kissed her. Her mouth was warm and soft, and he could taste her morning coffee. Maria bit his lower lip, then let him go. She stood, walked to the door, and locked it. She yanked down the blinds with a rattling slap. Then she turned, hands on her hips, and looked him up and down.

“You’re overdressed,” she said.

Harry laughed. “So are you.”

She shot him a cat-like grin. Let’s fix that,” she commanded.

Harry undid his tie and dropped it on the chair. He unbuttoned his shirt, then shrugged it off. Maria walked over and traced a finger down his chest. She was so close, he could smell her perfume, shampoo, and the arousal soaking into the crotch of her panties. He liked it.

Maria slowly unbuttoned her blouse, smirking as she put on a show. Each button revealed a little more. She wore a black bra with red stitching, and it looked expensive. She didn’t take the blouse off. She just let it hang open. Then she dropped to her knees and pulled at his belt. Harry stepped forward, and she unzipped his fly. His cock was already half-hard, and it was free in a second. Maria looked up at him, grinned, and ran her tongue up the length of it.

She didn’t bother with foreplay. She took him in her mouth. She started bobbing her head slowly at first, then picked up speed. Her lips were hot and wet, and Harry braced himself on the edge of her desk, fighting the urge to thrust. Maria used her hand on the base, twisting in time with her mouth. She let out a low, humming moan, and the sound vibrated through him. Harry glanced down and saw her eyes locked on his. Maria always made eye contact, even when she was working. It was both sexy and intimidating.

She sped up, going deeper each time. Harry reached down and tangled his fingers in her hair. He didn’t pull or try to guide her. He just held on. Maria hummed like she was enjoying herself. He looked up at the office door. The blinds were closed, but he could see the silhouettes of workers outside. It was thrilling and a little dangerous. He wondered if Maria got off on the risk.

He felt his orgasm building fast and hard. Maria must have sensed it because she started going even faster, using both hands now, her mouth a tight ring around him. She moaned again, this time louder. Harry gritted his teeth. He came, and Maria swallowed without hesitation. She licked him clean, then pulled away and stood up.

She wiped her lips, fixed her blouse, and shot him a look. “Now, get your ass back to work. We have a product to launch.”

Harry zipped up and tried not to look smug. He left the office feeling ten feet tall. It was good to be the boss.

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Harry was at fifteen thousand feet, riding the edge of the atmosphere and still grinning like an idiot. The air was thin and cold, but the suit handled it. The sun was still low over the Pacific, painting everything gold. Tony's armor shimmered just ahead of him.

"So," Harry said into the comm, "I got my first workplace BJ today."

There was a pause, then Tony snorted. "Welcome to the American dream, my friend."

Harry felt his cheeks hurt from smiling so widely. "It was pretty awesome," he admitted.

Tony dropped his altitude and banked left. Harry followed. "You think that's good? Wait until you get one mid-flight. I had a stewardess once ..."

"I don't want to know," Harry said, but he was laughing anyway.

Tony's voice was smug. "It's good to be the boss. That's one thing I'm gonna miss."

Harry arced out over the water, his jets trailing a faint vapor. "You're still the boss ... or co-boss at least."

"Yeah, I suppose. Luckily, I've got something better to do with my time," Tony said.

A silence hung for a second. Harry spotted a pod of dolphins below, surfing the wake of a container ship. Tony veered lower, thrusters screaming. Harry followed him lower. They were so low now the ocean looked like it was right there, close enough to touch. Harry rolled his suit, flexed his wrist, and let his armored fingertips skim the surface. A big wave rose up and whacked his hand. The suit's servos snapped it back into place, but the splash was massive.

"Nice one," Tony said, chuckling. "If you don't keep your head up, next time you'll run into something a lot harder than a wave."

Harry wiped the saltwater off his visor. "Noted."

"Keep practicing, you'll be almost as good as me in a decade or so," Tony said smugly, and Harry could tell just from the sound of his annoying voice that he was grinning.

They shot straight up a kilometer, and then hovered. Harry's heart was pounding with the thrill of flight. He never got used to it, no matter how many hours he logged. A ping echoed in his helmet. Jarvis's clipped British voice said, "You have an incoming call, sir. It's Ms. Romanoff."

Harry felt his stomach flip. He hadn't heard from Natasha in a while. "Patch her through."

"Hey, stranger," Harry greeted the sexy spy.

Natasha's voice was low and playful. "Hey, Harry! I'm back in LA. You want to get together?"

Harry tried to play it cool. "I can be at your place in an hour ... or less, if I don't mind breaking a few speed limits."

She chuckled. "Looking forward to it." The call cut off. Tony turned to face him, suit hovering in a perfect, effortless stasis.

"Got a date?" Tony said, mock-serious.

"You could call it that," Harry said with a stupid grin. "Can you handle patrol on your own tonight?"

Tony put a hand on his heart. "Are you kidding? I was born to do this solo. I am the one and only Iron Man, after all."

Harry rolled his eyes, then hit the afterburners, peeling away toward the city.

Tony's voice chased him through the air. "Give Natalie my best, you lucky bastard!"

Harry grinned, banked hard to the left, and aimed for home. He had an hour to shower and make it across town. It was plenty of time, if nothing exploded between now and then.

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Natasha didn't waste time with hellos. She opened her front door, yanked Harry in by the collar, and shoved him against the wall. Her mouth was already on his, biting his bottom lip. Harry got one hand on her hip and the other tangled in her hair, and for a moment he was sure she was going to have him fuck her standing up, right in the foyer, in full view of her neighbor's security camera. Instead, she broke the kiss, bit him on the chin, and said, "Bedroom. Now."

Harry didn't need to be told twice. He stumbled after her as she stripped off her sweater and let it fall to the floor. The house was still sparsely decorated, just as he remembered. She dragged him into the bedroom. The curtains were already drawn. Natasha shoved him backward onto the bed and climbed on top. Her jeans were skintight, and Harry could see the outline of her underwear through the fabric. Her shirt was just a white tee, but it was stretched taut across her chest, showing off the shape of her large, perfect breasts. She wasn't wearing a bra.

She ground her hips against him, smirking. "I missed these lips," she said, and then kissed him again, deeper this time. Harry's cock was already hard, straining against his jeans. Natasha must have felt it, because she broke the kiss, slid down his body, and popped his button with one flick of her finger. She unzipped him, then yanked his jeans down. His cock sprang free. Natasha wrapped her hand around it, squeezed, then leaned in and licked the head.

Harry groaned. "Bloody hell. I've missed your lips, too."

Natasha smirked and licked him again, slower, like she was testing the flavor. Then she crawled back up, straddled his hips, and pulled her t-shirt over her head. Her breasts fell free, heavy and round, the nipples already dark pink and hard. She reached down, peeled off her jeans, and tossed them away. Her panties were a thin red mesh, already dampened with arousal.

She let Harry stare at her for a few seconds, just drinking in the view. Then she hooked her thumbs into the waistband and shimmied them down her hips. She had no hair, just smooth, pale skin and the flush of heat between her legs. Harry ran his hands up her thighs, traced her hips, then cupped her breasts. They were warm and impossibly soft. He kissed one nipple, then the other. Natasha hissed and pushed his head down.

He took the hint. He rolled her onto her back, kissed her stomach, and moved lower. Her clit was swollen and already slick with wetness. Harry kissed the inside of her thigh, then licked her pussy, slow and flat. Natasha arched her back and grabbed his hair, holding him in place.

He licked her, then sucked her clit, then shoved his tongue deep inside her. Natasha moaned, louder than he'd ever heard. She bucked her hips and ground herself against his face. Harry licked her harder, faster, and Natasha's thighs locked around his head.

She came with a strangled cry, her whole body shuddering. Harry didn't stop until she let go of his hair. Natasha lay back, panting, arms flung wide. After a minute, she opened her eyes. "Take your clothes off," she said, her voice hoarse.

Harry peeled off his shirt, then his boxers. Natasha watched him, her gaze hungry. She spread her legs and touched herself, spreading her lips with two fingers. Her pink, silky insides were shiny and wet.

"Come here," she said.

He climbed over her, lined himself up, and pushed inside. Natasha's pussy was tight and so wet it was almost too slippery. She moaned into his mouth as he started to fuck her. He started thrusting slowly at first, but quickly moved faster when she protested. Natasha moaned and wrapped her legs around his waist.

Harry kissed her, then pinned her arms above her head. He kissed down her neck, then her breasts, sucking hard on each nipple until Natasha was writhing beneath him. She clenched down on his cock with every thrust. Harry could feel her nails digging into his back. He fucked her harder, then pulled out almost all the way before slamming back in.

Natasha's pussy fluttered around him, and she bit his shoulder to keep from screaming. She came again, even harder, her inner muscles rippling and squeezing. Harry barely held on. He felt the orgasm roll up from his balls, through his whole body, then he was cumming, spurting

hot cum deep inside her. He collapsed on top of her, both of them breathing heavily. Natasha kissed his neck, then bit his ear.

“Next time,” she panted, “I’m on top.”

Harry laughed and rolled onto his back, pulling her with him. She curled up next to him, one leg draped over his hip. “Give me a minute to recover.”

Neither of them spoke for a while. Harry listened to her breathing before she started kissing his chest. Her hand cupped his slick cock, and she began massaging it back to hardness. It wasn’t long before he was fully stiff and ready for another round. Natasha did as she said and mounted him in expert fashion. It was one hell of a welcome home party.