

## **Metal and Magic**

### **Chapter 34**

The living room was pitch black except for a sliver of streetlight that sliced through the blinds. Harry apparated in with a soft pop and stood there for a moment, feeling every muscle in his body complain about the last forty-eight hours. He rolled his neck and groaned. Harry then arched his back until the bones popped. When his eyes finally adjusted to the dark, Harry began moving through the small house.

Harry padded through the kitchen and checked the time. It was a few minutes before ten. He then made his way down the hall toward the bedrooms. He quietly turned the knob on the nearest door, expecting to see the shape of Maria curled up in bed, but the room was empty.

Suddenly, the bathroom door opened, and Maria stepped out with a towel wrapped around her body. She was rubbing a second towel through her dark, wet hair. She grinned when she saw him and slung the towel off her head, letting her hair flop in her eyes.

“Nice of you to drop in,” she said, sounding half amused and half annoyed. “I thought maybe you got lost.”

Harry chuckled and then stretched his back again. “I figured I should actually come to check in, or I’d be sleeping on a park bench.”

Maria looked him over. She quickly noticed how tired and worn out he looked. She raised an eyebrow. “Did you have a rough time?”

He chuckled again. “Natasha got herself into a bit of a situation. I had to help her out.” He watched for Maria’s reaction, but she just nodded. Her lips pulled up into a slight smirk.

“She’s always getting into those,” Maria said. She stepped closer, and Harry could smell her shampoo. The towel was small, and her breasts were spilling out of the top. She stopped right in front of him, and her breasts pressed into his chest. She then reached up and pulled Harry’s face down for a kiss.

Her tongue was hot and very eager to explore. She held the back of his head and pressed in, letting her tongue do all the work. Harry wrapped his arms around her, and his hands wandered down her damp skin. She broke the kiss, playfully nipped his lower lip, then pulled back with a smirk.

“Are you staying the night or just passing through?” she asked.

Harry started to answer, but she slid a hand under his t-shirt and ran her nails over his chest. Her towel started to slip, and she didn’t bother adjusting it. She pressed her body into him and

let the cloth fall to the floor. Maria stood there, completely naked. Her nipples were already tight and stiff in the cool air.

She caught him staring and laughed. "You're hopeless," she said, but her hands were already working at the waistband of his pants. She leaned in again and kissed him. This kiss was softer and more passionate. Harry squeezed her ass with one hand while the other trailed up her body and palmed her breast. He rubbed his thumb around the crinkled tip of her nipple. The stiff, little nub became even harder.

Maria moaned and let her head fall against his shoulder. Her hair tickled his cheek. She ground herself against his thigh, and Harry felt himself getting hard instantly. He ducked his head to kiss her neck, then went lower, teasing her bare skin with his lips.

She tilted her head back and closed her eyes. "God, I missed you," she breathed.

Harry grinned and bit gently at her neck. "Of course you did," he teased.

She snorted and gave him a little shove. "Don't get cocky. You owe me an explanation as to why you've been gone for so long, and what happened to Natasha."

He cupped her breast again, pinched her nipple, and rolled it between his fingers. She gasped and pressed herself harder into him. "You can start explaining after this," she said, and reached down to slide his pants lower.

Before anything could happen, his phone rang. They both froze. Maria pulled her head back and narrowed her eyes. All she wanted was some time with Harry. Was that too much to ask?

Harry groaned and let go of her reluctantly. He pulled the phone from his back pocket, not even bothering to check the number. "What?" he snapped, hoping it wasn't a false alarm.

Tony's voice came through. It sounded hoarse and anxious. "Where the hell are you?"

Harry scowled. "I'm with Maria. Can this wait until morning?"

"Not unless you want me to die a horrible, fiery death," Tony said. "I'm sending you my location. Suit up and get here ASAP."

Harry looked at Maria, who was naked and glaring at the phone. "Is this urgent?"

Tony made a noise that sounded like a cross between a scream and a cackle. "Just get your ass here pronto!" The call cut off. Harry stared at the phone, then looked at Maria.

She rolled her eyes, bent down to pick up her towel, and flashed him a clear, unapologetic view of her naked ass and glistening pussy lips. She whipped the towel at his leg. "Go. You're probably the only one who can save his sorry ass anyway."

Harry smiled sheepishly. "I'll be back as soon as possible."

She grinned, wrapped herself in the towel again, and walked back into the bathroom to grab her hairdryer. "You better be," she called over her shoulder.

Harry watched her walk. He couldn't help but stare at her shapely ass as it bounced from side to side. Right then, he cursed the day he met Tony. Letting out a frustrated sigh, Harry fixed his clothes and apparated away.

## **Metal and Magic**

Harry ripped across the night sky with his suit's repulsors roaring at full burn. The black and chrome finish on his armor reflected the city's glow below as he sliced between the buildings. Jarvis filled his comms with crisp, emotionless waypoints to Tony's location. Each new coordinate popped up on Harry's display as a luminous point in the distance, always pulling him one block closer to Tony's latest disaster. Harry's HUD showed a range of warnings. Apparently, there were high-velocity projectiles, irregular flight signatures, and explosions that kept spiking the seismic sensors.

"You're closing in on Mr. Stark's position," Jarvis said. "There are multiple hostiles detected within a two-mile radius."

Harry grunted in acknowledgment. He couldn't see them yet, but the suit's radar was lit up with red dots. Somewhere in there, Tony was making a mess of things as usual.

He banked hard left, following Jarvis's vector, and shot over a freeway just as a trio of flying suits flashed by on his right. These weren't the slow, clumsy prototypes he'd seen on the news. They moved in a tight formation with perfect control. The lead drone rotated its whole torso and spat a volley of 30mm shells at Harry. Warning triangles blared in the corner of his HUD. He twisted, dived, and the shells hammered into a building behind him, missing by less than a meter.

"Bloody hell. Tony must have really pissed someone off," Harry muttered as he climbed to avoid a burst of armor-piercing bullets.

"Mr. Stark's suit is highlighted on your display," Jarvis informed him. "He is currently surrounded by heavy opposition. I advise immediate support."

Harry crashed through a billboard, shattering the metal frame, then righted and gunned it toward Tony's suit. "Tony! I'm coming in hot. Where do you want me?" Harry said as he gained altitude and dodged another burst of gunfire from a pursuing drone.

Tony's voice came through, sounding ragged and a little breathless. "About damn time! I need you to get these damn Hammer Drones off my ass. Get their attention, then double back and meet up with me."

"You got it," Harry replied.

He cut the repulsors and let himself drop for a moment, then kicked them on again to snap upright. The maneuver sent two Hammer Drones zipping past him. Harry's wand appeared in his hand, and he fired a trio of Drilling Hexes straight at one of the drones.

The drone's targeting system was faster than expected. It twisted and tried to catch what it thought was a missile. Instead, the Drilling Hexes slammed into the metal beast with a shriek of twisting metal. One hand was instantly ripped apart, and the two other spells caught it in the stomach and chest. The metal buckled and sheared, and the humanoid drone fell from the sky, sparking dangerously. Harry flicked his wand at the falling drone and sent it flying into his approaching comrade. The two drones slammed into each other, and at that moment, Harry detonated the damaged drone with a powerful Blasting Charm. The explosion was concussive, and Harry's suit shuddered from the shockwave. Harry grinned at the massive fireball and flaming metal parts falling from the sky. It was nice to be back in the air, Harry thought.

Projectiles suddenly whizzed past Harry's head, and he turned to see another drone joining the fight. Harry pointed straight at it and accelerated. Only a second before they collided, Harry banked to the right, missed the drone by inches, and flicked his wand. Its left leg suddenly turned into sand and rained down on the ground below. Suddenly unstable, the drone spiraled out of control and crashed through a cluster of pine trees, detonating on impact. Harry didn't have time to appreciate the destruction. He accelerated and got closer to Tony. Harry fired several more curses at the drones following him. A few took the bait and broke away from Tony, instead turning their sights on Harry.

"Two hostiles locked on your position, sir," Jarvis said. "Engagement recommended."

"Excellent," Harry said, and gunned it straight up, daring the drones to follow.

The sky above the city was chaotic. Tracers and streaks of plasma illuminated the clouds. Harry looped through a bank of smoke, dramatically decelerated, and watched the drones zip past him again, overcorrecting in their pursuit. Harry shot forward, grabbed each by the cannons on their backs, and dragged both Hammer Drones with him. Another set of drones flew after him. Their machine guns flashed as they fired, and a few rounds pinged off his armor, but he kept his eyes on the ground. Harry accelerated faster and faster, and the ground grew closer. His suit's ground proximity warning blared, but Harry ignored it. The two drones in his grasp tried to break

away, but Harry held firm. Just before slamming into the ground, Harry shoved the drones downward and rocketed back up in a perfect Wronski Feint. Below him, both Hammer Drones collided with the ground in a spectacular explosion.

“Nice move!” Tony called over the comms. He was starting to sound less stressed. “I’ll have to remember that one!” Before Harry could answer, his suit was peppered with machine gun fire.

Two Hammer Drones tailgated Harry, cutting through the night sky with their jets leaving a blue-white wake behind them. They moved with precision, following his every move. These drones weren’t piloted by humans. Harry knew that humans couldn’t react that quickly. Their software was relentless, and they stuck to Harry’s six like stink on a monkey.

Harry sharply climbed, then feinted left, pulling every Quidditch move he could remember from his Hogwarts days. The drones corrected instantly, adjusting their trajectory with minute compensations. They were smarter than he’d expected. Harry’s HUD flashed with targeting warnings, so he looped high and then rolled into a steep dive, heading straight between two tall buildings.

The drones opened fire, and their cannon fire cracked through the air behind him. The first burst destroyed the windows of a thirty-story office tower and sent a glittering spray of safety glass out into the night. Harry banked, kicked the repulsors into overdrive, and forced a tighter curve than any suit was supposed to handle. The g-forces were so hard that the suit couldn’t fully compensate, and it momentarily blurred his vision, but the maneuver worked. The drones overshot for a split second.

That was enough. Harry twisted and locked onto the lead drone. He closed in so fast he almost slammed into it. At the last instant, he braced with his legs and landed on the drone’s back in a violent, crunching embrace. The drone’s armor was thickly plated, and its servos whined as it attempted to shake Harry free. He gripped the drone’s arms and yanked upward. The drone tried to roll and dislodge him, but Harry’s augmented suit outmatched its strength.

He fought it hand-to-hand, holding on with one arm while his other fist pounded the back of the drone’s skull. The suit’s fingers punched through the casing, and wires arced and sparked around his knuckles. The drone twisted violently, but Harry held on with his legs, clamping the drone’s torso between his thighs. He reached under the drone’s chin, found the seam in its neck, and tore the head clean off.

The drone’s body spasmed and spun, but Harry was already moving. He used the dying machine’s momentum to flip himself up and over, landing on the second drone as it slid closer to help. The two drones collided and tangled in midair, and Harry used the chaos to rip both arms off the second drone. Both tangled drones started corkscrewing uncontrollably, and Harry fished them off by firing a powerful Piercing Hex straight into the armless drone’s chest. The armor fractured in a shower of burning shrapnel. The drone’s chest cavity exploded, spraying circuit boards and fire into the air.

Harry kicked away and watched the drones spiral down in a flaming tumble before slamming into the asphalt below with two concussive booms. Somewhere in the distance, he heard Tony whoop in victory as another drone exploded under a barrage of repulsor blasts. Harry took a second to breathe. He looked down at the wreckage. The street was now littered with molten drone bits, flaming wreckage, and dozens of screaming, fleeing civilians.

The Hammer Drones weren't done. Another surged out of nowhere. Its armor was scorched, and its faceplate was half-melted from its battle with Tony. Harry turned to meet it head-on, but the drone was faster than he anticipated. It closed the distance in a heartbeat and raked Harry's suit with a full barrage of armor-piercing rounds.

The impacts staggered Harry. His suit's electronics flickered, and warning lights flashed red across his HUD. The drone lined up for a killing shot, but Harry summoned his wand. He jabbed it forward and released an angry curse.

A ball of white-hot energy tore from the wand, punched through the drone's midsection, and detonated on the other side. The drone folded in half around the explosion, then split apart, raining junk metal onto the street below. Harry hovered for a moment, watching the drone's legs twitch as they tumbled through the air.

The comms popped with static, then Tony's voice cut through. "They're regrouping and heading back to the Expo center. I'm marking the path. Let's clean up on the way." A yellow waypoint blinked on Harry's HUD, and he snapped his attention to the highlighted avenue below. It was already swarming with Hammer Drones, firing down at anything that moved.

"Keep them off the civilians!" Tony barked, and then he was gone, lost in a dogfight with three more drones. Harry dove after the main cluster and accelerated so quickly his ears popped. Every time he fired off a curse, he made sure to target the drones nearest to bystanders, keeping the collateral damage to a minimum. He launched a Severing Hex at a drone, clipped an arm, and watched it pinwheel helplessly before it exploded into a parking lot. He flicked his wand again, and a Grappling Charm snagged another drone by the foot. Harry yanked it into the path of a building, and the drone clipped the edge and spun out of control. The resulting detonation shredded the drone and brought down a streetlight, but Harry transfigured the lamp post into a flock of birds with a quick spell before it could flatten a family sheltering behind a car.

All up and down the avenue, the chase was a flashing, thundering mess. The Hammer Drones crashed through billboards, clipped the tops off city buses, and kept firing at Tony and Harry even as they lost chunks of armor to magical attacks. Harry flew so close to the ground he could see the terrified faces of those watching. He zigzagged through a gauntlet of missiles, then climbed sharply, drawing two pursuing drones away from a group of terrified police officers. He let the drones close to within ten meters, then cut his thrusters and spun, releasing a pair of Blasting Hexes point-blank. The drones were vaporized in a fiery explosion. Burning parts

rained down and crashed into a gas station canopy, but at least the officers below made it out alive.

Not far away, Tony crashed through the upper floors of an office building as a trio of drones hammered him with gunfire. "Need a hand here!" Tony shouted, and Harry could see him grappling with another drone as they both tumbled out the far side in a shower of drywall and glass shards. Harry shot over, saw the drones lining up for a kill shot, and unleashed a rapid succession of spells. The barrage caught all three mid-flight, rendering them useless as sparks began flying out of each joint. Tony finished them off by blasting them apart with his repulsors.

"Not bad!" Tony crowed. "Keep doing that, and someday you'll reach my level!"

"Of what? Drunken buffoonery?" Harry shot back as he rolled to avoid a missile. He then redirected it with his wand and sent it straight into a cluster of drones ahead.

"Hey! I'm not THAT drunk," Tony defended himself.

The remaining Hammer Drones looped around, regrouped, and knifed through the air toward the Expo center. Harry and Tony stayed hot on their tails, picking off stragglers and using every trick they knew to keep the drones from reaching the civilian crowds gathering around the plaza.

Tony's suit took a direct hit from a high-caliber cannon, and for a moment, the Iron Man suit tumbled end over end through the haze of battle. The shot hadn't penetrated the armor, but the impact sent him spinning out of control. Instead of regaining altitude, Tony began a steep, uncontrolled dive straight toward the park below.

Harry reacted before he could even think. He bolted after Tony, dropping in elevation as fast as he could. The HUD's red danger warnings flashed wildly, but he focused on the gold-and-red blur corkscrewing toward the earth. He closed the gap in the blink of an eye, and snagged Tony's ankle just two meters above the ground. The sudden stop yanked Tony's momentum sideways, sending both of them into a wild, tumbling roll through the air.

They crashed into the park's ornamental pond, skidded across the surface, and came to a halt in a geyser of mud and water that drenched everything within fifty yards. Tony righted himself and shook off the pond scum, flicking it off his faceplate like a wet dog. "I had that under control," he insisted, but his comms were so rattled it sounded like a quack.

Harry was already up, scanning the treeline and sky. All around the perimeter, Hammer Drones were closing in. The impact and commotion had drawn them in like sharks to blood, and now a whole crew of drones landed in the park.

Harry and Tony stood back to back, ringed by at least two dozen drones. One immediately leveled its minigun at them. Tony fired a repulsor blast that blew the drone's arm off, but three more hovered in to replace it.

Behind them, another drone tried to flank. Harry conjured a fire whip with a slash of his wand. The whip lashed out, wrapped around the drone's midsection, and yanked it out of the sky. The drone crashed into the ground, where Tony blew it apart.

Harry was forced to conjure a thick metal wall, shielding them both as another drone's missiles detonated against it. The metal splintered and melted but held for a critical moment. Harry could see the drones regrouping and circling, preparing to attack from all sides. Harry violently banished the scorched metal wall, destroying three drones at once.

Tony, with his battle-damaged suit, and Harry with his wand blazing moved as a unit. Harry switched to an Incendio spell and shot massive fireballs at the drones as they advanced. The drones banked left, trying to avoid the fire, but Harry's aim was too good. Two more were engulfed in a tornado of flame. Their armor quickly became superheated and burst. Their flight control units melted as they dropped out of the sky.

And yet more drones landed, forming a ring around them. Tony fired off a cluster of mini-missiles from his shoulders. The projectiles fanned out and struck six drones at once, toppling them like dominoes. Harry summoned two from the sky at exactly the same time. They slammed into the grass with a loud thunk, and he used a Blasting Curse to detonate the drones at point-blank range.

More and more drones kept coming. The sky was so thick with drones that Harry could barely see the clouds. Tony's suit flashed a warning. He was out of missiles.

"Any ideas?" Tony shouted.

"Yeah," Harry said. "Keep low. Things are about to get dangerous. Keep them off me."

Tony unleashed repulsor blasts at anything that moved. His HUD was awash in targeting reticles, all flashing red. There was no time for finesse now. He just used raw firepower and speed. He zigzagged through incoming gunfire, blasting drones apart with every shot, but there were always more. They swooped in from every angle, encircling the pond where he and Harry had just crash-landed. Tony ducked as a missile streaked overhead and exploded in a tree, showering him with chunks of bark and shredded leaves.

Meanwhile, Harry stood at the center of the chaos, but he wasn't firing off spells as before. Instead, he focused on his wand, tracing a complicated, looping pattern in the air. He muttered under his breath. It wasn't in English, but in something much older. The air around his wand shimmered and throbbed. Heat radiated from his hand, and the tip of the wand started to glow red-hot. Then it turned white-hot. The drones closed in, but Harry ignored them, even as bullets and shrapnel whistled past his head. He kept chanting, and the pattern of his wandwork grew faster and more complicated.

The first missile hit a few feet away, showering the ground with dirt. A drone extended a hand and lunged toward Harry's face, but Tony sent it flying with a well-timed repulsor blast. He finished the loop and jabbed the wand skyward. From the tip of his wand, a jet of fire screamed upward with the force of a rocket engine. The blast caught a drone mid-lunge and torched it into a puddle of molten metal. Harry didn't stop. He turned slowly in place, and the fire followed his wand's motion, sweeping in a searing arc across the sky.

Tony, only a few meters away, gaped openly. The fire wasn't behaving like any weapon he'd seen before. It moved almost intelligently, snaking out to intercept every drone that entered its path. Every time a drone tried to dodge or circle behind, the fire split and multiplied, forming snarling animal heads and talons that grabbed the drones mid-flight and incinerated them instantly. The park lit up in a strobe of orange and white.

The inferno grew with every drone it devoured. The air was so hot that the ornamental pond began to boil, sending up clouds of steam that glowed with the reflected flames. The cloud of fire twisted and condensed, forming a scaly body and a set of vast, leathery wings. In seconds, the firestorm had assembled itself into a full-blown dragon, at least fifty meters long. It twisted overhead, and its jaws snapped shut on an unlucky drone squadron. The dragon's belly was lined with burning cinders, and its eyes burned with white light. As the last few drones tried to scatter, the dragon arced downward, chasing them one by one. Each time, the dragon's flames were so intense that they left the afterimages burned into Tony's retinas.

Harry stood at the epicenter, and his face was lit with the orange light of the dragon's shadow. The wand in his hand practically pulsed with raw energy. Behind him, the grass was singed to ash, but he didn't seem to notice. He pointed the wand, and the dragon responded, circling tighter and tighter above the park. Harry swept his wand in a final, decisive slash. The dragon folded its wings and dove at the last drone, tackling it midair and driving it into the ground with a thunderous detonation.

For a moment, everything went silent except for the crackling of burning trees and the hissing of steam. The dragon hovered in the air with all of its attention fixed on Harry. It opened its mouth and roared. The sound was so loud that every window in the nearby Expo center shattered at once.

Tony leaned out from behind a scorched boulder, still in awe. "Uh, Harry? Is this part of the plan?"

Harry didn't answer. The dragon dove toward him with its fangs bared, and its claws outstretched. Tony's suit whined as he tried to get up and intervene, but he felt useless. He aimed his repulsor at the dragon, but hesitated. He'd seen what it did to drones. Harry stood his ground, staring up at the firestorm creature with no sign of fear. Just before the dragon hit, Harry flicked his wrist. The wand's tip flashed, and the dragon exploded into a perfect sphere of superheated vapor. The shockwave knocked Tony flat on his back and set off every car alarm within five blocks.

When the smoke cleared, Harry was still standing with his wand at his side. The only evidence of the dragon's rampage was a scorched ring of grass and a few smoldering drone limbs littering the ground. Though Tony couldn't see him under the black and chrome suit, he could tell that Harry was breathing heavily.

Tony staggered over, brushing soot off his suit. "Are you alright, kid?"

Harry nodded, then chuckled. "That kind of magic really takes a lot out of you," he said in a slightly ragged voice.

Tony shook his head, clearly impressed. "That was some next-level pyrotechnics. You ever think about working in special effects? I could really use you at MY next Expo."

Harry opened his mouth to answer, but a new sound drowned him out. It was a deep, grinding whine. A shadow loomed over the park. Something large hurtled down from the sky. Harry and Tony both looked up just in time to see a large mech-suit crash into the boiling pond, sending up a forty-foot geyser.

The water rained down, and there in the middle of the ruined pond stood a man encased in a suit of armor much larger than Tony's. The suit was blackened and pitted, with veins of blue-white electricity running along its arms. The faceplate suddenly lifted back, revealing the pilot's face. He had a wild tangle of greasy black hair, and his lips twisted into a smirk.

The man inside spread his arms wide, and two long whips of whitish-blue crackling energy unfurled from the wrists and lashed out, leaving scorched scars on the ground wherever they touched.

The man grinned, showing two gold teeth. "Good to be back."