

## **Metal and Magic**

### **Chapter 29**

2010

The Malibu mansion was quiet and peaceful in the early morning, and Harry sat on the couch with a mug of coffee, his eyes on the TV. Some daytime show was on, and he watched with a loose smirk as a former child star preached about clean living after spending years as a drug addict. Harry didn't bother to wonder why the TV was always tuned to American daytime programs in Tony's house. Maybe it was Pepper's way of reminding herself that reality existed outside of their cozy bunker.

He heard Tony's shuffling steps, a clatter of pill bottles, then a muffled curse. The great Iron Man limped into the living room looking like a man who'd spent the night in a gutter. Tony's hair was a disaster, and his eyes were rimmed with dark circles. The arc reactor glowed dimly through the thin cotton of his shirt.

Tony slumped onto the couch and pawed at the coffee table until he found the remote. He aimed it at the TV and hit mute. "Is this what you do all morning?" he asked. "Just sit here and watch has-beens yap about their problems?"

Harry sipped his coffee. "There's something mesmerizing about watching people try to convince themselves they're happy."

Tony squinted at the mug. "Is there vodka in that?"

"Not before nine, Tony."

Tony grunted and rested his head on the back of the couch. He sat there with his arms hanging limp. Harry could see the darkened veins in his forearms. He'd always been thin, but lately, Tony looked like he'd been peeled.

Harry let him stew for a while, then asked, "How's the palladium situation?"

Tony didn't lift his head. "Have you ever been slowly poisoned by your own genius?"

Harry considered it. "Maybe. Do you remember when we flew our cars to Ontario? On the way back, my stomach started rumbling something awful ... though that just may have been all the poutine we ate."

Tony did not remember, and he grumbled into the granite. Harry finished his coffee and set the mug down on the coffee table. "Have you figured out the new element yet?"

Tony flopped his head sideways. "I'm getting close. Your magic has been a big help. I still have to stabilize the core, but if I can pull it off, I'll live long enough to die of something more interesting."

Harry reached into the pocket of his hoodie and produced a small, dark blue glass bottle. He set it on the counter in front of Tony, who curiously stared at it. "What's this?" Tony asked.

"Drink it," Harry said. "All of it."

Tony picked up the bottle, sniffed the lip, and gagged. "This smells like an Irishman's ballsack." Harry raised an eyebrow.

"How do you know what an Irishman's ballsack smells like?"

"Don't ask questions if you're not ready to hear the answer," Tony wisely stated, and Harry snorted.

"It'll flush your kidneys and clean out your blood," Harry said.

Tony uncorked the bottle, considered the sludge inside, and said, "You couldn't have given me this before my kidneys were shot?"

"Your kidneys are fine, drama queen," Harry said. "And it took me five months to brew this stuff. It wasn't easy."

Tony looked at him, and the magnitude of Harry's efforts finally registered. "You bastard," he said in lieu of a thank you, and he downed the bottle in a single, shuddering gulp. He coughed, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "It tastes like raw sewage. Are you sure this won't just make me shit myself?"

"No, but you should probably wear a diaper," Harry smirked. "You'll be peeing like a racehorse in about five minutes."

Tony stared at the ceiling, like he could hear time ticking down. "If this makes my dick fall off, I'm blaming you."

"Who knows? It might make it work better," Harry said. "But I'm sure that's just wishful thinking."

Tony chuckled and rubbed the aching muscles in his arm. "You know, I was going to buy you a yacht after we sold our first billion bottles."

"I'd just crash it," Harry said. "Remember what I did to your boat?"

"True," Tony said. He looked off into the distance, like there was something on the horizon that only he could see. "Do you ever think about dying?"

“Not when I can help it,” Harry said. “But if you do die, I’m putting your face on every bottle. I’ll call it Tony’s Last Stand.”

Tony snorted, then groaned as the potion began to work. He shifted on the couch and clapped a hand to his stomach. “Oh god, it’s already moving.”

“I told you it would,” Harry said, but Tony was already up and out of the room, sprinting for the bathroom with one hand clutching his crotch.

Harry watched him go, then turned back to the TV and unmuted it. The anchor had moved on to a new guest, a man in a glittery suit who was selling a blender. Harry listened to the pitch, and for a moment, he was almost convinced. He let himself smile and poured the last of the coffee into his mug.

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The next few hours passed in relative quiet. Harry fixed a breakfast that consisted of eggs, bacon, and six slices of buttered toast. He then spent most of the morning in the garage, tinkering with his new, upgraded suit. After a while, he came back inside and read through some reports for his and Tony’s company. The company was doing way better than he could have possibly imagined. His hangover cures had spread worldwide, and he now had two dozen bottling plants in Europe and Asia, and he even had two in Africa. As Tony had stated, they were already creeping up on one billion bottles sold. Needless to say, Harry and Tony were flush with cash.

Every so often, Harry checked his phone for a text or a call from Tony, but the man was evidently locked in his own private hell. Harry could hear intermittent groans, then the thunder of plumbing, then silence. The hours crawled by, and Harry’s smirk only grew.

At noon, he went to the kitchen and found that Pepper had left a bowl of fruit and a note that said, “Don’t let Tony die. Also, please stop leaving the toilet seat up.” Harry snorted, ate a banana, and threw the peel in the trash.

At three, Tony reappeared. He wore jeans and a black t-shirt that hung baggily on his frame. He was still thin, but at least his face looked better. The color had returned to his cheeks, and the blue veins had all faded. Harry looked up from his reports as Tony shuffled in. “Back among the living, I see?” he asked.

Tony spread his arms. “I feel like I could run a marathon ... or at least jog around the block and not collapse.”

Harry grinned. “No kidney pain?”

“None. My headache is gone, and my muscles have stopped spasming. My urine is still highlighter yellow, but at least it’s not glowing.”

Harry snorted. “You’re welcome.”

Tony poured himself a glass of orange juice and chugged half of it in one go. He wiped his mouth and said, “Seriously, that was some miracle shit. I think I might actually survive this mess I created.”

Harry said, “That’s the plan. It’s bad for business if you kick the bucket.”

Tony chuckled. “That’s why you’re my partner, Harry. You always put profit first.”

Harry leaned back in his chair and kicked his feet up on the table. “So ... Now that you’ve escaped Death’s clammy grasp, what now?”

Tony sipped more juice, then leaned on the counter. “I was thinking. You, me, and Pepper ... we should celebrate my untimely survival.” He set the glass down with a thunk. “Have you ever been to Monaco?”

Harry shook his head. “I can’t say that I have.”

“We’re going. The Grand Prix is in two days, and I have Stark Industries business to attend to while I’m there. Pepper’s already packing. I need you there. If nothing else, you’ll keep me from getting arrested for public intoxication.”

Harry considered it. “There’s always a first time for everything.”

Tony grinned wider, like a kid who’d just gotten the best present ever. “Think of the women. French, Italian, British, whatever you want. The only rule is that you have to drink way too much and make a complete spectacle of yourself.”

Harry shrugged. “You buying?”

“When am I not?” Tony replied.

Harry grinned and smacked his shoulder. “Sure. I’ll go.”

Tony looked at him, and for a second, his face got serious. “Thanks,” he said. “For everything, and especially for keeping me from dying in my own house like a sad billionaire cliché.”

Harry nodded. “Anytime.”

Tony pointed at him. "Go pack a bag. The private jet is already gassed up and waiting. We leave at midnight. Make sure to bring something you can wear to a casino."

Harry nodded and saluted. "See you in Monte Carlo, Mr. Stark," he said in his best Bond villain voice.

Tony left the kitchen, whistling under his breath, and Harry grabbed a juicy plum, then went to find his passport.

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The Gulfstream touched down in Nice early in the morning, and a black limo carried the group the rest of the way to Monaco. Pepper slept the entire drive, her head pillowed on the window, and her legs curled under her. Tony passed out in the back, slumped at an angle that suggested years of practice at sleeping in strange places. Harry watched the French Riviera through the glass.

The car dropped them at the Hotel Hermitage, where the bellhops hustled the bags inside before Harry could even offer a tip. The lobby was gold, marble, and white velvet, and everything reeked of money. Harry checked in, showered, and napped for three hours, then woke up and went to the balcony. From here, the port was dotted with billionaire yachts, and in the distance, scaffolds and grandstands marked the snaking route of the Grand Prix.

At noon, Harry dressed in his black, tailored suit. He brushed his hair, tied the red tie in a half-windsor knot, and inspected himself in the mirror. Tony emerged from his suite at exactly twelve-thirty, clad in a light gray suit with no tie and a white shirt left open at the top. He wore sunglasses and looked like he was ready to seduce every heiress on the continent. Pepper knocked on Harry's door at quarter to one, wearing a red dress that hugged her body and ended an inch or two above her knees. The neckline wasn't scandalous by any stretch of the imagination, but somehow it managed to make her cleavage look even more impressive. Happy came in a few minutes later and told them the car was ready.

Happy drove them to the restaurant that overlooked the starting line of the Grand Prix. The place was quite luxurious, and one entire wall was nothing but glass, giving every guest a million-euro view. It was packed with people who were famous, rich, or both.

The maître d' recognized Tony instantly. "Mr. Stark! Welcome. Your table is ready," he said, and then led them through the main dining room, which was a hive of low laughter and the click of utensils on china. Every single table tracked them as they passed.

Harry grinned and winked at a pair of socialites at the bar. One of them flushed and looked away, then immediately glanced back with hungry eyes. He tossed the sexy woman a smirk, but Pepper grabbed his arm and yanked him forward. "Try not to embarrass me before we even sit down," she quietly said while Tony smiled widely.

The table was at the edge of the terrace, right against a glass rail. Tony pulled out Pepper's chair, and the maître d' made a show of adjusting napkins and silverware, then disappeared with a deep bow.

No sooner had they taken their seats than the press arrived. A flurry of camera flashes lit up the air, and a scrum of reporters jostled for position beyond the velvet rope. Pepper rolled her eyes, but Tony just turned in his chair and waved. "Ladies and gentlemen," he called out. "Please. We're trying to enjoy our lunch. Form an orderly stampede, and we'll get to you in time." The reporters laughed, scribbled notes, and lobbed a few half-hearted questions, but they all seemed more interested in snapping a hundred pictures of Tony and Harry together.

Harry sipped his water and watched it all with a kind of detached amusement. In his old life, he'd never been one for the spotlight, but there was a weird thrill in being at the center of it. He scanned the press corps, noting the usual suspects. There were some dorky guys in cheap suits pushing and shoving, the seasoned older men who knew how to be patient, and the local paparazzi with expensive cameras.

However, one of them caught his eye. There was a blonde bombshell in a white pantsuit that made her look like she'd walked off the set of a Bond movie. She locked eyes with Harry, then breezed past the other reporters with the arrogance of someone who had always gotten what she wanted.

She leaned on the rope with her notepad tucked under one arm. "Harry Potter?" she called, her voice both sweet and seductive. Harry smirked at Tony, who smirked back. Pepper huffed and shook her head, already knowing that something embarrassing was soon to follow.

Harry stood, straightened his jacket, and approached the rope. "That's me. What can I do for you?"

The woman smiled sexily, using her beauty to her advantage. "Can I get a private interview? I promise it'll be quick and painless."

He eyed her up and down, then let his gaze settle on her lips. "I've been described as many things by beautiful women, but quick isn't one of them." She smirked and raised a perfectly manicured eyebrow.

"And what about painless?" she asked.

"Oh, no, my dear. I'm definitely a pain in the ass," Harry stated with a charming smile.

A couple of the other reporters laughed, but the blonde didn't miss a beat. She unclipped the velvet rope and gestured for him to follow. "Come on. We'll find somewhere more ... discreet."

Harry looked over his shoulder at Tony and Pepper, who were both watching like it was their favorite soap opera. Tony lifted his glass in a toast. "Don't get her pregnant!" he shouted, and several people snickered.

Harry grinned, then followed the blonde through the press crowd, which parted for her like she was royalty. She led him down a flight of stairs to a quiet alcove beneath the terrace, where the roar of conversation faded into the distant murmur of waves against the marina.

She turned, pulled a tiny recorder from her pocket, and pressed the button. "Is it true that you and Tony Stark are planning to launch a new line of energy drinks in Europe?"

Harry blinked. "You dragged me down here to ask about beverages?"

She arched an eyebrow. "We can talk about whatever you want, but I'm told this is the story of the week." She stepped closer, so close that he could smell her perfume and see the tiny freckles on her nose.

Harry tilted his head and decided to play along. "It's true. Tony and I are expanding the business. Right now, we're focusing on the hangover cures. The demand is very high, and it keeps growing. However, I have developed a sugar and caffeine-free energy drink that works incredibly well. I imagine it'll be on the shelves within six months."

The reporter's mouth quirked into a smile. "And will it be available in Monaco?"

He leaned in, his face inches from hers. "If you come to the party tonight, I'll give you the very first sample ... on the house."

She bit her lip, pretending to play hard to get. "Will you promise to drink it with me?"

He gave her the full green-eyed charm. "If you insist, but I should warn you. Me with a lot of energy is a dangerous mix. You might not make it back to your hotel room."

She laughed loudly and brushed his arm with her delicate fingers. "Is it true what they say about Englishmen and their stamina?"

"I don't know. You'll have to let me prove it to you."

She clicked off her recorder. "That's off the record, right?"

Harry chuckled and ran his hands down her sides and over her wide hips. "Nope. That's very much ON the record," he joked.

The woman slid her card into his pocket, let her hand linger, then turned and strutted back up the stairs. Harry stood there and watched her incredible ass swaying from side to side before returning to the table, where Tony and Pepper were already halfway through a bottle of wine.

Tony looked up as Harry approached. "Did you at least get her number?"

Harry fished the card out and flicked it at Tony. "She gave it to me without me even asking."

Tony whistled. "That's impressive. I'll have to try my luck later," he said, wiggling his eyebrows at Pepper.

Pepper sipped her wine and snorted. "Please. If Tony ever tried that with me, he'd end up with a lawsuit and a black eye."

Tony grinned. "Maybe, but you adore me anyway."

Pepper smiled, then stabbed a cherry tomato with her fork. "I tolerate you. Big difference."

Harry poured himself a glass and sat back in his chair. The sun beat down on the terrace, and the air buzzed with excitement. He watched the cars getting prepared for the big race, watched the crowd fill the grandstands, and watched as a dozen other reporters craned their necks, looking for a better angle. Harry had a feeling that today would be quite memorable.