

Metal and Magic

Chapter 30

Harry had been in Monaco for only a few hours and already felt like he'd consumed a month's worth of champagne, juicy gossip, and rich, snobby nonsense. The restaurant buzzed with the sort of energy that only came from having more money than sense. Three women sat at the bar, glittering in designer dresses. They were allegedly famous, but Harry had no idea if that was true. The blonde in the center had already sent Harry two drinks, a napkin with her room number, and a smile that looked like an open-ended invitation.

He took the third drink in stride. When he turned to signal thanks, she and her two friends were already standing inches away. The blonde wore a white dress cut low enough to draw every eye to her buxom chest. Her friends, a tall redhead with one of those impossible waistlines and a short, curvy brunette in sequins, never left her side.

"You're Harry Potter, aren't you?" the blonde purred in a sexy French accent.

He gave her his best charming smile. "Guilty as charged."

The brunette looped an arm through his, making sure to rub her impressive breasts against his bicep. "Is it true that you're now richer than Tony Stark?"

"I'm so rich that I've got Tony begging me to foot his bills," Harry smirked. The redhead snorted and sipped her cocktail. This, of course, was a bit of a fabrication. While Harry was now officially a billionaire, Tony was still way richer than he was.

The blonde pulled a digital camera from her purse. "Take a picture with us?"

Harry leaned in, put his arms around all three, and grinned for the camera. His hands were firmly on the blonde's and redhead's round, juicy asses. The brunette pressed her lips to his cheek at the last second, and the flash went off just as she did it.

"Send it to my PR team," Harry said. "They'll want a copy." Harry just wanted the copy for himself.

The blonde looked at the photo on the camera screen, then kissed his jaw just below the ear. "We're on the guest list for the Amber Lounge party tonight," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "Will we see you there?"

Harry tucked a stray hair behind her ear. "Only if you promise that we'll get sloppy drunk and make a complete spectacle of ourselves."

"That's half the fun," the redhead giggled.

Harry extracted himself with a smile and a promise to definitely see them again. He walked back to the table with a spring in his step and a lipstick print on his jaw.

Pepper and Happy sat alone at the table. Happy was having a quick meal, and Pepper had her phone in one hand and a glass of white wine in the other. She glanced up as Harry slid into the chair opposite her.

“Is it always like this?” he asked.

Pepper didn't look up. “With Tony involved? Yes.”

Happy snorted. He set his glass down and followed their gaze. The terrace overlooked the entire starting line, which was a checkerboard pattern painted on the street. Everyone in the restaurant was excited about the race, but Pepper looked none too pleased. Dignitaries, oil barons, and their surgically-altered companions lined the terrace edge, all eyes turned to the racetrack below.

“Where's Tony?” Harry asked.

Pepper set her phone down and stared at him like he'd asked where the sun went at night. “Where do you think he is?”

Happy pointed his fork at the track. “He's been gone twenty minutes. He said he had to stretch his legs and meet a business partner.”

Harry craned his neck and, after a moment, spotted Tony on the main straight, a hundred meters from the starting line. He wore a red-and-gold racing suit with his own name embroidered across the shoulders, and he was waving like an idiot at the cheering crowd. Tony was smiling widely, and he looked to be having the time of his life.

He carried a racing helmet under his arm and mugged for the nearest TV crew. The crowd went wild. Tony grinned and mimed blowing a kiss to the stands.

Harry shook his head and sipped the drink. “He's going to kill himself.”

Pepper's voice was strained and resigned. “That would be the most Tony way to die.”

On cue, Tony jogged to his car, which was a low-slung silver beast plastered with sponsor logos and the Stark Industries logo on the nose. He climbed in, buckled up, and grinned at the nearest camera. Two mechanics fussed around the car, then one handed Tony a pair of racing gloves and patted him on the shoulder. Tony gave the mechanic a thumbs-up, then pulled on the helmet.

A commentator's voice echoed through the speakers in the restaurant. "And on the grid today, we have a very special guest driver. Tony Stark, the infamous womanizer and genius behind Stark Industries, has entered himself in today's race."

People in the restaurant clapped and hollered. Pepper rolled her eyes, but she looked more nervous than excited. "If he dies, I'm putting you in charge of his estate," she said to Harry.

Happy stared out the window. "He'll be fine. Probably."

Harry finished his drink and watched the pit crew roll Tony's car onto the grid. The other drivers looked at Tony, then collectively shrugged. The race starter raised a green flag. The crowd fell silent as engines revved. Harry felt the tension building all the way into the restaurant.

Pepper set her wine down, her hands in her lap. "I swear to god, if he tries to drive that thing like the McLaren you made him, I'll ..."

The starting lights flickered on. One by one, they turned red. The air was thick with excitement. Harry grinned and whispered, "Five bucks says he wins the whole damn thing."

"Not a chance. He'll crash within three laps, guaranteed," Happy snickered. Pepper sighed and started drinking again.

When the last red light went out, the race began.

Tony's car lurched off the line, wheels smoking, and rocketed down the main straight. The crowd screamed as he slotted into third place before the first corner, weaving like a man possessed. Harry watched, heart pounding, as Tony bullied the car through a chicane, nearly clipped a wall, and came out the other side with inches to spare.

"Jesus," Harry said. "He's actually good."

Pepper huffed. "That's what scares me. He's going to be too cocky and reckless."

The cars roared around the first lap, engines screaming, and the entire terrace vibrated with the noise and the thrill of it. Tony held the line and actually gained ground on the lead car.

Metal and Magic

By the third lap, Tony had worked his way up to second place and was driving like a madman. Harry, Pepper, and Happy watched from the restaurant, their eyes glued to the TV screen above the bar. The camera angles were insane. There were overhead shots, cockpit views, and slow-motion replays of every near-wreck. Pepper gnawed at her fingernails while Happy nursed a double espresso.

Harry drank mineral water and watched as Tony pulled off moves that were both reckless and spectacular. The crowd in the restaurant whooped. The next lap, the camera panned to a weird disturbance near the pit wall.

Happy pointed at the screen. "Who the hell is that?"

A man in an orange jumpsuit strode out onto the track. He looked like he belonged in a maximum-security prison, not on the grid at Monaco. He unzipped the front of his jumpsuit, revealing a glowing light on his chest, and his walk had the deliberate calm of someone who didn't care about what happened to them.

The announcer stammered. "Security breach on the circuit ... we have an unidentified individual ..." The sound cut out as the feed went to a wide shot. The orange-jumpsuit man pulled out two long, black batons.

The batons flickered and then exploded into arcs of white-blue energy, each seven feet long. The man grinned, then swung them once, slicing a track banner in half. The ends sizzled and glowed bright orange. Pepper gasped and grabbed Harry's forearm.

On the TV, the man tossed his head back and howled. The crowd in the stands shrank away, but the security guards hesitated, confused by the sight of electricity arcing around his hands. One guard tried to run at him, but the man flicked a whip in his direction, and the guard went down in a shower of sparks.

"That can't be real," Harry said, but he already knew it was.

The man stepped onto the track, just as a cluster of racecars rounded the curve. The lead car missed him by a hair, but the second car was less lucky. The man's whip sliced the carbon-fiber nose off like it was made of butter. The car spun, caught air, and tumbled end-over-end down the straight, scattering carbon shards everywhere. The third car veered wildly, tried to dodge, and slammed into the barriers.

The crowd screamed, and the camera cut to Tony's car, which was now closing on the orange-jumpsuit man.

Tony swerved, but the man squared up and swung both whips at the car. The whips came down, bit into the hood, and carved the entire front of the car off. Tony's car spun sideways, sparks and smoke billowing, then slammed to a stop a hundred meters down the track. Tony's helmet bounced off the steering wheel. He didn't move.

Pepper's hand flew to her mouth. "Oh god."

Harry watched as the orange-jumpsuit man strode toward Tony's car, whips humming. The TV zoomed in on the man's chest. The front of the jumpsuit had burned away, revealing a crude,

circular arc reactor, glowing with pale blue light. His face was aged, his dark hair was greasy, and he had tattoos scattered across his chest, stomach, and arms.

Pepper turned to Harry, her eyes wild. "Do something!"

Harry nodded, already standing. "Happy, go get the suitcase from the trunk. The red one." Happy was already on his feet, moving faster than Harry had ever seen.

Pepper grabbed Harry's arm. "Get Tony out of there."

Harry squeezed her hand. "I'm on it." He ducked out of the restaurant, jogged to the elevator, and hit the button for the lobby. As the doors closed, he apparated away with a soft pop.

Metal and Magic

Tony always loved the Monaco circuit. The whole track was hazardous. The turns were too tight, and crashes were quite common. The tunnel was his favorite part. Every sense was compressed by speed and light, and the engine's scream reverberated off the walls, vibrating his bones.

He floored the accelerator and felt the car's tail wag as it hit the entrance to the tunnel. The roar amplified, rattling his skull. The onboard screen in the dash kept flashing sector times, but Tony barely registered them. He was here to prove a point. Nobody, not even world-class pros, could out-drive Tony Stark.

The tunnel spat him into a brief, blinding sun. The air smelled of burnt rubber and ocean brine. As he hit the merge onto the straight, Tony saw something he shouldn't have. There was a human figure standing dead center of the track, between him and the next corner.

The guy stood there without a care in the world, his greasy hair whipping in the wind. Tony saw the black batons in his hands and the long whips of electric energy. His brain went into survival mode.

Tony yanked the wheel. The car obeyed with a yelp, but it was too late. The guy raised both arms, and the whips exploded to life. The left whip came down on the nose, and the whole front of the car vaporized. The next instant, Tony was airborne, spinning, and the world blinked from racetrack to sky to crowd, over and over. The safety harness nearly broke his ribs as the car slammed into the barrier, flipped, and slid a hundred feet upside down, shedding pieces as it went.

He hung there for a second, and the blood rushed to his head. Everything was upside down and strangely silent except for the hiss of something melting. Tony groaned, braced himself, and tried to unbuckle, but the harness was jammed. The fire-retardant suit smelled singed. He reached for the emergency release, but his right arm was pinned down.

He risked a look through the mangled wreck. On the track, other cars were pinballing through the debris. The stands were losing their collective mind with a rolling wave of panic and fascination.

Then, the orange jumpsuit man started walking toward Tony. Up close, his face looked like it had lost a fight with a belt sander. The chest of his coveralls was scorched away, and something glowed blue from the center of his sternum. It was a circle of light, ugly and homemade.

Tony's mind spun through possibilities. Who was capable of creating a crude arc reactor, and where did they obtain the knowledge from?

The man reached the car and grinned, showing off his silver teeth. He raised a whip. Electricity hissed, and the air crackled. Tony braced himself, tried to move again, but his arm was trapped, and his legs were jammed in the wreck. He was about to die in a wrecked car, exactly the way every dumb magazine had predicted.

Then, a black bird swooped down from behind the man. Out of nowhere, the bird transformed midair into Harry, and he double-kicked the man straight in the middle of the back. Before Harry could hit the ground, he was back in his raven form, flying over to Tony. The man jerked forward, lost his balance, and the whip scorched the tarmac instead of Tony's face.

The man fell forward and landed face-first onto the hard street with a sickening thunk. Tony heard the moan groan pitifully. The bird landed by Tony's car and transformed back into Harry. Harry bent over and ducked his head so Tony could see his smiling face.

"Morning, sunshine," Harry said. He looked at Tony's arm. "Can you move?"

Tony tried. "No dice. Everything's pinned. You want to give me a hand before this lunatic broils my sorry ass?"

Harry chuckled. "Hang tight." He reached in, grabbed Tony by the collar, and apparated. Tony felt like he was being sucked through a very narrow straw.

Suddenly, Tony was standing on the side of the track, a good ten meters away from the car. He was upright and fully conscious. His arm was throbbing, but the rest of him was functional. Tony looked back at the car and breathed a sigh of relief. All things considered, he felt amazingly lucky to have survived.

"Teleportation. The answer to all of life's problems," Harry said.

The man with the whips was already pushing himself onto his knees. He looked at Harry, then at Tony, and bellowed a curse in what sounded like Russian.

Tony saw Pepper and Happy barreling toward him in the black rental car. Happy's brow was furrowed in concentration, but Pepper had the look of someone who was going to kill Tony herself if he died without permission.

The car screeched to a halt right near them. Happy jumped out, popped the trunk, and pulled out the suitcase Tony had asked him to bring. It was large, heavy, and fully metal. Tony looked at Harry. "It's time for some good old-fashioned ass-kicking."

Harry laughed. "I was hoping you'd say that."

Tony stepped on it, and the suitcase opened up. The panels unfurled like a blooming flower. Tony jammed his hands in and felt the suit start to build itself around his arms, then the shoulders, and then the torso. The pieces slid together, clicked, sealed, and within twenty seconds, Tony was armored up from head to toe in the emergency Iron Man suit. It was a bit slimmer than the usual, but Tony had to trade armor for portability. He turned to Happy, who stood with his mouth open.

"Get Pepper out of here," Tony said, then locked the faceplate down. The HUD lit up, all systems green. Happy nodded, jumped back into the car, and peeled away just as the Russian man got to his feet.

He could hear Harry and the Russian shouting at each other, but Tony tuned it out. He ran a quick diagnostic and powered the repulsors. It was time for some fun.

The Russian took a wild swing with the right whip, arcing straight for Harry's head. Harry ducked, rolled, and popped back up, a wand in hand. He shouted a word Tony didn't catch, and the ground in front of the Russian exploded in a shower of gravel. The Russian shielded his eyes, but didn't slow down. He just screamed and kept swinging blindly.

The Russian didn't flinch when Harry ran down the track, right toward him. Instead, he flicked his wrist and sent the first whip arcing toward Harry's face, sizzling with blue current. Harry, who had been running at full speed, dove and vanished in midair. The whip sheared through the spot where Harry had been, tearing a huge gouge into the street, and the Russian twisted, already scanning for his target's reappearance.

Tony barely had time to brace before the second whip snapped at him. The crack of energy was so loud it rattled his teeth behind the faceplate. He didn't try to catch it. Instead, he threw himself into a sideways roll, using the thrusters in his boots to launch himself clear of the impact. The whip gouged a foot-deep furrow into the tarmac, liquefying the painted lines and sending a spray of molten asphalt in every direction.

Harry popped back into reality fifteen feet behind the Russian, landing in a crouch with one hand on the ground. He immediately thrust his wand forward, and the Russian's boots seized to the ground, fusing instantly with the track surface. He tried to wrench himself free, but the spell held.

Tony, spotting the opening, rocketed right at the Russian's exposed side. He went for a shoulder tackle, but the Russian spun, twisting his entire torso. The right-hand whip lashed around, and the tip caught Tony across the helmet with a glancing blow. Sparks exploded across the HUD, half-blinding Tony, but the suit absorbed the hit, and he managed to lock his arms around the Russian's chest.

For a split second, Iron Man and the Russian brute were locked together. Tony could feel the arc reactor in the Russian's chest pulsing, sending feedback through his own suit's sensors. The Russian bared his teeth and brought both whips up, trying to slash Tony's arms with a crisscross of blue energy.

Harry reappeared on the Russian's other side, this time standing upright and looking more annoyed than heroic. He tapped the Russian on the shoulder with the tip of his wand and said, "Excuse me, comrade. You're needed in the medical tent." Then he delivered a hard punch directly to the Russian's jaw, sending a spray of blood and a silver tooth tumbling through the air.

The whips faltered, and their glow flickered. Tony seized the moment, disengaged one arm, and drove a repulsor blast point-blank into the Russian's sternum. There was a muffled thump, and the Russian's feet tore loose from his boots, sending him flying backward into a chainlink barricade. Metal links snapped, and the crowd behind it scrambled to get clear as the Russian crashed into and through the fence, hitting the ground hard.

He wasn't down for long. The Russian rolled, came up on one knee, and screamed. His face was a mask of blood and fury. He started swinging the whips in wild, concentric circles, carving up everything within a ten-foot radius. He sliced through camera booms, sponsor banners, and anything else in his way. The air was filled with the smell of burning metal, rock, and plastic.

Tony advanced, letting the suit's bulk absorb the flying debris. One whip coiled around his forearm, and he felt the heat and the static charge as it tried to melt through. But the upgrades Harry had placed on the armor did their job. The runes along the gauntlet glowed a deep blue, and the whip sizzled uselessly against the armor.

"Aw, did your toy break?" Tony taunted, gripping the whip with his free hand. He wound it twice around his arm, then yanked, hauling the Russian a step closer. The big man roared and tried to yank it back, but Tony had all the leverage.

With the Russian off-balance, Harry circled around and punched him in the kidney. The Russian howled and tried to reach back, but Tony yanked again, pulling him forward into a devastating left hook. The sound of the punch cracked over the noise of the crowd. Blood sprayed, teeth scattered, and the Russian dropped to one knee, clutching his mouth.

Tony looked at Harry through the HUD. "Do you want to finish him, or shall I?"

Harry dusted off his hands and shirt. "Be my guest."

Tony powered up both repulsors and set them to nonlethal. He planted his boots, aimed, and let both beams fly at the Russian's chest. The impact lifted the man clean off the ground and sent him tumbling end over end down the track. He came to rest in a smoking heap, and the whips shorted out and sparked on the ground beside him.

All around, police and security staff who'd been too scared to intervene now rushed the scene. A dozen men in riot gear wrestled the Russian into submission. He fought them every inch, spitting blood and cursing in a guttural snarl, but Harry had the last word. He flicked his wand, and the arc reactor ripped from his chest and lazily flew into Harry's outstretched hand. Harry handed it to Tony, who studied it for a moment before crushing it in his armored palm.

Tony, out of breath and running on pure adrenaline, slid the faceplate back and grinned at Harry. The crowd was screaming, some in terror, and some in awe. Harry soaked up the attention, bowing for the crowd before blowing kisses at the attractive female onlookers.

"Not bad for a morning's work," Harry said, wiping the guy's blood from his eyebrow.

Tony flexed his arm, which was blackened and still sizzling from the whip. "I'm going to need a new paint job."

"I'll take care of it later with a bit of magic," Harry replied, letting the Elder Wand vanish.

They turned together and played it up for the cameras, showing off for the crowd, and grinning like idiots. Photographers and reporters mobbed the edges of the track, yelling questions and angling for the best shots.

Pepper pushed through the scrum, looking both furious and relieved. She smacked Tony in the chest plate before breathing a sigh of relief. "You idiot," she whispered.

Harry caught a glimpse of himself on the Jumbotron and struck a heroic pose. He winked at the nearest camera, which only prompted the crowd to cheer louder.

For a second, the aftermath felt like a wild party. Medics crowded the Russian, who was now locked in steel shackles. Debris smoldered on the track, and the air was thick with black smoke.

Tony looked over at Harry, who was already posing for a picture with a group of cute Swedish girls. Tony shook his head, laughed, then turned to find Pepper already dialing someone on her phone. 'She's probably doing damage control,' Tony thought.

Iron Man and Harry Potter, modern gladiators as the papers would soon call them, stood in the wreckage of Monaco, soaking up the applause. It was one hell of a show.