

Metal and Magic

Chapter 28

The sky over the Korean peninsula was black and empty, but Tony and Harry streaked through it like lunatics on a suicide mission. The Iron Man suit ahead of Harry gleamed gold and red even at this hour, and Harry's own was a patchwork of chrome and black paint. The two men flew side by side at thirty thousand feet, talking to each other as if they were out for a Sunday drive.

"Remind me again ...," Tony said over the comms. "... why we're breaking into the Hermit Kingdom?"

Harry shifted in the suit. "Kim kidnapped some rich guy's daughter from Tokyo. It's blackmail or ransom ... I'm not really sure. Fury wants her out, and nobody else is dumb enough to try."

Tony cackled. "Let me guess. The buxom Ms. Romanov asked you nicely."

"Actually, it was Maria, and she did ask nicely ... veeeeery nicely," Harry said in a smug tone.

Tony's music screamed in Harry's ears, through the helmet. He flipped through the on-screen HUD, checking the maps Jarvis had uploaded. Pyongyang glowed ahead as a faint yellow stain in the dark. It was the only patch of electricity for a hundred miles. "We're five minutes out," Harry said. "Do you think we're on radar yet?"

"Do you really want the honest answer?" Tony asked.

Harry grinned. "Lay it on me."

The Iron Man helmet swiveled toward him. "They started tracking us in the Sea of Japan."

"That's comforting."

A warning light flashed on both their screens, then the world lit up as a tracer fire stitched the sky from below. The ground was invisible, but the flak wasn't. It rose up in a dense, arcing lattice, glowing orange and white.

"Well," Tony said. "I guess this is their way of saying hello." Flak began bursting around them, forcing them to make evasive maneuvers.

"Hang on," Harry said, and dove. He punched the repulsors and dropped straight down, letting the flak fly right past him. The first explosion hit off his right side and sent the suit into a barrel roll. He grunted from the impact, and the suit's gyros fought to keep him upright. Tony took a more elegant route, zigzagging through the bursts.

"You need to fly smarter, not harder," Tony said.

"Where's the fun in that?" Harry shouted. The next shell detonated twenty meters off his left shoulder. Harry saw the ball of fire and debris, but kept on the throttle. The HUD screamed at him, warning him of incoming projectiles, but he ignored it.

They punched through the clouds. Below, the Taedong River cut through the city, lit up by a grid of cold blue lights. Harry aimed for the widest part of the channel, trusting that the suit could handle the impact. He pulled up at the last possible moment and rocketed parallel to the water, sending massive plumes of spray into the sky. Harry then rocketed straight back up, confusing whoever it was who was aiming at him.

"Nice," Tony said. "You only missed the surface by ..."

Tony was interrupted by a volley of white-hot streaks. They left ghostly trails that curled up toward them like smoky fingers. Harry watched three missiles lock onto Tony, and two more curve for him.

Tony rolled right, juked, and then rocketed straight up. The missiles followed. "Isn't this supposed to be the fun part?" Tony asked.

"I'll take care of the ground-to-air. You get the ones on your tail," Harry grunted.

"Deal."

Harry banked left, dropping altitude. He could see the first SAM launcher on a rooftop. He raised his left palm, and the Elder Wand appeared in his hand. The runes on the back of his armored hand glowed. He aimed, shot, and a shimmering bolt of red light lanced out, striking the launcher mid-barrel. The entire thing exploded in a spray of metal and fire.

"Show-off," Tony said, but he was already firing his own micro-missiles. The suit's guidance system was unfair, given how sophisticated it was. The missiles curved and wove, out-thinking the substandard Korean ones, and blew two out of the sky instantly. The last one kept coming.

Harry leveled out above a dense neighborhood of concrete towers. Another battery opened up, launching more anti-aircraft missiles at him. Harry saw the missile incoming and tried to outpace it, but it closed faster than expected. He reversed direction, jerked up, and the missile curved to match. It was gaining ground quickly. He checked the HUD and found it too close for comfort. Harry then nosedived straight for the city below, and the missile changed its trajectory, following him.

He rolled onto his back, pointed his wand, and shouted, "Reducto!" The curse streaked out like a beam of pure light. It hit the missile dead on, and the missile disintegrated into dust and

shrapnel. The shockwave caught Harry and threw him into the side of a building. He bounced off, the impact registering as a dull thud through his armor.

"That's going to leave a mark," Tony quipped. He'd looped back to join Harry, but was still several hundred meters above.

Harry checked himself and found nothing broken. He used the suit's microjets to slow down, then dipped lower, skimming the rooftops. "Nah. I think I'm fine," Harry reassured him.

"I'm talking about the suit, jackass! I just repainted it last week," Tony told him, and Harry snorted. "Missile count?" Tony asked.

"Two less," Harry said. "But I think they're loading more."

"They are," Tony said. "Jarvis just picked up three new launches."

"Handle them," Harry said. "I'm going to the target so we can get the hell out of here. I've got a date with that blonde bimbo we met at the smoothie shop, and I definitely don't want to be late."

Tony whistled. "Do you remember the way she wrapped her lips around that straw ... and the suction ... my god ... It was like a hoover vac. See you at the rendezvous."

Harry peeled off. He let the suit run at max output, moving way too fast for the standard ground fire coming at him. The city blurred below him. Jarvis marked the government building where the girl was rumored to be held. It looked like a block of gray Legos amid a sea of identically boring buildings.

He pulled up and cut speed, letting inertia carry him the last few hundred meters. He touched down on a balcony, his heavy metal boots crunching the stone. He scanned the window. On the other side, there was a dimly lit office.

Harry didn't bother being subtle. He slammed his fist against the glass and blew it out. The shards scattered inward, and he stepped through, scanning the room.

A fat and terrified general was halfway out of his chair. He wore a green uniform covered in medals. Harry strode up and grabbed him by the front of the jacket. The man shouted in Korean. Harry understood enough to get the gist. Jarvis helpfully translated anyway. "He says you're dead."

"Where is she?" Harry asked, and Jarvis translated it over the suit's speakers.

The general blanched but shook his head. Harry tightened his grip and hoisted the man off his feet. He stepped back toward the window and dangled the general outside, above a five-story drop.

"Where is the Japanese girl?" Harry repeated.

The man screamed as he looked down at the long drop, and he tried to claw at Harry's arm. He shook his head again, as stubborn as the day was long.

Harry pulled him back in and set him on the ground. He gestured with his wand, and the office door fused shut. The general's eyes bugged out. Harry bent close. "You have one more chance."

The man babbled rapidly, and Jarvis translated. "Basement. She is in the prison in the basement." By then, Harry heard angry yelling from behind the wall where the door had just been. Soldiers were beating against the wall, trying to get to their terrified general. Harry nodded and stunned him with a flick of the wand. The man collapsed onto the carpet.

Harry listened to the shouts and boots pounding the hallway. The wall on the other side of the general's office vibrated as men stacked up, ready to breach. He could have waited for them, but he was on the clock and had a taste for blood. He raised his left arm, wand in hand, and blew the wall apart.

The curse hit the concrete, and it buckled, then disintegrated. Rebar snapped like brittle twigs, and fragments of wall shrieked through the room, pelting the soldiers who had been trying to bust in. They howled as the air filled with powdered stone and rebar shrapnel. Two of them crashed through the gap, bleeding from dozens of shallow cuts, their guns at the ready. Harry didn't flinch as a hailstorm of bullets spat from their rifles.

The first rounds pinged off the suit's breastplate, though Harry didn't even feel it. Harry ignored the gunfire and grabbed the first man by his balaclava, yanking him off his feet. He slammed the man headfirst into the cinderblock above the door, and the crack of skull on concrete made the rest of the squad pause. Harry kicked the limp body aside, then rushed the remaining men.

Gunfire turned to screaming as the soldiers tried to retreat down the narrow hallway. Harry closed the gap in three steps. He ducked under the first wild burst and elbowed the shooter in the ribs, folding the man in half with a wet crunch. The next two aimed for his head, but Harry dropped to one knee, letting the bullets chew up the wall behind him. He grabbed both by the knees and yanked them to the floor, then drove a fist into each helmet with enough force to snap their heads back. The helmets crumpled. One man went limp, and the other tried to crawl away, dragging a useless leg.

A voice bellowed from the end of the hall. The remaining soldiers, ten or more, had spread out behind an overturned table. The muzzle flashes were blinding. Bullets snapped through the air around Harry, and a few found the gaps at his shoulders and hips where the protection wasn't as beefy. Harry winced in discomfort, but powered through it.

He lifted the limp body of the man he'd just downed, and used it as a shield. He sprinted down the hall, the dead weight soaking up the worst of the incoming rounds. The body shook and jerked with every impact. Harry tossed the corpse into the table barricade, then vaulted after it. He landed among the cowering soldiers.

He punched the first in the mouth, breaking many teeth, then snatched the rifle from another and broke it over the man's helmet. He swept a leg, tripping the next two, and stomped down on both chests with a sickening crunch. The men groaned and clutched their broken bones, squirming in pain. Two more managed to get their weapons up. Harry caught the first barrel, ripped it free, and drove it butt-end into the soldier's nose. The man went down in a spray of snot and blood.

The last soldier tried to run, but Harry grabbed him by the shirt, lifted him over his head, and threw him into the far wall. The impact made a dent in the plasterboard and left the poor bastard unconscious on the ground.

The hallway was a ruin of unconscious bodies and splintered furniture. Harry paused to look down at his suit. There was a massive scorch mark from where the flak had struck him. The black paint was chipped in dozens of places, but nothing seemed broken. He scanned the corridor for movement and found nothing. He could hear more soldiers on the next floor down, scrambling to set up a second line.

Harry found the stairwell at the end of the hallway and took the steps three at a time. The landing was already slick with blood from a wounded soldier who had tried, and failed, to crawl to safety. Harry reached the next floor and saw that the entire corridor was blocked by a barricade of office chairs, desks, and overturned filing cabinets. Behind it, more soldiers waited, guns at the ready.

He raised his wand and fired a blasting curse at the barricade. The front row of furniture exploded, and the men behind it were knocked flat by the shockwave. Harry charged the debris and crashed right through the barricade. He landed in the heart of the defenders and unleashed hell.

He backhanded a soldier into a window. The glass shattered, and the man vanished into the darkness outside. Harry caught a bayonet thrust, bent the blade down, and then finished him with an uppercut to the jaw. The next man tried to tackle him, but Harry sidestepped and used the man's momentum to hurl him down the stairwell. He heard the body bounce all the way to the bottom.

Three men tried to dogpile him. One got an arm around Harry's neck, but Harry just headbutted backward, catching the man's nose and breaking it. The other two tried to drag him to the ground, but there was no hope of that happening. Harry simply grabbed them by the back of their shirts and flung them, sending them crashing into a wall. Two more soldiers began

peppering his suit with rifle fire, so Harry used his thrusters to rocket down the hall, where he grabbed both by the collars and slammed their heads together.

More shouts echoed from the far end of the corridor. The second wave had heavier weapons. Harry saw two men lugging a tripod-mounted machine gun. They set it up and aimed at him. Harry ducked and sprinted forward, zigzagging as the first rounds buzzed past. The machine gun stuttered, and the wall behind Harry shredded into powder.

He got close enough that the gunners panicked and tried to swing the gun at him. He grabbed the barrel and bent it upward. The next burst cooked off in a fireball, and the barrel exploded into a puff of shrapnel. The gunners cried out loudly as their bodies were peppered with white-hot shards of metal.

Someone behind him got bold and tried to stab Harry in the kidneys, but the blade skidded off the armored suit. He turned and caught the knife-wielder by the wrist. He twisted, breaking the wrist, then turned the knife around and buried it in the man's thigh. The soldier screamed, and Harry grabbed him by the face, smacked his head into the wall, and left him drooling.

The hallway was silent again, except for the slight ringing in Harry's ears. He panted, and sweat stung his eyes. He checked the directory sign bolted to the wall and found the arrow pointing "DOWN" to the detention level.

He found the service elevator at the end of the corridor. The door was locked, but he punched right through the middle and forced the doors open. Harry stepped up and looked down. The elevator car was at the bottom, four floors down. Harry shrugged and dropped down the shaft.

He hit the top of the elevator with an explosive bang, tearing right through it, and landing hard inside the car. Harry kicked the elevator doors, bending them out of shape. The detention level was painted gunmetal gray and lit by flickering fluorescent lights.

A cluster of guards waited behind a metal security gate, guns already leveled. Harry waved his wand, and the gate crumpled inward like it had been hit by a truck. He barreled through the opening, ignoring the return fire. Bullets tore holes in the walls and ceiling, but Harry rolled forward, came up under the nearest shooter, and drove his fist into the man's gut. Harry heard his ribs snap right before he collapsed. The next tried to bash Harry with the butt of his rifle, but Harry caught it, yanked it away, and drove it right into the man's forehead with a comical thunk. The soldier's eyes rolled back, and he fell straight backward.

The rest of the guards ran, scattering like cockroaches. Harry chased the one with the large set of keys, caught him by the collar, and lifted him off the ground. "Which cell is the Japanese girl in?" he demanded forcefully. The man stammered and pointed down the hallway.

Harry tossed him into the nearest wall and followed the corridor to a row of heavy metal doors. The last door was reinforced with an extra padlock and chain. Harry simply grabbed the chain and ripped it clean off. He then grabbed the door and ripped it open.

Inside, the girl was curled in the corner, hands zip-tied behind her back. She was alive and alert, but her face was bruised, and her left eye was swollen shut. She looked up at Harry in terror as he entered. She was maybe eighteen, thin and pale.

Harry's helmet retracted with a hiss. He knelt and asked. "Yumi Nakamura?"

The girl shrank back but nodded. Harry leaned in and snapped the zip-tie with his fingers. "I'm here to help you, okay?" Jarvis translated for him.

She nodded, trembling. Harry pulled her to her feet and held her in his arms. He turned back toward the corridor just as the lights cut out. The alarms started to wail. Harry heard the pounding of boots ... lots of them, and the hallway filled with armed soldiers.

He glanced at the girl. "Hold on tight."

She squeezed his neck with surprising strength. Harry chuckled and called out to Tony. "I've got her. Meet us at the spot."

"Nice. Good timing, too. I'm starting to get seasick from dodging so many damn missiles," Tony responded over the comms. Harry rolled his eyes and apparated away.

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Harry and Yumi landed on a muddy embankment. The world above them was black and silent, and the only thing he could hear was the harsh, ragged gasping of the girl in his arms.

Yumi was wrapped around him, clinging with all her strength. She whimpered as he gently pried her hands off his neck. "It's okay. You're safe. We're out," he assured her. Her body was stiff and trembling, and her eyes were wide with disbelief.

Harry checked for immediate danger and took stock of the situation. The embankment where they'd landed was steep, and brambles tore at his suit. They were a few hundred feet from the bottom, sheltered from the road above by a row of low trees. He could see a sliver of moonlight off to his left. He listened for shouts, boots, or gunfire, but there was nothing. The air was thick with mist, and it was very quiet.

He exhaled and checked the girl for injuries. Her face was badly bruised, and her eye looked pretty nasty. She wore a dirty dress that looked more like a cleaning rag at this point. Her knees and arms were a mess of cuts and scrapes. Her right ankle was twice the size of the left, and

her wrists had swollen from the zip-ties. He used his wand to vanish the ties from her wrists. She flinched at the wand, so he kept it hidden after that.

She stared at him, not blinking. Harry worried she might go into shock. He looked around, wondering when Tony would get there. The silence was suffocating, but Harry forced himself to stay patient. The meeting point was a few miles on the other side of the DMZ, in South Korea. They didn't want to risk flying the girl back while being shot at.

They sat in the cold for another few minutes. Then, through the thick mist, Harry saw two red dots descending from the sky. He felt the whump of Tony's repulsors before he heard the landing. Tony dropped out of the clouds and touched down with all the grace of a car crash, sending a spray of mud everywhere. He stood up, brushed himself off, and surveyed the scene. The suit was pockmarked with new scratches, and one shoulder looked slightly misaligned.

"Well," Tony said, clapping his hands together. "Did you get her here safely?"

Harry held up Yumi's hand like a prize. "She's here, but she's hurt."

Tony peered at her, his expression serious for once. He didn't say anything stupid. Instead, he said, "We've got to move. They're moving troops toward the DMZ, and South Korea is doing the same. We've stirred up a bit of a hornet's nest. I've already contacted the South Korean government and told them what's going on. I told them to meet us at the Japanese consulate."

Harry nodded. He scooped Yumi into his arms, causing her to let out a cute yelp. "Jarvis, how's the suit?"

"Systems at 94 percent, but some of the servos are slipping."

Tony checked his own suit. "We go low and slow," he said, and looked down to Yumi's level. "Yumi, right? We're getting you to Seoul. But you have to hold on tight." She nodded and hid her face against Harry's metal chest.

Harry stepped back, adjusted his grip on Yumi, and fired the suit's repulsors. The two of them shot slowly into the sky. The air was freezing, and Yumi shrieked, but Harry held her close and shielded her face. He sneakily waved his wand at her and hit her with a Warming Charm.

Below them, the land shifted from darkness to a blinding urban grid. The lights of Seoul covered everything, and the air was thicker, warmer, and smelled faintly of the city. Harry checked the map. The Japanese consulate was on the far side of the city. He banked slightly right.

They flew low over the rooftops, dodging police choppers and searchlights. The flight was much smoother than the first. At least he didn't have to deal with flak. Harry slowed the pace, not wanting to freak Yumi out any more than necessary. She squeezed his neck, but eventually, she stopped shaking. She even opened her eyes and looked out at the city.

They swooped over the Han River, circled the Namsan Tower, and then rocketed toward the consulate. Harry could see the building from a mile out thanks to Jarvis marking it on his HUD. They dropped into the courtyard, stirring up a wind that made the flags whip violently. The moment they touched down, the air was filled with sirens, shouting, and a hundred camera flashes. The press, the police, and what looked like half the staff of the embassy rushed out, swarming the landing spot.

Harry kept Yumi cradled in his arms. She hid her face, but he could see her smiling into his chest. He walked straight to the doors, flanked by two startled consulate guards. The press crowded up to the glass, their faces crazed with curiosity.

A woman in a suit rushed over, her badge swinging, as Harry set the girl on her feet. She asked Yumi some questions in rapid Japanese. Yumi replied, her voice hoarse but clear. The woman smiled brightly, wrapped an arm around Yumi's shoulders, and babbled with relief. Harry let her go, watching with a sense of pride. Yumi looked over her shoulder at him one last time with a shy smile.

He turned to see Tony, who had retracted his faceplate and was winking at the news cameras. Tony soaked up the attention, giving a little wave and a thumbs-up to the press. Harry grinned and shook his head. The girl was safe, and the mission was accomplished. That was all that mattered.

Harry looked up at the cameras, gave them a quick salute, and then followed Tony into the flood of flashing bulbs.