

Metal and Magic

Chapter 38

The town of Puente Antiguo looked like a town stuck in the 1940s. One main street ran straight through the middle, lined with older, beat-up vehicles and storefronts with sun-bleached signage. At least half the businesses looked on the verge of bankruptcy, and the only place that seemed to be getting steady customers was an old-style diner. Harry walked down the sidewalk in a pair of jeans and a plain white tee, absolutely baking in the sun.

He had no idea how he was supposed to find the hammer's owner. He thought that maybe he could follow the subtle trail of magic from the hammer to the owner, but the trail was so faint that it was bordering on useless. He circled the small town three times, and each time he ended up back at the same crossroads. He started to wonder if the whole mission was doomed from the start.

He kept at it anyway. Harry drifted up and down the street, following the tiniest flickers of the strange magic, but he always lost the thread when it felt like he was getting close. A family of tourists chasing their screaming toddler across Main Street broke his concentration, and he lost the trail again. Harry tuned out the screaming and focused on the tiny wisps of foreign magic. It led him past a store that sold antiques and a liquor shop, and then it stopped dead in front of what looked like a clinic.

The sign said "Puente Antiguo General Hospital." Like every other business in this town, it appeared quite small from the outside. The faint trail disappeared once again, and Harry was about to give up and go find coffee when he felt the jolt. It was more than just a faint flicker this time. It ran straight up his spine like a live wire.

Something hit him hard from behind. Harry stumbled out into the road, and his arms windmilled as he tried to keep his balance. There was a metallic shriek, a squeal of rubber, and then a soft, wet thud. The world spun around him as he tumbled, and Harry landed on his backside on the hard asphalt.

Only a few feet away from him, a man in blue hospital scrubs lay sprawled in the street. He was burly, and easily over six feet tall, with arms like tree trunks and a dirty mess of golden hair covering most of his face. Blood oozed from his nose and dripped down his cheek. For a second, Harry thought the man was dead, but then the guy groaned and tried to push himself up, and he fell flat again.

An older white SUV van-thing was sputtering nearby, and Harry guessed that it was the vehicle that ran them down. The doors flew open, and three people burst out in a rush.

The first was an older man wearing a jacket and jeans. The second was a curvy young woman with pale skin, glasses, and a head full of long, loose brown curls. She sprinted forward, waving

her arms and shouting, "Ohmygodohmygod!" The third was a petite woman with soft, lovely features. There was a look of panic on her pretty face. They all gathered around the big blonde man, flapping their hands and talking over one another.

"How many times are you going to run this guy over?" the girl with the glasses said, looking at her friend in disbelief.

"I promise I'm not doing it on purpose!" the other girl said. She knelt and lightly shook the man's shoulder. He remained unconscious. "He just keeps getting in the way!"

The old man clucked his tongue and knelt down. He peered at the man's pupils, possibly checking for a concussion. "We need to get him out of here and tend to his wounds." Then he stood up, gave Harry a thin smile, and said, "You wouldn't mind helping, would you? He's awfully heavy."

Harry groaned as he pushed himself to his feet. He walked over and joined them. From up close, the magic within him felt dense and coiled, like it was being heavily restrained.

"Sure," Harry said. He knelt beside the guy, put two fingers to his neck, and checked his pulse. The pulse was steady and strong, as was his breathing. Harry glanced up at the two young women who hovered anxiously over the body.

"He's fine," Harry said. "It looks like vehicular manslaughter won't be on your list of charges."

The pretty girl ... Jane, apparently, let out a relieved sound. She looked at Harry, and she smiled cutely. "Thank you. I'm Jane Foster. And this is ... well, actually we're not sure. We found him in the desert ranting, but we think he might be delusional." She held out her hand. Harry took her hand in his and lightly kissed the top. He smiled handsomely at the cute girl.

"Harry Potter ... It's a pleasure to meet you."

Jane's face turned beet red, and she looked away shyly.

"Hi!" said the other girl as she jumped in between him and Jane. She was only a little taller than Jane, with thick-rimmed glasses and a cute nose. "I'm Darcy Lewis," she said, holding her hand right in front of his lips. Harry chuckled, took her hand, and kissed it as well.

"Charmed," he simply said, which made Darcy giggle. The older man cleared his throat. "Oh! This is Professor Selvig," she added, jerking her thumb toward the older man.

The older man nodded and offered Harry a sheepish grin. "Erik Selvig, to be more precise," he said, shooting Darcy an unimpressed look.

Harry held back a laugh. He straightened and helped Erik haul the big man upright. The blonde guy's dead weight was heavy as hell, just as Selvig had described. The blonde guy looked big enough to bench press a small car. Harry grabbed under the man's arms, the girls each took a leg, and they shuffled him toward the open hatch of their vehicle.

Harry felt the magical spark again. It was unmistakable. This guy was the hammer's owner, or at least the key to getting it out of the sand. He stole a glance at Jane. She was struggling to carry the man's heavy weight. She noticed him looking and blushed. She then bit her lip and tried to avoid his gaze. It didn't work at all. She kept shooting him quick glances.

Once the big guy was loaded in, Darcy closed the hatch with a loud thunk and leaned against it, breathing hard. She stared at Harry for a second, looking him over with delight. "You look really familiar," she said. "Have we met before?"

"Unlikely," Harry replied. "Trust me. I would remember meeting you," he teased. Darcy's cheek turned pink, but she looked pleased with his answer nonetheless. "You've probably seen me on TV. I've done a lot of interviews over the last couple of years."

Jane shook her head. Harry looked familiar to her as well, but she just couldn't place him. "Anyway ... thank you for your help." She held out her hand. Harry took it and gently grazed her palm with the tips of his fingers. It was a little maneuver that Natasha absolutely loved. Jane seemed to share her opinion. She shuddered lightly, turned bright pink, and almost lost her balance.

Harry smiled, then looked at the big guy stuffed in the back of the vehicle. The man's eyelids fluttered, and for a second, Harry thought he might wake. "He'll be fine," Harry told them. "Just let him sleep it off."

Jane nodded. The relief on her face was almost comical. "Thank you again."

Professor Selvig offered Harry a handshake too, then turned to herd the two girls into the van. "Let's get him home before he wakes up and starts going crazy again," he told them.

As they started to pile into the vehicle, Darcy reached back, caught Harry by the arm, and yanked him close. She pressed her chest into his bicep and hugged his arm. "You can ride in the backseat with me, handsome," she said. Her eyes twinkled behind the lenses of her eyeglasses.

Harry laughed and let her drag him along. He caught Jane glancing at him in the rearview mirror. Her cheeks were still flushed. As the van pulled away from the hospital, Harry relaxed into the backseat and let Darcy chatter about how boring New Mexico was, Jane's wild theories, and all the things that made Puente Antiguo the weirdest town in America.

He settled in for the ride, not really caring where they were going. Sure, he was supposed to be investigating the hammer for SHIELD, but he was now with two sexy women who both seemed desperate for his attention. Jane repeatedly glanced at him through the rearview mirror while Darcy continued to hug his arm, holding it between her big, pillowy breasts. SHIELD would just have to wait.

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The ride out to Jane's lab was a bit chaotic. Darcy spent most of it chatting his ear off while bouncing around against him. Selvig snored in the front seat with his mouth open while Jane tried to drive responsibly while continuously peeking at him through the mirror. In the back, the big man talked in his sleep about mead and roasted goat, which Darcy found hilarious.

By the time they parked in front of the lab, Harry had heard the highlights of Jane and Darcy's life stories in one long breathless monologue. He could barely get a word in, but he didn't mind. He was more interested in how two good friends could have such different personalities. Jane was soft-spoken, calm, and earnest, and Darcy was loud and witty as she jiggled against him. Harry guessed that the saying, "Opposites attract," was sometimes true.

The "lab" was exactly what Harry expected from a pair of underfunded scientists working in the desert. It mostly looked like an open office space. No high-tech, state-of-the-art equipment was anywhere to be seen. There were several desks and computers, and there was a stack of black cases in the corner, which Harry assumed were full of data-gathering equipment.

Jane led the way, cradling her bag to her chest, while Harry fireman-carried the big guy into the back room. They dumped him onto a couch that was too small for his large body. His knees bent over the armrest, and his legs dangled down.

"Okay," Jane said, wiping sweat from her brow. "Let's keep an eye on him for a few minutes and make sure he doesn't have a concussion or something." She sat on a rolling office chair and spun to face Harry, who leaned against the door with his arms folded.

From up close, Harry could really see how attractive Jane was. While she was short, her body had graceful, feminine curves. Her face was quite beautiful, and her eyes had an exotic look to them. Her brown hair hung a few inches past her delicate shoulders, and it was thick and straight with a side-part. Stray wisps brushed her rosy cheeks, and her smile was very lovely.

Darcy, on the other hand, was the opposite of subtle. She took off her jacket, plopped down on a chair, and propped her feet on the table. She leaned back so far the chair almost tipped over. Her body was much curvier than Jane's, and her large breasts filled out her top spectacularly. Harry couldn't help but appreciate her bombshell curves.

"So, Harry," Darcy said, flashing him a cheeky look. "What brings you to the ass-end of nowhere? You're not the type of guy we normally see around these parts."

"I'm on a business trip," Harry said. "I run a company out in LA. Have you ever heard of Harry & Tony's Hangover Cure?"

Darcy's eyebrows shot up. "Have I heard of it? It was the hottest thing on campus. Those things saved my bacon more than once."

Harry chuckled. He always received the highest praise from college students. "Well, that's my company ... Half mine, anyway."

Jane raised a perfectly manicured eyebrow. "That's where I know you from! You're the drunken hooligan who always hangs out with Tony Stark! I've seen your shenanigans on the evening news."

Harry rolled his eyes with a smile. "Drunken hooligan is such a strong word. I'd prefer inebriated gentleman."

Darcy cackled. "We saw the news piece on how you got caught doing the nasty with that German supermodel on the roof of the Griffith Observatory. Back on campus, you were a legend."

"Ah, that story was heavily sensationalized," Harry replied, waving it off. He liked how Darcy's banter never let up. It was quite impressive.

Jane tilted her head. "What are you really doing out here, though? You don't look like the type who just winds up in a small New Mexico town. I can't imagine there are many business opportunities out here."

Harry smiled. "Would you believe me if I said I was just passing through?"

Darcy snorted. "Nope. Weirder things have happened out here, but you definitely do not scream 'tourist.'"

Harry gave her a look. "Neither do you two. Two young, sexy astrophysicists in the desert? That sounds like a recipe for trouble." Jane blushed hard at being called sexy.

Darcy flung her arms wide and nearly knocked over a stack of printouts. "Jane is out here cracking the code of the universe, and I'm her trusty intern. Beyond that, there's not much to do out here in the middle of nowhere ... at least there wasn't until you got here," Darcy said, making exaggerated kissy faces at him.

"Mostly we look for astronomical anomalies," Jane said as she smacked Darcy on the thigh to get her to behave. "We had some very strange readings the other night. There was something big happening in the desert that didn't match any known patterns. There were gamma bursts,

localized gravity shifts ... the works. I think it might have been a singularity event, but ...” She broke off and glanced at Harry to see if he was following along.

He nodded and pretended to be a little more confused than he actually was. “You found something?”

Darcy leaned forward, and her voice dropped to a breathy whisper. Harry thought her quiet voice sounded very sexy. “We found tons of stuff. But then these government goons showed up, stole all our data, took our servers, and told us to go home.” She glared at the wall, wishing she could give those goons a good karate chop to the neck.

Harry tried not to laugh. “That’s rough.”

Jane nodded, and her eyes darkened. “We lost everything. If we don’t get our data back, the last year of our lives just ... evaporates.” She bit her lip and looked down, embarrassed. “Sorry. I’m just not good at talking to people about stuff like this.”

Harry smiled kindly and patted her jean-covered thigh. He felt her shudder slightly under his touch. “You don’t need to be embarrassed. This research is obviously very important to you. I can’t imagine losing an entire year’s worth of work in an instant.” He gave her knee a gentle squeeze, and Jane looked at him with a cute expression. She was still embarrassed, but she was also very pleased that Harry understood how important it was to her.

Harry felt the magic in the air again, radiating from the couch, and tried to focus on the job at hand. The guy had rolled onto his side and was snoring. He occasionally muttered nonsense, but nothing else seemed wrong with him.

“He’s fine,” Harry told them. “I’d bet good money he’s just ...” He was about to say “hungry,” but the big man suddenly sat upright. His eyes were wide and wild.

“I require sustenance!” he bellowed, making Darcy jump.

Jane stared at him for a moment, then turned to Harry. “Is that a British thing?”

Harry grinned. “I don’t think so.”

The big guy got to his feet, swayed for a moment, then steadied himself. He towered over the two girls. His blue hospital scrubs hung limply off his broad shoulders, baring his naked ass. Darcy took a quick peek and giggled. He sniffed the air and pointed to the fridge at the far end of the lab. “Is there foodstuffs in that strongbox?” he demanded.

Harry went to the fridge, opened it, and pulled out a casserole, intending to serve him a plate. Instead, the man ripped the entire leftover casserole from the dish and started eating it with his bare hands.

Jane covered her face with her hands. "That's so gross," she mumbled.

Harry just laughed. "Believe it or not, I've seen worse house guests."

Darcy grinned and nudged Harry with her shoulder. She always seemed to be standing or sitting very close to him. "You're pretty chill about all this. Most people would have run screaming by now."

Harry shrugged with a smile. "It takes a lot to surprise me these days."

"Ditto," Darcy said, and for a second they shared a look of amusement. Jane looked over at Harry, and he shot her a handsome smile. She blushed and looked away again.

"This meatcake is grainy and dry. Perchance do you have some ale, or mead, or perhaps some stout grog?" the man asked as he continued to chow down.

Darcy covered her mouth and tried to keep from laughing at Jane's scandalized face. She had cooked that casserole personally. It was an old family recipe.

With a look of pure amusement, Harry dug into the fridge, found a bottle of beer, and opened it up. He then handed it to the big man. "Many thanks, stranger," he said, and chugged half the bottle. "Ah! Most refreshing."

He finished the casserole and let out a massive burp. "You are generous hosts," he declared. "I am in your debt."

Jane looked at Harry, exasperated and more than a little disgusted at their guest's behavior. "Is there any way you could maybe keep an eye on him for an hour or two? I need to run some errands. I doubt Darcy can handle him by herself."

Darcy pouted. "Says you."

"I'll hang around. I kind of like the company," he said.

Jane looked genuinely relieved. "Thank you. Seriously." She scribbled her number on a Post-it and handed it to Harry. "If anything happens, call me right away."

Harry pocketed the note and watched as Jane grabbed her purse and hurried out the door. Darcy shot him an amused grin and asked, "So, want a drink? I bought a new brand of Tequila that I've been dying to try."

Harry smirked. "Sure. I'll have a taste."

Darcy poured them both a shot and clinked glasses with him. They drank the shots down and winced at the taste. They both chuckled as the big guy tried to make a sandwich out of two Pop-Tarts and a slathering of peanut butter.

He made a mental note to ask Coulson for the girls' research. It seemed pretty important to the girls, and for some reason, he had really taken a shine to them. Darcy poured another round of shots and handed him one, and they quickly drank them down.

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Harry watched as Darcy's posture on the rolling chair slumped, and her head lolled dangerously close to the rim of an empty beaker. The man, who Harry had learned was named Thor, had drained all the remaining beer from the fridge, and he was now chasing it with big glugs of tequila. The pantries lay bare, and crumpled snack wrappers were scattered in a glorious mess across the worktable. Jane had left Harry with explicit instructions to keep things under control, but the situation had already gone well past anything he would call controlled. He tried to keep the party atmosphere from turning into outright chaos, but Darcy operated on her own frequency. She was only half his weight, yet she could drink like a sailor coming home from a war. The more she drank, the more affectionate she became.

Darcy pressed the rim of her empty glass to her mouth and shot Harry a look of mock betrayal. "You're not even keeping up," she accused, slurring a little. "I thought you were a party legend."

Harry rolled his eyes and poured himself a token shot, which he downed in one go. He had realized early on that Darcy had no off switch to her mouth. She went for the bottle of vodka, but her aim was off, and Harry caught her hand before she could tip the bottle over onto Jane's laptop. "Whoa there," he said. "Maybe stick to water for a bit."

She gave him a dramatic pout. "You're just jealous because I can drink you under the table."

"Maybe so," Harry said, and he gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "But ego aside, I'd rather not explain to Jane why her clean lab suddenly smells like a frat house."

That got a giggle out of her, and she collapsed onto his shoulder. Her glasses sat askew, and her hair was messy from all the head tossing. Harry could feel her breathing slow and deepen. He tried to nudge her upright, but she just muttered, "Five more minutes," and burrowed in closer. In the background, Thor started singing a song in what sounded like some ancient Norse language. He poured a measure of tequila onto the table and thumped his chest, as if he was making a toast to invisible friends. Harry glanced at him, then back at Darcy, who was now fully asleep and in danger of drooling on his shoulder.

He decided to move her before things got messier. He scooped Darcy up as gently as he could and carried her down the short hallway to the back room. The air inside was a little chilly, and there was a faint smell of old carpet, but the couch looked inviting enough. He set Darcy down

and tried to arrange her limbs so she would not wake up with a crick in her neck. He covered her with a fleece blanket and made sure her glasses were safe on the side table. She mumbled a soft, "You're a gentleman, Harry." Then she was out like a light.

He lingered a moment, wondering if he should text Jane an update, but he decided it could wait until later. Besides, if Jane was anywhere near as driven as Darcy said, she was probably hunched over a microscope or glued to her phone at the supermarket, fully focused and blissfully unaware of the debauchery unfolding back at her precious lab.

Harry closed the door to the back room and leaned his head against the wall. With just a thought, he summoned the Elder Wand into his hand. He gave it a few waves and conjured some jeans, a flannel shirt, and a pair of hiking boots. The clothes would help him fit in, and the sturdy materials would withstand Thor's less-than-gentle activities.

Satisfied with how they came out, he picked up the stack and returned to the main lab. Thor had switched from singing to pacing. He examined the posters on the wall and occasionally sniffed at the whiteboard markers.

When he saw Harry enter with the fresh clothes, Thor's eyes lit up. "Ah, my friend! You have acquired raiment befitting a warrior!" he bellowed, and in a single motion he tore the thin hospital scrubs from his body. Harry had been prepared for this, but the complete lack of shame with which Thor paraded his nudity was still impressive. Still, Harry made a point of facing the other way as Thor put on his new flannel and jeans. The big man's hands were comically unskilled at buttons and zippers, but he worked through the problem easily enough.

"You are a true friend, Harrold the Potter," Thor declared in a loud, pompous voice. He stomped his foot into the boot and beamed at Harry with childlike delight. Harry couldn't help but grin back.

Now that they were alone, Harry decided it was as good a time as any to try and get some much-needed answers.