

Metal and Magic

Chapter 37

Harry flew high through the air, and the black and chrome armor almost disappeared against the sky. Only a faint glow from the afterburners showed where he was, and even that faded quickly over the desert.

A gold marker pulsed in his helmet display, pointing him toward a line of red dots. Jarvis showed a dozen or so SUVs racing across the open ground. Their tires threw up so much dirt and sand that Harry could have spotted them without any help. They were moving fast ... at least ninety miles an hour, Harry guessed.

"Five seconds to contact," Jarvis said in his usual calm demeanor.

"Copy that. I guess I should drop in and say hello," Harry answered. He pushed both hands forward and dropped in a steep curve toward the sand below.

The lead SUV, which was a heavy black vehicle that appeared to have been heavily upgraded, never saw him. Harry landed hard on the hood in a controlled crouch. The front of the truck sank deep into the sand. The engine caved in with a loud metallic crash, and metal pieces flew out the sides. Harry heard the front tires explode, and the windshield instantly shattered. The vehicle jolted violently, and the suit absorbed the force. Harry heard the engine seize, then the sharp snap of the transmission breaking.

The rear of the SUV jerked up, and the two back wheels left the ground. The front dug into the sand, and the whole car flipped end over end. It crashed down and tumbled, throwing glass, doors, and plastic across the ground. Harry let the roll throw him clear, and he landed on his feet in a cloud of dust.

The rest of the convoy kept going. Three more SUVs swerved and sped up, and a fourth cut off at an angle. The ones at the back held their positions, and someone in the last vehicle fired a burst of suppressed rifle fire at him.

Harry ducked and smiled inside the helmet. "Now that's what I'm talking about," he excitedly said, ready for some action.

He fired his boosters, rocketed forward, and landed in front of the next SUV. The driver swerved to hit him, and in response, Harry raised a hand and fired off a magical concussive blast. The car stopped dead with a crunch. The engine ripped free of its mounts with an earsplitting sound. The front seats crumpled, and Harry swept his arm and sent the three-ton vehicle tumbling aside with a burst of magic. It flipped twice and landed upside down in a large thicket of brush.

“A third vehicle is accelerating to regroup with the convoy,” Jarvis informed him and highlighted the SUV on his HUD.

The SUV had a sunroof, and a man dressed in black tactical gear leaned out with a heavy machine gun and sprayed in Harry’s direction. The rounds sparked off Harry’s chest and helmet, leaving only dull marks. Harry aimed his palm and hit the shooter with a Levitation Charm. The man’s arms flew up with a yelp. The ammunition belt tore free, and he tumbled forward over the roof of the SUV and into the sand. Harry fired his boosters and tore after the wayward SUV.

Harry pulled up next to it, and the car tried to swerve to avoid him. Harry punched through the driver’s door up to the wrist, twisted, and yanked the panel off. The driver and passenger shouted a few choice words, which made Harry chuckle. The passenger reached for a pistol, and as it was aimed at him, Harry grabbed the barrel and squeezed, crushing the metal flat. Unfortunately for the gunman, he chose that moment to pull the trigger. The handgun exploded violently, and the driver screamed as he clutched his bloody hand to his chest.

He then ripped the steering wheel free, and the SUV skidded, hit a rut, and rolled. Harry drifted back and let it flip past him twice before it slammed onto its side. It stopped dead with its wheels still spinning.

“Nice move,” Tony said as his voice crackled through his helmet.

“Are you eavesdropping on me again?” Harry asked as he flew toward the rest of the escaping group.

“You think I’d let you have all the glory?” Tony amusedly asked. “Fury contacted me. He thought you might need some backup.”

“ETA?” Harry asked.

“About ten minutes. I just got out of a meeting. Pepper really dislikes being the CEO of Stark Industries, but I said No-Takebacks, so she’s kind of stuck,” Tony responded. Harry chuckled and continued with his mission.

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In the main trailer at the SHIELD perimeter, Agent Coulson watched the fight on six monitors and a tablet. One feed came from a satellite tracking Harry. Two others showed infrared views of the scene from a drone. Three technicians spoke quietly over radios as if this were a normal operation.

Coulson stood with arms folded, watching closely. He saw Harry smash the first SUV, then throw the second off the road. Each hit sent up sand and vehicle parts and left men lying still but alive

according to the heat signatures. Coulson was impressed and glad the man in the suit was on their side for now.

A technician said, "He's already on the fourth vehicle, sir."

Coulson leaned in. The drone camera struggled to keep up. Harry was a blur as the black suit hit the fourth SUV, smashed through the back window, and vanished inside.

"I lost visual," the tech said.

"Wait for it," Coulson answered.

Five seconds later, the roof burst open. Harry shot straight up, dragging the steering wheel with a deflated airbag with him. He hovered, then dropped back down. The car's heat signature faded. The engine was dead, and the men inside appeared to be out cold. The SUV rolled to a stop on ruined suspension.

A younger agent whistled. "He's not subtle, is he?"

Coulson didn't respond. He watched Harry land, yank out a piece of plastic that was jammed in the seam of his armor, and take off again. On another screen, three more SUVs tried to escape. The black suit closed on them at impossible speed.

"Satellite is tracking multiple anomalies, sir," another tech said. "There's a spike in the EM field every time he makes contact. It's like the suit is broadcasting a burst of energy or ..."

"Or he's using something else," Coulson finished. The suit was StarkTech, but Harry's methods were clearly more than that. Of course, Coulson knew all about it, but according to Fury, the fewer people who knew the truth, the better.

They watched the fifth and sixth SUVs go down. One of the SUVs humorously filled with pearlescent pink bubbles that spilled out of every open window. Coulson guessed that the driver could no longer see through them, because he swerved, hit a small sand dune, and sent the SUV flying. The SUV soared into the air, and both wheels left the ground. It came down at a crooked angle, and the front corner smashed into the sand, sending the SUV cartwheeling.

The sixth might have been even more humorous. The SUV was driving along, tearing through the sand, when suddenly, the entire shell disappeared. Coulson snorted when the occupants of the SUV suddenly found themselves driving a bare chassis. However, they weren't driving it for long. Six men were magically ejected from each side. They hit the soft sand hard and rolled as the barebones SUV continued to ride along.

Coulson's mouth opened briefly, then closed. "Can't you be a bit more subtle than that?" he quietly asked Harry, even though Harry obviously couldn't hear the question.

“Sir?” a technician asked, but Coulson just waved it away and made a mental note for Harry’s file.

On the screens, the seventh and eighth SUVs tried to reach the hills. The sand in front of one of them appeared to become incredibly mushy, and the front end sank deep, bringing the SUV to an immediate stop. The man in the passenger seat must not have been wearing his seatbelt, because he crashed headfirst through the windshield. Luckily for him, he was wearing a tactical helmet, which most likely saved his life.

The wheels on the eighth SUV suddenly turned into square concrete blocks. Coulson watched as pieces of the fenders were ripped off as the SUV thunked and jerked while trying to drive on square tires. As Harry flew past, the SUV stopped, and several men got out with assault rifles. They began firing at Harry, who suddenly turned back and hit them with a powerful blast from his hand. Coulson’s eyes went wide as the men were blown fifty feet in all directions.

Coulson leaned back and let out a long breath. He looked at his team. Some were wide-eyed, but most were just gobsmacked. They had never seen someone perform such jaw-dropping feats. Coulson would remind them that they were to forget about what they had just seen.

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The remaining men in the convoy refused to give up. They pushed their overheating engines as hard as they could. Harry overtook them easily, and he monitored their progress on the HUD while Jarvis called out threats.

“Sir, the rear vehicle is arming a shoulder-mounted explosive,” Jarvis said. “The trajectory suggests a direct hit on your position.”

Harry saw the RPG tube poke out of a rear window, then there was a flash. The rocket screamed toward him, trailing white smoke. He rolled right, spun, and caught it around the middle in one armored hand. The tip glowed red-hot, and hot gases continued to expel from the stem.

He looked at the rocket for a second, then tossed it at the speeding SUV. The man who fired it was hanging through the open window with his mouth open in shock as the projectile hurdled toward him. Harry laughed and gave a casual salute right before the back of the SUV exploded, sending shrapnel flying everywhere.

The last SUVs were bunched together, trying to use each other as cover. Three had roof gunners with assault rifles. Another had a man in the sunroof holding a short grenade launcher. Harry decided to show them what he could do.

He boosted forward, landed in front of the lead SUV, and pointed his hand at the windshield. A powerful blast tore the windshield free, sending it into the driver and the passenger. The driver slammed the brakes, and the vehicles behind piled into each other in a loud crash.

Gunners from all the SUVs opened fire, emptying magazines into Harry's chest. The suit took every round, but the loud metallic pinging hurt his ears. Harry walked up to the SUV, reached over, and smacked the machine-gun barrel. The top half sheared off, flew backward, and hit the gunner in the helmet. The man tumbled onto the hood and lay still. Harry then lifted his hand, and all the firing machine guns suddenly jerked up and caught their gunners under the chin. Harry wasn't sure how many jaws had been broken, but from the amount of moans and groans, he guessed quite a few. Harry thought he was done with lunatics firing at him, but he was wrong. A crazy man with a grenade launcher popped up from a sunroof and took aim directly at him.

The grenade launcher fired with a heavy thump. A spinning canister slammed straight into Harry's chest and exploded. Harry was blown backward by the force and landed hard. His HUD was flickering, and he groaned as he got onto one knee. The paint on his chestplate was chipped and scorched, and the metal was smoking. Luckily, the damage was only cosmetic. Harry heard another thunk, and he combat rolled just in time to avoid another grenade canister. Sand shot high into the air with a loud explosion. Just as the crazy man lined up another shot, they all heard rock music steadily growing louder. The crazy man turned his head in time to see a repulsor shot strike the hood of the SUV he was in. He yelled as the SUV was blasted off its wheels and rolled multiple times. The grenade man was ejected from the sunroof, though Harry didn't see where he landed. A second later, orange flame and smoke filled the interior. The windows blew out, and several men scrambled to safety on their hands and knees. Armor of red and gold landed next to Harry.

"Took you long enough," Harry grunted as he got to his feet.

"I was just admiring the carnage you left in your wake. Very impressive, by the way," Tony humorously stated.

A new notification flashed on Harry's HUD. "Incoming communication, priority channel," Jarvis intoned. Harry accepted the call. Coulson's steady voice came through the helmet speakers.

"Mr. Potter, a cleanup crew is inbound. Hold the area. We're sending containment and medical teams to collect the injured."

Harry flew up and hovered a hundred feet over the scorched sand and watched three Blackhawk helicopters streak in. They made fast, purposeful arcs over the remaining smoking vehicles, then circled down in a tight formation. Wind and grit buffeted the ground teams as they fast-roped onto the site with their rifles leveled. A moment later, a pair of armored personnel carriers kicked up dust as they arrived with a squad of SHIELD operatives. They fanned out and

swarmed around the unconscious or dazed mercenaries. Medical teams in red-trimmed gear followed, rolling out stretchers and portable medkits.

“Good response time, Coulson,” Harry said, landing lightly near a newly subdued SUV. The side was caved in, and a handful of mercenaries were moaning from inside. One SHIELD agent saluted him before he started pulling the injured from within.

“You and Stark are to report to debriefing as soon as you’re done playing superhero.” There was a pause. “Director Fury wants both of you in person. No excuses this time.”

Harry looked up and saw Tony hovering overhead. His gold and red suit gleaming in the desert sun. Harry could almost feel Tony’s smirk through the faceplate.

On cue, Tony’s external speakers kicked in. “You heard him, Harry. Straight to the principal’s office.”

Harry was still grinning despite the ringing in his ears from the grenade blast. He activated his own comms. “Did you see the guy with the bubbles?”

Tony gave a two-finger salute. “That was badass. He caught like ten feet of air.”

They flew off together through the sunny haze, leaving the SHIELD teams to sweep up the aftermath. From up high, Harry could see the battered SUVs fanned out like chess pieces. Their former operators were lined up on the sand. They were on their knees with their hands zip-tied behind their backs. The Blackhawks began to extract captives while a team of investigators set to work gathering evidence from the wreckage.

The sun was lower now, casting everything in an orangey golden tint. Harry banked left, matching Tony’s lazy roll, and he took a last look at the chaos of the destroyed convoy below before they cranked their boosters up to full blast and exited the area.

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The SHIELD compound in the New Mexico desert seemed empty after cleanup. Besides the guards outside, the only people anywhere near the hammer were a couple of bored scientists at the monitoring station, and Harry, who now sat before the mystery hammer like a cross-legged monk. The hammer still rested in a shallow crater, unwilling to move. He set his wand on his knee and squinted at the hammer.

“Okay, you,” he muttered. “Let’s see what makes you tick.”

Harry opened a notebook that he had taken from Voldemort’s stash. The entire notebook was on the subject of detection spells. He looked at his watch. He had three hours before Coulson

expected a status update, and if he couldn't budge the hammer by then, at least he'd document the attempt in a fresh notebook.

He started with the basic stuff. First, he tried a simple Levitation Charm. Harry pointed his wand at the hammer and flicked his wrist. The air shimmered, and sand skittered away from the hammer, but the metal didn't move. Harry frowned and upped the power. The hammer didn't budge, though the ground around it started to ripple. Harry grinned and tried to picture the hammer as a really stubborn racing broom. He barked, "Up!" and put his full magical focus behind the word, but his only reward was a ping of feedback that made his teeth ache.

"Fine," he said, and switched tactics.

Next, he tried one of his favorites. "Accio hammer!" he stated with purpose.

The hammer didn't so much as twitch, but he was rewarded with a mouthful of sand. "PFFFFT ... PFFFFT!" Harry spat out the sand and wiped his tongue on his shirt. Harry checked and saw that the spell had redirected itself into the sand three inches to the left, digging a tiny pit. He scowled and logged the attempt in his notebook.

Harry rolled his shoulders and thought for a moment. He'd dealt with cursed objects before, and sometimes you had to finesse it. He tried finite incantatem, which did nothing. He then cast a battery of counter-hexes usually saved for cursed Muggle objects. The hammer seemed to shrug those off like a lazy dog ignoring a thrown stick.

He got up and walked a slow circle around the crater. He examined every inch of the hammer. He tried to analyze the spellwork, but the aura it gave off was like nothing he'd ever studied. He poked it with the tip of his wand and felt a magical jolt pulse up his arm. The wand's wood vibrated with a resonance that was somehow both familiar and alien.

Harry grunted and sat back down. He ran through a checklist in his head. He'd done levitation, summoning, negation, and brute force. He'd tried an old family spell for moving incredibly heavy objects short distances. He'd even tried to talk to the damn thing, hoping it would respond to Parseltongue. The hammer just sat there, mocking him.

Harry sighed and tried a few simpler things. He tried to shrink the hammer and only succeeded in making his shoelaces disappear. He tried to enlarge it and got nothing. Transfiguration had no effect on it. He tried to duplicate it, but the clone evaporated the instant it manifested. He tried to banish it, and the spell rebounded, slamming into his forehead.

"Bloody hell," Harry muttered, rubbing his forehead.

He considered fire. Some things yielded to fire. He conjured bluebell flames and ringed the hammer in them, but the metal didn't even warm. He tried a freezing charm, but the frost sublimated instantly, leaving the hammer untouched.

The more he failed, the more stubborn he got. Harry stood and wiped his hands on his jeans. He conjured a crowbar and jammed it under the handle, then used a leverage spell to multiply his own strength by ten. The crowbar snapped, and the handle vibrated like the string of a giant bass guitar. Harry cursed and threw the broken tool away.

Harry then walked over, grabbed the handle, and tried to Side-Along apparate it a few feet to the side. The only thing he got in return was a hand of splinched fingers. "AACK!" Harry cried out as he looked at his hand and found a stumpy palm. His fingers were on the ground by the hammer, wiggling like worms. He quickly went over and reattached them with a wave of his wand.

He knelt down by the hammer and stared at it. He reached out with a tentative finger and tapped the surface. He got another jolt, but it wasn't hostile. It almost felt like the hammer was curious, or maybe just bored. Harry felt a flash of empathy for the object. It was almost like it was trapped and inert, waiting for someone to solve its puzzle.

He sat cross-legged again and stared at the hammer. "Right," he said. "I'm not leaving until you tell me what you want."

Harry closed his eyes and tried to meditate, focusing on the magic in the air. He sensed the hammer's presence. It was immense and coiled, but not angry. He tried to mentally nudge it, like you might rouse a sleeping person with a gentle prod. It didn't resist, but it also didn't move. Harry meditated deeper and reached out with his magic. This time, he got the sense that the hammer was looking for someone worthy. He tried to picture himself as 'worthy,' but the hammer's idea of worthiness was just as alien as its magic. Harry got the impression that it was waiting for some cosmic alignment, or some specific quality that he didn't yet possess. He opened his eyes and snorted.

"Typical," Harry said. "You and the Sorting Hat would get along."

He tried again, doing something a little different. He pointed his wand at it and said, "Legilimens." He breathed in and out slowly and tried to imagine himself as part of the desert, connected to the hammer through the sand and the sky. He pushed his magic outward, not as a force, but as an invitation. He offered the hammer a chance to move, if it wanted to.

A faint tickle ran up his arm. The hammer vibrated so faintly that Harry almost thought he imagined it. He grinned, then composed himself.

He kept at it. Nothing happened for a while. Then, just as Harry was about to give up, he felt the faintest pulse of warmth from the hammer. He reached out and put his hand on the handle. The heat intensified, tingling all the way up to his shoulder. Harry closed his fingers around the grip and waited.

A vision flashed in his mind. It wasn't a memory, but something deeper. There was a sense of thunder, of storm, of power and restraint. He felt the presence of the hammer's creator, distant but watching. Harry had another vision. There was a tall blonde man with a handsome face and large muscles. Harry got the sense that the hammer was meant for him, and the hammer could tell that the man was near.

He blinked and looked down at his hand. The handle had left a perfect imprint on his palm. There was a faint pattern like frost on a windowpane. Harry started to laugh, then shook his head. "Well, at least we're communicating," he said.

He sat and stared at the hammer for a while longer. He then got up and walked back toward his Jeep. He called Coulson for an update and explained what he'd been doing.

"Let me guess," Coulson said. "It's magical, but it still doesn't want to move."

Harry grinned. "Not yet. But I'm working on it. I think I just need to find the right key."

He hung up and walked back to the hammer. He sat again, determined not to be beaten by a chunk of metal. Harry started making notes for his next round of experiments. He suspected the answer lay in the strange magic ... or perhaps the blonde man the hammer was longing for. Whatever it was, Harry was determined to find it.

He wasn't sure if he was worthy, but he was sure as hell persistent. Harry decided that after he finished up with the hammer, he'd go into town and try to locate this mystery man.