

## **Metal and Magic**

### **Chapter 32**

Harry awoke to a high-pitched, magical ping in his ear. It was a sound only he could hear. It was a startling jolt in his skull that yanked him from his sleep. His eyes shot open, and his heart was pounding. The room was still dark. Harry's wand immediately appeared in his hand, and he flicked it at the door. The ghostly image of three men appeared on the other side of the hotel room wall. Someone was outside their door.

Natasha stirred with her head still resting on his chest. She blinked a couple of times before becoming alert. She squinted up at Harry. "What is it?" she whispered.

He pressed a finger to her lips and mouthed, "Ward." She stilled and instantly began running through different scenarios in her head. A second later, she slid out from under the covers and reached for the gun on the nightstand. Natasha then checked her phone for the time. It was 4:13 am local time.

Harry rolled out of bed, keeping his wand raised. He looked at the door, then pointed at the bathroom with a tilt of his head. Natasha nodded and eased across the threadbare carpet, her bare feet making no sound. She pressed herself against the wall beside the bathroom door. Natasha raised her handgun and waited for another signal.

Harry padded to the spot with the best sightline to the entryway. He flicked his wand and cast a silent Disillusionment Charm on Natasha. The air shimmered, and she vanished entirely. Only a faint distortion in the air showed where she moved, and even that vanished the moment she stilled.

Harry kept his back to the wall, and his wand pointed at the entrance. His mind raced. Harry wondered how they had found Natasha so quickly. Momentarily clearing his mind, he watched the door handle. It was old, brass, and loose. It jiggled quite badly when they had first entered. Now it trembled a few times before stilling.

Natasha was completely invisible, but Harry knew exactly where she was. He could picture her crouched, gun aimed, and eyes narrowed for maximum focus. The silence in the room was suffocating. Even his soft breathing felt too loud. Harry felt the familiar adrenaline rush, but now it was sharpened by the knowledge that Natasha was with him, and he was responsible for her safety.

The handle jiggled again. This time it was a little harder, and it made a soft rattling noise. Someone on the other side was using a lockpick as they worked the old Soviet tumblers back and forth. He took a couple of slow steps, getting a direct view of the door.

He signaled with his left hand, gesturing “ready on three.” Natasha responded with a soft click of her pistol’s safety. Harry silently counted ... One ... Two ... Three.

Harry silently flicked his wand at the door, and the lock clicked open. The door swung inward just a bit with a soft creak. Harry saw the tip of a gloved hand push it open slowly. He raised his wand, ready to stun whoever walked in. The hand was followed by a shadowy silhouette. It was tall, broad-shouldered, and definitely male. The silhouette paused, then pulled out a gun fitted with a suppressor.

In quick succession, Harry hit the shadowy figure with Disarming and Summoning Charms. The gun popped out of his hand as his body was jerked into the room. A Stunner slammed into his chest, and his body skidded across the old carpet. The second intruder burst in.

Harry fired a silent Disarming Charm at the gun, sending it flying from the intruder’s grip. There was a muffled curse in Russian. Natasha dropped low and swept the man’s legs out from under him. There was a heavy thud as the man crashed to the floor. Harry used the opportunity to stun the intruder, knocking him out cold as he lay on the stained carpet.

The third appeared in the doorway, his gun pointed into the room. Harry swished his wand, and his body was violently thrown backward. His back slammed into the thick concrete hallway wall with a brutal thunk. The man let out a pained grunt as he fell face-first onto the hallway floor. Harry hit him with a quick Stunner to keep him down. “That’s all of them ... for now, at least,” Harry quietly stated.

Natasha reappeared next to Harry. He flicked his wand at her, and her skin shimmered back into view. She let out a sigh of relief and immediately got to work. She pressed the muzzle of her pistol to the man’s temple and patted him down for other weapons.

Harry secured the door, then flicked on the lights. The man in the hallway looked like a mid-level thug. He had on a black leather jacket, bad tattoos, and a gold chain with a cheap Orthodox cross. There was a small puddle of blood under the back of his head. Harry figured he must have smacked his head on the wall pretty hard. Harry used his wand to levitate the body into the room. Before closing the door, Harry used his magic to clean the blood from the hallway floor.

Harry knelt beside the unconscious attackers and checked them out. “Do you know who these guys are?” he asked as Natasha rifled through their pockets with swift and practiced hands. She tossed aside a cheap Russian passport and scoffed. “They’re probably FSB henchmen. I doubt they’re actual agents themselves,” she muttered, yanking a burner phone out of one man’s jacket. She clicked the screen on, considered it, then pocketed it. She glanced at Harry. “No one this sloppy gets to carry a badge.”

“So, I’m guessing it’s time to get the hell out of here?” Harry asked, gathering all the henchmen’s stuff and tossing it in Natasha’s bag.

“Definitely,” Natasha said, checking the hallway through the peephole. She turned back and began stripping the attackers of anything useful. She took two full pistol magazines, a folding knife, and a battered lighter. She stuffed them into her pocket.

Harry pointed his wand at Natasha’s black duffel bag. It shrank to the size of a matchbox, and he slipped it into his pocket.

“Shoes on,” Natasha said, sliding her feet into a pair of boots. “We can’t risk staying any longer than necessary. If they have friends, they’ll be here in minutes.”

Harry hopped into his shoes. “Do we go out the front?” he asked, glancing at the unconscious bodies.

Natasha shook her head. “There’s probably a tail on the entrance. We need to vanish.” She nodded at him to get moving.

Harry waved her over to him. Once she was at his side, he flicked his wand, and both of them shimmered into invisibility. He grabbed Natasha’s invisible arm and apparated her away. They appeared outside, close to their parked car. It was dark and chilly, and their breath fogged, giving away their position.

Harry started for the passenger side, but Natasha grabbed his arm and yanked him to a stop. “No car,” she whispered into his ear, still invisible. “It could be compromised. We go on foot.” She took his hand and led him toward the back alley.

They ran behind the hotel, down a narrow passage filled with dumpsters and broken glass. Natasha led confidently, barely making a sound. Harry kept pace, trusting her sense of direction. They crossed the alley and emerged onto a side street.

They kept moving, zigzagging through side streets and ducking behind parked trucks whenever they heard voices or footsteps. After several blocks, Natasha finally let go of Harry’s hand and whispered, “Drop the charm.”

He flicked his wand, and they reappeared instantly. Natasha put her back to the wall, pulled out the burner phone, and started pressing buttons. She dialed a number, waited, then spoke in rapid-fire Russian. Harry didn’t understand a word of what she was saying. She snapped the phone shut and tossed it into a nearby storm drain.

“We have about an hour before they lock down the city,” she said, brushing her hair out of her face. “We need to make it twelve blocks east, and we can’t take the main roads. Can you keep up?” she asked, giving him a wry look.

Harry nodded. “I can keep up. But will you tell me what’s waiting for us there?”

Natasha smiled. "Not until we get there. Hurry up." She checked her gun, slipped it into her waistband, and took off down the sidewalk at a brisk jog.

Harry followed as the adrenaline faded and the exhaustion came back. They cut through courtyards, down empty tram lines, and once through the lobby of a shuttered movie theater. Natasha took the route with absolute certainty, and Harry wondered if she had worked this city before. She ignored traffic lights and never paused at corners, only slowing to peer around them before darting across.

At one point, Harry thought he saw a black van creeping the wrong way down a one-way street. Natasha saw it too and pulled Harry into a side alley, pressing him flat against a damp brick wall. She counted out thirty seconds, then peered around the corner. The van was gone, but she wouldn't let them move for a full minute more. Only when she was satisfied did they resume.

They finally paused at the edge of a deserted playground. Natasha leaned against an old chain link fence to catch her breath. Harry kept watch, scanning the street for any sign of pursuit. There was none, but he could feel the city tightening around them. This whole spy thing was quite exciting, Harry thought. Of course, there wasn't any real chance of them being trapped. If all else failed, he could just apparate them both away. But doing it the old-fashioned way was a new experience for him, and he kind of enjoyed it.

Once she had caught her breath, Natasha straightened up and pointed at a low building across the street. "There," she said. "That's our way out."

Harry looked at the windowless concrete walls that were spray-painted with graffiti. "What is it?" he asked.

"It's an abandoned bank. It has a tunnel that leads to the edge of the city," Natasha said.

Harry grinned, despite the fatigue. "Of course it does."

"An old friend of mine will leave a car near the tunnel's exit, so let's get going," Natasha said and motioned for him to follow. They sprinted the last block, crossed the street, and ducked out of sight as the first police cruiser rolled by with its lights and siren blaring.

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The stink of mildew and stagnant air hit Harry's nose as soon as Natasha popped the rear service door. The interior had been stripped years ago, leaving only bare concrete and graffiti. Every step echoed loudly. Beer cans, broken bottles, and the shredded guts of old mattresses littered the floor.

They moved deeper. The building was mostly dark, except for a faint stripe of streetlight where a gap had opened in a boarded window above. As Harry adjusted to the gloom, he saw the

shapes of a handful of people huddled together in the corner of an old lobby. One man lifted his head and squinted at Natasha's outline. He grunted, then rolled over, tugging his sleeping bag tighter. An older woman muttered something and reached for a liquor bottle beside her. Natasha didn't break stride as she passed them, but Harry slowed and palmed his wand just in case.

A young guy, maybe in his twenties, moved to block their path. His hair was spikey, and his face was covered in tattoos. He jabbed a finger at them and barked a slurred warning. "You can't come back here, it's private," he said in Russian. Harry didn't understand any of it, but regardless, he got the message. Natasha ignored him, but the man lunged, swinging a bottle. Before Harry even thought about it, he hit the tattooed man with a Disarming Charm. The bottle clattered across the floor. Harry followed with a quick, weak Stunner to the chest that sent the man sprawling backward onto the cold concrete.

"Idiot," Natasha muttered, stepping over the collapsed man. Harry snickered and followed, careful not to trip on the body or the broken glass underfoot.

They ducked into a side corridor. The walls here stank worse, with a mixture of rot and urine. There were more bodies. They all appeared to be living, but Harry couldn't be sure. He didn't look too close. Natasha led the way, weaving between the rubble with practiced ease, as if she already knew the layout. Harry guessed she probably did. He kept his wand up and made sure nothing followed them.

After a flight of stairs, they reached a reinforced steel door that was covered in rust. Natasha grabbed the locking wheel and tried to twist it, but it wouldn't budge. The damn thing was seized from the rust. She took a step back and jerked her chin at Harry. "Do you want to do the honors?"

"It would be my pleasure," Harry said and pointed his wand at the lock. He tried Alohomora first, and nothing happened. He tried again, pushing more energy through the wand. This time, the lock mechanism snapped with a sharp metallic pop, and the heavy door groaned open on reluctant hinges. A piece of the door fell off and landed with a clang, making both of them flinch.

Beyond was a dark staircase heading down into a basement. The air that rushed out was freezing and thick with dust, and Harry was hit with a sudden memory of going down into the bowels of Hogwarts as he searched for the Chamber of Secrets. Natasha coughed and covered her nose with her sleeve. "Why do I always end up in filthy, smelly basements?" she muttered.

"You're just lucky, I guess," Harry snorted. Natasha rolled her eyes and took the lead.

They descended the staircase, and with every step, the temperature dropped, and the darkness thickened. Harry flicked his wand and ignited the tip. Blinding light filled the entire stairwell. The staircase ended in a concrete vault chamber that was empty except for a few bent shelving racks and a steel grate set into the floor. Natasha knelt and grabbed the grate. She wrestled it back and forth before it finally gave way. She set the rusty grate on the floor next to the hole.

Harry peered down and saw a rusted ladder leading into complete darkness. He could hear the faint trickle of water below, and behind that a kind of low, constant rumble that might have been the city's sewer lines or a highway. Natasha nodded at him to go first.

Harry hesitated for a moment. He wasn't scared of heights, but the first rung looked like it would snap if he so much as breathed on it. He gripped the floor and slipped his legs into the hole. Harry felt the metal bend slightly under his weight. The descent was awkward, and by the time he landed, he was covered in flakes of rust. He raised his wand. The tunnel was about five feet wide and maybe eight feet tall. It was lined in crumbling concrete. The bottom half was flooded with shin-deep sludgy water.

Above, Natasha slid the grate closed, and he heard her boots clanging on the ladder. She dropped down beside him and splashed the disgusting water on his arm. "Nice," she said, looking around. "Let's hope we don't run into anything alive down here."

They started forward, sloshing through the cold water, and Harry tried not to think about what it might contain. After about thirty meters, the tunnel twisted left and dropped a few feet, making Harry stumble and splash. The ceiling dripped steadily, and the whole place smelled like mildew.

They carried on for what felt like hours. Eventually, they found marks on the tunnel walls. He saw chalk lines, little arrows, and once, a spray-painted circle with a slash through it. Harry guessed these were signs left by other people who'd used the passage, maybe smugglers or thieves. Natasha paid close attention to the symbols and picked up the pace whenever she saw a new one.

At one point, they had to duck under a rusted-out service pipe that had collapsed across the tunnel. Natasha braced her hands against the wall and hopped over, clearing the obstruction with ease. Harry was less graceful. He tried to swing over with one hand and lost his balance, landing knee-deep in a brackish puddle that soaked him up to the waist. Natasha laughed and offered a hand.

There were side corridors now. Some were blocked with debris, and others were so narrow that Harry could barely fit his head inside. They ignored these and pressed on. The water got deeper and came up to Harry's knees now, and his legs were numb from the cold. "This is disgusting," Harry groaned, feeling his foot brush something slimy.

Natasha's voice echoed off the tunnel walls. "Can't you, I don't know, dry the water up or something?"

"Nope. There's too much of it," he replied, bursting her bubble.

She sighed and pushed onward, leading him around a large bend. In the distance, Harry noticed the tunnel floor sloped upward, and there was a faint gray glow from ahead. That was good, Harry thought. Maybe they were close to the exit.

They waded up the incline, and the waterline slipped down to their ankles. The tunnel opened up into a round junction chamber, and here the ceiling arched high. There were three more tunnels branching off, each marked. Above them, a steel catwalk hung from chains. Natasha grabbed the first rung of the catwalk ladder and shimmied up. She hauled herself over the rail and reached a hand down to Harry. Harry smirked and transformed into his raven form. He flew up and landed on Natasha's shoulder. He gently nipped her ear, making her giggle. Harry flew off and transformed next to her.

From up here, the view was different. Harry could see the tangled maze of pipes running in every direction, and the old electrical boxes long since dead. There was a ladder bolted to the wall that led to a small maintenance hatch at the very top of the chamber.

"This is our way out?" Harry asked, ready to get out of this mess.

Natasha wiped her hands on her pants and nodded. "If I remember correctly, we should come out behind an abandoned service station."

Harry looked at the maintenance hatch at the end of the rickety ladder. "Ladies first," he said.

She grinned and started climbing. When she reached the hatch, she forced it open with her shoulder. Daylight hit their eyes. The sky was gray, cloudy, and overcast. Natasha slipped through, and Harry followed, pushing himself up onto the muddy ground above.

They emerged behind a small, crumbling concrete building that was surrounded by knee-high grass. Harry breathed in the fresh air, then looked back at the hatch. "That was better than I feared, but worse than I hoped," he said.

Natasha laughed and smacked his arm. "You survived. So, stop complaining," she said. "Now let's get out of sight before anyone notices us. There should be an old, dark blue car around here somewhere."

Harry nodded and followed her, and together they scurried away from the bank, dripping and filthy but alive and free.

## **Metal and Magic**

Nick Fury sat in the battered swivel chair that had been standard-issue before SHIELD had upgraded to a more ergonomic model. He'd never bothered switching. He didn't care for that fancy new stuff. The left arm creaked as he leaned his weight into it and pressed two fingers against his temple, willing away the stress headache that had been building for hours. His vision

was full of tiny spots from staring at glowing screens for most of the night. He'd gotten three hours of sleep, and the bitter coffee in his mug was cold.

The Black Widow's report had come just after nightfall. The report had been sent over the encrypted phone she carried, which told him how badly the operation had gone. The safehouse in Pavlodar had been compromised. According to the Widow, she'd been able to escape the city by crawling out through the sewer main. Fury had read the summary twice and then closed the file.

The Russians had found out about the safehouse. That was obvious, but none of it made sense. Pavlodar was supposed to be a redundancy. It was a last-resort fallback for agents with nowhere else to hide. Only a handful of people, besides Fury himself, knew the address. All of them were supposed to be ironclad. He'd run the background checks himself before delegating anything. So either the Russians had a mole in SHIELD, or there was someone higher up the food chain who was selling out their country. Fury didn't like either option.

Fury's eye drifted to the chipped mug on the desk. He reached for it, dumped the remaining cold coffee into the rubbish bin, and poured himself a slug of whiskey instead. He sipped it and let his mind run through what he knew to be true. Natasha was safe, but angry. Her handler was probably already compromised. The locals were on alert, so any planned missions in the region would have to be scrubbed. And somewhere, the person who'd blown the safehouse was sitting back, waiting for the next mistake. He hated being played.

Fury stood up and paced the length of his office. He ran a hand over his scalp and considered the options. The logical move was to pull back, do a full sweep, and let things cool. That was what any reasonable intelligence chief would do. Fury hated being reasonable. Reasonable got agents killed.

Instead, he decided to make some noise. He'd start by interrogating his own people, one by one, until he found the leak or forced the traitor to make a mistake. Fury thumbed his comm and sent a coded message to his senior staff summoning them to the war room. He added an extra line at the end. Emergency Priority. No excuses.

He slid his whiskey bottle back into his desk drawer. The headache was still there, but he felt a little more awake. There was a rat in his house, and it was making a fool of him. That was a very dangerous mistake. Nobody makes a fool of Nick Fury and gets away with it.