

Metal and Magic

Chapter 35

Tony stared at the looming figure in the pond and called out to him. "Hey! Aren't you the jackass from Monaco?" he called across the ruined landscape. The armored man in the pond let out a soft snicker and cracked one of his electric whips in their direction. The tip cracked against the air and sent up a spray of boiling water.

Harry, who'd already started moving the second the faceplate lifted, barely dodged the whip as it lashed out horizontally. A white-blue line of plasma sliced the space where Harry's head had just been, and steam and smoke filled the air. The whip left a trench in the ground deep enough to bury a small car. Clumps of dirt and mud sizzled along its edge.

Tony instantly returned fire, and twin repulsor blasts thundered toward Vanko's chest. The bolts glanced off the thick front plate, scattering in white-hot splinters. Vanko just laughed, closed his visor, and advanced. The heavy suit created thunderous vibrations with every step as it plowed through the pond's remains. He swung the first whip upward, slashing at Tony's arc reactor. Tony darted left and fired again, this time peppering the helmet with a dozen repulsor shots, but they did little to stop the hulking metal beast.

The whips coiled back, then lashed down in a V, aiming to slice Tony into pieces. He used his microthrusters to leap clear, but the tips still grazed the edge of his boot. Every system in his suit screamed in protest. "Electrical discharge at sixty percent! Rerouting!" Jarvis called out through his HUD. For a split second, Tony's servos locked and he tumbled through the air, landing hard on a mound of charred earth.

Harry, meanwhile, conjured a shield in a tight, shimmering bubble. The whip hit it and rebounded with a sound like a giant metal gong being struck. Vanko's grin grew wider as he stalked around the pond's rim, herding Harry and Tony closer together. Water dripped from the suit's elbow joints. With each step, Vanko swung his arms and sent arcs of electricity between the whip's core and the ground. It scorched the earth and set the grass alight.

"Hey, Greaseball! Haven't you heard that gold teeth are SO last year?" Tony kept up the banter, hoping to distract Vanko from Harry, who was already lining up another complex incantation. Tony feinted right, then charged, firing his repulsors in rapid succession. The suit's auto-target tried to lock on to Vanko's chest, but the man kept weaving, letting the blasts bite into the armor everywhere except for the vital points.

Vanko pivoted and cracked the whip again, this time wrapping it around a stone lion statue on the edge of the pond. He yanked, and the lion, which was easily a ton of marble, hurtled straight at Tony. Tony caught it with both hands and used the momentum to hurl it back, but the marble shattered as Vanko's suit plowed through it like tissue paper.

Harry muttered under his breath, and his wand flashed brightly as he sent a focused bolt of energy directly into the gap at Vanko's knee. It sizzled, but the armor held. Vanko hissed in pain, but he did look at Harry with something like professional respect. Then he flicked the whip at Harry's head, trying to decapitate him. Harry easily ducked the whip strike, and it instead cut down a tree right behind him. As the tree began to fall, Harry flicked his wand at it and sent it flying at Vanko. The tree struck the armored man and burst into splinters. The force of the impact was enough to send Vanko stumbling.

Tony wasn't done. He cycled through every weapon he had left, including his shockwave cannon, micro-missiles, and even the high-powered laser he saved for special occasions. Each attack sparked and dissipated on the suit's outer shell, which sparked and glowed orange with heat. "Harry, I'm running out of toys over here!" Tony shouted.

Harry ducked another whip and responded, "I'm working on it!" He slashed with his wand, sending a ripple of force that cracked the ground straight toward Vanko. The ground buckled, and Vanko stumbled, but he dug in with both feet and rode it out, leaving smoking footprints in the turf.

Vanko laughed out a deep, amused sound. "Is this the best you can do, Stark? I expected more." He spun both whips into a full-on tornado, and the energy arcs grew blindingly bright as he advanced on the pair, step by relentless step.

The whips struck every bit of metallic debris on the ground and flung it toward Tony and Harry like shrapnel. Harry conjured a spectral shield, and the glowing shards struck it and burst into a million pinpricks of light. Tony braced his boots and absorbed the hail with his forearms.

"Getting tired yet, Ugly?" Tony called out, but there was a hint of real worry in his voice this time. The big suit was barely slowing down. Vanko grinned and swung again, this time aiming for both of them. The whips clashed overhead, forming an X of pure light that sent off a shockwave.

Harry and Tony tumbled backward, and for a quick moment, Tony's maskplate retracted, exposing his sweat-streaked face. "We need a new plan, kid! We're going to have to get creative!"

Vanko grinned, and his gold teeth glinted in the orange, fiery light blanketing the area. He started to advance on the two of them with the whips spinning and crackling with ever-growing arcs of voltage.

Harry's patience with Vanko's rampage evaporated. He flicked his wand, and a whip of molten fire erupted from the tip, carving a steaming gouge into the earth. The incandescent lash cracked once in the air, illuminating the charred landscape with sulfurous light. Vanko met the challenge instantly, snapping his own whip of electric plasma at Harry's face. The two weapons met midair with an impact that sounded like the sky itself being torn open. The collision hurled

Vanko and Tony apart, and a ring of concussive force radiated from the epicenter, toppling battered trees and debris for fifty feet in every direction.

Tony landed hard against a scorched hunk of metal, and for a second his vision went blank from the impact. His suit's HUD flickered, then stabilized, and he rolled just in time to see Vanko staggering up from the grass with murder in his eyes. Vanko's suit steamed, and the legs were caked in mud and burnt plastic. He powered forward, raising a colossal boot to crush Tony where he lay. Tony triggered his flight stabilizers, but Vanko's foot came down too fast. It pinned Tony's left arm to the ground, crushing metal into the mud. Every joint in the gauntlet shrieked in protest.

Harry responded before Vanko could finish Tony off. The flame whip arced in a wide circle and lassoed Vanko's helmet, coiling around the crown with a hiss and a sizzle. Vanko howled and tried to pull free, but Harry held the whip taut with both hands, bracing his feet in the churned-up grass. The flames ate at the metal, leaving black streaks and exposing molten patches that dripped down the suit's front. Tony seized the moment of distraction and analyzed the suit's anatomy, searching for any vulnerability. He spotted a hairline seam in the groin joint, just above the thigh actuator. Jarvis painted it red on the HUD as a "POSSIBLE ENTRY POINT."

Tony fired a micro-repulsor burst straight into the seam. The energy pulse vanished into the gap with a meaty thunk, and it was followed by a muffled pop and a blue corona of sparks. Vanko screamed in agony and staggered backward, clutching his groin with both hands. The force of Harry's whip yanked him off-balance, and Vanko tumbled backward, dragging a furrow into the ground as he slid. Harry didn't let go, instead using his leverage to pull Vanko farther away from Tony. The suit's boots gouged twin trenches in the grass, ripping up yardage of earth like a plow.

Vanko finally managed to power through the pain and dug his heels in, halting his momentum. He braced both arms against the whip and tried to pull Harry off his feet. Harry planted himself and twisted, sending a pulse of magic through the whip. The flames intensified, turning from orange to blinding white, and the tip drilled into the side of Vanko's helmet, melting through the outer shell in seconds. Vanko screamed again, and the sound became an animalistic bellow as he started flailing his whips at Harry to break the hold.

One whip caught Harry in the shoulder, but his magically enhanced armor absorbed the hit, spraying the air with sparks of energy. Another whip slashed at Harry's legs, and he barely managed to jump over it. Harry grimaced from the feeling of all this excessive electricity. The suit couldn't deal with it all, and it was beginning to make his skin tingle unpleasantly. He yanked the whip again, this time rotating his entire body for extra force. The amplified magic tore Vanko sideways and flipped him over twice before slamming him face-first into a concrete park bench. The bench exploded into powder and bent rebar.

Tony managed to push himself to his feet, shaking mud and dirt from his armor. He saw Vanko thrashing on the ground, and his suit was smoking and sparking as the whip constricted tighter around his neck. Harry's knuckles whitened as he poured more power into the attack. Tony

noticed something else. The repulsor shot he'd fired earlier was still wreaking havoc inside the lower torso of the suit. A blue-white glow leaked from every joint, and Vanko's movements grew desperate and less coordinated.

With a wordless shout, Tony surged forward. He locked onto the thigh seam again and fired a powerful repulsor shot, punching a hole straight through the joint. The leg buckled, and Vanko's body twisted at an unnatural angle. Harry took advantage and slammed Vanko to the ground again and again. The impact shattered flagstones and sent shards in every direction. Tony's boot jets kicked in, and with one powerful thrust, he rocketed straight into Vanko's chest, knocking him flat.

The combined assault left the suit in smoking ruins. Vanko lay on his back, gasping and gibbering inside the cracked helmet. Harry finally let go, and the fire whip dissolved into embers that rained down slowly. They stood still and looked down at the battered wreck. The only sound was the metallic clatter of Vanko's arms as they twitched and sparked.

Tony staggered over to Harry, who was breathing hard. "You think he's down for the count?" he asked.

Harry nodded as he looked down at the pitiful sight. "I think so."

But Vanko wasn't finished. He slowly and laboriously rolled onto his stomach and tried to push himself up. The servos in his arms and hips shrieked in protest. Smoke billowed from every vent in the suit. Tony and Harry both watched, waiting for the next attack, but Vanko just glared at them with one bloodshot eye through the ruined helmet.

"You think this is over?" Vanko spat, each word shaking with hate. "You think you can win?"

Tony smirked, masking his exhaustion. "I think you need a new tailor. And maybe a bucket of ice."

Vanko tried to rise but only managed to lift himself a few inches before collapsing again. The suit's damaged legs gave out, and he fell flat with his face in the dirt. Harry braced himself for another assault, but none came.

Something changed in Vanko's suit. The battered armor let out a sudden, high-pitched beeping. The sound was faint at first. Then it quickly grew louder and more urgent. Vanko groaned and twisted in his shattered shell, but the sound made him smile. The skin around his eyes crinkled with a kind of savage pride. He gripped the grass with his metal fingers and rolled sideways to glare at Tony through the fractured mask. A new light pulsed in the center of his chest.

Tony's eyes immediately went to the arc reactor in Vanko's breastplate. The familiar blue was gone, replaced by a throbbing red that flashed too rapidly to be safe. The suit began to audibly

vibrate, and the dirt beneath Vanko's back trembled in rhythm with the pulse. "Uh, Harry?" Tony said, not taking his eyes off the reactor. "Are you seeing this?"

Harry ducked beside him. He clenched his jaw and focused on the reactor's ominous glow. The beeping accelerated, and the light in Vanko's armor was now more like a warning.

"Self-destruct?" Tony asked in a disbelieving voice.

"Of course," Harry said, his voice grim.

Vanko coughed and spat a gob of blood onto the dirt. "Always a copycat, Stark," he said. His voice was wracked with pain but still loud enough to carry. "But I am no suicide. I am vengeance."

Tony hesitated. He wanted to mock the guy, but this was neither the time nor the place. Jarvis confirmed what Tony already knew. The arc reactor's output curve was spiking exponentially, and the temperature in the core was past the point of safe shutdown. "What's the blast radius?" he barked.

Jarvis obliged with a HUD overlay, painting the landscape in concentric red rings. The smallest one, vaporization, swallowed up half the park. The outer one, consisting of lethal debris, overlapped with the nearest residential block. "That's not good," Tony said.

Harry's lips thinned. "Can you fly in the state you're in?" he asked.

"Yeah, I think so." Tony flexed his gauntlets and rolled his shoulder. Harry pointed his wand and muttered a word, and bands of translucent energy lashed Vanko's torso, binding the man in place.

Vanko let out a mocking laugh. "You run from me? How cowardly, Stark. Magic boy. HA!"

The beeping grew faster, which definitely wasn't a good thing. The ground trembled, and Harry and Tony exchanged a look. Harry jerked his thumb at the sky, and Tony nodded in agreement.

Tony braced his feet on either side of Vanko's head and got a two-handed grip on the man's armored arm. Harry grabbed the other, and their combined power strained to drag Vanko's bulk upright. The suit's feet gouged trenches in the mud. Vanko struggled, but the magical bindings held. They yanked Vanko skyward, and Tony's boot jets fired with a gout of blue flame. Harry lifted off beside him, and together they soared from the ground in one awkward, spiraling arc.

The air over the park was thick with smoke and pulverized debris. Tony's HUD threw off warnings about the impending arc reactor meltdown, but he ignored them all. Instead, he focused on the bellowing red glow in Vanko's chest, which now burned so brightly that it was hard to look at. "Faster!" he yelled.

"We're already at our limit!" Harry shouted back. His face was strained, and nervous sweat poured down his forehead. The bindings on Vanko crackled under the stress, barely holding. Vanko's body jerked and writhed as the arc reactor started to rip itself apart.

Tony checked the altitude. They were at seven hundred feet and climbing, but not fast enough. The reactor reached a new frequency. It was more of a high-pitched, constant scream than anything else. "He's gonna blow!" Tony loudly declared.

Harry acted first. He let go of Vanko's arm and pointed his wand at the enemy. The suit violently jerked upward, and Tony almost lost his grip. Then he understood what Harry was doing. He was trying to get the payload as far from the ground as possible, even if it meant a crash landing for himself. He pumped his flight pack for every ounce of thrust it had left, then let go and tumbled away, pulling Harry with him. Harry jerked his wand again, and Vanko's suit shot even higher into the air, pulling far away from them.

Vanko, alone in the sky, laughed even harder, and the sound was full of hate and triumph. The reactor in his chest surged, produced a blinding light as bright as the sun, and then exploded.

The detonation was silent at first. It was just a blinding flare that instantly brightened the night sky. Then came the shockwave. Even from so far away, the blast caught Harry and Tony like insects in a hurricane. The air turned to fire and slammed them both downward. The heat was so intense that their suits chimed a critical temperature warning.

They hit the ground hard, tumbling together through the dirt, mud, and blackened grass. Tony's armor screamed with the stress. Harry's suit produced a grating metallic sound as he landed face-down in a crater of glassy slag. The park was unrecognizable. Practically every tree had been leveled, and the once green grass had been scorched into a field of black. Tony's suit was down to its last reserve of power, and it clanked as he tried to rise.

Harry crawled to his hands and knees and retracted his faceplate. He immediately coughed as he breathed in bitter smoke. He looked over at Tony and was glad to see the old man moving. Tony staggered upright and looked around. "Jarvis, status," he croaked.

"Suit integrity at thirteen percent, sir," Jarvis answered with his usual calm. "All systems failing in sequence."

"You alive, kid?" Tony called out, not bothering to look for Harry with his own eyes. His HUD was so fried that it flickered in and out.

Harry groaned. "Barely."

"You are a maniac, Harry," Tony said, and then he actually laughed. The action of laughing didn't feel good on his bruised ribs. "Nicely done."

Harry got shakily to his feet and flicked sweat from his brow. "Let's not do that again," he said.

Tony finally sat down in the charred mud and retracted his helmet. A breeze kicked up, scattering fine ash and dust. The distant wail of sirens echoed down the ruined block.

"Well, that was fun," Tony said, and then he flopped backward and closed his eyes.

Harry, not keen on being here when the cops showed up, kicked Tony in his armored thigh. "Let's get the hell out of here."

Tony groaned and sat back up. Harry grabbed his shoulder and apparated them both back to the Malibu mansion.

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Harry apparated into Maria's living room and turned on the light. He then limped over and collapsed onto the couch, exhaling a pained groan as he sprawled out. He lay there, willing the ache in his muscles to go away.

While he lay there, Maria exited her room and walked over to join him. Her robe was light pink silk with black piping, and even from this angle, Harry could see the shape of her body outlined through the fabric. Her hair was pulled back in a bun, and her face was soft and filled with concern.

"I heard about the chaos," she said, leaning over the back of the couch. "I assume that was you?"

Harry snorted. "If you mean the park, then yeah, that was me." He rotated his shoulder and grimaced. "And Tony," he said, immediately throwing his friend under the bus. "And one very pissed-off Russian. Tony's an expert at annoying people."

Maria came around the front and knelt by the couch. She looked him up and down, cataloging his various scrapes and bruises. "You look like you went through a blender," she said.

"That's probably because I did." Harry managed a lopsided smile, then winced as his ribs protested.

Maria's fingertips brushed his brow. "There's a little blood on your head," she said. She licked her thumb and gently wiped it away. Harry caught her hand before she could take it away and kissed it. Maria's cheeks turned a little pink.

"I took a pretty big spill, and the suit can only protect me so much," he explained.

She sat on the edge of the couch, close enough for her robe to slide open. He caught a glimpse of pale thigh. "Tell me everything," she said while Harry was busy caressing her smooth leg.

He did, as best he could. He recounted the drones, the ambush at the park, the fight with Vanko, the meltdown, and the explosion that had almost vaporized them. As he spoke, Maria listened in total silence. Her dark eyes never left his. She didn't ask for clarification or interrupt. When he got to the part about using magic to rocket Vanko into the sky, she actually laughed.

"Fury will want details," she said, standing up. "I'll go contact him and see if he can smooth things over."

She crossed the living room and pulled her phone from her robe pocket. She dialed as she walked into the kitchen, and one hand tucked some loose hair behind her ear. He couldn't help but appreciate how sexy she was. Harry could hear the faint rumble of Fury's voice as she briefed him. He didn't catch the words, but the tone was unmistakable. Fury wanted to know everything.

Harry sat up, forced himself to his feet, and staggered down the hall until he found the bathroom. He shut the door and leaned against the cool tiles, which felt good on his aching body. He stripped off his clothes, turned on the water, and stepped under the spray. The water instantly eased his pains and sluiced away the filth of the battle.

He stood there with his head bowed, letting the hot water soothe his body. He didn't hear Maria come in until she wrapped her arms around his waist from behind. Her robe was gone, and her skin was soft against his. She pressed her lips to his shoulder, and didn't say anything.

Harry leaned into her, closing his eyes. He let her take over. She picked up the soap and started at his chest, working up a thick lather. She then moved to his arms and neck. She was careful around the bruised spots. When she reached his cock, she gave it a playful tug.

"Your bruises are already starting to lighten," she said. Her breath was hot in his ear.

"Magic," he replied, grinning at her through the steam.

She nipped his neck and moved her hand faster, stroking him to full hardness. Harry twisted and pressed her against the tiled wall. He kissed her deeply, and she responded by wrapping one leg around his waist. Their hips came together with a wet slap, and she guided him inside her. Her fingernails dug into his back as he started thrusting.

Their bodies moved together, and Maria's moan echoed off the tile as she climaxed after only a dozen shallow thrusts. Harry chuckled. "You must have been really worked up," he said. Maria playfully smacked his arm and slipped off his cock. She grabbed the soap and worked his cock into a healthy lather. She then put the soap down and began tugging his shaft, using the slippery soap as lubrication.

They stood there, pressed together under the pounding water. Harry moaned as one of her hands tugged on his meat while the other massaged his bloated sack. A moment later, over the sound of the shower, they heard footsteps approaching. A voice called out. "Maria? Harry?" It was Natasha.

Maria's eyes brightened. "In here!" she shouted, not bothering to hide what they were doing.

The bathroom door opened, and Natasha stepped inside. Seeing what was going on in the shower, Natasha immediately stripped down and stepped inside. She gave Harry an appraising look. She then focused on Maria.

"I take it everything went well in my absence?" Natasha said, letting the hot water spray her big, round tits. Her nipples instantly hardened, and the tips crinkled and jutted away from her pink areolas.

"We survived," Maria said, grinning at the redhead.

Natasha looked Harry up and down. "You look like hell."

"I gave as good as I got," he replied.

"I know," Natasha said. "They're scraping him off the park as we speak."

She moved closer and kissed Maria. Harry gleefully watched their mouths open, and their tongues slip together. Then she kissed Harry and playfully nipped at his lower lip before she pulled away and cupped his cock in her hand.

Natasha pressed herself against his side, and her breasts were slick with water and soap. She began to stroke him with one hand while stroking Maria's thigh with the other. Maria leaned in and kissed Natasha again, then took Harry's hand and pulled it between her legs. The three of them stood under the water, playing with each other's bodies.

All of their problems outside the bathroom faded away. There was only the warm shower, the taste of Maria's tongue, the feel of Natasha's teeth at his neck, and the tightness as Natasha bent over and allowed him in. It was a fantastic ending to an otherwise shitty night.