Of Wizards and Heroes

by storyforsomeone

Summary

Centuries after that fatal day of the battle of Hogwarts, Harry Potter has fallen into legend, a bedtime story parents tell their children, a name whispered around campfires. He wanders the world alone and immortal, until one single reckless moment sends him hurtling into a parallel dimension of heroes and villains. A new enemy arises from an ancient power, and Harry must take a stand as the last wizard to protect this new world. If only SHIELD would stop trying to track him down...and someone could explain what the hell was an 'Avenger' was supposed to be. Honestly, muggles...

Notes
Sadly, I do not own any of the Harry Potter world or the Avengers universe, nor its characters. This is my first fanfic (of any kind), and it's non-beta'd, so any and all feedback is very welcome!

NOTE - to any confused who read this when it was first published, my prior username has now changed to 'storyforsomeone' in order for me to keep all my pseuds together. Different name, still me!

You can also now follow me on tumblr for new updates, thoughts, and writing tidbits at https://storiesforsomeone.tumblr.com

As a further note: Please do NOT repost my works on other sites without my express permission. I love that you want to share my work, but please respect my wishes in this regard.
Prologue

Chapter Notes

As I myself often listen to music whilst I read and write, you will notice I have included a soundtrack suggestion for your own reading enjoyment to accompany the work - unfortunately I do not have the dexterity to embed the tracks into the work, so a youtube link has had to suffice :) Of course, the multiple tabs will not work on a mobile device, so apologies for that. Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**Soundtrack suggestion - Aeon** - *(bit of advice: right click on the link to open in a new tab, that way you can read and listen simultaneously)*
To die would be an awfully big adventure
- J.M.Barrie, Peter Pan

Well, in the case of Harry Potter that was certainly true. Harry just didn’t think the next adventure would be so…muggle.

One minute he had been lazily duelling one of the last rogue vampire clans, managing quite well with his holly and phoenix feather wand thank-you-very-much, mind half on the angry hoard surrounding him and thinking you know maybe I’m too old for this, I mean no one asked me to ruddy save the world.

Not that that was anything new.

The world had had no trouble casting him as their boy saviour the first time round, why should the rest of his life be any different? Harry had spent his very-long-life battling Death Eaters, vampires, werewolves, goblins, even the occasional dragon. If Harry had wanted a quiet life, throwing himself into Auror training had perhaps not been the best idea.

Then again, the War had never really ended for Harry. It was all that he knew.

So when the vampires closed in and Harry got bored with blasting them with fire and transfigured his wand into a sword that looked remarkably like one once owned by Gryffindor and threw himself once more into the fray, he couldn’t help but wonder if this was it. Doomed to walk the earth for eternity, never ageing, cursed to watch as everyone he loved lived and died in their time and he endured, a lone figure battling the forces of darkness because that was all that he knew how to.

Put into perspective, it was an awfully lonely existence.

And Harry was tired. So damn tired of being alone.

(Is this it?)

He wondered if he could even die. Sure he wasn’t ageing, but in Harry’s experience, getting your neck snapped generally meant you were a goner. So maybe that was why he stopped fighting, let the sword go slack in his hand, stared placidly into the hungry red eyes of the vampire leaping towards his throat, greeting death as an old friend…

It was the sort of thing everyone he once knew would have been horrified by, Harry Potter giving up?

Never cruel or cowardly. Never give up. Never give in.

But then, they weren’t exactly around anymore were they?

So with nothing to lose, Harry opened his arms and let the vampire sink its teeth into his neck, welcoming the darkness that enveloped him like a cloak.
"I've got to go back, haven't I?"

"That is up to you."

"I've got a choice?"

"Oh yes. We are in King's Cross, you say? I think that if you decided not to go back, you would be able to…let's say…board a train."

"And where would it take me?"

"On," said Dumbledore simply.

Far away, in a world hidden amongst the stars, a solitary golden watcher dropped his staff with a ringing CLANG and stared in rare astonishment at this new impossibility gracing the earth of Midgard. A figure, born out of nothing-ness, his aura billowing with an ancient power of life and death itself, a pinprick on the map of space and time, utterly unaware of the peace and chaos he would bring.

After all, it was not Harry’s destiny to die by a vampire’s hand, nor by any lesser mans, nor even by his own hand: Death was not his to claim.

And as dawn broke on the new world, Harry Potter opened his eyes and took a deep shuddering breath. The ground was hard and cold beneath him, and anyone looking from above would have seen the imprint of the hallows symbol carved into the tarmac around him. His hands brushed a silky material, a slender wand that sparked with power, a small stone heavy with loss.

And in that moment; the Master of Death was born again.

Chapter End Notes

Credits for the embedded quote go to the lovely J.K.Rowling - Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows.
Director Fury, you must understand, did not like things he did not know.

A huge thanks to everyone who took the time to read my first instalment yesterday, hopefully the second will not disappoint!
On a more depressing note, I still do not own neither Harry Potter nor Avengers :)
Happy reading.

“We accept the fact that there may be other worlds out in space, but might there not be other worlds here? Other worlds, in other dimensions, coexistent with this? If there are other worlds parallel to ours, are all the doors closed? Or does one, here or there, stand ajar?” — Louis L'Amour, The Haunted Mesa

Director Fury was not a man to be easily unsettled.

Being head of the biggest secret service operations unit worldwide, one saw a great deal of strange goings-on; keeping your head when the world goes to shit was kind of a necessity.

And then there was the boy. Perhaps ‘man’ would be a better description, though the guy barely looked twenty. He looked average enough - messy dark hair, brilliant green eyes behind a pair of glasses, an odd looking scar zigzagging across his forehead, a lithe, agile build that moved with an easy grace, ordinary - if a little shabby - clothes.

Of course, your average person doesn’t usually appear out of thin air in the middle of Times Square, with an odd symbol stamped deep into the tarmac beneath his feet. Ordinary people do not give off a considerable EMP when said appearing-act takes place, wiping out half of the electricity in New York. And ordinary people do not, in Fury’s experience, appear out of nowhere with no records of any kind.

Forgery, he could understand. Deleted records? Fury could have his people find them in minutes. But no trace at all? Not even an old school picture, a glimpse of him of camera, a name, a family, nothing. Fury did not know one thing about him, only what a security camera had picked up about his appearance and that he had an English accent.

Fury, you must understand, did not like things he did not know. For one thing, the stranger didn't exist. For another, he didn't exist. And as far as Fury, official-semi-retired agent and unofficial Director of Shield was concerned; that was a crime worthy of court material.
He was the spy, after all. It was his job to know everything and anything about the world. And this boy was a liability.

The last time someone had appeared on Earth with runes on the ground, he had turned out to be a God. A nice God, granted, but a God no less. The Director of SHIELD was not about to make the same mistake of underestimating mysterious figures with mysterious abilities again.

Not on his watch.

“More coffee, sir?” Harry started, hand flying to his wand before he realised it was a girl talking to him, not a Death Eater.

He relaxed. “I…um…tea would be great. You have tea, right?”

The girl giggled, “You’re from England.”

“What gave me away?” The sarcasm apparently went completely over her head, because she giggled again.

“Your accent. It’s like that Sherlock guy, Benbiydim Cucumber-something…”

“Benedict Cumberbatch.” Another voice smoothly interrupted.

Harry, who had been watching the serving girl in the way one might view a Crumple-headed-snorkback, with a detached sort of bewildered curiosity, turned gratefully to the newcomer. She was pretty, with bright scarlet curls framing a delicate, aristocratic face. She looked harmless enough, but as Harry met her gaze, he saw a cold hardness to her eyes that he had only seen in those who fought alongside him in that final battle of Hogwarts. It was the look of someone who had seen the horrors of the world, and lived to tell the tale. Make no mistake, this woman was very much a soldier in her own right.

Harry dropped into Auror habits, letting his body language shift to display an open, relaxed poise and an easy smile on his face. “I’m sorry, do I know you?”

“Natalie” she didn’t give a last name.

His lip quirked, and he shook her hand, “Harry.”

‘Natalie’s’ eyes sharpened on the name. It made Harry wonder just how ‘coincidental’ this meeting might have been. Or maybe that was just old Auror paranoia. Either way, he didn’t see any harm in inviting her for a drink. It’s not like she could really hurt him anyhow; that theory had already been tested when a vampire ripped out his throat and he awoke without a scratch. And of course, he couldn’t escape the irony that his first acquaintance in this new world was, yet again, a redhead.

Ever since he opened his eyes to the chaotic light show of New York, Harry had been wandering the streets with an abstract sort of bemusement, wondering if this was some kind of afterlife. There had been no kings cross this time, only darkness, then a hard landing on a deathly-hallow-infused-ground. Apparently the hallows could not so easily be destroyed or lost, as they were there too. That, or the objects had developed a sort of fondness for their owner.
The first few minutes after his arrival had been a panicked jumble of *what the bloody hell is going on* with occasional *where in Merlin’s arse had he ended up* and the final worrying *how the flying fuck was he still alive?* As the lights had begun to flicker on around him, Harry had grabbed the invisibility cloak and melted into the crowds, maintaining a steady stream of cussing under his breath. It seemed death wasn’t about to let him die so easily. Or at least, he *could* die, only to be regenerated somewhere else. *Perfect.*

Seeing the somewhat familiar sights of New York around him, Harry had expertly deduced that he was in fact, still on Earth. Or a *version* of Earth, anyway. He had apparated to London in an attempt to find Diagon Ally without any success. Hogwarts was a ruin. The Burrow belonged to an elderly farmer and his wife. The Ministry of Magic was the base of the British Secret Service. Eventually, Harry was forced to admit that maybe, the Wizarding World as he knew it just didn’t exist here.

It was Earth, but *not.*

A parallel dimension, a reflection in a mirror, a world running alongside his own like twin cores in a wand, dancing around each other, alike and yet so utterly alien from one another. Perhaps once Harry would have been devastated at the loss of his own world. But right then? It was *fascinating.* This was the most exciting thing Harry had come across in the last century, and he wasn’t about to waste the opportunity to explore and discover by grieving over a life that he was prepared to give up anyway. This was a chance. A chance of another life, where he wasn’t gawked at and highly revered everywhere he went, where whispers haunted him down every street, a daily reminder of just how much he had lost. Where the name Harry Potter didn’t even exist. Where maybe, just maybe, he could find his home again.

“Agent Romanov, report.”

“Target identifies as ‘Harry’, no last name given, he matched the description of the man who appeared in Times Square. Definitely English, I’d say Surrey-area, mentioned he grew up at a boarding school in Scotland. He invited me for a drink, seemed friendly enough.”

“And?”

Natasha Romanov sighed, “With due respect sir, he seems pretty ordinary.”

“Ordinary people do not appear on my CCTV footage in several different continents in the space of a few hours. Ordinary people do not stumble across my division in MI6 by accident. Ordinary people do not just *pop* into existence one day in the middle of the city that was attacked only last year by bloody aliens.”

The man was all but snarling now. Natasha hid her smile, thankful he couldn’t see her. This guy really hated being outmanoeuvred.

“He didn’t seem dangerous.”

“Neither does Bruce Banner, until you get on his nerves. If this guy’s a threat, we need to know his every move three moves in advance. Do you understand?”

“You want me to track him the old-fashioned style, or am I using any of that fancy SHIELD tech you pretend doesn’t exist?”

Even over the earpiece, Natasha imagined Director Fury rolling his one eye.
“I’ll send some agents, Barton too once he’s done in Iraq. They’ll have the necessary equipment you need.”

“Much appreciated.” Either the man didn’t hear the dryness in her voice, or he chose to ignore it.

“I’ll expect an update within the next 24 hours” and then the director paused, “don’t get too close.”

Harry bit back a groan as he caught a flicker of movement from the corner of his eye, a dark figure positioned on a roof, another tailing behind him on the street. Only two today - maybe his other stalkers had taken the day off, he thought wryly. He decided in the end to remain in the states, he’d only seen the inside of the American Ministry of Magic when he had visited in the past, and New York seemed as good a place as any to start exploring. Of course, the experience was somewhat dampened by the incessant stream of coincidental followers he seemed to have picked up on the way. Harry didn’t believe in coincidences.

But if someone thought he was worth following…it made Harry wonder whether the world wasn’t quite as oblivious to him as he first thought. After all, losing his anonymity would just plain suck.

As was becoming routine now, Harry found himself falling back on old Auror tactics: evade, observe, then, if necessary, engage. Merging with the crowds, Harry casually slipped into an alleyway and cast a wordless disillusionment charm on himself. The invisibility cloak was by far more effective, but when moving in a large crowd, being completely invisible wasn’t actually helpful. The disillusionment charm meant people’s gazes just slid over him, and he had far more agility and freedom to run or cast any more spells if need be than if he was hiding under great swathes of material. Sometimes, the simplest solutions were the most effective. For good measure, he also sent an occasional repello muggletom charm at his followers. He smirked as the one on the roof stopped and glanced around in confusion. Either these were amateurs, or they had never dealt with a wizard before. Harry strongly suspected it was the latter.

A few minutes later, he ducked into the New York Public library and began piling up a stack of books that amounted far above his head. A quick levitation spell had them following him around happily as he wandered, humming as he went. Upon reaching the counter, the librarian gaped at him.

“Sir…you can’t possibly borrow that many, the library policy…”

Harry waved a hand in front of her face and she blinked, her eyes glazing over with confusion. Harry’s lips twitched. A quick confundus charm worked wonders when trying to stay under the radar. Befuddlement spells weren’t officially allowed for mundane things, but that was when he was an Auror and the Ministry actually cared what he did. Besides, he’d bring the books back…probably.

When no one was looking, Harry shrunk the books and sent them into his undetectable-extension-charmed backpack with a lazy flick of his wand. He’d gotten the idea from Hermione of course, with her small beaded bag. What would she think if she could see him now? Probably be delighted, Harry thought wryly, a whole world out there and I’m spending my time reading.

It couldn’t really be helped though. Upon arriving, one of the things that struck Harry was just how ignorant he was of the muggle world since his absorption into the Wizarding World. The sheer technology they created was unparalleled, and when anything with electricity seems to die around you, it might be a good idea to figure out how he was going to navigate this world without it exploding everywhere he went. Thus: books.

The afternoon found Harry settled in his usual spot in Central Park, perched comfortably on a
precariously placed branch and surrounded by words and paper. The sun cast a warm glow across the pages. A gentle breeze flirted with the leaves above his head. And sat there reading about particle theory? It was the most peaceful Harry had felt in a long time.

“Harry?!”

*Scratch that.*

With a yelp, Harry dropped the book he was holding and his hand flew to his wand…

“*Quantum chromodynamics* by Doctor Stephan Strange?” The voice below his sounded dryly amused. Harry glanced down to see Natalie waving the book he had dropped. “A little heavy for a Friday afternoon, don’t you think?”

“Oh the contrary” Harry stepped off the branch and landed with a neat flip, muscles coiling as he broke his fall. He grinned at the redhead, “I think it’s fascinating.”

If Natalie was surprised at his sudden show of acrobatics, she didn’t show it. “So nerd by day, mysterious English bachelor by night?”

Harry laughed, “I prefer the term scholar myself. Needed to brush up on some things.”

“Like Quark Matter?” She said in disbelief.

“Not a fan of physics, I take it?”

“Not really my field. I take a more…practical approach.”

“Blowing things up?”

“Of a sort.”

Harry smirked, “Careful there, Red, you might actually reveal something about yourself.”

“Says the guy who won’t tell me his last name.”

“Would you believe me if I did? Natalie?”

She raised her eyebrows, and for a moment Harry thought she looked oddly impressed. Then the expression flickered and went back to the teasing smile.

“You sir, are a man of mystery”

“That’s what all the ladies say.”

Abruptly she laughed, “Alright, I’ll take a hint. Here.” She handed back the book, “I’ll let you get back to your…tree.”

Harry looked offended, “What’s wrong with my tree?”

“You couldn’t just use the ground like everyone else?”

He shrugged, “I like being up high. It feels more…”

“More alive.” The words slipped out of her mouth.

Harry blinked, “Yes. How...”
“My friend” she said a little hesitantly, “he feels the most at home up high. It’s as natural to him as breathing.”

“Sounds like we’d get along.”

For a moment, the two shared a look of something akin to understanding.

“Yes, well…” suddenly she looked a little uncomfortable, “I’d better be going.”

Natasha Romanov could hear Fury jabbering in her ear, demanding why she was abandoning the target so quickly, but she ignored him. She’d completed her task, the nano tracker had been slipped onto the book. She only hoped SHIELD wouldn’t engage in hostilities straight off the mark. Natasha had developed a small fondness for the boy with the haunted green eyes so like hers, the boy who reminded her of Clint in so many ways.

Don’t get too close.

And as the Black Widow slunk out of central park, she wondered if perhaps it was already too late for that.

Darkness fell over Central Park, and Harry Potter continued reading by the gentle glowing orb of a lumos spell. All around him, SHIELD agents were closing in, fixated on the infrared outline of the boy in the tree. Whoever he was, wherever he came from, in that moment it didn’t matter: no one could run from SHIELD forever.

It was time to see just who this Harry was.
Chapter Summary

“Director? You are not going to believe where this guy of yours just walked into.”

…“He did what?!”

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a little shorter, but fear not, more updates are coming!
Thank you so much for all the support I’ve gotten, any feedback is always welcome :)

Harry Potter and Avengers belong to the lovely JK Rowling and Marvel comics. But you knew that.

p.s. I’ve included a soundtrack suggestion for this chapter - a little badass Harry deserves some badass music in my books (any guesses where I got it from?)
Just right click on the link, open it in a new tab, and enjoy :)

I love New York. You can pop out of the Underworld in Central Park, hail a taxi, head down Fifth Avenue with a giant hellhound loping behind you, and nobody even looks at you funny.” — Rick Riordan

Soundtrack suggestion: 'Driving with the top down' - (remember to right click and open a new tab)

"Awaiting your orders, sir"

Fury looked at the screen with some satisfaction; finally, finally they had him.

He put his hand to his ear, "Move out"

The first giveaway had been the distressed beeping coming from his book the moment Harry tried to wandlessly levitate it back into his rucksack. He frowned, cautiously turning the book over in his hands. It wasn’t electronic, but why else would it be reacting in this way to his magic? On a sudden impulse, Harry carefully straightened so he was standing on the branch.

“Homenum Revelio”

The words were but a whisper on the wind. A faint tremor pulsed out from his wand. Several glowing auras blossomed in the night around him. Harry swore. The forest was full of people, people trying very hard not to be seen, and doing a damn good job of it. What did these people want with
him for crying out loud? He was reading, not plotting the world’s untimely demise. With a careless flick of his wand, all his belongings flew into his back. Harry grabbed the invisibility cloak, cast a quick silencing charm on his feet and leapt to the ground. He landed silently, of course, and hastily pulled the cloak over his head. These stalkers of his were getting closer every time, he couldn’t afford to take any chances.

Even with the silence spelled on him, Harry barely breathed as he passed various men in black, who blended in with the night so well he would have missed them if not for the revealing spell that had made them light up like beacons. A few of them were shifting nervously, muttering to something in their ears. Was it some kind of communication device? Harry dared to edge closer to one of them, and wordlessly cast a quick Supersensory charm on himself. All at once, the strange static noises coming from their headsets amplified in his ears.

“Agent Redwood - keep us posted on the target’s movements. The tracking signal seems to be fluctuating.”

*Tracking signal? Target?*

“Do you have a visual?”

“Negative.” The agent spoke in curt, tense tones, “Target has moved position. Our infrared isn’t picking up any movement.”

*So his invisibility cloak blocked infrared?* Harry couldn’t help a smirk: *that was good to know.*

“What are you saying, Redwood?”

“I…he just vanished, sir”

“You lost him?!”

The incredulous outrage in the voice across the earpiece made Harry struggle to bite back a snigger. It made him realise once again that these were Muggles he was dealing with: not vampires, with their super-human speed and strength, not Death Eaters, with their extensive knowledge of dark spells and lifetime’s experience of duelling a fellow wizard, not even your everyday wizard, who could at least detect a befuddlement charm and reverse the effects. Small spells, minor jinxes, charms that any fifth year could master would actually work on these ‘agents’. And, if Harry was right, there was no one to realise spells were even being done. Compared to his work as an Auror, this was child’s play.

“I’ll get someone to retrace the tracking device. He can’t have left it far behind.”

*Ah.* Harry stilled. Of course. Muggles had their technology.

“We have a signal. He’s… all of a sudden the man voice erupted with a slight panic, “He’s all but on top of you! I repeat, target is on your position!”

Stifling a curse, Harry turned on the spot and disapperated fifty feet away. The edge of Central Park greeted him, and he set off walking with a sigh, pulling off his invisibility cloak as he went. If he was really being tracked, they would pick up on his sudden jumps around the city as he apparated. Harry wanted to keep magic to a minimum when there was a chance these agents might pick up on it. He was supposed to be staying under the radar after all.

As he left, he never saw the man on the roof, the outlines of his bow silhouetted against the setting sky.
Agent Barton was good at his job. Where Romanov was the spy, he was the soldier. The hawk always watching from above, unseen and unheard. And he was a very, very good shot with a bow. So when he slotted a tranquilliser arrow against the nocking point and got the boy in his sights and pulled his elbow back and felt the bowstring go taunt and breathe in, exhale and let the arrow fly with a deadly accuracy…

He did not expect to miss.

The amplified sounds of cars and people and crowds and restaurants and traffic lights were so goddamn loud in Harry’s ears he almost considered cancelled the Supersensory Charm he had cast earlier. That is, until he heard the unmistakable sound of something travelling at high speed straight at him, an almost inaudible whistling zap as it sped through the air… Without thinking, Harry whipped round and sliced his wand through the air in one blindingly fast movement, a wordless protego materialising in the air around him. The thing hurtling towards his head stopped in midair and rebounded. Harry stared at it on the ground: an arrow. He had just been bloody shot at. So much for thinking Muggles were all about technology.

Harry’s eyes flew to the surrounding buildings, and he thought he saw a dark figure flit across the rooftops.

"Oh no you don't"

If these agents were prepared to shoot him, the 'target', he couldn’t afford any half-measures. Harry cast a wandless antigravity charm and launched himself into the air. The ground shot away from him, traffic shrieking in his wake. Rapidly calculating the peak of his projectile in his head, he whipped out his Sonic 3000 broom from his rucksack, unshrinking it as he went. Wait..wait...now.

Harry's legs closed around the broom seamlessly just at the point his momentum pulled him back to Earth and BAM: he shot forward. A grin of jubilation stretched across his face. God he hadn't had this much fun in years. Below him, his Supersensory charm informed him of the agents forming a perimeter on the ground, and something called 'probes'. He didn't particularly want to find out what they were. Below him, the dark figure of the man with the bow was flitting across the rooftops like a wraith in the night.

Harry narrowed his gaze; time to find out who these people are.

He shifted his weight and the broom swooped to the right towards the archer. Ten feet above his head though, and Harry glimpsed something small and very, very fast hurtling towards him in the air. He didn't think; he swerved to the left and barrel-rolled out of it's path. It shot past, a black sphere about the size of a bludger. What the...

Another came from below him, buzzing with some kind of electric charge. He dodged that one too, and then suddenly he was surrounded by a swarm of hovering black spheres. They hummed at him, lenses focussing on his face...

Wait a minute.

Lenses. Cameras.

So these were probes. But if they knew where he was that would mean...
"HALT, WE HAVE THE AREA SURROUNDED" An amplified voice boomed out over the thunder of propellers, and suddenly Harry was blinded by the floodlights of a helicopter. "REVEAL YOURSELF AND RETURN TO THE GROUND, I REPEAT, RETURN TO THE GROUND"

'Reveal yourself?' So his disillusionment charm was still working. Excellent.

The probes whined. With an irritable scowl, Harry glared at the probes and sent a twitch of magical energy in their direction. All seven exploded and fell like rocks out of the air. The probes could detect him, because you couldn't buffudle technology, but people...well, they were all too fallible.

Without warning, Harry exploded forward straight towards the helicopter. Cries of alarm erupted inside, and they swerved as he shot past. Harry laughed out loud as he left them far behind. He angled upwards and soared over the tops of skyscrapers, letting his face fall back in the light of the moon. The Sonic 3000 moved like it had been made to traverse the stars, riding the currents of the air like a fish in water. The night air was cool and crisp, the adrenaline singing through his blood. He had never felt so alive.

A whining tremor shuddered through the air. Harry cocked his head, listening. This sound was lower, thrumming and demanding.

His eyes widened. Ah. So they had called for backup. Out of the night, two fighter jets shot above his head. He felt a tingle as their sights focussed on his position.

'Shit.' With a startled laugh, Harry swerved as they doubled back and open fire. He barrel rolled again, and the bullets spiralled past him. Now this was flying. His body moved instinctively, shifting into old habits. He twisted and rolled, spiralled and swooped, never dropping speed, never hesitating; nothing could touch him. Harry was grinning now, utterly surrendering to the feel of the air rushing past him. No spells, no magic, just him on a broom and the whistle of bullets cascading around him. Oh it was christmas. He should have done this years ago.

Either side of him the fighter jets began to converge, trapping him in the middle. Harry glanced sideways, flashed the pilot a grin, then dropped out of the air. He spread his arms like a skydiver, his broom gripped tightly in one hand. Below him, the river gleamed in the moonlight. Harry waited until the moment before impact before he mounted his broom mid-fall and swooped up, skimming the waters edge. Brooklyn Bridge arose before him. Above him, the fighter jets whined as they tried to dropped altitude to follow him.

Harry's eyes suddenly gleamed with mischief. Eying the bridge ahead, he dropped right down so he was practically upon the water. The jets dropped lower. Bullets rained in his wake. Harry held his path. The jets dropped lower. He shot forward, angled low across the broom. The jets dropped lower.

Then the bridge was right there, and Harry let out a yell as he yanked the tip of the broom up with as much force as he could muster. The broom turned vertical and shot directly up into the sky. The jets however...

Attempting to follow, they angled up, but how many fighter jets have the pivot capacity of a five foot broom? Their engines screamed. The towers of the bridge loomed in their wake, and the jets swerved frantically, barely missing the top. Unstable and disorientated, they teetered in the air, barely holding altitude, shooting forward and away from Harry.

When the pilots had regained control and looked again into the night sky, the small flying figure had
long gone.

Harry sniggered to himself as he flew aimlessly above the city. He knew the agents below were still on high alert. He needed to disappear, but not through magical means, if there was just somewhere…

There. Below him, an outrageous gleaming hotel, lit up like a christmas tree, flocked with cars pulling up left right and centre as extraordinarily dressed people streamed through the doors. Harry knew an extravagant party when he saw one. Somewhere very public, and yet private and secure, entirely exclusive to those invited… It was perfect.

Harry veered his path towards the hotel and landed inconspicuously a few blocks away. With broom shrunk and illusion charm replaced, Harry emerged out onto the streets once more, quickly transfiguring his clothes as he went. By the time he reached the doors of the hotel, a tall, dark haired figure tailored in an equally dark Burberry suit stood before the bouncers. A Rolex watch glinted on his wrist, his sharp eyes gleamed behind dark Ray-band shades, the jade cufflinks setting off the pine shades in his eyes, his dark hair arranged artfully in the raggedly-perfect-I’ve-just-gotten-out-of-bed dishevelled look that he somehow managed to pull off. Even though he was shorter than them, the bouncers automatically took a step back. He stood an imposing figure, dark and with a quiet aura of authority that spoke of power and influence.

“Invitation?” One of them said gruffly.

“Oh come now, I’m sure there’s no need for that.” The figure tossed him a pair of car keys and nodded towards a scarlet Ferrari that had suddenly appeared behind him, “stick this old one somewhere would you?”

And then, without a single hint of befuddlement, Harry strode past them.

Not two minutes behind him, Clint Barton skidded to a stop and stared at the doorway his target had disappeared through. His hand touched his ear.

“Director? You are not going to believe where this guy of yours just walked into.”

…”He did what?!”

Harry smirked as he accepted a cocktail from a passing waiter, absentmindedly swirling the glass as he gazed out across the scene. Incredibly rich people conversing with the even more incredibly rich, dressed in subtle fortunes glinting off their wrists and dangling from their ears. Couples were dancing elegantly in the centre, twirling around one another in a way only the rich can ever pull off. It reminded him somewhat of the Yule Ball all those years ago, though he wished he had known the charm to transfigure his robes. Perhaps Ron would have cheered up a little. Though, at least Harry now knew how to dance without making a complete idiot of himself. The countless balls held in his honour after the defeat of Voldemort had kind of made it a priority. Nobody wanted to see the saviour of the wizarding world fall flat on his face.

Maybe that was why he felt inclined to step out across the dance floor and rescue the poor girl from her balding, sweating partner who looked a little too close for her liking. Harry didn’t need to be a Legimens to hear her crying out for help.

“Mind if I cut in?” His voice was cool and smooth, with an underlying steel that had the man
thinking twice about objecting.

He scuttled away and Harry stepped in, transitioning effortlessly into the next waltz as the music switched to 3/4 time. The lady, who Harry noticed was actually quite pretty, looked at him gratefully.

“Sir, you are an absolute saint”

Harry laughed, “It was my pleasure. It’s not every day I get the opportunity to dance to with such a beautiful partner.”

“And a charmer no less” she remarked, “my my, how ever shall I repay you?”

“You can allow me to buy you a drink?”

“Done.” They laughed quietly.

Harry couldn’t help but feel slightly pleased. Two girls had actually noticed he existed in the past week and they didn’t even know he was famous in a distant world. It was good to know his charm hadn’t fallen out of practise in the long years of vampire hunting. In fact, he couldn’t even remember the last time he had properly spoken to a girl, ever since Ginny…

He swallowed. No; not here, not now, not when everything was starting to feel human again, when the pain of watching time steal everything you once held dear was finally starting to fade. The two continued spinning slowly across the dance floor.

“So am I allowed to know the name of my rescuer?” The woman’s voice tugged him back to the present.

Harry realised with a sudden irony that she was also red-haired. Not that he had a type or anything.

“Harry, just Harry.”

“Pepper Potts.”

“So Miss Potts, what brings you to this fine ball this evening?”

“My boss, Tony” the woman rolled her eyes, “he’s a bit on the impulsive side.”

“And you’re what, his minder?”

“His PA. So… yes.”

Harry chuckled, “Lucky guy, having someone as kind as you watching out for him.”

“You’ve known me what, a minute?”

Harry grinned, “I am an excellent judge of character.” She gasped as Harry spun her in an elaborate twirl and swept her fleetingly off the ground. It was a move he had learned from Bill and Fleur’s daughter, Eponine.

“A little warning, maybe?”

“And where’s the fun in that?” She laughed.

They danced in companionable silence for a few more minutes before Pepper spoke again.

“Worry about him, or his state of mind?” Pepper looked at him sharply and Harry sighed, “I went through a period of becoming very withdrawn and isolated. I put all of my friends through hell worrying about me. I was safe physically, but at the mercy of my own thoughts. I understand what that’s like.”

She nodded slowly, “He’s been through a lot recently, and he…he doesn’t even seem like the same person anymore. He doesn’t sleep, he barely eats, I don’t even know why he comes to these stupid galas…”

“And you’re worried what he might do.” Pepper looked at him, and he saw the confirmation in her eyes. “Is he here tonight?”

“He was just by the bar earlier, I…” Pepper’s forehead creased with worry, “I can’t see him. He was right there, and I just…”

“Hey, calm down.” Harry brought their waltz to a stop, “Look I’m sure he just went out for some air or something. Do you want some help looking?”

“It’s not an inconvenience…”

“Nonsense. Now come on, you take the downstairs, I’ll take the upstairs?”

Abruptly Pepper grasped his hand firmly, “thank you Harry, I may not be an excellent judge of character, but I know you’re one of the good ones.”

And then she was gone. Blinking, Harry smiled slightly, before turning and striding off to find a rogue billionaire.

Maybe Hermione was right, maybe he *did* have a saving-people-thing.
Chapter Summary

“What do you even do, anyway?”

“Oh, this and that. “ Harry said lightly, “Sales marketing with Goblins, cultural relations with werewolves from Bulgaria, the odd dragon who needs to be taken down a notch, the usual stuff.”

Chapter Notes

A bit more Tony-centric for this chapter, because one can never underestimate the power of putting two of the most sassy characters in the same room together. Thanks again to everyone taking the time to read this, feedback is highly appreciated :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“...until that moment I had not understood that this was a story about lonely people, about absence and loss, and that that was why I had taken refuge in it until it became confused with my own life, like someone who has escaped into the pages of a novel because those whom he needs to love seem nothing more than ghosts inhabiting the mind of a stranger.” — Carlos Ruiz Zafón, The Shadow of the Wind

Tony Stark was not having a good day.

Ever since the battle for New York, he couldn’t remember the last time he'd slept, really slept. Hell he couldn’t even remember when he last ate. And then there was the company and the damn suits and this bloody arc reactor killing him every minute of every day and then Pepper has the nerve to say he’s changed. Of course he ruddy changed, he nearly died saving all their asses as a human missile and they have the audacity to blame him for not being his perfect flawless self.

You want the truth? Fine. He was just a man, a screwed up man with a brain that wouldn’t function and without his intellect he was nothing and when all he saw when he closed his eyes was people dying and all he heard were screams and gunfire and he just couldn’t be Tony Stark anymore let alone Iron Man, he was only human and he couldn’t take this anymore…

Tony could feel his hands shaking with exhaustion, the edges of his vision blurring. He barely noticed the glass in his hand slip and shatter on the ground. Distantly, he heard people around him shouting in jarring, distorted voices that broke upon him like waves and it was so loud and then there were people touching him, asking if he was alright, holding him upright and it was all too much, just stop, stop STOP -

“Stop it.”
A quiet, forceful voice cut through the noise. It sounded strangely amplified, as though he was speaking into a microphone, though there wasn't one in sight. Tony saw a tall, dark haired man step out from the crowd and stand in front of him almost protectively, a shield against the rest of the world.

“This area’s off limits. I must politely ask you all to quietly make your way to the lower levels.”

A man from the crowd spoke out jeeringly, “Who are you, the cops?”

“Do you really want an answer to that?” The man’s voice was very cool, “I was asking nicely. Now I must insist. If I have to tell you a third time, the police will be the least of your worries. Now leave, please.”

Tony couldn’t see the man’s face, but he reckoned if the steel in his voice was anything to go by his expression must have been something to behold. Within minutes the room had emptied. Tony let out a breath he hadn’t realised he’d been holding and sagged against the wall. His vision was beginning to go dark again, and he blinked furiously. He couldn’t pass out, not now, not when he would see the very images he fought off sleep every night to prevent himself from seeing…

“Oh, Tony? It is Tony, right?” A low, musical voice broke through his inner ramblings, “I want you to breathe with me, okay? Nice and slowly, in, out…good.”

With a jolt Tony realised he was on the verge of a panic attack, his breathing shallow and unsteady. He looked frantically up at the figure kneeling next to him, a pair of bright green eyes boring steadily into his.

“I…can’t…”

Every breath tore through his lungs like sandpaper and oh God it hurt...

“In and out, Tony. Come on.”

The guy caught him as his knees buckled, and somehow that reassuring grip was just enough not to push him over the edge. Tony's hands flew out instinctively to grip the man's jacket, hands fisting in the material. The stranger was saying something else, soft words that spoke of calm and competence and an overwhelming sense of safe.

Tony let his head fall forward, exhaustion making gravity seem all the more ruthless. He couldn't help the small, insecure act as it dropped onto the man's shoulder, and his cheeks flushed. He did not have the strength to lift it.

"It's alright" The stranger murmured, "you're safe. Everyone's safe. It's alright."

*How did he know that was exactly what Tony needed to hear?* It didn't matter. As though a switch had been flipped, Tony gripped the man's jacket and breathed.

Slowly but surely, his world stabilised.

Silence.

"Here, eat this."

Something thin and hard and vaguely familiar - foil - *chocolate*? - was pushed into his hand. Tony glanced down and blinked. It *was* chocolate.
"Don't think, just eat." The man's voice was firm but not unkind, "You're running on fumes right now and I honestly don't know how you haven't collapsed already."

Surprising himself, Tony obeyed. He put it down to the stress. "Do you often prescribe confectionary to damsels in distress then?"

The voice turned amused, "only the stubborn ones."

Tony gave a choked laugh, and finally looked up. The man's green eyes were hard and steady, but their gaze was warm. He seemed unbothered by the fact Tony's hands were still gripping his jacket.

“Do I... know you?” Tony said at last.

“Nope.” He smirked, "You’d have remembered a handsome face like mine.”

“God you sound like me." Tony shook his head, "So who was it then - Pepper or Rhodey? I should imagine they're paying you quite nicely to keep me out of trouble.""

"I..." The man stopped, bemused, "I'm not entirely sure what a 'Rhodey' is, but I can assure you I'm here entirely on my own account."

"Really." Tony's tone said it all.

“Look, in case you haven’t noticed, I’m not exactly from around here.” Harry offered a hand and pulled him up, “I’m Harry.”

“Harry…”

“Yes, that’s my name.” Harry said patiently, “The appropriate response is to now give yours.”

Despite himself, Tony felt a smile tug at his lips, “Tony Stark, if that wasn't already blindingly obvious.”

Tony looked at him expectantly, obviously expecting some recognition. Harry smiled a little uncertainly, “so I’m guessing your some sort of billionaire to have gotten in to this fancy do?”

He gaped at Harry, “You mean you don’t…that I’m…you just…why…” For once the genius was utterly out of words.

“Like I said, not from around here.” Harry said dryly.

“I'm starting to get that.” He muttered, “What you did, making everyone leave…”

Harry’s eyes flashed with understanding, “Back in England, I was in a War that lasted the majority of my childhood. Afterwards, I was a bit of a mess. I get it.”

Tony nodded curtly.

“So…” Harry wandered over to the bar, “since we’ve got the entire bar to ourselves, it'd be a shame not to take advantage of such excellent facilities. I do make a fantastic martini if I do say so myself…”

“Harry,” Tony said with his signature smirk, “this could be the start of a beautiful friendship.”
“Nope, not buying it.”

“You just told me there is a man who flies around in a metal suit powered by a mini power station in his chest and guided by an Artificial Intelligence called JARVIS, and you still think teleportation is unfeasible?”

Pepper stopped as she headed up the stairs, head cocked as she heard voices.

“It’s not just unfeasible, it’s impossible!” Tony insisted, “the semantics involved…”

“Just think of it as a kind of matter transference via a wormhole. It’s not perfect, but if the person harnessed enough energy and visualised where they wanted to go…”

“Do you have any understanding of the basic laws of physics?”

Outside, Pepper started at Tony’s voice. It sounded so…him, in a way she had barely glimpsed recently.

“Don’t be sassy, Tony. It doesn’t become you.”

Pepper stifled a giggle.

“The instability” Harry continued as Tony spluttered, “might be due to the vibrations in the space time continuum, of course…”

“But that would require an incredible power source as well as an existing rift…”

“Aha! So you’re admitting it’s possible, if you could harness enough power and channel it through a medium…”

“And what medium would you suggest, then? A magic wand?”

“Well…”

Pepper was laughing so much at that point she all but fell through the door, and both men blinked owlishly up at her. Harry was midway through making a martini, Tony was standing on a bar stool with his hands waving enthusiastically, both of their suits rumpled and ties askew like boys who had been playing when they should have been working. The effect was mildly comical.

“Pepper!” Tony exclaimed, “where have you been?”

“I could ask you the same question. I’ve had no less than twelve people ask me of your whereabouts this half hour.”

Tony and Harry shared a look. Pepper noticed Tony looked slightly pale.

“Did you know”, Harry said before Tony could speak, “that our Tony here does not know how to make a Vesper Martini?”

Pepper blinked.

“I know” Harry continued sadly, “I was speechless myself when I heard. Thus, I made it my sacred mission to rectify this crucial gap in his education so he should never be in such a position again. And this bar was just so conveniently empty…”

Tony snorted.
“It seemed too good an opportunity to miss.” Harry winked at her. “Would you care for one madam?”

And that was how Pepper found herself joining the boys with an expertly made martini made in her honour. Harry was like a crackling storm in their midst, dazzling them with his rapier wit and smirk that spoke of trouble. And watching Tony? It was like having the old Tony back again. The banter, the laughter, the gleam in his eyes whenever he argued something he was passionate about, the light that came on when he and Harry went off on a conversation Pepper could barely follow. And more than a few times, Pepper could have sworn Tony looked at Harry with a sort of awed puzzlement, and even a hint of something grateful. Not that she knew what Tony had to be grateful for, but anyone who could bring Tony out like that Pepper could have kissed. And all this coming from a boy that looked barely twenty, a stranger they didn’t even know the last name of. It was almost, dare she sit it, magical.

Harry Potter could not remember the last time he had laughed so much. Tony Stark, whoever he was, was an absolute genius, and Harry was often pushed to the limits of his centuries of knowledge to keep up with the man. It was exhilarating to say the least.

He was somewhat disappointed then, though not entirely surprised, when Tony started looking ready to collapse as the first light of dawn began creeping over the horizon. He and Pepper shared an exasperated, fond look.

“Come on” said Harry, “let’s get you home. Wherever home is.”

“You don’t want ‘nother drink?”

“I think we’ve spent enough of both of our money tonight, my friend. You might be made of money, but I, unfortunately, am not.”

“What do you even do, anyway? You never…never said.” Tony yawned and Harry caught him gently by the shoulders as the man swayed on his feet.

“Oh, this and that. “ Harry said lightly, “Sales marketing with Goblins, cultural relations with werewolves from Bulgaria, the odd dragon who needs to be taken down a notch, the usual stuff.”

Tony snorted. He seemed content to lean on Harry as he helped him down the stairs (with a very small aid of a levitation spell, of course) and out to a gorgeous Porche that Pepper had had brought up outside.

Harry whistled, “with wheels like that, I wonder why you get out of the car at all.”

“Meh, driving’s overrated. Flying on the other hand…”

Harry looked at him quizzically, but the man didn’t elaborate.

“You alright getting him home?” he asked Pepper as Tony half fell into the rear seat.

She looked at him strangely, “You really care don’t you? You’re not just asking that?”

“Of course I care. The man’s brilliant, and he’s lucky to have you.”

“You don’t even know who he is.”
“He’s Tony.” Harry said simply.

Pepper smiled slightly, “you really are something else.” And then, surprising Harry, she kissed him quickly on the cheek, “thank you Harry. I put my card in your jacket earlier. If you need anything, just ask.”

“Likewise. It’s been a pleasure, Miss Potts.”

“Harry?” Tony’s voice drifted out from the car, “I…what is your last name anyway?”

And Harry smirked, “If you can find that out, I’ll make all of your drinks, free of charge.”

“Done.” Tony looked pleased.

It was just as Pepper was getting into the car that Harry saw it. Silhouetted against the rising sun, a single figure with a bow strapped to his back crouched on the rooftop opposite the hotel, utterly still. Harry stiffened. He’d been a fool to think they would give up so easily.

“Harry?” It was Tony again, sounding remarkably with it in spite of all the alcohol in his system, “what is it?”

“Remember when you said teleportation was impossible?” Harry smiled a little resignedly, “I really hope you don’t remember this in the morning.”

And just as Clint Barton released a dozen arrows from the rooftop, Harry span on the spot and disappeared, leaving nothing but a faint pop and a flurry of arrows hitting the wall as Tony’s car pulled away.

“Did he just…”

“That’s not possible”

“He vanished”

“Disappeared off the radar”

“Do we follow him?”

“And where the hell do we start?”

Agent’s voices erupted in the surveillance room as they stared at the screen Harry had disappeared from. Someone had put the footage on loop, and the faint image of him flickering in and out of sight seemed to taunt them from the screen. Director Fury heard the word everything was thinking: teleportation. Suddenly the trouble they had had tracking this boy began to make a horrible sort of sense. If he could disappear and reappear at will, that meant mutant or tech genius. Fury had the sudden dreadful thought of two Tony Starks battling it out in science that went way beyond the poor minds of the rest of the world. One genius was quite enough, thank you. Then again, maybe mutant was more worrying. If someone out there had been experimenting on people with these kind of results…

And then there was the most terrifying prospect of all. What if he was neither? They knew next to nothing about him, his very identity was a shadow and his abilities were shrouded in mystery. If this ‘Harry’ turned out to be an enemy, Fury didn’t know what they would do.
Hidden in the reflection of a shadow, unbeknownst to everyone there, Loki looked at the screen and smiled.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Loki will feature in the coming chapters. I couldn't miss out on the chance to set the illusionist against the wizard now could I? Then again, maybe they'll be best mates. The sass is also strong in the God of Mischief after all. :)
Chapter Summary

"Alright. You’ve got two minutes before I turn you into a ferret. Make it good."

Chapter Notes

As promised, this chapter is fairly Loki-fixated, so expect trouble!
Thank you for all the lovely comments, your feedback means a lot and is a huge motivator towards getting the updates up.
Happy reading :)

(There will come a day when I can say I own Harry Potter and the Avengers. But that is not this day.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“If you look up “charming” in the dictionary, you’ll see that it not only has references to strong attraction, but to spells and magic. Then again, what are liars if not great magicians?” — Deb Caletti, The Secret Life of Prince Charming

The God of mischief, as a rule, did not oft concern himself with mortals. They were just so…domesticated. All hurrying around, bumping into each other, keeping their little heads down; a nation of herbivores. As much as he loathed to admit it, Thor had actually been right in one thing: they were so petty. And tiny.

His damning mistake, however, was to presume this made them weak. Humans might be spectacularly ignorant and frail, but when they had an enemy to unite against? Even he might want to think twice. His failed attempt to take New York the past year was evidence to that.

So when Loki slipped out of Asgard’s containment cells (he was the God of lies and deceit for a reason, you know. It was a little insulting to think a mere cell would hold him for long) and traversed the secret passageways between worlds, he resolved to tread a little more carefully, to wait and watch before he struck. Because this time, his quarrel was not with the Earth, but a much deadlier target, one he would definitely need powerful allies to defeat.

And when it came to the Avengers, one did not take any chances.

“I’m curious.” A low, musical voice drifted from behind him, “Is longevity a usual trait found in your
kind, or are you just remarkably young?"

Harry didn’t think. In one blindingly fast motion he whipped round and sent a powerful *stupefy* in the direction of the smooth voice. There was a shuddering crash and the room trembled as someone was sent flying backwards. The man grunted in pain as he collided harshly with the wall. Harry kept his wand aloft and glared at the stranger. The man was uncommonly good looking; that was the first thing he noticed. The second was that he must have had a bizarre fetish for leather clothing. A dark jade cloak rippled out behind him, shifting to reveal glimpses of stealthily armoured garments. That would be the leather then. He had sharp, angular features and even sharper green eyes, framed with aristocratic eyebrows and long black hair. An intangible kind of vitality seemed to simmer about him, in the pale, luminescent blue-green eyes that seemed to deduce your entire life in one piercing gaze, in the predatory grace coiled in his lithe body, in the stark contrast of raven locks on ivory skin. There was a delighted smirk playing at the strangers lips.

The man laughed, “Well met, magician.”

“Who are you?” Harry’s voice was hard and unyielding.

“A friend.”

“Hmm, no. Try again.”

“Tut tut. So distrusting!”

“How do you think I stayed alive this long?” Harry retorted. No need to mention the convenient fact he couldn’t actually die in the first place.

The stranger winced as Harry’s spell continued pressing him against the wall, “Your magic is impressive.”

“You don’t know fuck all about my magic.”

“How do you think I stayed alive this long?” Harry retorted. No need to mention the convenient fact he couldn’t actually die in the first place.

The stranger winced as Harry’s spell continued pressing him against the wall, “Your magic is impressive.”

“You don’t know fuck all about my magic.”

“Do I not?”

The image of the man in front of him seemed to warp and shimmer, bending the light around him, stretching almost imperceptibly against Harry's spell that kept him trapped against the wall. Curious, testing, measuring. Harry frowned. Then with a smirk, the man just...*dissolved*, disintegrating into a thousand pieces that scattered like moths, brushing against his skin with the slightest flutter of wings, and suddenly a wave of force hit Harry from behind. He stumbled forward, spinning round just as the flurry of shimmering fragments coalesced opposite him into the form of one smirking figure.

Harry paused, hand raised where he had been about to blast his response. The man wasn't looking to attack. If anything, he looked...expectant. Curious. A glint of a challenge whispered in those all-knowing blue-green eyes. *Your move*, those eyes seemed to say.

Harry's lips quirked, bemused, but he extended his palm anyway, eyes flashing with intent. A single streak of flame blazed through the air, bristling and crackling. The man raised his own hand just as it reached him, and the fire extinguished with a hiss on a shield on ice. The stranger gave him a slightly withering look.

"Is that all you can summon, magician? A spluttering candle wick?"

Harry raised one eyebrow, and waited. The small noise of indignation from the stranger was almost funny as Harry's spell took effect and the wall behind him apparently decided to adopt the man as its own. It lurched forward, engulfing him in a trapping embrace at a wriggling of Harry's fingers, and
clinging to him with all the determination of a dog dragging its favourite toy back to its den.

"Matter manipulation," the man observed, even as he struggled against the sentient plaster. When it proved ineffective, he gave up with a huff. The wall hummed contentedly. "Clever. But magician, you should really learn to be more observant."

"Oh? What makes you say that?"

And suddenly the voice came from behind him. "A man of your abilities should really be able to recognise an illusion when he sees one, don't you think?"

Harry whipped round, easily deflecting the amber blast of light that was hurled in his direction. The man, the real one, was standing smugly in front of him. With a flash of those green eyes, the version of him trapped in the wall, his double, faded away in the illusion that it was.

Harry couldn't help the small, impressed smirk that crept to his lips. "Touché."

"Not one for delusion, are we?" The stranger remarked, "Pity. And I had such high hopes for you."

So Harry turned his hand over slowly, wrist now bared to the ceiling, and rewove the world around them into a pattern more pleasing. The reality around them blurred and shifted, colours running together like paint, and suddenly the sight that surrounded them was not one of his living room, but of one much more familiar. A castle, ancient and sentient, its walls simmering with magic. Students in robes ran past them, echoing laughter throbbing with memory, paintings tittering to one another as they passed. The air was alight with spells and enchantment. A ghost of a smile touched Harry's lips.

"This is not real," the man mused, reaching out to press his palm against one of the stone walls. A surprised quirk of a smile, "but it is no illusion." His head turned to Harry, cocked, a demand. "How?"

Harry waved his hand absently, and the scene was swept away. "Memory," he replied simply.

The man's eyes glinted, "interesting."

And then he flung another spear of light, Harry batted it aside, and the dance began again. Spells flew between them, faster and faster, an exchange of attacks and parries, transfigurations and manipulations. This time, when they fought, something was different. Strikes were lighter and faster, spells testing rather than tentative, evasive manoeuvres spawning easily from ducking and shielding. Magic visibly ignited in the air, their bodies moved in tandem with each other, instinctively falling into a familiar rhythm as though they had been fighting each other their entire lives. It felt...playful.

Harry couldn't pinpoint the exact moment the man started smiling, probably around the same time he did. It spread slowly across the stranger's face like the dawn breaking across the sky, and if Harry wasn't, well, Harry, he would have been horribly distracted by the unexpected beauty of it.

As it was, the stranger provided a distraction of his own, flinging his palm out and sending a jet of brilliant green light shooting towards him...

And just like that, Harry froze. The air trembled. Time seemed to stop. In that moment all Harry saw was *Avada Kedavra* from all those years ago and the screams of his mother, his father, of Cedric, Fred, Lupin, Tonks...and something snapped. Without consciously summoning it the Elder Wand was in his hand and Harry sliced it through the air and the blinding white light of *protego*
materialised around them and Harry let out a cry of all those he failed to protect and **BAM.** The force of the spell ripped through the air and the small house Harry had temporarily occupied collapsed outwards at the explosion. The stranger looked for a moment utterly stunned as he was sent flying backwards, and the green light fizzled out on the shield. A resounding **BOOM** shook the ground.

When the air cleared, Harry Potter was kneeling on the ground in the epicentre of the explosion, the Elder Wand held loosely in his hand. As the stranger approached him cautiously, Harry raised his head.

“**Don’t ever** try that again.” His voice was quiet, empty.

“And what in Odin’s name was that? Tad overreaction don’t you think?”

“**Avada Kadavra.** The killing curse. Don’t think I haven’t seen it before.”

“You think I was trying to kill you?”

“No other spell is that exact shade of green.” Harry glared at him, “I’ve been at the end of it often enough to know.”

The man tilted his head curiously, “the appearance of magic does not depend on the spell, but the caster.”

He raised a hand, and a small orb of gently glowing green light appeared on his palm. Harry flinched.

“See? Green is my signature.” He smirked, “Besides, if you managed to kill someone with a witch light I’d be thoroughly impressed.”

Harry stared at the light for a moment. He ran a hand agitatedly through his hair. “Right. Sorry about that.”

The stranger cocked an eyebrow, “you wield a formidable weapon, magician. If I were a lesser being I’d have been killed.”

“Hey, I already apologised. Don’t push it.” Harry grumbled, casually slipping the Elder Wand back into his rucksack, “it was you who decided to break into my house in the first place.”

“Oh how silly of me. I should have rung the doorbell” He said dryly, “I’ll remember that in the future.”

Harry rolled his eyes, “Who are you? And how did you get past my wards?”

“Loki of Asgard, at your service” the man - Loki - smirked, “believe me when I say I’m paying you a compliment in breaking through your wards. I haven’t had that fun in years unravelling them. All original spell work, I presume?”

Bemused, Harry nodded.

Loki grinned, “**marvellous.”**

“So you’re a wizard?”

“I am a **God**” he said sharply, “an immortal, all-powerful God. Do not insult me so.”

Harry blinked, “Right. Dragons and magic and mermaids, why not Gods? I suppose you’re also best
mates with Zeus and Hercules then?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Zeus is a terrible conversationalist.”

Harry snorted. “I wouldn’t have thought the god of lighting would be such a buzzkill.”

“Oh I don’t know. My brother, the God of Thunder, never lets me have any fun.”

“I didn’t know you had a brother.”

All at once, Loki stiffened, and something oddly vulnerable flitted across his face. “I don’t”

“But you said—”

“He’s no brother of mine.” The words were cold, and Harry got a very strong sense of stay away at all costs. Maybe it was the slightly feral look in Loki’s eyes.

“The real question,” said Loki suddenly, “is who are you?”

“Someone worthy of a God’s interest, apparently”

“Do you know how many magicians have ever been born on Midgard?” Loki didn’t wait for an answer, “none. Never in the history of time has there been a, what did you call it, wizard in this realm. And then there’s you.”

“If you say anything resembling a prophesy or chosen one I swear to God I will punch you.”

Loki blinked, “what? No - don’t you see? You and me, we’re the same.”

“Am I a God too then? That explains a lot. I swear destiny seems to have never heard the term overkill…”

“Magic!” Loki interrupted in frustration, “the art is all but forgotten in all the nine realms but for a very few. We are kin, you and I!”

And it was in that moment, on the word ‘kin’, that Loki’s voice broke ever so slightly. His voice, his famous silver-tongue, caught on a note of uncertainty, of something raw and broken and startling genuine. It was then that Harry saw it, as clear as though it was reflected from him or Tony or Natalie: it was loneliness. It was a buried desperation, a need for acceptance so well hidden you would almost doubt it even existed.

But in that moment Harry saw himself, a darker, far more lost version of himself, but it could of well been him. If there had been no Ron and Hermione, no Ginny and Albus and James and Lily.

So with resigned sigh, Harry conjured up two chairs and sat down, gesturing for Loki to take the second.

“Alright. You’ve got two minutes before I turn you into a ferret. Make it good.”

It was all Loki’s fault, really.

Without really meaning to, two minutes turned into two hours, and a chance meeting turned into a regular occurrence.
The God would turn up at the oddest of times, night or day; it was impossible to predict his arrival. (True to his word, he always rang the doorbell.)

Sometimes he seemed content just to watch Harry, arresting green eyes thoughtful and curious. The jade gaze would gleam on the occasion Harry performed the odd bit of magic, following his movements hungrily.

Sometimes he’d come with questions, bizarre things like “if you cast a ward around an area and then never came back, and there’s no one or nothing to breach it, does the ward still exist?”

At which point Harry would pause whatever it was he was doing, eyebrow raised, “This is sounding worryingly-quantum-theory-like. You haven’t been felling any trees in forests lately have you?”

“I…what?”

“Never mind.”

Often he didn’t seem to need Harry to talk back.

“So if your ‘transfiguration’ isn’t an illusion “covering up” the anterior object, surely the untransfiguration isn't the removal of a transfiguration, but rather its reversal, a second alternation of the physical structure, a retransfiguration…”

“It’s fascinating.” Harry said, "You know all these words, and they’re all English, but when you string them together into sentences, they just don’t make any sense.”

Loki gave him the look, all flashing dark eyes and withering aggravation, as though willing the other person to shrivel up and die just by the force in his gaze. It was somewhat ruined by the quirk of amusement on his lips.

“Shut up, Harry.”

And was that was a familiar phrase. Loki seemed to get an immense enjoyment from insulting him and spurring him to retaliate. (“what is that gibberish you keep sprouting, you’re completely butchering the Latin and don’t even get me started on the ancient greek…”)

First, Loki’s presence was mildly irritating (the word 'boundaries' seemed a foreign concept to the god).

Then alarmingly quickly, it just became another quirk of Harry's life. Soon Harry was automatically reaching for a second mug of coffee when he boiled the kettle, just on the off chance he would see a flash of green at the corner of his eye.

Make no mistake, Harry didn’t particularly like him. Loki was demanding and rude and elusive, and took offence at the smallest of things. He was frighteningly clever and endlessly curious, and just a tiny bit terrifying when that restless glint flitted across his eyes.

But then, the arrangement kind of worked. By some unspoken agreement, neither of them mentioned their pasts. Loki didn’t volunteer any information, and Harry didn’t press him, so Loki gave him the same courtesy. It was refreshing. In that little house, they were just Harry and Loki, and nothing else mattered.

Of course, one could only run from the past for so long.
Fury’s expression had a grim sort of satisfaction on his face as he gave the order to move out, eyes on the small image of live footage on his tablet. Two figures emerging from the remains of a small house on the outskirts of the city could just be seen from the satellite image. One laughed at something the other had said, and in turn they shoved him back half-heartedly, hand lingering on the other's shoulder. Fury's eyes bulged. If this wasn’t evidence that Harry was an enemy of the state, Fury didn’t know what was. He wasn’t about to wait for Harry to start blowing up New York to take him out.

And now he finally, had an excuse.

About a mile away from Harry’s position, airships were closing in, the sky above darkening with sudden storm clouds. A single figure darted in amongst the clouds, a flash of red illuminated by the lightning. As the first crack of thunder rippled across the sky, Loki glanced up.

“What is it?” Harry asked, seeing his expression.

Loki grimaced, “do you remember what I told you about my ‘brother’?”

“Only that he’s the god of…” Harry stopped. He looked up, “you’re kidding.”

“I wish I was”

“He’s here?”

“Apparently”

Suddenly Harry grinned, “wicked”.

“I…what?”

It was at that point that a figure dropped from the sky and landed with a resounding BOOM a few feet away. They stumbled backwards at the impact.

“LOKI!” A deep, roaring voice echoed out.

“He doesn’t sound very happy.” Harry said blithely.

“Believe me, this is him in a good mood.”

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE, BROTHER?”

The figure in red stepped forward, and Harry caught a glimpse of him for the first time. Longish-blonde hair, rugged features, incredibly powerfully built, a magnificent hammer in his hand. He couldn’t look any more different from Loki.

“The cell wasn’t exactly to my taste” Loki replied coolly, “I thought I’d do some travelling, see the nine realms…”

“ENOUGH”

Harry winced. Did he really have to shout all the time?

“This ridiculous venture ends now.” Thor said firmly, “the All-Father has degree it so…”
“Ah, dear father” Loki sighed, “he never learns…”

“Do not speak of our father that way”

“Your father” Loki snarled, “do not forget we are in no way related.”

“We grew up together. We played, together”

“And yet always in the shadow of your greatness, the mighty Thor…”

“Girls, girls…” Harry stepped between them, “whilst this is all fascinating, I get the strong impression this argument has occurred on numerous occasions, so I’ll save you the trouble of finishing it to it’s epic conclusion.”

Thor was blinking at him, “I’m sorry, who are you?”

“Harry. Friend of your brothers. Well, I say friend…”

Thor looked at Loki incredulously, “you have a friend?”

“Always the tone of surprise…”

Harry snorted.

“Well, um, Harry” Thor said a little uncomfortably, “you shouldn’t be here.”

“I’m sorry, last time I checked it was you guys who broke into my house.”

Loki raised his eyebrows, “the house that you blew up with your nifty shield charm?”

Harry waved his hand dismissively, “technicalities. So as flattered as I am to have two Gods in the remnants of my living room, I can’t help but wonder what in Merlin’s name you’re both doing here.”

“My brother has committed a serious crime” Thor said gravely, “I am to return him to Asgard to complete his sentence in confinement.”


“Harry, you should leave whilst you still can. If you are truly a friend of my brother’s, it would pain me to see you hurt.” Thor glanced fleetingly at the sky.

Harry’s eyes narrowed, “Why? What’s coming?”

“Oh Thor you didn’t.” Loki said.

“Answer me” Harry demanded.

Just then a booming voice echoed out through the storm and Harry heard the sound of jet engines roaring overhead.

“Would the man who identifies as Harry please step away from the accused. I repeat, we have the area surrounded, step away from the accused.”

Harry looked at Loki, “accused?”

“Humans don’t like me much.”
“I can’t imagine why.”

“This is our final warning. If you do not comply we will be forced to engage hostilities on your position…”

“Alright, alright” Harry put a few feet between him and Loki, “there, is that agreeable?”

The voice didn’t answer, but above him Harry saw one of the jets descend through the clouds and touch the ground a little way off. Men in black began pouring out, and Harry groaned. Not this again.

Just then, the voice from the skies appeared behind him, this time without the sonorous amplifying.

“Loki of Asgard, you are hereby under arrest for your crimes against the people of Earth. You have the right to remain silent, but anything you say…”

“Oh please”

Harry spun round just as the image if Loki shimmered and disappeared in front of the agent, and suddenly there were three, four, seven Loki’s all standing there grinning his signature smirk.

Harry whistled. “Man, you have got to teach me that trick”

The nearest Loki winked at Harry.

“Stand down Loki” Thor was speaking again, “this doesn’t have to get messy.”

“Oh brother dear” the God of Mischief smirked, “it’s almost like you don’t know me at all.”

Then Loki twirled his wrist in an elegant gesture and the agent who had spoken was sent flying backwards, crumpling into his colleagues and scattering them like a pack of cards. Cries of outrage emanated from all around them. Thor looked furious. Harry glared at Loki.

“And you wonder why they don't like you.”

Loki shrugged, “his face was annoying.”

“Right, that’s enough” Thor marched over and grabbed Loki by the arm, “we’re going home.”

“I don’t have it.” Loki spat, "Now let go of me!"

An ancient looking spear materialised in Loki’s hand and suddenly the brothers were fighting, exchanging blows faster than the eye could see. Thor was a sight to behold, the mighty swing of Mjölnir causing the very air to tremble in its wake. Loki was like a wraith, darting and flitting around his larger opponent with unparalleled speed and agility. It was impossible to judge who had the upper hand. And in that moment, they truly looked like Gods.

Harry could only stand there for a moment, mesmerised, and wondering who the hell he was supposed to be helping out of the two, when there he heard the almost inaudible click of a safety trigger being removed from behind him. He whipped round just in time to see twenty or so men in black surrounding him, guns aimed steadily at his forehead, detached expressions on their faces.

One stepped forward. “To the man identified as Harry: you are hereby under arrest for with consorting with enemies of the state and harbouring unregistered abilities with hostile intentions.”

Harry blinked, “come again?”
“If you co-operate, you will not be harmed.”

“Not what I asked.”

“Do you agree to the terms?”

“You haven’t *told* me anything!” Harry exclaimed, “I don’t even know who you are!”

“We are not your enemy, Harry. Do you agree to the terms?”

“Do I really have a choice?”

From the corner of his eye, Harry saw Thor knock Loki to the ground. His spear flew from his hand and Loki let out an involuntary gasp of pain. The agents around them retreated hastily. Harry’s gaze hardened.

“If you’ll excuse me a moment gentlemen” he said curtly, “you may be content to ignore the Gods fighting not three feet away from you, but I am not.”

Just as Thor raised his hammer, Harry flung out his palm and cast a powerful barrier charm between them. It was a slight rendition of the protego spell that he’d tweaked a century or so back. There was a thundering GONG as the hammer rebounded, and the shield lit up in a flurry of gold upon impact. Everyone turned to stare at Harry.

“You stopped my hammer.”

“You stopped his hammer?”

The Gods spoke simultaneously.

“Do I have your attention now?” Harry said.

Silence.

“Good, now…” Harry walked over and offered Loki a hand. After a moment, the God took it and Harry pulled him up. “Shall we try this again? Without any of the threats or the guns or the magic hammers.”

He glared at Thor, who had the decency to look a little sheepish.

Around them, it appeared the agents were quietly freaking out. *This wasn’t part of the plan.* It was supposed to be a simple capture and secure. No one expected this Harry would be in league with *Loki.* And as they watched the stranger conversing so easily with the two Gods, their eyes bulging at Harry’s hand on Loki’s shoulder, one of them panicked. His finger squeezed down on the trigger and there was an ear-splitting CRACK as the bullet shot through the air and found it’s mark in Loki’s chest.

With that one shot, the peace shattered.

Loki’s face contorted as he stumbled backwards, a gasp of pain escaping his lips. Thor let out a yell of fury and caught his brother.

And Harry…well. Harry went utterly rigid and turned very slowly to face the agent who had fired the bullet. His eyes were murderous, almost aglow with an ancient power. And when he spoke, every agent cringed at the trembling fury in his voice.
“You should not have shot my friend.”

Chapter End Notes

I know. I'm horrible, leaving you hanging like that. Fear not, the next chapter is well on its way...
A test of character

Chapter Summary

“Clint no!” Natalie’s cry burst out a warning too late.

And quicker than the eye could see, he nocked an arrow and let it fly straight at Harry. There was no time to dodge, no time to muster a spell or put his wards back up…Stupid.

He had played right into their hands.

Chapter Notes

Here it is! Sorry for leaving you all like that, you can't resist a little suspense here and there :)

I was impressed how many of you were guessing some of the plot, but there might just be some twists and turns along the way to keep you on your feet!

Thanks again for all the support, enjoy :)

HP and Avengers are still not mine, in case you were wondering.

“Worthiness should not be defined by the whims of magic weapons. Rise, my son, and let the hammer be damned. Rise and remember the hero that you are.” — Jason Aaron

Teleportation, they had said. Mutant, they thought.

This was something else entirely.

Harry moved like a storm in their midst, a small figure wielding abilities beyond comprehension. The onslaught of bullets suddenly transformed impossibly into a flock of birds, their weapons burned hot in their grasp and the agents dropped them with a cry, a shock wave rippled out leaving toads where men were standing, the ground suddenly turned sticky and sluggish beneath their feet, the very earth shifting at his will. Even the elements obeyed his command - wind and water and great spouts of fire that took the shapes of strange mystical creatures. And everywhere great multitudes of light - reds and blues and purples and ambers that streaked across the sky like fireworks, a kaleidoscope of stupefy and impedimenta and expelliarmus and confringo and reducto that left behind a trail of unconscious and somewhat stunned agents.

It was unlike anything they had ever seen before. And it terrified them.

“Hill, I need you to send out a distress call now. Level 7.”
“Level 7? But that’s-”

“I know who it is!” Fury growled, “just do it! As many of the team as we can spare.”

“Yes sir.”

Within the bubble of calm at the centre of the chaos, Thor was staring at Harry with an astonished, almost wary expression.

“What are you?”

Harry paused where he was sending off an oak tree to go chasing after some agents who had gotten too close.

“Would you be disappointed if I said human?”

From his position on the ground, Loki gave a half snort. “He’s not lying brother. Of course, whether or not he’s mortal remains to be seen…”

“Then why are you attacking SHIELD?” Thor demanded, “they protect people like you.”

“Protect!?” Harry sent a blasting charm behind him where the agents were rallying for another attack. They flew a good fifty feet in the air, instantly knocked unconscious when they hit the ground. Harry paused - okay maybe he was overpowering things a tad too far. They were only muggles after all. He scowled, “If stalking and shooting at me is how they protect people, I dread to even think what their offensive looks like.”

The two glanced up fleetingly as a rain of bullets rebounded off Harry’s shield. Surrounding agents cried out as the very same shots fired back towards them.

“And are you not proving them right?” Thor said, tearing his gaze away, “if they weren’t afraid of you then, they certainly will be now.”

“Yeah, well, they should have thought of that before they shot your brother. Doesn’t that count for anything?!”

Thor’s jaw tightened, “my brother has a lot to answer for. The people of this world have been done a great wrong.”

“From where I’m standing, so has Loki.” Harry retorted.

“Loki is not all that he seems, magician.”

And then Harry pushed his wet hair off his forehead to reveal the scar. The blinding light of his spells reflected fiercely in his eyes.

“Neither am I.”

Just then there was the shrieking wail of another jet engine and a second, smaller plane appeared in the air above them. Numerous figures began dropping from the sky around him, and Harry quickly checked his wards were still in place. A faint golden shimmer glinted reassuringly around him. He noticed the regular agents were retreating to make way for these new arrivals, and seemed only too happy to get out of Harry’s range.
Harry’s gaze narrowed.

All at once the air cleared and the storm seemed to dissipate around them, and Harry was left staring at the oddest assortment of people standing in front of him. A large green…man took up primary attention at the forefront of the group, flanked by a guy looking frighteningly patriotic in red and blue, and an archer Harry distantly recognised. *Ah yes, the assassin,* Harry thought dryly, *nice to finally meet you.* Two others joined the group, Thor and…was that Natalie? So *this* was who she worked for. Harry wasn’t exactly surprised; he had been an Unspeakable for a while back home: the life of the secret agent was easy to recognise once you had lived it yourself.

“You know, Red”, Harry called, “when you said you blew things up for a living, I didn’t think you meant it literally.”

“And I never realised your interest in science went far beyond the theoretical side.” She replied evenly.

Harry couldn’t help it, even now, he grinned. “Ah, but magic is just science we do not understand. Although, I’ve always thought it was the other way around myself.”

“All right, enough chit-chat.” The guy with the shield stepped forward, “Look, Harry, is it? We’re not the bad guys here. But if you continue to fight us, you’ll be making an enemy you really don’t want to make. Trust me.”

“So far you seem to be doing that pretty well all by yourself.” Harry remarked, “I don’t take too kindly to people stalking me and shooting my friends.”

The archer’s face seemed to spasm a moment on the word ‘friend’, and he glanced at Loki hatefully, who was stumbling to his feet with a hand pressed to his side. Harry quickly caught Loki round the waist as the man swayed on his feet.

The Captain spoke again, “Hand Loki over, come quietly with us, and no one else needs to get hurt.”

Harry’s gaze hardened, “forgive me, but that’s not really my choice to make now, is it?” He turned to Loki and his voice dropped, “can you get yourself out of here?”

The God looked at him strangely, “why are you helping me, magician?”

“He blinked slowly, “human weapons are meddlesome, but not lethal to us. All of my magic, however, is focussed keeping the bullet from hitting the subclavian vein. I have not the capacity to teleport.”

Harry cursed under his breath, ”and if I disappear, they’ll all freak and blame your brother.”

“Just do as they say” Loki said blithely, ignoring the ‘brother’ statement, “it’s not like I can’t escape any time that’s convenient.”

Harry looked unconvinced.

“You can’t run forever, magician. SHIELD may be overbearing, but they control this world. If you want to stay here, you must learn to adapt.”

Harry sighed. He looked at the Captain, “Alright, but he needs a healer, not a prison cell.”
The big green thing snorted, though it sounded more like a growl, and lumbered forward. Upon reaching Harry’s wards, the creature yelped and stumbled backwards. Harry rolled his eyes and reluctantly brought them down with a wave of his hand. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught the Captain staring at him incredulously. The green man ambled towards him, and Harry found himself suddenly feeling very small. His hand was still on his wand as he carefully handed Loki over. As soon as he left Harry’s grasp, it was like a secret signal had been given that made it safe for agents to rush in and clamp down handcuffs on Loki’s wrists and a ridiculous mask across his face. Loki flinched.

“Careful!” Harry snapped.

The green creature sniffed and threw Loki over his shoulder, before leaping straight over Harry’s head and landing an impossible distance away.

Harry turned back to the group, “So now what? Do I get handcuffs too?”

“No” the archer was speaking, Fury's voice in his ear, “you get one of these.”

“Clint no!” Natalie’s cry burst out a warning too late.

And quicker than the eye could see, he nocked an arrow and let it fly straight at Harry. There was no time to dodge, no time to muster a spell or put his wards back up…Stupid. He had played right into their hands.

Harry could only watch with growing dread as he watched his death come speeding towards him for the second time, his thoughts a panicked mass of no, damn it, not now…I’m not finished here…

The arrow froze in midair.

Time seemed to stand still.

Something, or rather, someone, had come between them.

And from across the distance, Loki stared at the small girl who had materialised, someone he never thought he’d see again. Her name was but a whisper on his lips, but it seemed to tremble in the air.

...“Hela?”

Harry stared at the figure in front of him. The girl was young, a child almost, but her face held a kind of timeless quality that made it impossible to guess her age. Her eyes were sharp and deductive, underpinned with something ancient. Haunted. They reminded him somewhat of Loki’s.

“Well met, Harry James Potter” she said, and her voice was that of the high, trilling tones of a child. It gave her words an ominous quality.

Harry started, “how do you know my name?”

“How do I know anything?” she said dryly, “I am the watcher, the guardian, the open at the close.”

Harry’s eyes widened, “You’re Death.”

“One version of her, anyway. Your world’s death was frightfully dull. All evil cackling and lurking under bridges. Talk about living up to the cliche…”
Harry got the impression she was teasing him somewhat.

“It is nice to finally meet you though. The famous Master of Death…it’s not every day you get someone who can outwit the powers of life and death itself.”

“Believe me, that was never part of the plan.”

“Of course it wasn’t. That was the critical part. You can’t go looking for power like that.”

Harry stifled a groan. *More riddles.* “So, don’t get me wrong, I’m grateful you stopped the arrow, but-”

“You don’t know why. Death has never intervened before.”

Harry nodded.

The girl sighed, “It’s because of him.”

She pointed, and Harry followed her gaze to see Loki staring at them both.

“Loki?”

“You saved his life.”

“Well, I wouldn’t exactly go that far…”

“Nevertheless, you stood by him when no one else would. That takes conviction.”

Harry blinked, “Thank you?”

“A life-debt has been payed. Your actions today will not be forgotten, Harry Potter.”

Then a faint tremble shimmered through the air, and her image began to fade.


And the girl looked at the God of Mischief with an ancient, helpless sort of longing.

“Because he’s my father.”

And then she was gone.

When Harry looked again at the Avengers, he saw Thor opening and closing his mouth in a very good impression of a fish.

“Was that…she…you…”

Harry ignored him.

He glared at the archer, “you shot me.”

Without consciously thinking it, his magic swarmed up and performed a subconscious switching spell on his bow, so agent Barton now clutched a lump of rock. The bow clattered to the ground next to Harry, who picked it up. At the same time, the arrow that had been meant for Harry once again rose into the air, and suddenly there were two, ten, *hundreds* of arrows all trembling in mid air, straining against Harry's grip. A wave of Harry's hand, and they all pivoted, narrowing their paths to
the one who had fired the first. Clint took an involuntary step back, eyes widening. Harry's eyes were burning a brilliant steely green. He clenched his fist. With a shudder, every arrow shot towards the archer.

This time Clint actually stumbled, mind going blank with panic as he saw the impossible array of arrows shooting towards him. He raised a hand to cover his face, bracing himself for impact...

Silence. He opened his eyes, and froze. Every single arrow had stopped about an inch from his body, quivering as though straining to break through and pierce his skin. Arrow after arrow stopped around him, like they were hitting an invisible wall, until Clint found himself standing in a cage of deadly points.

“So much for talking, huh?” Harry's voice had gone cold. The arrows pressed closer.

The archer swallowed. He didn’t dare move.

It was then that the Avengers broke from their stupor and actually remembered right, we're supposed to be helping fight this guy, and then without a conscious decision from either side suddenly they were fighting, a mass of frenzied spells and enchantments that lit the sky up like fireworks as the Avengers attacked before they knew what they were doing. Half of the time they didn’t even know who they were fighting - Harry in the centre, weaving a web of magic into the earth and sky, blasting agent after agent away with a careless flick of his wand, leaving behind a trail of unconscious, oblivitated, stunned, and oddly enough, transfigured agents in his path; Steve as he struggled to get past the (dare be believe it) trees that suddenly sprang to Harry's aid, Natasha as she attempted to cut down the cage of arrows trapping Clint, Loki as he struggled to get away from the Hulk, icy swirls of frost billowing from his palms, Thor as he tried to defend him…it was chaos.

Then absurdly, the air erupted with the sound of Back in Black as a small, red and gold like figure appeared in the sky. Harry stared: was that…a Muggle? Flying?!

The Captain glared at the flying figure, “About time Tony!” he yelled at the sky, “We could use a little help down here!”

...Tony?

The robot figure landed with a thud, and his mask lifted up to reveal a very familiar face.

“Honestly” Tony Stark drawled, “I leave you lot alone for five minutes and…”

He stopped as he caught sight of Harry’s face.

“Harry?” He said incredulously, “what the ruddy hell are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same question.”

“Well” he gestured vaguely to the suit in a kind of ta-da! motion, "I’m Iron Man.”

"You know, funnily enough, I had figured out that much for myself” Harry said dryly, "and for the record I still say it's a stupid name. There's no iron in that suit."

Tony looked offended, "Its a brilliant name-"

"It's a provocative romantic image and you know it" Harry's eyes twinkled, "it's obviously some sort of gold-titanium alloy reinforced with carbon nanotubes."
"Okay wait," Steve held up his hand, "you guys know each other?"

Tony’s lips twitched into a hint of a smile. He turned to the Avengers, “Does someone want to explain what the fuck’s going on?”

“This is the Harry, Stark” The Captain said curtly, still looking between them a little uncertainly, “our target?”

“Target? Harry’s no more a target than I am.” Tony said firmly, “so I would appreciate it if you would all stop trying to blow him up.”

“He’s dangerous” Barton insisted. His scowl could be seen through a small gap they had made in the arrow cage.

“He’s my friend.”

“We have orders” the Captain said stubbornly.

“And how often do we actually follow them?” Tony shot back, “guys, come on. He saved my life.”

Harry looked up sharply. His eyes met with Tony’s, and he knew he was thinking of that other night in the party, as Tony fell to pieces under the weight of it all. Thinking about what might have happened if Harry had not happened to walk into that bar that night.

The confession seemed to mollify the Avengers somewhat, but they were still looking at him in suspicion.

Of course, it was in that moment (as Thor and Banner were still at each other’s throats) that Thor got a little too enthusiastic with Mjölnir and the great hammer rebounded off the Hulk and was sent flying towards them. More specifically, straight towards Natasha. She froze.

Harry didn’t think.

Dropping his wand, he focussed on the hammer and pulled with everything he had, feeling his magic rise up around him, like a wandless accio, throwing out his hand and running towards Natasha…

The air shuddered, the very fabrics of reality trembling as one ancient power recognised another. Then, improbably, the hammer swerved. Harry leapt the final distance and his hand closed on Mjölnir in midair, plucking it from it’s path like he would a snitch. The world seemed to shimmer around him. Then his feet hit the ground and Harry let out a breath.

Mjölnir was still held firmly in his hand.

Harry lifted it up and studied it curiously. It was a lot lighter than it looked. The weapon felt almost buyout in his hand, and looking closely, Harry saw it was pulsing slightly with glowing runes. The hammer almost seemed alive. Harry grinned: fascinating.

Absorbed as he was, Harry never noticed it had gone utterly silent around him. He glanced up. Everyone was staring at him, mouths agape as though he had just announced he was the messiah or something. It was almost comical. Thor in particular looked fit to pass out from shock.

Harry raised an eyebrow, flipping the hammer casually in his hand with a natural ease.

“Was it something I said?”
A foolish, reckless loyalty

Chapter Summary

“I could turn all of them into frogs” Harry offered.

Tony open his mouth, then closed it. “Actually not a bad idea.”

This time Steve did hit his head against the wall.

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry I haven't had time to reply to all of your lovely comments, but thank you to everyone who's taken the time to leave some feedback and know that they are received with much love!

A little more Harry-Avenger-bonding time in this chapter (much to Fury's displeasure) so hope you enjoy!

Happy reading :)

“I don't care a damn about men who are loyal to the people who pay them, to organizations...I don't think even my country means all that much. There are many countries in our blood, aren't there, but only one person. Would the world be in the mess it is if we were loyal to love and not to countries?”
— Graham Greene, Our Man in Havana

Harry was used to being stared at. The boy-who-lived, saviour-of-the-wizarding-world, legendary Unspeakable, a man lost in time…honestly, it was like destiny had never even heard the term overkill.

But this? Harry had never been stared at with that much astonished awe. Frankly, it was a little unnerving. Even Loki seemed to have frozen, his eyes wide with a horrible sort of understanding. It was bizarre. After all, Harry thought as he handed it casually back to Thor, it was only a hammer.

The Avengers ignored Fury’s voice as it yelled in their ears, demanding to know what the hell was going on and why no one was fighting anymore and why the fuck was Harry boarding the jet with them?!

SHIELD was in uproar, the agents gaped at their heroes as the target walked among them unchallenged, his strides matching theirs like he was one of them. It was absurd and wrong and impossible and…
Natasha reached up and yanked the earpiece irritatedly out of her ear. Around her, many of them were doing the same. Screw protocol: one did not simply make an enemy of someone worthy of bloody Mjölnir. Even the Captain had grudgingly backed down, though he could still be heard muttering something about orders as they boarded the jet.

“So Harry…” Tony said as the jet pulled away, “I don’t suppose along with failing to mention you’re a powerhouse on legs, which is infinitely cool by the way, you happened to have any, oh I don’t know, super-lightning-powers in your arsenal?”

Harry cocked an eyebrow, “If that’s a round-about way of asking me out, I think your dirty talk is in dire need of improvement.”

Loki choked, and it took them all a moment to realise he was laughing.

“I think” Natasha said, struggling to hide a laugh, “Tony is asking how the hell you managed to lift Mjölnir without spontaneously combusting or something dramatic.”

“Myerma?” Harry raised an eyebrow, “what’s that, a salad?”

Thor groaned suddenly, “I do not believe what I am hearing.”

“Mjölnir.” Steve corrected, “is the legendary hammer of Thor Odinson. Only he has ever been known to wield it.”

“I’m not going to steal it if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Both Thor, Tony and Steve all threw their hands up in the air in exasperation.

“Harry, I don’t think you get it” Natasha said a little more gently, “no one else can wield it.”

“But I…oh” Harry’s eyes widened, “is that why I’m off the ‘people to kill list’ for the moment?”

“For good, if I’ve got anything to do with it.” Tony muttered.

Abruptly Thor stood, and Harry found himself reaching for his wand instinctively; this was a God after all, and he stood an incredibly imposing figure. Add in the fact Harry just compromised his only-I-am-worthy-mojo, which couldn’t be easy to bear with good grace. Then, startling him, Thor clasped Harry’s shoulder in a death grip that was probably supposed to be reassuring.

“Know this, young Harry; I do not know why or how you were found worthy to lift such a treasure, but know that you have proven your calibre. I give you my word as an Asgardian that no harm shall come to you whilst there is breath in my lungs. Thine enemies shall be mine enemies, and my friend shall be thy friend. It would be an honour to fight alongside you.”

Harry’s thoughts were whirling, and for a moment he could only gape thinking what the hell he could have done to deserve such a declaration. Then propriety kicked in and he placed his hand on Thor’s shoulder in a mirror gesture.

“I thank you, Thor Odinson, and accept your oath, so mote it be.”

A faint golden light illuminated them for a moment, then was gone.

Thor tilted his head. “It is curious. You speak with the tongue of rituals of old.”

“Where I come from, the wording of things is pretty significant” Harry said wryly, “you saw some of what I can do out on the field, one little mispronunciation might had turned you all into toads.”
“Is that what it is?” Steve spoke up, “spells?”

And Harry smirked, “come now, a magician never reveals all his secrets.”

“Try telling that to Fury” Natasha remarked, “he’s already pissed at you for, you know, not existing.”

“And that’s another thing!” Tony exclaimed, “JARVIS couldn’t find any record of you, like at all, care to explain that?”

“Parallel dimension” Harry said, “I wasn’t kidding when I said I wasn’t from around here. I guess in this world I technically don’t exist.”

To his surprise, Tony looked ecstatic. “As in a real, hypothetical self-contained separate reality co-existing with our own? As in an alternate reality, a multiverse network, an actual fourth dimension on a spatial axes…”

“Hmm, I’ve always thought of it as a series of planes of existence where the laws of nature differ, allowing magical phenomena of some sort on some planes.” Harry said blithely.

The rest of the group stared at him like he had sprouted another head.

Tony, on the other hand, looked like christmas had come early, “the actual quantum-mechanical hypothesis of parallel universes! Separated from each other by a single quantum event, meaning…oh fuck I need to test this. JARVIS! Cancel everything this week. The possibilities involved…”

“Alright, ALRIGHT spare me the gory details,” Steve Rodgers threw his hands up in the air, “one sassy genius at a time please. Since when are you two so chummy anyway?”

Harry and Tony, who had been talking avidly, shared a glance.

“Martinis are an excellent icebreaker” Harry said at last with a smirk.

On Harry’s other side, Natasha rolled her eyes, “so what, you just happened to stumble across the third richest man on the planet at some party?”

“As it happens, I was running from Robin Hood over there” Harry inclined his head towards Clint, who glowered, “cheers for that, by the way.”

“Wait you ran?” Tony said in disbelief, “you could have blitzed his ass into the next century!”

Harry raised an eyebrow, “Believe it or not, I was actually trying to avoid the whole fighting thing.”

“Could have fooled me.”

“Are you asking to be turned into a frog? Because the idea is getting sorely tempting.”

“Can you do that?” Tony looked fascinated.

Harry smirked, “do you want a demonstration?”

“Okay no, no” Steve interrupted quickly, looking like he wanted to bang his head against the wall. “No impossible magic tricks on my jet.”

Tony pouted, “buzzkill.”
“Don’t buzzkill me Mr-following-isn’t-really-my-style, do you have any idea just how much shit we’ll be in when we get back?”

“I could turn all of them into frogs” Harry offered.

Tony open his mouth, then closed it. “Actually not a bad idea.”

This time Steve did hit his head against the wall.

The rest of the flight passed in a similar manner, and Harry found himself becoming more and more at ease with the strange group of people he had stumbled across. Of course, Clint still looked like he wanted to hit something as he lurked in the back-most corner, glaring suspiciously at Harry, but Harry figured he could deal with that later. He had enough enemies as it was.

Every so often Harry would glance over at Loki, bolted to the seat and flanked by two blank-faced agents. His hands were bound, and the mask was still across his mouth. His eyes, however, were as sharp and cutting as ever as they regarded Harry. It was a puzzling look, almost as though Loki couldn’t work out what to make of him. Harry frowned as he saw the blood still pooling out of the bullet wound from before; surely Loki would have healed himself by now? He knew he wouldn’t be allowed near the God, but he wasn’t just going to sit there…

Quietly, so no one would hear, Harry muttered a quick wandless “Vulnera Sanentur” in Loki’s direction. It was a spell Harry remembered Snape using on Malfoy that horrible day he had cast Sectumsempera on the Slytherin. It wasn’t something he was ever likely to forget. There was a sharp intake of breath from the God of Mischief as the spell took effect. Then something strange happened. The air suddenly flared hot between them, Loki’s image seemed to flicker, and Harry’s spell rushed back to him in a tangle of energy.

Almost as though there was no wound to heal.

Loki’s eyes flickered down to the blood staining his clothes and then back to Harry. His green eyes seemed to pierce right through him, revealing something that lurked beneath the smirks and flairs. Something both calm and dangerously restless, endless and unmistakably dark. A challenge, a warning, a subtle threat to back off. Say something and you'll regret it.

Harry’s only tell was the slightest flicker of an eyebrow. Loki's gaze burned with something unreadable, and then he looked pointedly away just as Natasha turned towards them. Huh.

There was no doubting it; Loki wasn't injured. He was faking. He wanted to be caught. Question was...why?

About midway through the journey, a man approached Harry that he didn’t recognise, introducing himself as Bruce Banner. When Harry looked mildly confused, the man sighed.

“You may remember me as the big green thing who ran headfirst into your shield.”

Harry’s expression brightened, “Oh! That’s some pretty impressive transfiguration you’ve got going on there. I’ve never seen a human transformation so extreme in energy-to-mass conversion.”
Bruce blinked, “you’ve seen this before?”

Without missing a beat, Harry’s image flickered and a magnificent bird of flame and ancient beauty hovered in his place. Then Bruce blinked and Harry was in front of him again.

“What was that?” He asked, awed.

“We call them animagus transformations” Harry explained, “what you saw was a phoenix, which is the form mine has taken more recently. It changes every so often.”

What Harry didn’t say, what that he suspected the change in form had been a result from his miraculous ability to quite literally regenerate from the ashes. He had rather missed the stag form, but then at least he still had his patronus.

Bruce was still staring at him, “incredible.”

“Well Harry, if you’re quite done breaking the rules of physics for the time being, I suggest you buckle the fuck up, because we’ve got some welcome party waiting for us down there.”

Harry looked up at Tony’s voice. His jaw dropped. *Holy shit Muggles were geniuses.* It was a massive floating… thing. A ship, an aircraft, four massive propeller engines keeping it aloft. *If Mr Weasley had seen this…*

He shook his head. He had more pressing things to worry about. More precisely, the hoards of men in black swarming across the landing strip, all armed, all aiming at the jet as Captain America expertly brought her to land. Harry stood, slotting his usual holly and phoenix feather wand into the invisible wand holster on the inside of his arm. His rucksack casually slide onto his shoulder. Right; time to face the thunder.

As he turned, Harry blinked at the sight of all the Avengers flanking him on either side, weapons out, expressions determined, clearly ready for a fight. Even Barton had taken his position at the back, though he clearly wasn’t happy about it.

The Captain nodded curtly, “Go ahead, we’ve got your back.”

Harry was still processing this as the hangar opened and light flooded in to greet them.

An incredulous voice broke the silence, “What the fuck?”

“Director Fury, I can explain…” Steve stepped forward.

“Explain?! Explain how the target I specifically ordered you to capture using *lethal* means if necessary is standing there apparently of his own free will?” The man looked beyond angry, “When I told you to bring him in, that was *not* a fucking licence to let him walk all over my organisation!”

Harry opened his mouth, but someone else beat him to it.

“He’s not a threat!” It was Natalie, or *Natasha*, he corrected inwardly. Her voice was cool and fierce.

“Yeah? Tell that to the agents I’m scraping off the floor after his little light show in New York”

“Because you forced his hand you clotpole!” Tony snapped, “if you ordered a strike on any of us do you really think we would just sit there twiddling our thumbs?”
“I…clotpole?!” Fury repeated incredulously.

“Sir” It was Steve, always trying for peace, “just because you don’t know everything about him doesn’t give you the right to hunt him down.”

“An intelligence organisation that fears intelligence” Tony drawled, “I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again. Historically, not awesome.”

“That does not give you the right to bring him onto my ship and compromise the lives of everyone here!” Fury growled.

“I’m not-” Harry tried to speak up.

“I’m sorry, wasn’t that the idea in bringing me here in the first place?” Bruce inserted placidly.

“Doctor Banner, that was different…”

“You were going to bring him here anyway, you hypocrite,” Natasha snapped, “what does it matter if he’s not chained up like a criminal?”

“Guys…” Harry started, but got cut off again.

“I made the call director, please respect that. There’s things you need to know before you do something you’ll regret.” Steve said firmly.

And the director of SHIELD glowered, “You can explain in full once that freak is safety locked up with Loki. Agents, arrest Harry and be done with it.”

The men in black surged forward, and Harry prepared to disapparate when, once again, someone else stepped in. A booming voice came from behind them.

“You lay a hand on Harry and you will regret it, human.”

Thor looked tall and regal and powerful and seriously pissed as he stepped in front of Harry, Mjölnir in his hand. Fury took an involuntary step back (which Harry couldn’t really blame him for - Thor looked every inch the avenging God that you did not want to cross).

“Stand down, Avenger. This isn’t your fight.”

“No, it’s yours. And I am telling you with the utmost discretion to kindly back the fuck down before I see just how fast this hammer can go.”

Everyone stared at Thor.

“Did he just say fuck?” Tony said incredulously.

Thor ignored him; “I warn you not to cross me on this, Fury”

There was a moment of painful silence where the two stared each other down. Then Fury made a sound of frustration.

“At ease, gentlemen. Go back to your stations.” The men dispersed.

Thor nodded, “A wise choice”

Fury shook his head as he stared at the Avengers, at his heroes, standing and defending this complete
stranger. It had not even been an hour, and Harry had their loyalty.

“What is wrong with you all? Why are you doing this?”

And then before anyone could blink Thor lightly tossed Mjölnir in Harry’s direction.

“Catch.”

On a reflex, Harry flung up a hand and caught the mighty hammer before it could hit his face.

“You can’t just throw a weapon made in the heart of a dying star at my face with no warning you know”. Harry complained half-heartedly. “It could have broken my nose or something.”

Fury opened his mouth, then closed it. There was a moment of silence.

“Alright, come inside the lot of you.” Fury said at last, running a hand tiredly across his eyes, “I’m getting way to old for this job…”

The moment Fury left, the Avengers turned to face Harry with small, triumphant smirks on their faces. Thor, in particular, looked way too pleased with himself.

“Why did you do that?” Harry demanded.

“I told you” Steve said, as though it was obvious, “we’ve got your back.”

”You don’t even know me.”

“I know you’re brave, and stupid, and a complete dork” Natasha said.

“I know you’re smart” Tony continued, “almost, dare I say, as smart as me, and that’s saying a lot. I know you make a mean Martini, and that you can make me laugh, and that you were willing to help out a guy you barely knew.”

“And I know that you would risk your life for my brother, a man you also barely knew, just because he got shot on your account.” Thor said quietly, “by my standards, that in itself makes you worthy to lift the hammer.”

“So suck it up” Steve finished with a grin, “because I think that’s enough to be going on with, don’t you?”

Harry swallowed, and looked at each of them in turn, people who hadn’t hesitated to defend him against their own. It was a reckless and foolish loyalty, the kind of which he hadn’t seen in a very long time. It made him think of a small redheaded boy with dirt on his nose, a girl with big busy hair and her head buried in a book, and a devastating battle where he gave his life to save those he loved.

Yes. He thought as he followed them inside. That was enough.
It's an awfully lonely existence

Chapter Summary

It’s easy being the bad guy, isn’t it? No one to disappoint, no one to hurt you when they let you down.

Chapter Notes

I know it’s been while, and apologies for that, things have been pretty crazy at my end :) Thank you for all your continued support, it does wonders for me getting these updates up! Less action in this one, more feels. Feedback, as always, is much appreciated. Happy reading!

“Outcasts, callused from being in exile for too long, learn to thrive on being the hated; the attention and infamy of our actions fuel us to become antiheroes. Too often do we forget: we risk self-destruction if we fail to follow what we know is right; our talents too often become misplaced, misdirected, misguided from what could have been something wonderful.” — Mike Norton, Fighting For Redemption

Fury stared at him hard.

“Experiment?”

“Nope.”

“Alien?”

“With a British accent?”

Tony snorted, quickly disguising it as a cough when Fury glared at him.

“Mutant?” He pressed.

“Um…no.”

“God?” This was getting desperate now.

“Do I look like a God to you?”

Fury’s eyes flashed, “alright cut the crap, hotshot. It's a simple enough question."
"On the contrary; I don't recall you actually asking me a question at all." Harry said blithely, "You just started firing accusations at me and then had the audacity to take offence when I call bullshit.

The Avengers stared at Harry: no one talked to the director like that. Not if you wanted to keep all your limbs intact. In was then, as Fury seemed to consider whether or not to leap across the table and strangle Harry, that a quiet, placid voice spoke from the back of the room.

“Well it’s obvious isn’t it?” Bruce Banner stepped forward, “the wands, the spells, the impossible things he can do…not to mention Loki and Thor called him ‘magician’ like every other sentence…” He trailed off at the looks he was getting, “what? Don’t tell me you didn’t notice the fireworks coming out of a bloody magic wand.”

Apparently no one else had, as they all looked a little sheepish.

“He’s a wizard.”

“Bingo” Harry grinned, “thank god someone was paying attention.”

“Don’t tell me magic is actually real” Tony drawled, “surely it’s just a name for inborn mutant abilities, or really nifty tech, or scientific phenomenons that…”

Unfortunately, Tony was unable at this point to continue, as Harry had turned him into a frog.

Harry smirked, “you were saying?”

The frog made a noise of indignation. Over the sounds of people sniggering, Steve spoke up.

“You didn’t use a wand for that, or at least if you did it was ridiculously quick.”

“Wandless magic” Harry explained, “the wand itself is just a channel for our magic, but given enough time and study we can train ourselves to access and use our magical core without it. It’s not as accurate or powerful, but it sure comes in handy in a fight.”

“And turning Iron Man into an amphibian apparently.” Natasha said.

“Nah,” Harry smiled ruefully, “that was just to shut him up.”

A wave of his hand and Tony was sitting there as though nothing had ever happened. He blinked, then a slow grin crept across his face.

“That was awesome.”

Harry rolled his eyes, “Sorry director, you were saying?”

Fury, who had been watching the entire affair with a resigned sort of bewilderment, sighed. “I confess I am utterly out of my depth. SHIELD is not informed or equipped to deal with this…magic.” He said the word like it tasted unpleasant.

“Well, lucky you, I’m one of the good guys” Harry remarked, “so you won’t need to be ‘equipped’ or even hugely informed because I’m not a threat. I just want to live my life in peace.”

“That’s all very well, Mr…”

Harry smiled tightly, “Harry will do for now, I think.”

“Even now, you insist on keeping all these secrets”, Fury said disdainfully, “You can hardly expect
me to take a leap of faith and just let you go”

“That’s exactly what I expect. I won’t mess with your stuff and you don’t mess in mine. Mutual looking the other way, and Voila! We part ways as unlikely friends.”

“You don’t give the orders around here, boy” Fury said coolly, “if I say I want you under surveillance in a contained facility and watching paint dry 24/7, you damn well do it. So when I asked for your name, it wasn’t a request.”

“And when I’m satisfied you won’t put a bullet in my brain the moment my back is turned, you’ll have it” Harry replied evenly.

“Okay no one is putting a bullet in anybody’s brain” Steve interrupted with a pointed look at Fury, “we’re here to talk, not exchange death threats.”

Just then Tony spoke up, “I’ve been thinking…”

“Never a good idea” Natasha muttered.

“A compromise” Tony said, ignoring her, “You want Harry in a place you can reach him easily, under surveillance, and Harry wants the freedom to…do…magic stuff” he waved his hand dismissively, “point is, why doesn’t he move into the Tower with us? Temporarily of course, but then he’s under our ‘surveillance’, easy for you to contact, and can do whatever the hell he wants without you or SHIELD butting in.”

Everyone stared at Tony for a moment.

Steve nodded slowly, “that’s actually not a terrible idea.”

“I want CCTV footage” Fury said abruptly.

“Sorry, my personal security only” Tony shrugged, “you’ll just have to trust that Earth’s mightiest heroes can make sure one man doesn’t go on a killing rampage.”

“He’s dangerous” Fury insisted.

“So are we. You trust us, don’t you?”

Harry raised a hand, “do I actually get a say in this?”

“Not a chance.” Natasha said. He huffed.

Fury then sighed, “fine, FINE! Go and kidnap him for all I care. But if he does harm even a single citizen in my city, it’s on you Stark.”

“Duly noted. Now come on Gandalf! We’re having a slumber party tonight!”

Harry raised an eyebrow, “Gandalf?”

Tony turned very slowly, “tell me your joking”

“I’m joking.” Harry deadpanned.

“Gandalf, Aragorn, Frodo, the one ring to rule them all…no?”

“Is that even english your speaking?”
Tony groaned, “that’s it. You, me, the Fellowship of the Ring, now. Come on, I’ll call a jet.”

And just like that Tony was gone.

Harry blinked, “should I be scared?”

“Terrified” Natasha told him.

“Spectacular” Harry said wryly, “alright come on, we’d better go before he blows something up.”

“Harry” It was Fury. Harry raised an eyebrow in question. “Look, I know the team trusts you, but try anything and you’ll regret ever having heard the name SHIELD.”

“Is that a threat?”

“It’s a promise. We are not prone to forgiveness here you see.”

The Avengers had gone still around them.

Harry cocked his head, “This is about Loki, isn’t it?”

“He’s not your friend, Harry. Loyalty and honour are foreign concepts to him.”

Thor bristled but didn’t contradict him.

“And when he comes against us again, which” Fury held up a hand to stop Harry’s interruption, “he will, you must chose your side wisely. Helping him once, I can let slide. Twice?”

The unsaid threat lingered in the air.

Harry frowned, “what did this guy do to you?”

“That’s none of your-”

“Invaded Earth with an army of Chitari which for the record, are not very friendly, attacked New York, killed a bunch of people, tried to take over the world…” Tony’s voice drifted through the door and he popped his head into the room, “you know, generic diabolical evilness. I’m sure you can fill in the blanks.”

Harry seemed to contemplate this for a moment. Then his face hardened, and he disappeared. The room erupted with exclamations and yells. The chaos ensued for the best part of a minute before Banner realised the screen showing Loki’s cell now held two people. They stopped, stared.

Fury cleared his throat, “Hill, initiate sound audio for cell 7.”

“Ah” Loki smirked as Harry appeared with a CRACK, “so the great magician finally deigns to visit.”

“Tell me you didn’t try and actually take over the world.” Harry interrupted, “because do you have any idea how stupid that was?”

“I’m the God of Mischief,” Loki said blithely, “stupid isn’t in my vocabulary.”
“Along with suicidal, psychopath and tyrant, I suppose.”

Loki’s green eyes flashed, a flicker of a warning. “If you’ve come to lecture me on morality, I’m afraid you’ve had a wasted trip.”

“I wasn’t.” Harry sighed, running a hand through his hair. An odd feeling of betrayal, of deception, left a bitter taste in his mouth. Granted, he had not known Loki long, but now even that small acquaintance was cast into doubt. *Who was he, really?*

“I have one question” he said at last.

"Only one?"

Harry ignored him. "Why?"

Loki’s expression flickered. Confusion.

"Why did you do it?” Harry pressed, "Inva...
It was then, as Harry went through a brief moment of oh *shit*, that he thought he saw something out of the corner of his eye. A small figure shrouded in darkness, a sad smile on her face. She threw something, which Harry caught automatically and swung round just as the spell collided.

**BAM**

Loki’s face was stunned as he went flying backwards, slammed against the wall of the cell by the force of his own spell turned against him. Harry stood breathing heavily, staring at the thing in his hand. *The Elder Wand.* How…? It was still in his rucksack upstairs. Harry glanced sideways, but the small figure had disappeared. Huh.

Loki coughed, staggering to his feet. “There, are you satisfied magician?”

“Why did you attack Earth?”

Silence.

“*Loki*…”

“Because causing chaos is the only thing I have left,” Loki spat. His eyes, when they met Harry’s, were hard with a broken kind of defiance, “without it, I am nothing. I have, *nothing.*”

“You have Thor.”

“*Thor.*” Loki scoffed, “he does not care, in his heart. I am a ghost to him, a monster, something to be *fixed.*”

“He loves you.”

“No,” Loki brushed off his cloak, defying Harry's sympathy with a ferocious stare, "he loves his brother, and I lost the right to that title a long time ago.”

“Sounds like another excuse to me.”

Loki exhaled frustratedly, “why do you even care, magician, what use is this to you?”

“The whole evil-mastermind-taking-over-the-world villains?” Harry strode forward until they were only a few feet apart. "I've met them, hell I've dealt with several of them. And you don't strike me as one of them.”

“What makes you so sure?” He sneered.

“Call it a hunch” Harry shrugged, seeing in his mind’s eye the terrified eyes of Draco Malfoy as he held Dumbledore at wand point, the broken crack in Snape's voice as he'd lay dying - *you have your mother's eyes* - the steel in Narcissa's gait as she'd lied straight to Voldemort's face. “You’re trying so hard to be the bad guy, you’ve got everyone fooled, and it’s a bloody good act, but in the end it’s still just an act.”

Loki’s eyes went cold, and very sharp. “I would chose you’re next words carefully, magician. Do not dare to presume to know how or why I do anything.”

“There you go again, threatening me,” Harry said, “it’s *easy* being the bad guy, isn’t it? Do you know why?”

Loki didn’t answer.
“Because no one expects anything of you.” Harry said quietly, “when people see good, they expect good, and you don’t want to have to live up to anyone’s expectations. This way, there’s no one to disappoint, no one to hurt you when they let you down.”

Loki closed his eyes, “I think you should leave.”

“Why, because I’m right?”

“Because if you keep talking I will be forced to rip your tongue out.”

“Nice, graphic, I like it.”

“Leave.” He snarled.

“Alright, alright I’m going. Just remember that the easy way out isn’t always the best one. It’s an awfully lonely existence, after all.”

As Harry turned to disapperate, Loki’s voice echoed out from behind him, “Harry?”

He turned.

“Don’t come back.”

Harry bowed his head, “As you wish.”

And then he disappeared.

“Okay seriously Clint, what’s wrong with you today?”

“What’s wrong with me?” The archer hissed as he pulled her into a corridor out of earshot, “what the hell is wrong with you? Since when are you a sympathiser?”

“Is this about Harry?” Natasha asked curtly.

“Oh I’m sorry, are there any other of your friends who happen to be enemies of SHIELD that you haven’t told me about?”

“He’s not an enemy, Clint.”

“And how would you know? You’ve known him what, a week?”

“Why are you being so difficult about this?”

“Because, in case you haven’t noticed, your friend is rather close to our favourite God of Mischief. Who, in case you forgot, tried to kill us all last year.” Clint snapped, “and a friend of mine enemy is mine enemy.”

“Great, what is that, Shakespeare?”

“Natasha…”

Natasha sighed. She could never resist him when he said her name like that.

“I’m worried about you. Trusting people like this, sympathising with the target…”
“You think Harry’s got some mind mojo on me, like Loki had on you.”

It wasn’t a question, but Clint nodded anyway. “He’s a magician. You saw the connection between him and Loki…”

“Harry didn’t know the first thing about him. He was only helping who he thought to be an innocent man who we’d gone and bloody shot. Clint…”

She didn’t take his hand, or offer any words of comfort or anything like that; that wasn’t how they worked. Instead, Natasha held out the bow she had teased off Harry earlier.

“Trust me on this.”

Clint looked at her for a long moment, then sighed, taking his bow.

“Alright. I’ll try.”

Everybody jumped as Harry appeared with an almighty CRACK amongst them. He looked withdrawn and tired.

“I’m guessing you all saw that?” He said as they all continued staring at him.

Thor cleared his throat awkwardly, “Do you really believe it’s an act?”

“Loki’s the God of Mischief, not the God of all things Evil,” Harry said bluntly, “there has to be another motive.”

“Thank you.”

Harry raised an eyebrow, “for what?”

“For not killing him when you found out what he had done,” Thor smiled a little sheepishly, “many have tried to have his head for less.”

“Yeah well, your brother has the unfortunate habit of acclaiming rather powerful enemies.” Harry said resignedly, “no need to add another.”

Out of the corner of his eye, his saw Natasha and Clint enter the room. The archer gave him a curt nod, which Harry belatedly returned. Huh.

“Harry,” Fury said patiently, “if in the future you wish to see my prisoners, I’d appreciate if you restrained from demonstrating just how easily you can pop in and out of their cells. There is a perfectly functioning door you may request access to.”

Harry raised an eyebrow, “and would you have let me in if I had?”

Fury’s lips tightened.

“That’s what I thought. Now, where’s Tony? I believe I have a Fellowship to attend?”

“Can’t you just…pop there?” Bruce asked.

“It only works if I know where I’m going” Harry said absently, “now where is that idiot?”
“You called?” A voice came from the monitors, and moments later Tony’s face appeared on one of the screens.

“Stark, what have I told you about hacking into my systems?” Fury said exasperatedly.

“Eh, must have slipped my mind,” he waved his hand dismissively, “now Harry, get your cute but out on deck, the jet’s ready.”

“I’ll be right there.” Harry told the image wryly. He turned to the room. “well, as fun as this has been, I’m afraid my carriage awaits.”

“Carriage?” Thor looked confused.

“Cinderella!” The Captain exclaimed delightedly, “I understood that reference.”

Harry rolled his eyes, “you’re all idiots,” he said fondly, “now come on, we’d better make sure Tony hasn’t gotten bored and crashed the jet just for the hell of it.”

“I heard that.” Tony added.

Harry and Natasha’s eyes met, and they both burst out laughing.

As the jet pulled away, Loki raised his head and followed it’s path by the sound until it got so far away he could no longer hear it. There; Harry was gone. He should feel relieved, satisfied even that it was so easy to drive him away like all the others, but instead Loki just felt tired. A bone-deep weariness that had been tugging at his thoughts for as long as he could remember.

**Weak.** “There, are you satisfied magician?” Trapped, helpless at the mercy of **humans** no less.

**Liar.** “If you’re looking for regret, I’m afraid you’ll be disappointed.”

**Monster.** Loki closed his eyes.

*Without chaos I am nothing. This is all I have left.*

So why did it feel like the words were like sawdust in his mouth?

Alone and unheard, there was no one to see the God of Mischief slump against the cell wall and exhale with a slight hitch as his breath caught. There was no one to see the traitorous tears burning behind his closed eyelids as the frozen walls thawed around him. There was no one, because Loki did not have anyone.

Harry’s words echoed in his ears; *it’s easy being the bad guy, isn’t it? No one to disappoint, no one to hurt you when they let you down.*

*Just remember that the easy way out isn’t always the best one.*

*It’s an awfully lonely existence, after all.*
Suiting up

Chapter Summary

Harry looked at them thoughtfully, “how’s this. All of you against me.”

There was a pause. Then from the other side of the ring, Tony laughed, “now this I have to see.”

Chapter Notes

I haven’t said it for a while, but you can probably all guess that I still do not own neither Harry Potter nor Avengers. I know, it's tragic.
Anyway, thanks for the continued support, keep those reviews coming!
Happy reading :)

“Myths and legends die hard in America. We love them for the extra dimension they provide, the illusion of near-infinite possibility to erase the narrow confines of most men's reality. Weird heroes and mould-breaking champions exist as living proof to those who need it that the tyranny of "the rat race" is not yet final.” - Hunter S. Thompson

Life at Stark Tower settled down remarkably easily for someone who hadn’t really had a home for the past century. Avengers came and went with a familiar ease, many of them staying most nights, and before Harry knew it a week had passed and it was beginning to feel like he belonged with this odd assortment of people. It was…nice.

Harry glanced around at the generous room that he had been given the day he arrived (Tony had tried to give him an entire floor, so this was somewhat of a compromise). The room was light and airy, the only feature of note being the floor to ceiling windows offering a spectacular view of New York. The contents of his rucksack were spilled out across the double bed; the hallows, his Marauders Map for old times sake (not that it worked here, of course), a few vials of pepper-up-potion and potion-making kit, his dragon hide amour (a gift from the goblins), an ancient looking time turner (definitely NOT taken from the department of mysteries), some old Weasley Wizard Weezes products, his wedding and signet rings, his unshrunk Hogwarts trunk, his firebolt (more for sentimental value than anything else) and sonic 3000 (the latest broom centuries of development had been able to offer, supposedly faster than the speed of sound) and finally an assortment of photos.
Strange; that a random jumble of objects could be all that he had left of his own world, of the people he knew.

Stranger still that he would find his home now among even stranger people.

Harry sighed, brushing his hand lightly over the Elder Wand. It almost seemed to hum beneath his touch, trembling with an ancient and terrible power. Personally, Harry preferred his own Holly and
Pheonix feather. The ‘deathstick’ (adequately named) just felt so...cold. Unpredictable, sparking with a frantic energy, all that power and history rolled into one deadly weapon. One attuned specifically to Harry. He didn’t particularly like owning it, but he couldn’t deny it’s use. When one was going against Gods and monsters, having the most powerful wand in existence at your disposal might just be the difference between winning and losing. Besides, the thing had a disturbing habit of appearing in his hand whenever he had need of it, as though it had a mind of it’s own. Harry put it to one side.

What he really wanted was to go flying, but he didn’t exactly want SHIELD freaking out when they found out any more of the things he could do. It was funny, how things that were simple and instinctive in the Wizarding World, like apparation, were considered practically mind blowing over here. Only yesterday had Thor accidentally flown through the window (don’t ask) and when Harry had wandlessly repaired the millions of broken shards back into place, he had been subject to an awful lot of stares. Perhaps it would take a while before they stopped being surprised at the impossibilities he was performing.

“Harry!” A voice yelled from below him, “get your cute butt down here.”

“Has the world been invaded in the last five minutes?” Harry called back.

There was a pause, “No” Tony said reluctantly.

“Then it can wait. I’ll have you know I intend to make good use of this spectacular shower in my room.”

“We’re making coffee.”

Another pause, then Harry disapperated and appeared with a pop in the kitchen. “Why didn’t you say so?” He grinned.

Tony yelped, spinning round and all but throwing the mug at Harry’s face. Harry held up a hand lazily and both the mug and spilling coffee froze in the air. He raised an eyebrow.

“Jumpy today aren’t we? Exactly how much coffee have you had?”

“Not enough” Tony grumbled, “would it hurt for you to you know, walk?”

“You said there was coffee” Harry said, as though it was obvious.

Tony groaned, “I give up. You’ll just have to wait for another batch then, because…”

He trailed off. Harry had plucked the levitating cup from the air and cast a quick refilling charm on the coffee. He held it out. “Am I forgiven?” Harry’s green eyes were wide and imploring, and Tony shifted. No one could say no to Harry when he looked at them like that.

Deadly weapon. That smile should be registered as a deadly weapon.

“Fine.” He said, "But no popping in my face.”

Harry’s lips twitched, “no popping in your face.”

It was in that moment that Steve entered the room. He blinked at them. “I don’t even want to know” he said resignedly.

Harry sniggered, “coffee for the Captain?”
“Please.”

He was still crafting his signature coffee blend when the others began trickling in. Harry nodded a greeting, “all those for coffee say I”

There was a chorus of I’s. They all brightened considerably.

“Okay Harry, this may seem like a dumb question” Natasha remarked as she sat, “but why are you making coffee…you know, normally”

“Magic is great, but I’ve always thought that cooking and the like tend to taste better when made by hand. Call me old fashioned, but” Harry shrugged, “you haven’t tasted my coffee yet.”

She raised an eyebrow, her skepticism still evident as she drank the coffee Harry levitated out a few minutes later. Harry hid a smile as her mouth fell open.

“Okay what is in this beverage?” She demanded.

“Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee beans. I picked them this morning”

“Picked them?” Steve said slowly, “as in physically harvesting them from the Blue Mountains?”

“Where else?” Harry answered blithely, “I can go to Italy tomorrow if you prefer the traditional blend.”

“Traditional…” Tony shook his head, “and where did you have time to go to Jamaica? I’d know if you’d have left the house.”

“Teleportation, remember? Distance isn’t really a problem anymore.” Harry pointed out.

“Of course” Natasha said faintly.

“This drink” Thor said suddenly, “it’s good. Another!”

The mug smashed on the floor. Everybody groaned. Harry grinned. Because right then, as he watched Earth’s mightiest heroes squabble over coffee, it was almost like he was one of them. Because at the end of the day, these people were just that: people. They might be heroes out in the real world, but here in the Tower it was a family, a group of outcasts who had found their home amongst people just like them, and Harry got it. He was an outcast in his own right, after all.

And for the first time in a century, he didn’t feel quite so alone anymore.

‘Training’, as the Avengers innocently dubbed it, inevitably swung round that afternoon. In short, it was an opportunity for them all to hit each other as hard and as fast as they could without fearing they might accidentally kill their opponent. Or rather, as was quickly becoming the norm, a chance to see Harry in action.

He grinned as he faced Tony, Steve, Natasha and Clint from across the circle. Thor stood next to him. It had been Harry’s idea; getting them to fight in teams instead of one on one. Four on two might have been a tad ambitious, but having the God of Thunder on your side couldn’t help but be a little bit of a confidence boost. He and Thor shared a quick camaraderie nod. His holly and phoenix feather wand span across his fingers casually.
Tony was first to make a move. White bursts of energy shot from his hand pulser and Harry dived into a roll, firing a quick *expelliarmus* in midair. Tony shot upwards, just missing the blast. Then Steve was flinging his shield in a wide arc and Natasha and Clint were sprinting forward towards him. Harry cast a quick transfiguration and suddenly the floor rippled and swelled beneath their feet like an ocean of marble. Clint fell, Natasha only just remained standing. Distantly, he noticed Tony turn his attention to Thor. The shield came racing towards Harry. He ducked and it sailed above his head. Two quick *impedimentas* had Natasha and Clint down again, but Harry knew he was only buying himself some time. If these assassins got him in close contact fighting…

A bang from beside him made Harry’s head whip round. Tony had used a mini EMP to lasso the hammer away from Thor and was hitting him with everything he had, explosions and blasts and all manner of strikes. Harry thought about just stunning him, but that was *boring*. With a slight smile, he conjured a spout of water and, with a skill that would have impressed his old headmaster, sent the wall of water crashing into Tony and quite literally sweeping him off his feet. Tony yelped, small sparks flying off his suit as the electronics fried.

Thor glanced up to thank him, when his eyes widened, “Harry behind you!”

Harry spun round, *too slow*, as Natasha swept his legs out from underneath him and pinned him to the ground. She grinned, her red hair tickling his face. “Does this mean I win?”

*“Levicorpus”* Harry whispered as an answer.

The look on the assassin’s face was priceless as she suddenly found herself jerked into the air by her ankle and left dangling in midair. Harry gave her a mock salute, “maybe next time, Red. If you’ll excuse me.”

And then he went back to duelling Clint as he fired arrow after arrow, forcing Harry on the defensive. He restrained from just using a shield (*boring!*!) and settled for transfiguring them all into fish. Well, make that *flying* fish. For a moment everyone seemed to stop and stare at the odd sight of tuna flying through the air. Harry took advantage of it to cast a quick disillusionment charm.

Moments later, Clint had joined Natasha in the air as he dangled from his left foot. Right, now that just left…

**BAM**

All the great whooshed out of Harry as Captain America’s shield rammed straight into his side. He stumbled, barely having the chance to raise his wand when Steve was all but on top of him. The two pressed against each other, a blur of blows and blocking, where more and more Steve began to gain the upper hand. After all, in close combat the Captain was all but unbeatable. Harry grunted as one of Steve’s blows connected, and then suddenly he was raising the shield and Harry’s wand lay forgotten a few feet away and you couldn’t deflect adamantium easily and there wasn’t…

*“Harry!”* Thor called where he and Tony where also engaged, and then Harry heard the whooshing of something flying through the air very fast…

Harry flung out a hand and caught Mjölnir. In the same movement he swung the great hammer up and it collided with the shield, sending them both flying backwards. Lightning crackled around Harry. Curving his other hand around the bolts, he pointed the hammer at the ceiling and the world erupted in light and fire.

When the air cleared, everyone save Harry and Thor was on the ground, dazed but perfectly fine thanks to Harry’s shielding charms he had placed on them all earlier.
Harry grinned and tossed the hammer lightly back to its owner. “Thanks for the hand”

Thor held up Mjölnir with a smirk, “anytime, my friend. I never imagined sharing it’s power could be so…victorious!”

Harry laughed, “here that you lot? I think this means we won this round.”

“Enjoy it while it lasts hotshot” Tony groaned as he sat up, “I will beat you one of these days.”

“Keep telling yourself that” Harry offered a hand and pulled Tony up, “sorry about the suit.”

Tony shrugged, “it needed a clean.”

Harry smirked. The suit was dripping wet.

“Um, Harry?” a slightly strained voice interrupted them, “if you’re quite done bragging, would you mind…”

Harry turned to see Natasha and Clint still dangling by their ankles. “Oh right yeah” he waved a hand and wandlessly cancelled the spell. They both fell to the ground with a huff. Harry smiled a little sheepishly, “sorry about that.”

“That. Was. Awesome.” A voice said from outside the circle. They all turned to see Bruce all but jumping up and down. “Can you do it again?”

Tony groaned again, “Be my guest, but this time it’s my turn to sit out. Go ahead big guy, see if you can beat the dream team.”

Harry and Thor looked at each other, then cracked up.

“It is an honour fighting alongside you, my friend” Thor bowed.

“Likewise big guy, but I think it’s time to switch it up” Harry looked at them thoughtfully, “how’s this. All of you against me.”

There was a pause. Then from the other side of the ring, Tony laughed, “now this I have to see.”

Far away, in a briefing room thousands of feet in the air, Director Fury was studying the screen in front of him with narrowed eyes.

“He hasn’t said anything?”

“Nothing, sir. He just…sits there.”

Fury made a small noise of irritation, “Loki never does anything without reason. The only way he could still be here is if he wants to be here.”

“…Sir?”

On the screen, Loki stared right at Fury as though seeing through the small camera straight at the Director himself. A small smirk curved his lips. Fury clenched and unclenched his fists.

“Start the interrogation process. If Loki’s planning something, we need to know about it.”
“And the restrictions, sir?”

And Fury turned away from the screen. “No restrictions. Just make him talk.”

As he stalked away, Fury could have sworn he still felt Loki’s gaze burning a hole in his back.

“I still can’t believe you beat all of us only to get kicked in the head by Natasha” Tony said petulantly, wincing as JARVIS attempted to take his armour off.

Harry smiled a little ruefully as he held an icepack to his temple, “Never underestimate a pretty redhead my friend, I learnt that lesson a long time ago.”

“Yeah well, you had more sense than I did” Clint remarked as he plonked down next to Harry, “it took me years before I started holding my own against her.”

From her place on the sofa, Natasha grinned at them both, “I knew there was a reason I liked you both.”

Harry and Clint groaned in unison, then looked at each other.

“Nevertheless, that was some fight you gave us Harry, and I commend you for that.” Steve smiled, “Not many people have ever been able to best us as a team.”

“And with any luck, I’ll never have to” Harry said wryly, “unless Fury orders you all to kill me. That would really suck.”

“He can order us until he’s blue in the face” Tony dismissed lightly, “I for one, don’t give a damn”

“What Tony here means to say” Steve interrupted, fighting a smile, “is that unless you give us reason to, no harm will come to you. You’re one of the team now.”

“I…team?” Harry repeated.

“Unless you don’t want to, which is you know, fine” Tony said hurriedly, “I mean you don’t know us and we don’t know you and just because you’re living here and have these awesome badass powers…”

Harry threw the icepack at his face, “Tony, you idiot, of course I want to.”

He blinked, “you do?”

“Remember what me and Thor did against you lot? Imagine what we could do if we all worked together.”

Thor grinned, “I can already hear the songs that will be sung in our honour.”

“But” Harry held up a hand, “I need to be sure this is a unanimous decision.” Nobody missed the way his eyes flitted to where Clint was sitting.

“Clint?” Steve said. The archer rolled his eyes, “don’t get your spandex in a twist, I’m all for having a wizard on our side.”

Tony clapped his hands, “hurrah, now I don’t know about you lot, but I’m somewhat curious as to
what else Harry’s got hidden under that ridiculous hair.”

Harry looked offended, “what’s wrong with my hair?”

“I’m not even going to grace that with an answer. So we know you can teleport…”

“Apparation” Harry corrected, “I can appear anywhere I can visualise.”

“Can you teleport other people?” Bruce chipped in curiously.

Harry made a face, “side-along apparation can be done, but it’s not pleasant. I’d rather go by portkey, which is like an object you charm to teleport a group of people.”

Banner grinned, “fascinating, so can you…”

“What was that thing you did with the floor?” Natasha interrupted.

“It’s called transfiguration, the alteration of matter.”

“Like with the phoenix thing?” Clint asked.

“That was my animagus. Human transfiguration if you like.”

“Like when you turned me into a frog!” Tony exclaimed.

“And the fish thing with the arrows” Clint added.

“Can you fly?”

“What about time travel?”

“Can you heal?”

“Mind read?”

“Make things explode?”

“Breathe underwater?”

“GUYS!” Harry’s voice was tinged with a quick sonorous charm. They all shut up, looking a little sheepish. Harry rolled his eyes, “look, the answer to most of your questions is probably going to be ‘yes’. There are spells, enchantments, potions, runes, artefacts, plants…all magical things that can do pretty much everything you can think of. Potions can heal. Plants can make you breathe underwater. Spells make things explode. An object called a time-turner lets you go back in time. A broomstick allows you to fly. The possibilities are endless.”

There was silence for a moment. Then, Steve’s voice spoke up hesitantly. “So what can’t you do?”

“Can’t raise the dead” Harry said easily (the resurrection stone so did not count), “can’t manipulate emotion, or create genuine love or anything like that. I may be harder to kill, but I’m not invincible. I can be hurt. Can’t personally see the future, we had seers back at home for that, for all the good they did anyway. Permanent transfiguration is tricky, and conjuring objects up is a bastard to control. I can’t like, make food appear out of nowhere for instance.”

They all blinked at him. “Well…” said Tony at last, “there goes my idea of free pizza”
Thor cleared his throat, “I can’t believe I’m asking this, but can you *die*?”

Harry opened his mouth, then closed it. *Ah…*

Thankfully he was saved from having to answer as JARVIS spoke up suddenly. “Sir, if I may interrupt, a call has come in from SHIELD. Mr Fury is being quite insistent.”

“Of course he is” Tony muttered, “alright, put it through.”

“Stark, is the team with you?” Fury sounded strained.

“Body and spirit, director, what’d you need?”

“I need you in London” the man said curtly, “priority one. Suit up.”

Tony grinned, “music to my ears, director. What are we facing?”

“I’ll brief you on the way, don’t waste any time.”

The call disconnected. Tony whooped, “*finally!* Villains these days are getting harder to come by.”

“Save it, Tony, we’ve got a job to do.” Steve stood, “you heard the Director…”

And then he looked straight at Harry.

“Time to suit up.”
No flying tuna

Chapter Summary

“These robots weren’t just programmed to take over the city. They were programmed for us.”

Chapter Notes

Greetings, fellow readers, I hereby present you with mine tenth instalment in this humble story.
Like always, feedback is hugely appreciated and I will try and get round to replying to as many as possible.
Happy reading!

“And Harry remembered his first nightmarish trip into the forest, the first time he had ever encountered the thing that was then Voldemort, and how he had faced him, and how he and Dumbledore had discussed fighting a losing battle not long thereafter. It was important, Dumbledore said, to fight, and fight again, and keep fighting, for only then could evil be kept at bay, though never quite eradicated. . . . - J.K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Half-blood Prince

When people thought about the Avengers, they might single out Natasha as the most cynical of the group when it came trusting people, given her history. Some might say Bruce, maybe Tony given his knack for reading people.

No one would have thought of Steve.

Captain America, golden boy, national icon of unity and hope and alliance.

And sure, on the outside, that was true. But what people forgot about Captain America was that above anything else, he goddamn cared about his team. Harry’s presence was an unknown entity, a new factor that shifted the dynamics of the team. So maybe he was on their side, but for how long?

Any threat, even if it were no threat at all, was to be treated with the utmost of suspicion.

And Steve tried, he really did, to view Harry impartially as he would any other stranger. Problem was, everyone liked Harry.

They trusted him, sought him out, laughed with him. They took him out into New York for the lay of the land, showed him the underground network no one was supposed to know about, and as soon as they learned that Harry was fluent in about five different languages, including the local Mexican dialect, and modestly charming when he wanted to be, the others took him along to scout out connections and pick up some precious items. He was on a first name basis with most of the restaurant owners in a mile radius. Some of the local gangs who watched them from afar would smile and wave at Harry, and Harry would walk over to them, share a laugh or two, and come back. He
had even charmed the local pub owner into letting Tony back in after he had trashed the place last
time (a miracle in itself that had Tony worshipping the ground Harry walked on for the next few
days).

Pretty soon, Harry wasn't just fitting in; he was very quickly becoming an integral part of the team,
the glue that kept them all together, and all without even trying very hard.

Tony willingly parted with his beloved cars to give Harry a taste of New York in true billionaire
style. Thor willingly parted with his hammer for christ's sake just to play catch with Harry and watch
the other's squirm. One time Steve came across Clint showing him how to shoot. Tony invited him
down to his lab, something Steve had refused to believe until he’d seen it for himself. It was just...no
one got safe passage to Tony’s lab, let alone an invitation.

Steve couldn't help it any more than the rest of the team; he liked Harry. Steve didn't want to like
Harry. He thought it was a bad idea to like Harry, only be disappointed when he couldn't live up to
their expectations.

Of course, that all changed the day Fury called them out to London.

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The call came in at 6:36 pm. By 6:40, everyone was assembled on the roof in full gear, eyes on the
jet speeding towards them. Harry stood slightly to one side, attired in his usual well-worn-jeans and a
faded, tight fitting t-shirt, absently twirling his wand over his fingers. In other circumstances the
contrast would almost be funny; there were the Avengers, looking every inch like they meant
business, and then there was Harry, looking like a groggy teenager who just woke up and was called
downstairs to a family meeting.

At least he'd shrugged on a faded looking robe on his way out.

“You know I could just portkey you all there in a second, right?” Harry pointed out.

Steve sighed, “Harry, we’ve been over this. You weren’t supposed to even know about this mission,
if Fury finds out you’re actually coming..”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it. Nuclear temper tantrum. World war 3. The end of mankind as we know it.”

Barton tried to hide his laugh behind a cough.

“Look, Harry” Steve suddenly looked tired, a little uneasy, “you don’t need to do this, you know. I
know you’re living with us and all, but don’t think that you have to earn your place among us.
There’s no shame in staying behind. We cannot guarantee your safety, after all.”

A sad smile touched Harry’s lips, “At two years old, the darkest wizard of my time tried to kill me.
At three, I was living with a family who despised and shunned my existence. At eleven, I defeated
the same dark wizard again. At twelve, I killed a basilisk. At fourteen, I was abducted and my blood
was used to resurrect said dark wizard so he could have another shot at killing yours truly. At fifteen,
I watched my Godfather die in front of me. At seventeen, I was on the run, a wanted criminal of the
corrupted government. And at seventeen, I became the saviour of the wizarding world and,
temporarily, a martyr.” Harry turned to face the Avengers, “I don’t tell you this so that you admire or
pity me, I’m telling you so that you understand. My safety has never been guaranteed. And I’ve
never let that stop me.”

Tony whistled softly, “Jesus.”

“Actually my name’s Harry”
Tony shoved him good-naturally. “You became a martyr at seventeen?”

“What can I say, I had a wild teenage phase.”

“Oh for…” Tony threw his hands in the air, “you’re not allowed to be charming and evasive. That’s my job.”

Harry dimpled, “but you know I do it so much better!”

“Guys, a little focus please?” Steve said.

Harry and Tony grinned at each other. Above them, the jet circled the Tower once then hovered above their heads. A ladder dropped down. “All aboard” Banner said wryly.

“What, in that old thing?” Tony scoffed, “I think I’ll pass. Try and keep up with me.” And then he winked, the mask snapping shut over his face, and shot into the sky.

Natasha rolled her eyes, “show off.”

Steve turned when he saw Harry still standing there, “Harry? You coming?”

Harry smirked, wandlessly unshrinking his Sonic 3000 from his rucksack, “I’d better make sure he doesn’t get into too much trouble. I’ll meet you there, alright?”

Before anyone could even blink at the sight of an actual flying broomstick, Harry had mounted it and disappeared after Tony. The sky was cool and clear and crisp, and Harry revelled in it. God it had been too long since he had flown. The Sonic 3000 moved like a dream, wickedly fast and frighteningly sensitive. It was almost like he didn’t even need to consciously fly it, the thing seemed to sense his movements instinctively. And need he even mention it was fast. Within minutes he had caught up to Tony, who almost fell out of the sky at the sight of Harry soaring along side him.

“Shut up” Tony’s voice came from the suit.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“That is a piece of wood. Flying wood.”

“Woah, easy with the innuendos Tony…”

“You can fly?!”

“Obviously.”

A pause, “That is so fucking cool”

Harry laughed, swivelling around him in an expert barrel roll, “Tony, you have no idea.”

Doctor Doom was not a gambling man. When he released his deadly machinery onto the unsuspecting streets of London (what everyone’s obsession was with invading New York he would never understand) he did so knowing and fully expecting the Avengers to appear. All of his work, attuning each doombot specifically to target a members weakness, would finally have an audience. It was all meticulously planned, flawlessly planned out. There was very little risk, then, to himself. Every eventuality had been arithmetically calculated, every possibility accounted for. The Avengers
might be good, but their fame would be their downfall. After all, any common idiot could look them up on YouTube, see their flaws, the chinks in their armour. It was information just begging to be exploited. In fact, one could even say Doom wanted them to try and stop him.

But in all of his many calculations, his seamless programming, his countless contingency plans…none of it could have prepared him for the stranger who stood among their ranks. A boy, no less.

That was his first mistake.

The situation was worse than they realised when the Avengers touched down in Trafalgar Square. Explosions, gunshots, screams…it was New York all over again. Captain America swallowed as he looked across the destruction, “Agent Barton, what’s the view like from up there?”

“Not pretty.” Up on the rooftop, Clint grimaced, “I recognise his doombots, they've been programmed by Doom himself. Unless we figure out how to shut them down they won’t stop until the city is torn apart.”

“How many?”

“I…hundreds. Thousands, I don’t know.”

Steve took a breath, “Okay. Stay in position for now. Romanov, Hulk, you’re with me on the ground. Thor, I want you in the air. Let’s see if we can take these bots out the good old fashioned way and get civilians out. Tony - can you do something about this programming?”

Tony cocked his head, “if I can get into the mainframe computer. That’s our best chance.”

“Right. You’re going to need stealth, and a way in. Now unless we punch you a hole in their defences I don’t see how…”

Harry cleared his throat. He held up a bundle of what looked like a cloak, silvery and shimmering and not quite visible.

“I think I can help with that.”

“This isn’t physically possible!”

“You do realise you’ve said that twice already?”

“But even if you did manage to get the metamaterials working at a nanoscale level, and that’s a massive if” Tony whispered adamantly from beneath the invisibility cloak, “there’s no way it would simultaneously redirect all of the light spectrum and allow you to see the world perfectly fine through it!”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Tony, we were aiming for discretion here…”

“And that’s not even mentionning that it would not be a flexible surface, let alone a ruddy cloak! Metaphysical technology is not this far advanced!” Tony insisted.

“Look, can we just skip trying to work out how it works, and just accept that it does?”
Tony huffed, "fine. But we’re not finished here, you can’t expect me to just roll with it when you keep pulling miracles out of your pockets."

"Magic, not miracles" Harry corrected absently. His gaze was on the heavily armed machinery zooming above their heads.

"I bet you can even walk on water" Tony was still muttering.

"Tony?"

"Mm?"

"Shut up."

The two moved unseen and unheard (no thanks to Tony) through the streets, barely breathing as they passed masses upon masses of doombots. The robots had a cold kind of ferocity, wreaking havoc on the city with all manner of weaponry. It was a terrifyingly methodical destruction.

"Holy shit" Tony swore softly as they passed the houses of parliament, which were slowly being ripped apart to the screams of the people in the firing line.

"Tony, remember the plan" Harry urged, grabbing his armoured arm as Tony made to step out to help, "You’re the only one with a hope of deciphering Doom’s programming, we need you on the inside. The rest of us will deal with damage control."

Tony made a frustrated sound, "alright, alright. Let’s just get this over with."

If the genius sounded slightly strained as they passed the hoards of screaming people, Harry didn’t mention it. Tony was their best hope, after all.

“Damn it Tony, what’s taking so long?” Steve muttered, flinging his shield in a great looping arc that knocked against the doombots with as much effect as flies bothering a cow. These were robots, not people. They didn’t feel pain, they didn’t have moral restrictions, they just did as was programmed. And right now, that was destroying everything.

“Steve, look out!” Natasha cried. He turned just as a bot opened fire. He dived, throwing the shield but the bot danced out of range, as though it could sense the shield or something ridiculous. In fact, it almost seemed repelled by it. Odd. Bullets whistled above his head, and Steve tried to run towards the robot but it flitted out of range again. It was infuriating! Steve couldn’t fight long range, not if the bot kept dodging his shield. It was almost as though the thing knew how he fought, and wasn’t letting him get close enough to try. As though it was taunting him.

Beside him, a similar thing was happening to Natasha. Her bots appeared to be bulletproof, and they certainly weren’t letting her get close enough to get personal. A moment later, Steve heard her cry out in pain. He whipped round, leaping across to shield her body with his own as she fell to the ground. “Agent Romanov? Are you hit?”

“Shoulder” she said curtly, wincing as Steve immediately bent to bind it with a scrap of shirt.

“Natasha!” Clints voice broke through on their earpieces, “are you hurt? What happened?”

“It’s a scratch, Clint, relax” She replied, “nothing I was doing was working on these things.”
“Rodger that” Barton sounded grim.

“Clint? What are you saying?” Steve asked sharply.

“These robots won’t let me get a clear shot. They’re always up and close, right in my face, surrounding me so I don’t have the chance to stick an arrow in them. I’m good at picking off the targets, not taking them all on at once in a close environment. That’s your area, Captain.”

Steve frowned. Was it a coincidence? That robots specifically programmed were acting independently? Just then Thor landed a few feet away from them. If Steve were to describe his expression, it might be ‘slightly pissed’.

“They resist the ancient power of storm and lightning” he growled.

Steve blinked, “What?”

“The lightning!” He exclaimed, “my lightning. These robots are immune!”

“Well can’t you just…you know, bash them?” Clint asked over the earpieces.

Thor scowled, “They seem to react to Mjölnir. It makes them flee like cockroaches before I can get a clean hit.”

“Yeah well, that makes two of us” Steve muttered, “Hows Banner doing?”

“It’s odd.” Clint said slowly, “you know how the more you attack him, the angrier he gets, and the more powerful he gets?”

“Yeah?”

A pause, “I think the robots are trying to get him to change back”

“What?”

“I mean, they’re avoiding him like the plague. No attacks, no provocations…”

“They’re trying to keep him from getting too powerful. Give him nothing to fight.” Steve realised. He looked at his team with a dawning understanding. “These robots weren’t just programmed to take over the city. They were programmed for us.”

Harry may have been a sight to behold in battle, but no one could beat him when it came to stealth. Invisibility cloak, disillusionment charms, muffliato, notice-me-not, repello muggletom, super sensory charms…honestly, sneaking past the hoards of armed guards and robots was child’s play. Getting into the command centre however, was a different matter. Biometric locking system. You couldn’t hack it, you couldn’t blow it up, you couldn’t imperio it to let you in…

“Damn it” Harry swore, “now what?”

“You are not seriously telling me that you, a wizard, can do all of these impossible things only to get defeated by a locked door.”

“Well it’s not like I can just go Alohamora and it would magically…”
The door swung open. Harry stared, suddenly feeling incredibly stupid. “My point?” Tony said.

“That…that was a first year spell!” Harry insisted, “It shouldn’t have worked!”

“Yeah well, puzzle it out later, we’ve got work to do.”

The two advanced through the door, invisibility cloak shunned for now, and rounded a corner only to stop dead at the sight of Victor Von Doom himself standing at the controls. He span round, eyes widening, and-

“Pertificus Totalus”

Doctor Doom froze. Tony blinked, “okay, that was easy. Now…”

He strode over to the controls and began typing furiously. Harry held back, keeping his eyes narrowed at Doom. Auror training kicked in; Never turn your back on an enemy. Tony began to curse.

“Urm, Tony?”

“It’s not working!” he growled, “it’s got a lockdown on the controls, you need some sort of code, a signal, a jumpstart or something…”

Harry’s eyes flickered to Doom, who he could have sworn looked slightly smug.

“You can do it though right?” Harry said, “you can break it?”

Tony didn’t answer, but his typing got faster. Harry didn’t like this. At any point someone could walk in, and they were stuck in here whilst the rest of the team was fighting for their lives out there. It felt precariously time pressured.

“Tony…”

“I know!” he snapped.

And then the world exploded.

The bomb, relatively speaking, was actually quite small. Harry discovered later it had been a safety mechanism - that anyone touching the controls who was not registered to Dooms fingerprint would be blown to bits sixty seconds after contact. That is, presuming, that they did not have Harry’s reflexes. The moment he realised what was happening Harry hadn’t stopped to think, only to pull. A split-second summoning charm and Tony was flying away from the explosion and colliding straight into Harry. The two tumbled away from the impact. Harry grunted as the full weight of Tony’s armour smacked into him. Ow.

Around them, the room was reduced to rubble. Doctor Doom was nowhere to be seen. The petrifying spell would have been canceled the moment Harry summoned Tony, so there was no telling where Doom had ended up. If he was even still alive.

Tony groaned, and rolled off Harry, “what the hell was that?”

“Summoning charm. Usually used for objects, but I guess it works on people just as well” Harry smiled slightly.
“You just saved my life” Tony said, a little dazed.

“Mm, you can thank me later” Harry stood with a wince, “I don’t suppose you managed to stop anything before the thing blew up in your face?”

Tony opened his mouth, but someone else beat him to it.

“Of course not. You didn’t really think I’d just leave the means to shutting down the entire operation accessible to any common idiot, did you?” The smooth voice came from behind them.

Tony bristled.

“Ah” said Harry before Tony could piss the man off any more, “Doctor Doom, I presume?”

The man was cloaked, and his face was hidden by a cold metal mask. Two eyes gleamed out from beneath the metal. The man sniffed at Harry, “and who might you be?”

“Me? Oh no one really, an interested party.”

“And what do you do then? Flatter people to death?”

“If I wanted you dead, you’d know” Harry said blithely, “trust me.”

The man laughed, “cocky little bastard aren’t you?”

“Pot, kettle” Harry shrugged, “I’m warning you now, you’ve already pissed off the Avengers, you really don’t want to mess with me as well.”

“Is that a threat?” Doom’s eyes flashed.

“Yes” Harry said bluntly, “so back the fuck up, or I’ll be forced to stop you.”

The man laughed, “I’d like to see you try.”

Suddenly masses of doombots appeared around them, sights trained on Harry and Tony.

“Harry?” Tony’s voice made Harry turn in surprise. It was an unquestioning bowing to Harry’s authority, an instant deference to his lead. He had found it in the DA, in the Aurors, even the Unspeakables; he hadn’t expected to find it here.

Harry raised his head. “You don’t think the doombots can be de-programmed?” His voice was low.

“Not without Doom’s cooperation. They answer only to him.”

Harry swore under his breath. People were dying all over the city, and there was nothing they could do about it. “What sort of arsenal are we talking about here?”

“Doom’s got electricity and robotics at his command.” Tony said crisply, “Doombots are nasty little buggers, average military firepower.”

“Right. I’ll keep Doom distracted, you take out the bots. And Tony?”

The man turned.

“Exactly how much of a low profile am I supposed to be keeping?”

A hint of a smile touched Tony’s lips, “You’re talking to me about keeping a low profile?”
Harry rolled his eyes, “Magic, Tony. I’m talking about magic.”

“You can get away with explosions and that stunning thing you do. Try and keep the impossibilities to a minimum, though, no flying tuna.”

A flick of his wrist, and Harry’s wand appeared in his hand, “aw Tony, you take the fun out of everything.”

Tony would have probably offered some genius witty comeback at that point, had he not been run over by a rogue doombot. The man cussed, then suddenly he was flying and firing and Harry knew he was looking at Iron Man, the soldier, not Tony Stark, the man. He was a whirlwind of light and destruction, leaving a trail of battered machinery in his wake.

In the distance, Harry could hear the roar of the Hulk as he tried to chase the enemies who refused to fight him.

Over his earpiece, he heard Steve yelling orders at everyone, a strain of tension in his usually calm voice.

On a nearby rooftop, he saw Clint wielding a mere knife against the bots surrounding him, too close for a clear shot.

In the air, Tony’s light show merged with Thor’s battle cry.

Across the street, he thought he saw a glimpse of red hair.

Harry tore his gaze away, violently suppressing the urge to rush to their aid. These were not terrified Hogwarts students, these were the Avengers - heroes. The best thing he could do right now is take out the heart of the matter, give them a fighting chance to defeat the masses of doombots swarming around them.

“Rodgers?” Harry put a hand to his ear, “if you’re listening to this, then you know I’ve got Doom in my sight. What do you need?”

“Shut down the doombots” Steve replied immediately, his breathing laboured, “we can’t keep this up much longer. If you can’t make him do that, take him out.”

Harry nodded curtly, “I’m on it. Don’t get yourself killed in the meantime.”

“You too, soldier. Good luck.”

The exchange had taken barely a few seconds. Harry turned and faced the masked man, wand held loosely in his hand.

“Do not be such a fool as to think you can stop me, friend of Stark.” Doom said dismissively.

“What’s there to stop?” Harry replied placidly, “all I see is a man hiding behind an army of machines. Take them away and what are you?”

Doom growled, “you dare…”

“Yes, I dare. Shut down the doombots, and let’s see how well you do without your pets.”

“Against who? You? But you’re…normal.” He said the word like it tasted disgusting.

“Then you’ve got nothing to worry about, have you?”
Doom took a step forward, “Tempting, but I’m going to have to say no.”

Harry sighed, “alright. But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Then he raised his wand, and the world erupted into chaos.

“Um…sir? You might want to see this.”

“Oh for the love of…”

Back in New York, Director Fury groaned into his hands. Did his words carry no weight at all with the Avengers? The screen in front of him showed one Doctor Doom getting his arse thoroughly kicked by a very familiar figure. A figure who should, by all rights, be sitting in Stark Tower on house arrest. SHIELD would have their hands full explaining this to the press.

“Do you want to issue an arrest, sir?”

The man glared at the screen. “No” Fury said after a moment, “I only said that Harry better not go against me. I never even dreamed he would fight for us. Mind you, I’ll be having words with the Avengers when they get back. Bloody trusting idiots.”

“With respect sir, Harry does seem to be helping the situation significantly.”

“With respect?”

The agent hesitated, “you’re so quick to criticise the Avengers for trusting him, and yet you carry the very same fault in that you are suspicious of everyone you meet. Not everyone is an enemy, sir.”

“And you think ‘Harry’ can be trusted?” Fury demanded, “we don’t even know his name.”

“Do you know mine?” the agent replied evenly.

Fury’s eyes narrowed. “We are a secret organisation operating at the highest level of discretion. Information is power.”

“And you wonder why he won’t provide you with any.”

Fury’s eye flashed, and the agent quickly backtracked. “I’m sorry sir, it is not my place to question you. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have duties to attend to. Sir.”

And with a nod, the agent left the room. Fury sighed. When did he think it was good idea to hire sassy assistants? Now even the staff were on Harry’s side. He turned back to the screen, where Harry now appeared to be wielding what looked like a flamethrower (it was, of course, just a wand, and Fury couldn’t help but feel some grudging admiration for the way he disguised his skills). As much as it pained him to admit it, Harry was actually doing a good job.

“So help me, Steve.” Fury muttered resignedly, “you better be right about this guy.”
Heroes and Villains

Chapter Summary

"There's something about you, Harry, it's like...it's like you can't not follow you. You make people want to fight for you, to be better, because when the world goes to shit around us, you're the one who's still fighting because it's the right thing to do. It's like this tug inside of me, a pull that says see this guy right here? He's the best chance you have. He's the one you should follow. He's the one who's going to save the day and give you the stories to tell afterwards. He's going to change the world, and you're going to want to be by his side when he does."

Chapter Notes

Really enjoyed writing this chapter, the angst is only beginning!
A huge thanks to everyone taking the time to leave Kudos and feedback, I can't stress enough how rewarding it is as a writer, and any comments are very much appreciated!
Happy reading :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

_Doesn't matter what you did, or what you were. If you go out there, you fight, and you fight to kill. Stay in here, you're good, I'll send your brother to come find you. But if you step out that door, you are an Avenger._ - Clint Barton, _Avengers Age of Ultron_

“Shut down the doombots.”

“No.”

Harry swatted his hand and suddenly Doom was hanging upside-down, his metal head bouncing lightly off the pavement. After the short duel (if it could really be called that, I mean Doom hadn’t hit Harry once), Doom was looking none too great for wear. The combined forces of intense heat (‘flamethrower’) followed by intense cold (convenient water leakage in the street that Harry supercharged) had left Doom in quite a sorry state as his metal features cracked and went rigid. Through his mask, Doom managed to scowl petulantly.

“You know I could do this all day” Harry commented, increasing the pace at which Doom’s head was bouncing off the ground. It was rather fun. “Or I could just wait until my friends get here. They’re not quite as tolerant, you see.”

Doom mumbled something that sounded vaguely like “piss off”.

“Gladly, only I need you to shut down the doombots first.”
Doom spat on the ground, “You’ll have to kill me.”

“That can be arranged” Harry said evenly, although in the back of his mind he was already preparing an Imperio. It was a last resort, one he’d rather not take, but Harry wasn’t about to let his moral standpoint get in the way of saving lives.

“Liar”

With eyes as hard as jade stones, Harry slowly rotated Doom so that he was face to face once more.

“I can see it in your eyes” Doom continued with a sneer, “you haven’t got the balls.”

“I’ve killed before. I’m quite good at it, actually.”

“But this is murder” the man said smoothly, “and you don’t strike me as a murderer, Harry Potter.”

Before he could blink, Harry had slammed him against the wall of the street half a block away, faces inches apart, green eyes blazing. “How do you know my name?” He demanded, his voice like ice.

Doom laughed, “I’ll admit I wasn’t sure until now. But you are him, aren’t you?”

Harry’s eyes narrowed, and even Doom shrank away slightly. “You better start explaining right now before this gets unpleasant” his voice was thunder, all false calm and a low pulsing authority.

“You’re appearance here hasn’t gone unnoticed, Mr Potter” Doom replied with a strange glint in his eyes, “my employer is very interested in you.”

“Employer?”

“A fan of yours, rather.”

Screw this. An imperio curse at his lips, Harry gripped Doom’s cloak and pulled him close, “I would think twice about trying my patience, metal man, now you will shut down the bots right now, or…”

Suddenly, Doom started choking. Harry pulled back abruptly. His eyes widened as he saw foam escaping through Doom’s mask. “What have you done?!” Harry yelled.

Doom giggled, then his eyes rolled back and he collapsed.

“Harry!” Steve’s voice crackled across the line, “the doombots are all forming a kind of wall around parliament. We think there could be up to a few hundred people still inside. Harry, they’re…” Steve paused for breath, “I think they’re going to self destruct.”

“What?”

“They’re creating a chain reaction of explosions, a bomb of sorts” Tony’s voice spoke up, “Harry, what’s the situation with Doom? If there’s ever a time we need him to disable the bots…”

Harry swallowed, looking down at Doom’s unseeing eyes staring up at him. Even in death, the man had a small smile on his face. “Doom’s dead.” Harry’s voice was hollow, “he…he took a pill, starting choking…”

“Fuck” Steve said hoarsely. It was what everyone was thinking, but to have Steve be the one to say it… “Harry.” For the first time, Steve sounded unnerved, “Harry I can’t save these people, I don’t know what to do…”
Harry closed his eyes, “don’t move, I’m on my way.”

And then, with a final glance back at Doom, Harry turned on the spot and disapperated.

“Current death toll is sixty eight people, with hundreds injured and over ninety still unaccounted for. People are calling it a terrorism attack, a bank robbery, an assassination of the Prime Minister…no one knows what to make of the hostage situation panning out in Parliament right now. Indeed there seems to be no organisation or individual claiming the attack, though the famed heroes Avengers have been spotted at the scene. With over four hundred people still inside the building, the government can only hope that the air force can get there in time, and if not, whether America’s very own special team can succeed where they failed in defending London from this savage attack. Citizens of Britain can only watch and wait, and pray for a miracle.”

BBC NEWS EMERGENCY BROADCAST.

The Avengers were all stood about the wall of doombots, their expressions stricken with something so agonisingly helpless Harry could almost feel the distress radiating off them when he appeared on the scene.

“Harry!”

“Are you alright?”

“What happened?”

“Yes” Harry interrupted, “He’s dead. I didn’t see him take the pill, I fucking missed it. I’m sorry, Captain.” He looked at Steve.

“It wasn’t your fault, Harry” Steve looked incredibly tired, there was blood all over him, “you couldn’t have known Doom was suicidal.”

“It matters not” Thor said firmly, “either we disable these robots, or we get the people out of there.”

“We know the programming can’t be cracked without Doom, so that’s out” Tony pointed out.

“So perhaps if Thor could fly over and…”

“Wait a minute” Harry said suddenly, “What if the bots didn’t need to be disabled? What if they could just be destroyed?”

“What do you think we’ve been trying to do for the past hour?” Natasha said cuttingly, “they can’t be destroyed, not without setting off the bomb.”

“Maybe not with normal weapons.” Harry said. In his palm, a ball of light appeared, “but what about mine?”

His thoughts were racing. Magic and technology didn’t get along. Something about being a wizard screwed up muggle devices like a scrambler, like a mini EMP wherever he went. There was a reason
tech had never worked in Hogwarts. *Hogwarts*…

“Wards!” Harry blurted.

“What?”

“Harry?”

Harry ignored the confused voices of the Avengers and ran towards the wall of doombots. Static crackled between them as Harry drew near. *Of course.* He had been thinking about it all wrong. It wasn’t just that he could fire a few *reductos* and the bots would explode; it was purely the *exposure* to magic. If Harry could hit them with a pulse of magical energy, even better a dome of constant exposure rebounding in a fixed frame of reference, it would fry the tech without even needing a spell. He needed something big, something heavily imbued with magic in it’s rawest form, a containment of fizzling energy…

*“Protego Maxima. Fianto Duri. Repello Inimicum.”*

Somehow the Elder Wand had appeared in his hand and silvery white streaks were shooting out of it, cascading into the sky and forming a huge dome over Parliament. Harry’s voice rose and fell in a waterfall of syllables, crisp consonants and warm vowels that entwined with the spell. The Avengers watched, awestruck, as the shield unfolded over the great wall of machinery. In his mind’s eye, Harry saw that last fateful day at the battle for Hogwarts, as hundreds of teachers and students alike pointed their wands to the sky and built the shield to keep the monsters out. Of course, Harry was a great deal more powerful now, and the shield was finished in seconds from his spell alone. As the final edge closed, there was a pulse of energy that shuddered through the air. Silence.

“Harry?” Steve asked hesitantly, “what-”

**BAM**

Every single bot trembled and juddered and whined in a building crescendo of rumbling drones. Then with a hissing spark they went dead, shutting down as the magic fried their muggle systems. The great wall of metal began to slowly fall apart, swinging precariously above the Avengers.

*“Arresto Momentum”* Harry said firmly, dropping the shield to focus on the falling carnage. The plummeting objects froze in midair, and the great dome of light and energy faded from view.

“So” Harry called into the silence, “any time you guys want to stop gaping at me like fish and start moving the people out?” He didn’t have to turn round to know they were all staring at him.

Steve cleared his throat, “Er, right. Tony? Would you mind…”

“Right, yeah.” Tony took to the sky, broadcasting his voice into the building. *“Citizens of London, it’s your lucky day. The situation has been dealt with, you are all free to make your way in an orderly fashion out to the street. And I mean it; anyone running, screaming or panicking in any way will be shot on sight. I for one, have had quite enough panic for one day.”*

Harry rolled his eyes. With an absent-minded wave of his hand, the dead robots began slowly lowering to the ground and arranging themselves in neat piles either side of the street. Harry flicked the Elder wand back into his pocket and watched the people slowly emerging from Parliament. Wide eyes beheld the Avengers as they stood bruised and bloodied on the streets. Some began pointing and whispering excitedly.

Perfect then, for Harry to quietly slip out of sight. No one looked twice at the boy standing in the
shadow of their legendary heroes. Little did they know they owed it all to him. Somewhere, someone started applauding and others joined in, beaming at the Avengers and crying exclamations of awe and gratitude. Harry smirked as he saw the Avengers flush slightly.

Natasha turned. “Harry get your *arse* over here” she hissed across their earpieces.

Harry raised his hands, “low profile remember? I bet Fury’s pissed off enough as it is without me flaunting it in his face.”

“But you should be *here*.” Steve insisted quietly, “it isn’t right that they should applaud us for what you did.”

“I didn’t save London, Steve. That was all you and the team. I just…helped out a little at the end.” Harry smiled as the Captain made to protest, “let it go, Cap. I didn’t do it for the ego boost”

“All the more reason” Steve muttered, but continued smiling and waving at the crowds without giving Harry away.

This, Harry was infinitely grateful for; after all, he had had enough of the spotlight to last several lifetimes.

After what seemed like hours of countless congratulations and thank you’s, the Avengers eventually managed to break away and duck hurriedly into the waiting jet. Harry couldn’t help but notice they looked a little frazzled and entirely ready to fall into bed.

“Well” Harry sighed happily, stretching out on his seat, “I’d certainly like to see what Fury makes of this one. God his publicity agents must *hate* me.”

“Harry, what did you *do*?” Steve asked quietly, sitting opposite him.

“Magic and technology don’t react well to each other” Harry explained, “I just hit the doombots with enough contained raw magic to fry their systems ten times over. Normally wards are used to protect an area, but I figured since muggle tech doesn’t usually work inside a protected area, it was worth giving it a shot. Anything else I could have done, explosions and mass destruction powwow would have just had the same effect as a bomb, so you know, BOOM. This was the only other way I could think of doing it.” He shrugged, “I guess the gamble came off.”

“Understatement of the year” Tony exclaimed, “that was…I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“There’s a reason us magic folk don’t mingle too much with you muggles” Harry said with a slight smile, “I mean you’re all so…*techy*.”

Bruce smiled tiredly, still looking a little worn out from having changed back a few minutes ago, “you really have no idea how incredible this all is, do you?”

“Avengers, *this is Fury*” A hard voice echoed out of their earpieces. They all winced, “*You are all to report directly to base the moment you get back. To clarify, that is an order, in case you’ve all forgotten how to follow them.*”

Steve cleared his throat, “Director…”

“I don’t want to hear it. I’ll expect you by 9:00pm local time. All of you. Oh, and Harry?” The
director paused for a long time, Harry almost wondered if he had switched off. “You disobeyed my direct orders and infiltrated an exclusive secret mission, possibly compromising my team.”

“Now hang on just a sec–” Tony protested.

“Thank you.” Fury’s voice was so low they barely made it out.

Harry almost fell over, “what?”

“You heard me” His voice was gruff, almost embarrassed, “9:00pm. Don’t be late.” And then he was gone.

Harry grinned at the team, “I think he likes me.”

Debrief was short and simple, with a somewhat halfhearted don’t ever disobey my orders again, a dash of what the hell were you thinking and then a final grudging good job. The only point of interest was when Fury had asked how Harry had shut down the doombots.

“You used…a shield?” Fury clarified slowly.

“But like, a really big shield.”

A pause, “pray tell me, how does shielding the robots help destroy them?”

“Because technology doesn’t react well to magic.” Harry explained for what felt like the millionth time, “I was thinking of wards, and how tech never worked inside areas magically protected. I effectively warded the area temporarily, which had enough magical mojo to screw with the bots.”

Another pause, “with…a shield?”

“Oh for the love of Merlin…”

When they were finally dismissed, Harry was all for leaping into bed and never leaving it again. He just wanted to go home and be done with it. Home. Harry blinked, surprised at himself. He wondered when he had started thinking of the Tower as home.

“You’re being awfully quiet, Harry” Natasha remarked as they headed out on deck, “Fury didn’t scare you off did he?”

“What? No” Harry shook his head distractedly, “I was just thinking, that guy Doom…he knew me.”

“Like he recognised you?”

“No, he knew my name.”

Natasha stiffened, “did you, I mean was he…”

“From my world?” Harry shook his head, “I don’t think so. It was more like he had been told of me, heard my name mentioned or something like that.”

“But who would know something like that? I mean come on, you’re not the kind of person to let something like that slip. You haven’t even told us.”
Harry smiled a little ruefully, “Harry James Potter. I guess it doesn’t really matter now.”

Natasha bowed her head, “I’m honoured that’d you would share it. Rest assured it is safe with me.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about, but thank you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Doom mentioned an employer, someone who had been paying particular attention to me.”

Natasha frowned, “Who’d employ an evil-mastermind?”

“Who’d be a fan of someone who technically doesn’t exist?” Harry countered with a small smile, “all I know is that even though Doom wasn’t expecting me, his employer certainly was. And I’ve got a feeling he won’t remain in the background for long. Doom was just the beginning.”

Natasha was silent for a moment or two, “then we’re going to need all the help we can get.” She said at last. “Look, I know it’s not really my place to ask, but if today has shown me anything it’s that we need you Harry. The Avengers are flawed, you know, we’re not a perfect team. But you…you change something.” She bit her lip, “The Captain’s always been our leader, and I’m not contesting that. But there’s something about you, Harry, it’s like…it’s like you can’t not follow you. You make people want to fight for you, to be better, because when the world goes to shit around us, you’re the one who’s still fighting because it’s the right thing to do. It's like this tug inside of me, a pull that says see this guy right here? He's the best chance you have. He's the one you should follow. He's the one who's going to save the day and give you the stories to tell afterwards. He's going to change the world, and you're going to want to be by his side when he does.”

Harry closed his eyes, his throat suddenly feeling thick. “Don’t, Red…”

“I think we’d even die for you if it came down to it.”

“Don’t say that” Harry’s voice cracked like a whip, “don’t ever say that.”

Natasha looked bewildered, “Harry, what-”

“I am not worth dying for Natasha, and I would not have you throw away your life like that.”

“It’s no more than I would do for any of the team” she said defensively.

“Yes, the team, not me. You…you don’t know what I’ve done…”

“We’ve all done things we regret, Harry Potter” she said firmly, “do not ever think that your conscience is ever darker than ours.”

“I will not allow you to pledge your life in such a careless manner” Harry insisted, his voice breaking slightly, “I’m so damn sick of people dying for me.”

Natasha opened her mouth, then stopped at Harry’s expression. His face was as hard as stone, but his eyes…God they were heart-wrenching. That haunted gaze, so full of past and pain, they surely could not belong to a boy of seventeen. It was the gaze of a man who had been through hell, and lost everything, only to emerge victorious, and alone, on the other side. It was the gaze of someone who had endured.

“Harry?” she said softly. Hesitantly, she reached out a hand and brushed a stray lock of hair off his forehead in away that was oddly motherly. He closed his eyes, and Natasha realised with a jolt that
he was actually shaking. “Он милый мой” her voice broke, and Natasha - the Black-Widow, the assassin who had killed dozens without a thought - pulled Harry close and simply breathed against his collarbone. Slowly, as though he wasn’t sure if he was allowed to, Harry enfolded his arms around her slight form. They stood there for a moment, red hair brushing against raven locks, faces hidden, clasping at each other tightly, two solitary figures still in the bustle of life on the deck.

“You may fight alongside me all you wish” Harry said quietly, “but please, do not ask me to let you die for me.”

“Alright, but no promises” Natasha smiled slightly as she pulled back, “you are a curious being, Harry Potter.”

“So I am told.”

“And ridiculously stubborn too.”

“It’s my secret superpower.” Harry deadpanned, “I was bitten by a radioactive mule.”

Her lips twitched, “naturally. Any more superpowers I should know about?”

“I can talk to snakes?”

“Okay now I know you’re messing with me.”

Natasha considered it a personal victory when Harry laughed. The two boarded the jet, and if the Avengers seemed to look at Harry with a new kind of fundamental understanding, Harry did not mention it. They had seen the unspoken words in Harry’s voice and his eyes, known because it was a reflection of themselves. They had all lost people, after all.

And funnily enough, it was not Harry’s willingness to come to fight in the first place nor his extraordinary abilities in the battle today that really settled him as one of them in the Avengers hearts. It was the tremble in his words, the terrified pain in his eyes, the flicker of vulnerability as he held onto their Natasha tight outside that shifted something in the team’s thoughts. Because they got it.

And ultimately, it was this one glimpse of weakness, not his impossible strengths, that proved he deserved to stand among them. Not only as a friend or a comrade, though this he was; but in every manner of the word, an Avenger.

Perhaps it was for the best then, that as the jet pulled away and carried off the Avengers in what became nothing more than a blot on the horizon, that no one heard the scream. Agents on the floating ship glanced at each other nervously, but no one made a move towards the locked door. Director Fury knew what he was doing. One of them flinched as the man screamed again, a horrible broken sound that set the entire ship trembling. Even when they heard shouting, a sharp crack, a juddering thud, a snarl cut off…no one moved to help. It was not their place, after all. The agents bowed their heads, and continued working.

No help comes to the damned.

That night, a whisper echoed throughout the worlds, the planes of reality rippling and shifting like
curtains billowing in a midnight breeze. Not a mouth uttered it, nor no mind did think it, but the earth remembered. The call was sung in the autumn leaf touching the ground, in the swelling of the waves, in the depths of the earth and the howling of the sky and the distant blazing of the stars. The worlds shifted and sighed and opened up to the great vastness of the void, offering up the single name that would change everything.

*Harry Potter*

In the darkest depths of the universe, the last Titan raised his head and smiled.

Chapter End Notes

I know, foreshadowing and cliffhangers, I'm horrible :)

милый мой (or МИlaya Мoyna) is a term of endearment or affection in Russian, loosely translating to 'My sweet'.
Chapter Summary

His eyes opened, and met with a bizarre sight. The chair next to him was glowing. Great, now he was delusional.
The silvery chair shifted, and Loki blinked. Make that a chair with horns. No…not horns…antlers. So Father Christmas had come to save him. Marvellous.

Chapter Notes

If you're reading this, you've stayed with this fic to my twelfth instalment and made me very happy, so thank you fellow reader :)
WARNING: Mild warning for torture in this chapter, nothing too graphic.
Happy reading.

“I have a new name for pain.

What’s that?

_The Obliterator. Because when you’re in pain, nothing else can exist. Not thought. Not emotion. Only the drive to escape the pain. When it’s strong enough, the Obliterator strips us of everything that makes us who we are, until we’re reduced to creatures less than animals, creatures with a single desire and goal: escape._

A good name, then.” — *Christopher Paolini, Eldest*

Doctor Doom was not the first, nor the meanest villain the team faced that week. The incident in London seemed to have opened the door to every serial killer, mass murderer and evil genius the world had to offer, and _all_ of them recognised Harry. None mentioned an ‘employer’, but Harry wasn’t stupid. He was, you know, somewhat of an expert in mass-villains trying to kill him and getting others to do their dirty work. In fact, one could almost say the incessant stream of battles gave him a feeling of nostalgia. People were hard. _Fighting_, well, that was second nature to the boy who lived.

And now that Fury had stopped hindering Harry’s contribution, the Avengers got more efficient with every confrontation. _Sabre-tooth_? Harry had been besting werewolves in his twenties through swordplay alone. _Enchantress_? Please. Her magic was _textbook_. _The Abomination_? Harry thought Banner had been handling it perfectly well, but a little phoenix fire never goes amiss.
In fact, Harry’s second and third battles were two of the shortest the Avengers had ever experienced as a team. The fights were over in less than the time it had taken Tony to run downstairs and put on his armour.

Then of course, those were only the battles they knew about. Steve recalled a particular instance where he had rose at the crack of dawn for his usual runs before everyone else was up, only to find Harry already awake and making coffee. He may have looked a little...disheveled for someone who'd only just got up, but Steve put that down to Harry's notorious bed-hair. He hadn't thought much of it at the time. That is, until the call came in from Fury a few hours later.

He casually posed the question to Harry over dinner, "Harry, you wouldn’t happen to know why HYDRA's base now appears to be on the bottom of the ocean do you?"

Some of the team paused in their eating.

Harry simply continued cutting his potatoes, "I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about", he said, "pass the salt, would you Nat?"

And that was that. When an hour later the entirety of Hydra's staff were found standing outside SHIELD's base, begging to be arrested, no one mentioned that either. If Harry looked a little pleased with himself, everyone pretended not to notice.

It was…a humbling experience to say in the least.

They knew Harry was powerful, but this was ridiculous; he didn’t look a day older than seventeen. It made them wonder what sort of place he had grown up in, to possess such an easy competence battling legends at such an age.

Of course, they didn’t know half of it.

“He’s top trending on three social media sites?”

“He had a fandom?”

“They’re calling themselves Potterheads.”

“Shut up.”

“I’m serious! Look-”

“Guys?” The Avengers spun round guiltily at the sound of Harry’s voice. Harry raised an eyebrow. The team were sat on the floor around Tony’s laptop, all fighting to catch a glimpse of the screen.

“Harry!” Tony exclaimed, snapping the laptop shut, “funny, we were just talking about you.”

“So I heard.” Harry said wryly, “you know they did have Twitter in my world too, I’m a wizard, not an alien.”

The team looked a little sheepish. “Were you famous back there as well?” Clint asked curiously, “you seem to have a habit of attracting trouble.”
Harry laughed, “you’re not wrong. Killing the darkest wizard of all time does tend to give you somewhat of a reputation.”

Natasha frowned, “wasn’t that the one you killed when you were two?”

“...Among other times.”

“You killed him more than once?” Tony clarified incredulously.

“Seven times, to be exact. Bloody horcruxes.”

Tony sighed melodramatically, “Are you being this annoyingly cryptic on purpose?”

Harry blinked, then grinned, “force of habit, I suppose. Growing up in a world that knew more about you than you did means I became quite apt at evading questions.”

“As we have daily proof” Natasha said, rolling her eyes.

Harry dimpled at her.

“But you said you killed him at seventeen, and made it sound like a while ago too.” Banner mused, “You can’t be that much older, surely…”

Harry’s smile fell from his face as the Avengers all turned to look at him.

“Harry?” Natasha prompted.

Thor stood, “I too have often wondered it. You look young by mortal standards, but the way you speak and the way you fight…”

“You talk about things hundreds of years ago in your world like you were there.” Natasha said slowly.

“And all the things you’ve done…”

“The things you know…”

Harry held up a hand. He sighed, suddenly looking a great deal older than seventeen.

“Harry…how old are you?” Steve asked quietly.

A small smile touched Harry’s lips; it was inevitable they would find out some day.

“Do you want the long answer or the short answer?”

The room was burning. The walls glowed with a scarlet haze, waves of blistering heat rippled through the air, a never-ending vortex of burning burning burning. Pain seared through him in a white hot agony, burning, his skin flickered blue and back in a confused daze to throw off the heat, burning, fire on his skin, in his blood, in his lungs, oh God he was burning…

Click. The room went white. The fire was gone. Loki arched upwards and took a deep, gasping
breath, pulling against the restraints with trembling limbs. The bindings cut into his skin like razors, and he didn’t have the strength to break through them. Maybe once, but now…Loki’s eyes fell shut and he sagged against the table. Behind the closed lids, his green eyes were blazing with fury. How dare they exploit his Jodun form in such a cowardly way? Using artificial heat that would have killed any mortal to wear him down rather than face him themselves. Pitiful.

Across the room, Loki heard the door to his cell open and someone walk in. He didn’t open his eyes. That particular rhythm of footsteps was unmistakable. “Come now, Director” he said smoothly, “I was beginning to think you’d forgotten me.”

It was a psychological warfare tactic -- hurt the prisoner, make him suffer unspeakable pain. The pain only ever went away when the torturer was in his line of sight, forcing a connection between freedom from pain and the torturer himself. It was a subconscious Pavlovian tactic that this world had adapted from their various wars and squabbles. But Loki had been around far longer than that; hell, he’d probably invented most of the techniques. And he was a genius when it came to manipulation.

The footsteps faltered for a moment. Loki smirked, and opened his eyes. Director Fury was glaring down at him.

“Loki” he said curtly.

“I’d offer you a seat, but well…” Loki shifted, and the bindings tightened. The one clamping his head to the table drew blood. “I’m afraid hospitality just isn’t what it used to be.”

"Oh? Then why are you still here?"

Loki gave Fury a look like he thought he was being particularly stupid, "You seem to be under the ridiculous assumption I have a choice in the matter"

Without blinking, Fury seemed to snatch a Glock 17 out of thin air and fired three times. Loki did not break eye contact, didn't even flinch, as three bullets tore into his bare chest. He cocked his head. His eyes glowed green. Then there were three distinct pings as the bullets were rejected out of his body and hit the floor. His skin was unmarked. His magic clustered around his burns, the cuts on his hands, on his forehead, sealing up the wounds and smoothing them over. Loki sighed in relief as the last traces of the burn faded. When he looked again at Fury, the man looked oddly disappointed.

"You were faking that day" Fury said with certainty, "you wanted to get caught."

Loki raised an eyebrow, but did not confirm or deny it.

"Now here's what I want to know" Fury pressed a button and the table Loki was on rotated so they were face to face. "Our weapons barely piece your skin, you don't seem to need any kind of sustenance, and even though for some bizarre reason heat is deadly to you, you have the highest tolerance to pain I have ever seen." Fury glared at him, "So what the hell are you still doing in my cell?"

"Maybe I needed somewhere to crash" Loki suggested.

"Or maybe you were running from something"

Silence.

Fury's eyes widened, "my God you actually were - someone's after you."

"Someone's always after me" Loki sounded bored, "I'm the God of Mischief, it's an occupational
"Who is it?" Fury demanded.

Loki laughed at petulant eagerness in Fury's voice, "no ally of yours"

"And you have a good record when it comes to allies, do you?" Fury sneered.

Green eyes flashed, "you know, I am almost tempted to let you try, watch him destroy you and your world like a twig snapped in a hurricane."

"Riddles hidden in nonsense" Fury slammed his gun next to Loki's head. It was the closest he had gotten to the God, "Now you'd better start talking sense real soon or-".

"What?" Loki interrupted, cocking his head to the side, "I think we've established your torturing methods leave a lot to be desired."

Fury's mouth twisted, "You might fool your idiot brother but you don't fool me, Laufeyson. I will-"

Fury's words choked in his throat as cold steel stabbed into his abdomen. He stared at Loki in shock.

"Call me Laufeyson again, and it'll be your heart" Loki hissed.

Security was swarming in, weapons trained on Loki, agents in black surrounding Fury as he yanked the small blade out.

"I'm fine - fine!" Fury was insisting, one hand pressed to his bleeding side. His eyes met Loki's, and suddenly he understood. The blow hadn't been lethal; it had been a warning.

_I may be the one tied to this table_, Loki's eyes seemed to say, _but don't you dare forget for one second who has the real power here._

Right. A cold calm seemed to come over Fury. Right.

"Get me phase 3 right now" he snarled to the nearest agent.

He hesitated, "sir, phase 3 hasn't received authorisation yet, I'm required to tell you that technically we'd be breaking-"

"Required?" Fury repeated quietly, "I'm sorry, on whose authority are you are required to tell me...what exactly?"

He trailed off at the expression on the Director's face.

"Nothing sir" he bowed his head, "nothing at all."

"That's what I thought." Fury turned and picked the blade off the floor. Behind him, agents backed away hurriedly, melting into the background. Loki was watching Fury with indifference, even as he approached and and sliced a thin cut along Loki's collarbone. This time he did bleed, for it was Asgardian steel. That was the only way it would have pierced his skin so easily.

Fury's gaze was fixed on that small cut, which Loki could already feel healing.
"Feel better?" Loki said placidly.

Fury ignored him, "Too long your kind has held the advantage. Too long have you played with our lives" he was still staring at the blood as it faded into a green glow, apparently lost in thought, "And now to find not only are you practically indestructible, but have abilities far beyond the supernatural. This...magic. Healing you, strengthening you."

"Being a divine higher life form also helps I imagine" Loki remarked dryly.

Fury’s eye twitched, "we are no longer oblivious to the powers of Asgard and that of you immortals. Phase 2 took care of that. Magic though..." he looked troubled, "to that we have no defence."

Loki narrowed his eyes, “this isn’t just about me, is it? You’re scared of him.”

“We have no defence” Fury repeated, as though convincing himself, “thus I am forced to conduct phase 3.”

“What are you going to do? Muggle me to death?” Loki asked flippantly, using Harry’s word.

As an answer, Fury looked to the camera in the corner of the room, and the door opened. Loki strained upwards to see. Three agents were wheeling in what looked like an enlarged hospital IV drip (yes, Loki actually knew what that was). Instead of blood or hydration fluid, the liquid inside was a sickly looking grey. Gunmetal grey.

Loki raised an unimpressed eyebrow, "so this is your master plan? Inject me with some cocktail your lab rats have cooked up? Experiment on me just in case Harry goes rogue? I hate to disappoint you, but healing tends to work on the inside just as well as on the out."

Fury smiled with a savage kind of delight, “but how will you heal, if you do not have magic?”

And then before Loki could even blink, Fury raised his hand and plunged the needle into Loki’s arm. The effect was immediate. The grey-black liquid surged down the drip and the moment it touched Loki’s blood, it was like a void had opened up inside of him. Everything suddenly felt...hollow, as though Loki wasn’t quite there anymore. His magic, ever blazing through him in an endless swell of the universe’s energy, seemed to recoil from the poison oozing through his veins. It snapped and fizzled and hissed, and then went quiet. Gone. Loki went very still. His heartbeat thudded in his ears. NO. Loki reached out desperately, but his magical core seemed dull and dark and utterly beyond his reach. Gone. Loki trembled. Magic wasn’t just an accessory, a trinket like Thor’s hammer; it was part of him. Loki was magic. And now it was gone.

And that was what broke Loki like nothing else.

He barely noticed Fury cutting his arm again, nodding in satisfaction when the cut did not heal and blood continued pouring down his arm. He did not see him leave the room, nor feel the heat when the room became unbearably hot again. He did not feel the illusion slip off and his skin tinge blue, cracking and burning and utterly exposed to the blistering heat. Dark splotches crept across his vision, everything suddenly felt so heavy and he was so tired and even keeping his eyes open seemed so hard. Loki sagged against the table, vision blurring, the world swirling dizzyingly around him.

Gone.

"Harry..."

The drip fluctuated with a sudden surge of liquid, and Loki fell into unconsciousness.
“Shut up. You can’t be older than twenty, thirty at the most.”

“Mm, keep going.”

“…fifty?” Clint guessed dubiously. Even to their ears it sounded ridiculous.

“It’s certainly a multiple of fifty.”

Out of all of them, only Thor seemed to get it. “You are like the Asgardians” he said with a dawning realisation, “you are like me”


“Technically I stopped ageing at seventeen” Harry pointed out, “but I think I’m around 350, last I checked.”

“You think?” That was Steve.

Harry smiled a little sheepishly, “you tend to lose track over the years.”

“It is true” Thor added, “I stopped counting myself after the first few centuries.”

Tony huffed in amusement, “so is that a wizard thing, or…”

Apparently that was the wrong thing to say. Nobody missed how Harry suddenly stiffened. “No” he said after a moment, looking at his hands, “no it’s just me.”

Natasha frowned, “Harry…”

“I’ll be in the training room” he said abruptly, standing, “if the world’s invaded in the next hour, come and find me.” Then with a smile that didn’t quite meet his eyes, Harry left the room.

Silence. The air suddenly seemed colder without Harry there. Clint cleared his throat, “did anyone else find that a bit odd?”

“What, the fact that he’s immortal, or the fact he’s obviously so torn up about it?” Natasha replied curtly.

He raised his hands, “hey, all I’m saying is that something isn’t adding up. He doesn’t age, he’s got centuries worth of magic up his sleeve, and yet somehow he ends up here by accident?”

Steve straightened, “what are you saying?”

“I’m saying that has anyone actually asked Harry how he got here? Why he got here?”

No one answered. Then, a quiet voice spoke up, “Do you remember last week, before the incident with Doom, the question that Harry never answered?” Banner asked.

“We asked him whether he could die” Natasha said softly. They all looked at each other. Below them, the Tower shuddered slightly and they heard explosions from the training room.
Suddenly, Tony spoke up, “you know what? It doesn’t matter.”

Steve blinked, “I’m sorry?”

“I said it doesn’t matter. Immortal, mortal, invincible, whatever. He’s Harry; what does it make a damn difference whether he can die or not?”

“Well, if we knew…”

“It’s not our business. Okay he might be centuries old, which I’m…still processing, but the guy can still be hurt. And what sort of a team would we be if we didn’t trust him?” And to that, no one had an answer. Tony sighed, “I’m going to work in the lab. If any of you have any respect for Harry at all, you’ll leave him be until he’s ready to tell us. I, for one, do not want an angry wizard wrecking my house because you all couldn’t keep your nose out of his shit.”

And with a twirl of his champagne class that only Tony could manage to pull off without it looking ridiculously camp, the genius strolled out, whistling as he went.

Steve ran a hand across his eyes, “Tony’s right. It doesn’t matter, not really. We’ll keep this under wraps for now, there’s no reason to get Fury all worked up again over our magician.”

The team nodded. “Our magician?” Natasha repeated teasingly.

Steve smiled, “I guess he is, isn’t he? He’s an Avenger. He’s one of us.”

And he was. And what struck the Avengers in that moment was that actually it really didn’t matter what Harry was or what he could do. Because somehow the boy with the haunted green eyes had slipped right past their defences and become as vital to the team as any member. They could not remember a time when Harry was not making coffee for them in the morning, showing them impossible magic with a childlike light in his eyes, laughing at Tony’s antics, playing catch with Thor’s hammer just because he loved to watch the other’s squirm, taking Clint up on his broom and teaching him to fly, curling up on the sofa with Natasha and falling asleep watching endless spy movies, reenacting all the James Bond scenes in their pyjamas, hands flying animatedly as he talked science with Banner, going running with Steve in the morning, driving Tony’s sports cars with him in the evening, flying with Tony and Thor at night with only the moonlight to guide them, teasing them all on the way to missions, helping clear up afterwards with a weary pain in his eyes as they saw the casualties, giving them a hand when it all became too much. He was Harry, and they could not imagine life without him.

On the floor below, Harry paused in his avalanche of spell casting and looked up where he had been listening to snatches of conversation. Our magician. Avenger. One of us.

If his spell casting got a little less vicious after that, and the Tower stopped shaking a little less, no one mentioned it.

It was later that night (or perhaps it was morning, Harry wasn’t quite sure) that he left the training room to find Tony still working in his lab. The genius was bowed over a piece of red and gold armour, absently tweaking something, his eyes tired and drawn and reflecting the blue lights of the holograms. Harry could have just transfigured the glass, but he figured it was polite to knock. Tony started, armoured hand flying up, then relaxed as he recognised Harry. He waved him in.
“Didn’t think anyone was still up” Tony called, removing his hand from the armour.

“Likewise. Exactly how long have you been down here?”

Tony brushed him off, “not long, I had dinner.”

“Tony” Harry said patiently, “dinner was seven hours ago.”

The man blinked slowly, “right.”

“You’re down here most nights, aren’t you? Do you even sleep?”

Tony laughed, though Harry noticed it sounded a little forced, “of course I sleep.”

Harry sighed, “JARVIS?”

“Mr Stark has not entered REM sleep in over three days, sir.”

“Traitor” Tony mumbled.

“Damn it, Tony” Harry said in exasperation, “how can you expect to defend the world when you can’t even stay on your feet?”

“I’m fine!” he insisted, standing. The words were somewhat wasted, as Tony had to subtly clutch the table to stop himself falling over from a sudden rush of dizziness. Through the haze of exhaustion, he felt an arm wrap around him. Harry.

“For the love of merlin…Come on, you” Harry said with an irritated fondness. Tony blinked, and suddenly they were standing in Tony’s room. He hadn’t even noticed Harry apparate.

“Harry” Tony said, his voice tense as he looked at the bed that hadn’t been slept in for days. Usually he just collapsed at whatever desk he was working at. “You don’t understand. I can’t…”

In the dark, Harry’s eyes flashed with understanding, “nightmares?”

Tony looked away. His throat was tight. “You must think I’m pathetic.”

“No, I think you care a hell of a lot more than you let on” Harry replied blithely, “and most of your nightmares are to do with failing people, failing the team. Am I right?”

Tony stared at him, “how…”

“Eh, you remind me of someone as equally stupid as you.”

“Oh?”

Harry smirked, “me.”

Tony huffed a laugh. He sat down as the buzzing in his head got annoying. “I’m still an insomniac most nights, you know. Trying to convince me to sleep is only half the battle.”

Harry pursed his lips for a moment. “I’d offer you a dreamless sleep potion, but they can get addictive and you really don’t want to go there. I guess…” Harry hesitated. “There is something I could try, with your permission.”

“What have we said about you trying to be cryptic?”
Harry chuckled. A flick of his wrist and his wand appeared. “Expecto Patronum” a whisper of a spell and a silvery-white mist billowed from the tip of his wand. Tony watched, transfixed, as the mist began to take the form of a stag.

“What is it?” he said curiously, reaching out a hand to brush against the glowing figure. The stag, to his astonishment, actually leaned into his hand, like it was real. A wave of safe, home, protect washed over him, soothing over his jagged ends and frazzled thoughts.

“It’s called a patronus” Harry said quietly, “back in my world, they were used to fight off dementors, beings of despair and misery. They are the embodiment of everything good and light in the world.”

At this point, Tony wasn’t really listening. With a calm that he hadn’t felt in weeks, he felt himself slumping sideways as exhaustion finally caught up with him. Steady hands caught him before he could fall, and Tony was vaguely aware of someone easing him onto the bed.

“Harry?” Tony mumbled as the figure made to leave. Harry turned. Tony focused on getting the words out, “you know…it doesn’t matter right? You…being…old and stuff”

Harry smiled. “I know Tony, now go to sleep.”

And as though Tony had been waiting for permission, he sighed and drifted off, the patronus standing guard over him in the night. For the first time since New York, his sleep was free of nightmares. Harry retreated into the living room, a book on relativity in his hand, a ball of conjured light hovering at his shoulder.

And if the stag slipped silently out of the window and disappeared for a while in the early hours of the morning, neither Tony nor Harry were none the wiser.

After all, where could it have gone?

It could have been hours or days that Loki spent drifting in and out of consciousness, the sluggish grey stuff pumping methodically into his bloodstream. People came and went like mayflies, testing this and measuring that, watching him bleed, taking his vitals with a detached sort of quiet satisfaction.

Sometimes they soaked him with water, hooking him up to machines that sent waves of electricity burning through his nervous system. Sometimes they tried out new weapons on him, observing closely how his skin bruised under their hands, seeing how much he could take before unconsciousness claimed him once more. Sometimes it was simple - place a glass of water three feet from his face and let him starve with thirst, forever taunted by the relief just out of reach until he had the blissful oblivion of finally passing out.

And always that burning haze of blistering heat.

Very soon his body, left raw and bleeding from the absence of magic, began to self-destruct.

Every so often he would bolt upwards with a rush of realisation and horror and raw fury at what these mortals had reduced him to, before one of the agents would plunge another needle into his arm and and drag him under again. Every time he broke through made the agents more and more nervous, inspiring an awed sort of chill at the sheer, unmitigated force of will that kept him from
They all knew Loki was tough. But no matter how much they hit him with, Loki just wouldn’t stay down. And the more he reacted and fought back, the more they had to subdue him and the more intense the dosage became.

Eventually, by the fifth time Loki had broken his restraints and nearly killed another agent, with six IV lines pumping poison into his blood, Loki was sent plummeting into a comatose-like-state of unconsciousness so deep even his heartbeat began slowing down dangerously. He lay exhausted and broken on the cold table, black spidery veins transcending out from the IV points, every breath seeming more of an effort than the last, skin pale under the harsh white light.

The agents, frankly, were baffled at the effect the drug was having. The chemical was supposed to repress his magic, not send him into a coma. They didn’t understand - they couldn’t. Loki was magic, and to take that from him was the equivalent of draining a human of their blood, or depriving their brain of oxygen. Slowly but surely, that grey sludge was killing him. And no one was going to do anything about it. Why would they? Everything Loki had done had been to destroy this planet; it was no wonder it’s inhabitants weren’t particularly fond of him.

Surprising then, that Loki should sense another magical presence in the room. He surfaced to awareness slowly, straining against the currents of unconsciousness, and emerged with a ragged intake of breath. His eyes opened, and met with a bizarre sight. The chair next to him was glowing. Magic chairs. Great, now he was delusional. The silvery chair shifted, and Loki blinked. Make that a chair with horns. No…not horns…antlers.

So Father Christmas had come to save him. Marvellous.

Loki was just resolving to ignore the hallucination and let himself fall back into blessed oblivion when the silvery thing brushed against his hand.

BAM

Loki’s eyes flew open. Magic: pure, unadulterated magic. The thing was bursting with it. At the contact, Loki felt it’s warmth bristle against his numb fingertips, giving him the strength to look past his blurred vision and see that it was not, in fact, a chair, but a stag. An honest to God, real, magical silver stag. The animal nuzzled Loki’s hand, and his breath caught in his throat. Safe, warm, hope, light swelled through him for a moment, and the feeling was almost too much to bear. Involuntarily, Loki’s fingers closed in the stag’s glowing hide with an almost childish desperation. Don’t leave. The gesture seemed to say, don’t you dare leave. The animal looked at him. Then, with a great toss of it’s majestic head, the stag tore through all six IV lines with it’s antlers. Astonishingly, the drip was ripped in half. Grey sludge pooled onto the floor. Loki slumped against the table. The stag turned to mist in his hand.

“No” Loki rasped, but the thing was already gone, vanished into thin air like it had never appeared in the first place. The only sign it had really happened was the torn IV scattered on the floor. Around him, a shrieking alarm went off.

Everything after that happened very fast. Loki snarled as he pulled the needle out with his teeth, spitting it onto the floor. Summoning all of his borrowed strength from the stag, he snapped the bindings clamping him to the table. He could hear agents amassing outside. Loki stumbled off the table and immediately fell to the floor, every nerve screaming in pain.

God he was exhausted.
Black spots hovered at the edges of his vision. The door to his cell opened. Loki stood with a furious kind of defiance, breathing shallowly. His eyes flitted back and forth like cornered prey. Agents swarmed in, weapons trained on him and shouting something that was probably important.

Loki closed his eyes, and in one final reckless attempt, thought of the stag, and the light, good, home, safe, love that radiated out from it. Loki held that in his mind, and threw everything he had into the screaming voice in his head that demanded he get out of here now. His image shimmered and disappeared just as they leapt for him.

And the last thing Loki saw was Harry’s startled face before his strength finally gave out and he crumpled to the ground.
They never learn

Chapter Summary

“What?” Steve demanded, “what does it mean?”

Tony opened his mouth, but nothing he came out. Bruce looked up, “It’s…it’s a weapon.” He swallowed, “that’s what they were testing on Loki. SHIELD have been building a new weapon.” Bruce paused, fists clenching, and for a moment a hint of green flashed across his eyes.

“It’s a weapon for Harry.”

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry for leaving you hanging for so long, this chapter was hell to get right!
As always, thank you for the continued support and all your lovely feedback, any comments are always well received.
So without further ado, I bid thee read this next instalment and try not to get too upset with me!
Until next time.
L

“There are no coincidences in life. What person that wandered in and out of your life was there for some purpose, even if they caused you harm. Sometimes, it doesn’t make sense the short periods of time we get with people, or the outcomes from their choices. However, if you turn it over to God he promises that you will see the big picture in the hereafter. Nothing is too small to be a mistake.” — Shannon L. Alder

After the whole business with dissembling diabolical plans and saving the world the past few days, Harry had resigned himself to a nice, quiet, early morning read, a well-deserved break from this whole ‘saving’ malarky. Of course, that plan sort of all went to shit the moment the God of Mischief appeared in front of him looking like he had been to hell and barely made it back.

Harry didn’t let himself think about how angry he still was with him and how or why Loki was there and what the ruddy hell had happened to him in the few weeks since the God had told Harry to leave and not return to leave him in such a state, and what on earth he was doing here of all places, a place definitely not overly fond of him with the Avengers asleep in the next room.

Harry did not let himself think of any of these things. He did what he always did; his thoughts shifted into that familiar pulse of adrenaline and cool rush of steely calm that arose under pressure, and Harry moved.
The book fell from his hands and Harry apparated before it could hit the ground, appearing just as Loki collapsed. He caught him easily around the waist. Merlin this guy was thin. Loki flinched at the contact, nostrils flaring, a hazy panic in his eyes. Harry wondered whether Loki could even see him at all.

“Loki?” Harry said incredulously, “what are you doing here?”

The God’s exhausted green eyes met Harry’s. A flicker of recognition. “Get off me!” He snarled, shoving Harry away.

Bewildered, Harry let himself get pushed back. “What?”

“Don’t…” Loki grimaced and gripped his head with a shaking hand, “don’t come any closer…”

“Loki-”

“DON’T” The word ripped from him. Harry realised he had taken an involuntary step forward. His green eyes narrowed, but he obliged.

“Alright, fine.” He said curtly, “but you’re the one who came bursting into my bedroom.”

Loki’s eyes flitted around for a moment, as though looking for something. When he obviously didn’t find it, he seemed to deflate somehow, his bravado wavering. Then he looked at Harry and the moment passed. Loki’s lip curled, “My mistake.”

“Mind telling me what the hell’s going on?”

“Don’t play dumb, it’s insulting” The God retorted, “I know SHIELD has adopted you as their new pet.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed, “Is that what they’ve been telling you?”

“There was no need. The agents have been singing your praises for weeks now.”

“That tends to happen when you, you know, save the world.”

“No” Loki snapped, “I wouldn’t know.”

“Right, you’re still rolling with the bad guy mojo. Doesn’t that get a little old?”

“And what would SHIELD be without it’s villains?” Loki said, an acidic bitterness in his tone, “where would they be without someone to blame and torture?”

Harry frowned, “Don’t joke about things like that.”

Loki laughed, and the sound was hoarse and empty, “Who said I was joking?”

And then Harry looked at him, really looked for the first time since he had appeared. Loki held himself as tall and regal as always, the elegant arrogance in the tilt of his chin, the deceptive calm in his posture. But something was very, very wrong. The act was breaking apart in front of him. On closer inspection, Harry saw the dark material of his fine clothes was actually torn and bloodied. Loki’s hands were trembling. His chest was rising and falling shallowly, almost panicked, as though he was on the edge of an anxiety attack. His eyes were wide and disorientated. In a slight movement so small Harry would have missed it had he not been staring, Loki swallowed hard, and he wavered, rocking on his heels, trying to keep his balance. He had gone very pale.
“Loki?” Harry tried again, his voice softer. “Loki what’s wrong with you?”

The God looked at him, and his eyes were exhausted. When he finally answered, his voice was cold and broken;

“What would you care?”

This time when Loki swayed sideways, Harry didn’t hesitate. He darted forward and caught the God before he could hit the ground. One of Loki’s hands flew up to fist in Harry’s shirt - to hang on or shove him away, Harry wasn’t sure - but he never found out. Loki’s breaths became ragged and uneven, and then his eyes rolled back and he went limp in Harry’s arms.

Harry swore.

He opened his mouth to call for the team, only to find the words stuck in his throat. The team were loyal to Harry, they would help Harry, but Loki? He was, and would always be, their enemy. Harry’s arms tightened around Loki, lifting him clean into the air. He was all too aware of the blood pouring steadily from the angry looking cuts on Loki’s chest and arms. More noticeable, and perhaps more worrying, was the sight of something dark lurking beneath strangely blue-tinged skin. A hiss of anger escaped Harry’s lips as he realised; those dark streaks running like rivers down his arms were his veins. That dark crap was in his blood.

Harry made a move to pull out his wand with a healing spell on his lips, when something made him pause. What was he doing? He was an Avenger now; Loki was his enemy. But hadn’t Harry also been on SHIELD’s wanted list not that long ago? He stared at the unconscious God breathing shallowly against his chest. Victim? Or enemy? Loki couldn’t have looked more different from the fearful figure Harry had seen the Avengers fight on TV when he invaded Earth all that time ago. He didn’t look like an avenging God. He looked…broken.

Appearances could be deceiving though.

Extending his magical senses, Harry mentally brushed against Loki’s aura. He recoiled. A blaring sense of wrong wrong wrong hammered into him, like someone had reached in and pulled everything that was Loki out, leaving a shell behind. What in Merlin had they been doing to him? With new eyes, Harry noticed the bruise like shadows under Loki’s eyes and the faint tremors racking his slight frame, the shallow breaths and stuttering pulse. He cast a quick wandless warming charm on them both with a wave of his hand. Loki’s skin was like ice against his own.

Harry didn’t need to be the Master of Death to know that Loki was dying.

His eyes hardened. He had never really had much tolerance for those who enjoyed inflicting pain. And if his suspicions were correct…a blaze of cold fury welled up inside him; this was SHIELD’s work. Loki’s voice…“where would they be without someone to blame and torture?” Torture. Fury had done this. Harry’s hands tightened reflexively, and the Elder Wand twitched in his pocket. Every ounce of willpower was suddenly fighting the urge to take up his wand and unleash his full power on these muggles, he wanted to avenge and destroy and burn SHIELD into the ground…

Around him, the walls began to tremble. He could feel the waves of subconscious magic cascading out from him, warping the air into a kaleidoscope of fiery swirls, a deadly orb of simmering magical energy swelling around him. Harry gritted his teeth, and the window nearest to him burst outwards in a shatter of glass. He bit back a yell.
Calm, calm, come on Harry, just like Kingsley taught you.

Slowly and methodically, Harry began reigning in his magic thread by thread. The ground stopped shaking. The magic dispersed with a shudder. He released a breath.

Oddly enough, during the commotion Loki hadn’t freaked out or cringed away from Harry, who had to have been giving off a hell of a lot of magic; on the contrary, if anything he seemed to have unconsciously curled closer, head burrowed in Harry’s chest. Even his breathing seemed to have evened out slightly.

All at once Harry was hit with a wave of something fiercely protective, which of course was absurd. He let out a sigh of frustration. Yes, Loki had crossed with SHIELD. But nothing he could have done deserves…this. It would have been kinder of Fury to kill him.

The effort not to call out was physically painful now. After the past couple of weeks all Harry wanted to do was summon his team and make a plan of attack just like any other problem they’d faced. But this was SHIELD, not some textbook villain. He would be forcing the Avengers to choose between a guy they only met a month ago and the organisation who had been with them from the start. No matter what SHIELD had done, could he really make the team turn on their comrades?

Harry closed his eyes. They wouldn’t choose him, why would they? He was just a stranger, a paradox, an alien. And now, a fugitive. Harry knew he stood on the brink, with a dying enemy in his arms and with every intent of making his torturers pay. By saving Loki, he would become an enemy in his own right, another villain just like the ones the Avengers were sent to eliminate.

And it wouldn’t be fair to take the team with him when he fell. He owed them that much.

Summoning his strength, Harry pulled Loki close and disappeared.

He did not see the second God that stared at him from the corner of the room.

Harry, Tony decided, was a complete idiot.

After discovering his untimely absence just after the tremors, it had been all Tony could do to stop the team from running off in outrage at who would dare kidnap their wizard. In the end, it had been JARVIS who had intervened.

He and the team now sat around the screen showing the footage of Harry and Loki early that morning whilst they had all been asleep. There were no exclamations of surprise from the Avengers, no cries of betrayal or anger; only silence. Silence as they stared in mute horror at the tortured state of their arch-enemy. The God looked terrible. Had they done that? Had SHIELD done this behind their backs? They all saw Harry open his mouth, obviously intending to call for help when Loki collapsed, and then hesitate, glance back down at the unconscious God in his arms. The expression on his face was unmistakable. And when Harry raised his gaze once more into the view of the camera, every single Avenger shivered and looked away at the cold fury blazing in his brilliant green eyes. Even as his magic swirled and sparked around him and the raw power swelled as easily as breathing, the scariest thing was that look in his eyes.

That was the look of a man who could raze the world to the ground and it take very little effort to do so. That was the look of a man you did not want to cross.

Harry’s image shimmered and the two disappeared with a faint crack. Again, silence.
Yes, Tony thought, *Harry was a bloody idiot.*

After what seemed like an age, Steve spoke up, “He was going to call us” his voice was hoarse, “he would have called for help. But—”

“Loki” Banner finished, running a hand tiredly across his eyes, “he didn’t trust that we would stop.”

“Would we?” Natasha challenged, “if we had rushed in after Harry called for help to see Loki in the room…”

Clint swore softly, “I…I’d have shot him on sight. It would have been instinctive…” He looked so pained in that moment that Natasha put a hand on his shoulder.

“That’s not all though, is it?” Tony said, hands flying across the keyboard whilst he spoke, “I mean three guesses who’s behind this?”

Steve’s jaw tightened, “SHIELD” the word was cold and brittle in his mouth. The team seemed to harden somehow, a though a switch had been flipped.

“You really think it was them?”

“Please, you don’t think they’re capable?”

“They were detaining him, not torturing him”

“So how come a God looks a breath away from death?”

“Interrogation…?”

“Interrogation does not warrant *that*…”

“Guys” Steve spoke firmly. The team quietened. “Whether SHIELD is responsible or not, our main problem is Harry’s disappearance. There’s a whole lot of suspicion about to come down on his head.”

“You don’t think he was working with Loki?” Natasha said incredulously.

“How else would he have escaped? In such a state—”

“Yes, in such a state” Tony interrupted, “Guys, this is *Harry* we’re talking about. He freaks if one of us gets so much as a blow to the head in battle. Didn’t you feel the tremors earlier? Imagine what he must have felt upon seeing Loki when he appeared. Even if he didn’t help Loki escape, there’s not a chance in hell that he’s going to abandon him now.” The team looked at each other.

“It doesn’t matter right now that Loki invaded the planet only last year” Tony continued, “Harry wasn’t here then. Loki has never really been his enemy.”

“So that’s it then? Harry’s betrayed us?” Clint said quietly. He sounded wretched.

“I don’t think Harry sees it that black and white.” Natasha said, standing, “he was just doing what he thought was right.”

“Rodger that” Tony commented, “he’s one of the most annoyingly righteous justice-ninjas I’ve ever met, excluding you, Captain.” Steve’s mouth twitched. “And honestly? I don’t know what I would have done if Harry had called for us. Maybe I’d have shot first, asked questions later, maybe not” Tony continued, “But he didn’t, and it *sucks,* and we don’t know what he’s doing, but there it is.
Yes, I was angry at first. Yes, he was an idiot for running off like that. But I know Harry; he’s saved all of our lives more times than I care to admit, and I seriously doubt he’s about to start duo-world-domination-plotting with our favourite God of Mischief.”

“I just…” Steve sighed, “I wish he’d trusted us.”

“I don’t think it was just about trust” Natasha said slowly, “I mean, when Fury finds out Loki’s missing, where’s the first place he’s going to look?”

“Here” Clint said grimly, “we all saw the connection between Loki and Harry that day in New York, and Fury’s always had it in for Harry.”

“Harry was protecting us” Tony realised suddenly. “By leaving solo, any suspicion for helping an enemy of SHIELD lies with him, and him alone. By telling us nothing, he was keeping us safe.”

The Avengers stared at him. Because he was right. Harry was nothing if not annoyingly self-sacrificing. Of course he would go and take the ruddy blame on himself.

Clint swore softly, “Fury’s not going to stand for this. You know he’ll put Harry on the kill list.”

“Then we refuse” Natasha said fiercely, “get someone else to do his dirty work.”

“And then what? Defer from SHIELD, go rogue with Harry? Where will it end?”

“You’re not saying we should abandon Harry?”

“Why not? He abandoned us-”

“Now wait just a-”

“Guys” Tony was looking at one of his screens with a strange expression on his face. Perhaps there was something in his voice that cut through various arguments springing up, something that made everyone turn and look. On the screen he pulled up, various chemical formulas and scientific looking notes were flashing across the screen. The images came faster and faster, until a single chemical formula stopped on the centre of the screen, labelled ‘phase three’.

Tony and Bruce had gone white.

“What?” Steve demanded, “what does it mean?”

Tony opened his mouth, but nothing he came out. Bruce looked up, “It’s…it’s a weapon.” He swallowed, “that’s what they were testing on Loki. SHIELD have been building a new weapon.”

Bruce paused, fists clenching, and for a moment a hint of green flashed across his eyes.

“It’s a weapon for Harry.”

In amongst the chaos, it took an embarrassingly long time for the Avengers to notice they were one short. One who, by a rights, should have been arguing most adamantly for Loki and Harry’s case. As it was, no one noticed Thor had disappeared until it was too late.
“Any leads on Loki?”

“None sir, we’re still trying to trace his last teleportation, but…this is way beyond our technology, director. We have no idea if we’re even following the right lead.”

“Perfect” grumbled Fury. How Loki had even managed to escape in the first place was beyond him; the guy had been utterly drained of magic. The only clue was a faint silvery glow that had appeared on the camera footage at Loki’s side before the IV drip conveniently ripped in half. If the God hadn’t been completely out of it, Fury could have sworn it had been done by…

He froze. Magic. And if Loki was powerless, there was only one other person it could have been.

“Hill!” Fury roared suddenly, making everyone start in their seats, “get me Harry right now. I don’t care what you have to do, I need surveillance, I need eyes, I need a gun pointed at his back and I need a way of confining him. Do you understand?”

Agent Hill stared at him, “Are you insane?”

“DO YOU UNDERSTAND”

“Yes, bloody hell, alright.” Hill darted away, a scowl on her face.

All the agents were staring at him. He narrowed his one eye and they all looked away hastily.

“Lockdown the base. I need security on level 7. We might have company.”

“Um, sir…” A young agent spoke up, looking terrified as Fury’s gaze turned on him.

“Did you not understand my instructions?”

“Yes, but-”

“Then stop wasting my time. With Loki out God-knows-where, they’ll be a lot of people demanding answers, and we need to keep this under wraps.”

“Well, yes, but-”

“What is it, agent?” Fury snapped, “spit it out.”

“I think” a very cold voice came from behind him, “he wishes to inform you of my presence. You mortals were never very good at listening were you?”

Fury didn’t blink. With old instincts rising to the surface, he whipped round and fired a handgun that had appeared from nowhere at the voice. Thor flicked the bullet aside with his hammer, an expression of disgust on his face. His eyes, when they met Fury’s, were ablaze with something hot and unstable and very, very angry.

“Thor” Fury’s voice was hard, “to what do I owe the visit?”

“Do not think me oblivious to the harms you have committed within these walls” Thor snarled, “do not think me blind to the harm against my kin.”

For a moment, Fury’s expression flickered, “Loki’s with you, then? You’ve seen him?”

Fury started to raise a hand to his ear, but Thor anticipated him. With a flick of his wrist, Mjölnir shot forward and missed Fury’s hand by a hairsbreadth, before swinging round back into Thor’s hand. Fury froze, slowly lowering his arm.
“Even now” Thor’s voice was trembling now, “even now you seek to betray him.”

“I seem to recall it was him who betrayed us, actually” Fury replied stiffly, “or have you forgotten the damage his wrought, the lives he took…”

“You speak of justice and honour but you forget Loki has been judged already.” Thor scoffed, “You have no right to torture him and call it fair punishment. My brother has been punished by our laws. He is not the same man as he was.”

“That is just what he would have you believe.” Fury took a step forward, “Loki cannot feel remorse, he cannot change, he does not feel. He cannot love.”

“You know nothing of such things!” Thor roared, and an impossible wind howled around him, “you cannot.”

“One learns a lot about a man when he is tested” Fury said calmly, “when he is given pain beyond comprehension, when he is torn apart and left in pieces on the floor, a shattered mind, a broken body, ready to be put back together at our pleasing…”

And Thor exploded. The hammer slammed into the floor of the floating ship and the whole thing shrieked and shuddered, thunder and lightning erupted around them, and Thor rose up into the air with a terrible expression on his face and murder in his eyes. The Thor as they knew him on Earth was gone, and in his place was a thing of nightmares, an avenging God, a creature of terror and destruction…

And he was pissed.

Fury stood very still amongst the chaos, gazing at Thor with a detached kind of alarm. Then, without a single sound, the director of SHIELD turned and fled.

The God of Thunder raised Mjölnir, and the world roared.

Hundreds of leagues away, Harry Potter raised his head. A terrible sound seemed to echo in his ears, a cry of fury and pain and loss and danger. Harry stood abruptly; he knew that voice. Thor. Thor was in danger. His wand appeared in his hand and Harry was already moving, a spell at his lips…

*Boom-bo-...boom...bo-...m*

A stuttering pulse brought him to a stop. Harry’s head whipped round. Loki lay utterly dead to the world, a faint sheen of sweat on his face, the dark shadows under his eyes so pronounced they were like bruises, his breaths shallow and rasping. As Harry had moved away, Loki’s head turned restlessly and his hand twitched, as though the mere absence of Harry’s presence was enough to push him over the edge. His breath hitched on a small noise of distress that triggered something in Harry - some long forgotten impulse that pushed him forward to touch his hand lightly to Loki’s burning brow, subconsciously healing the injuries on his head as his hand passed over them. Loki’s head fell sideways, eyelids fluttering as he registered the touch in some innate, distant part of his consciousness. Harry stilled as he felt it. Loki’s soul was slipping.

He swore violently.

There was a reason Harry never stayed, why he never waited as everyone around him died. ‘Master of Death’ meant he mastered his own death, yes, but also everyone else’s. He saw their souls tugging
free from their bodies as they slipped into the void. He felt the moment they passed from one realm to
the next.

And there was nothing he could do, but watch. Guide. Ensure their journey was a peaceful one.

But not this soul. Not today.

Harry's gaze hardened. Now it was the Elder wand that shot to his grasp. The stone turned thrice in
hand, the cloak to bring him home. In his desperation, Harry didn’t form words or thought, he just
breathed and let the magic flow. He drew the wand in a diagonal line through the air and golden
light surged out.

Not this soul. This soul is mine.

Sorry big guy, he thought bitterly, thinking of Thor, you’ll have to handle this one without me.

I’ve got you're brother's life to save.

He closed his eyes and lowered his mental barriers, releasing the clamp on his magic. It exploded out
like a wave, and he found Loki almost immediately, a lost, writhing consciousness that would have
been screaming had it had a voice. Harry flung out a mental anchor, going on instinct, easing Loki
gently back to Earth. He gathered him up, tucking the consciousness close to his chest, enveloping
him with feelings of safety and light. Then he opened his eyes, pressed his lips to Loki's forehead
and breathed him back in.

Loki’s body convulsed, and he took in a ragged breath, but Harry wasn't done.

Heal.

The light encased the two of them in a dome, an orb of rippling swathes of gold and light.

Heal.

Harry didn’t use a spell, perhaps there wasn’t one, but just let the hallows do their work. They wanted to serve it’s master after all. So absorbed as he was, it could of been seconds or hours
later that Harry saw Loki relax, slump back and take a deep breath, his skin returning to pale ivory,
the wounds healing over. With the supersensory charm still in place, Harry heard his pulse even out.
He lowered his wand slowly, and the light dimmed a little. Then he froze.

Had he just...

Harry stared at Loki, at his chest rising and falling, as though he expected it to stop any moment. Not
once in 350 years had he interfered with Death - not once. Loved ones, old friends, passing
strangers...all gone. Because that was life - that was how it should be. Everybody lives, and
everybody dies. So what made Loki so special? Perhaps because he was already immortal, or he had
Death as a daughter of all things..

(Or did you just feel guilty for leaving him with Fury?)

Suddenly shaky, Harry sank into a chair and put his head into his hands. He had literally just plucked
someone's soul out of thin air to save a man who would have otherwise should have been dead. And
looking at Loki sleeping peacefully next to him, the anger and pain on his face smoothed out, his
body curled in towards Harry, he couldn't even bring himself to feel guilty about it. He would do it
again in a heartbeat.
Harry groaned.

*What the fuck are you doing Harry?*

The Golden Watcher at the gate between worlds, as an unspoken rule, did not *run*. Nor did he panic. He certainly didn’t tear down the Rainbow Bridge like the hounds of Hel were on his tail yelling for the king.

This however, was one of the exceptions.

“Heimdall what is the meaning of this commotion?” Odin’s voice boomed across the throne room as Heimdall burst through the doors, “you are causing quite the scene.”

*Thor* Heimdall rasped, *Midgard*…

Just then, Frigga also burst into the room. Her hair was wild and her eyes were frantic. “Odin, you have to stop him!” she commanded.

“Frigga?” For the first time, Odin looked taken aback, “what-”

“He’s lost all sense of reason, oh Odin, so much anger burns inside of him…”

Heimdall joined in, “He’s fighting the mortals as we speak-”

“I see images, terrible images…”

“He’s tearing them apart and he doesn’t have the inclination nor the strength of will to stop-”

“He will burn like a storm that never ends-”

“It’s not just this SHIELD, it’s *everything*…”

“He won’t stop-”

“Midgard-”

“Destroyed…”

“Everything-”

“Everyone-”

And then, their voices slotted together eerily; “Mankind will not survive this.”

For a moment, there was silence as Odin stared at them. The King of Asgard was not one to trifle in the actions of his sons. If Thor wanted to prance around Midgard playing hero for the next fifty years, it was nothing to the lifespan of a God. Thor had killed many a mortal before, why should this be any different?

Frigga stepped forward, tears burning in her eyes, “You know he fights for Loki. You *know* what those mortals have been doing him in that cursed place. If you will not help one son, at least stop the other from tearing apart the world that he loves.”

Odin’s eyes hardened, “Loki no longer sees himself as my son.”
“And you have given him every reason to!” she snapped, “how could you just stand by—”

“Enough” his voice trembled with power. “Loki has chosen his path. Perhaps I can spare my firstborn the same fate.”

“You will intervene then?” Heimdall asked in his deep, rumbling voice.

Odin and Frigga jumped; they had forgotten he was there. Odin turned to his wife. “You are sure of this?”

She raised her chin, “The world will burn.” She said simply; “I have seen it”

Odin closed his eyes. Then he stretched out his hand and the golden spear materialised and the King of Asgard disappeared in a blinding flash of golden light.

The agents of SHIELD were not having the best of days. First the homicidal boss sending them off on a wild goose chase after Loki, now the God of Thunder ripping the world around them to shreds. As they clutched to their falling fortress plummeting to the ground, many thought fleetingly that perhaps taking the job hadn’t been the brightest idea. Now they were all going to die horribly, and it was all Fury’s fault.

Of course, that was when they saw Thor raise his hammer and call forth a sphere of lightning and chaos, and throw it straight towards them, and realised the God was never going to let them hit the ground alive. They closed their eyes and braced themselves.

What no one expected though, was the sudden flash of golden light. In the blink of an eye the world had rightened and the ship flew and the sky cleared and the God of Thunder was nowhere to be found.

Far away, in another realm, Thor fell to his knees at his father’s feet and howled.

“Agents of SHIELD, Avengers.”

Across America, people glanced up as a steely voice crackled across their earpieces.

“Some of you may be aware of the events that transpired here this evening. For those who are not, you need know only this. As of tonight, Loki Laufeyson, Thor Odinson and Harry James Potter are hereby proclaimed enemies of the state, of SHIELD, and of mankind on the grounds of treason. Any attempt to make contact, to aid, or to harbour, will be judged as equally guilty.”

A pause, and then Fury’s voice went very hard. “I now speak directly to the Avengers. Do not be fools. As enemies of the state, any action other than to shoot on sight will be regarded as treason. They are not your friends. They have betrayed you. And they will be brought to justice with or without your help, even if we have to go through you. You have your orders. Do not get in my way.”

The voice crackled off.

In Stark Tower, the Avengers stood utterly still. The silence stretched out like an elastic, quivering and trembling…
Tony Stark snapped out his hand and blasted a white explosion of energy at the wall. The TV burst into flame and the wall crumbled. He stared at it for a moment, then with furious tears sparkling in his eyes he ran and jumped out the window, speeding off into the night sky.

No one watched him go. Natasha had frozen. Clint had already disappeared to the roof. Bruce stared at his hands. Steve leant heavily against the wall, hand bowed and shield lying discarded on the floor.

And far away, Harry twirled the Elder Wand absently over his fingers, a terrible calm in his cold green eyes as he stared out the window. *Enemy of the state. Undesirable number one. Freak.* Harry’s finger twitched, and the earpiece lying on the table exploded. He huffed, shaking his head.

*They never learn.*
“you nearly died, you know that?”

“A minor setback.”

Harry gave a huff of disbelief, “alright, no thanks necessary. Glad we got that sorted.”

I know, it's been a long time, so apologies. I'll keep it short so you can go ahead and read!
Enjoy :)

*Your opponent's wrong doesn't automatically make you right. Most fights aren't about who's right; they are contention over degrees of wrongness.* — Richelle E. Goodrich

Ever since Thor had been whisked off Midgard and all but imprisoned in the palace, Heimdall did not oft leave his post. Even rarer was it that he should demand an audience with the king. Watching these ‘SHIELD’ had made him wonder increasingly whether he should of even told the king in the first place, letting the young God of Thunder take his revenge unchallenged.

The signs, however, could not be mistaken.

“My king” Heimdall dropped to his knee.

“At ease, my friend.” Odin gave him a cursory nod, “What matter do you bring to me with such urgency?”

“The matter of the infinity stones, sire. I believe they have been awakened.”

“That’s impossible” Odin rebuked, standing, “the stones were scattered long ago.”

“Someone has brought them together once again. I believe they wish to unite the gauntlet.”

For a moment, raw shock flashed across the king’s face, “no one could possible have that power.”

“Not even Thanos?” The name seemed to hover in the air between them, lingering long after the sound had faded from the halls.

Odin looked shaken, “I forbade any mention of that name long ago” his words trembled with fury.
“But sire…”

“Enough.” Odin’s voice rang with authority. “You are mistaken. The gauntlet will not be wielded by a mad Titan, nor any other. It is heresy, nothing more.”

Heimdall stood as his king made to leave. “My sight is true, Allfather. You would do well to take heed of it.”

“And you would do well to take heed of your king” Odin said forcefully. The walls shook slightly at the power of his voice.

Heimdall’s jaw twitched, but he bowed, “of course, sire.”

“Good. Now leave me.”

The golden watcher turned to leave. Before he reached the door, Odin’s voice made him halt.

“I trust you will not express this rumour to any of our citizens. We do not, after all, want to cause trouble without cause.”

Heimdall looked at his king for a long moment. “As you command, my lord.”

Then with a final bow, he left. If Odin would not take heed of his warnings, he would just have to find someone who would.

The planet had gone quiet. Placid? No, thought Thanos as he studied the little world, waiting. A tang of trembling apprehension hung about its aura like a mist, thick with betrayal and chaos and something other. Nothing had changed on the surface, but Thanos had been around long enough to know disarray and conflict when he saw it. If there was ever a time to strike, it was now.

Only one thing made him hesitate.

Extending his senses, it didn’t take Thanos long to find the gaping space of nothingness that was hidden from his sight. His mouth twisted distastefully; even now, the boy continued to evade him. Oh he walked the Earth just like any other mortal, he looked human enough, but his true form was shrouded in mystery. Only once had he caught a real glimpse of the figure, in the moment he appeared upon a strange looking symbol that resounded forcefully with death. His aura had been unlike anything Thanos had ever seen - a nebula of simmering vitality, of raw power that blazed like an inferno of ancient enchantment and barely repressed strength, resounding of life and death itself. It had been the death part that worried him; the right to familiarity with Her was his and his alone. This stranger had no right to even say Her name, let alone wield Her powers. And to help the mortals no less. Thanos growled. Yes; he had had his eye on this particular player for some time now. He had seen the mass power the boy wielded.

And yet the Earth had turned against him.

Thanos almost wanted to laugh out loud. Typical. Of course SHIELD would isolate the one person who could have saved them, one who might have stood in his way when the time came. It was just so human of them.

And in the end, he thought as he fitted the gauntlet across his forearm; it would be their downfall.
It said a lot for how bad Fury’s day was going that when he entered the lab to find it’s entire contents in pieces on the floor, he wasn’t even surprised.

His brain was still in processing mode as he picked his way carefully around shattered glass and pools of bubbling liquid that were probably never meant to see the light of day. Who knows; with the sort of (illegal) chemicals SHIELD was experimenting with, any one of these puddles on the floor could be a bomb just waiting for the right trigger. He held a hand across his nose and mouth in a half hearted attempt to keep the fumes out.

Having nearly died a grand total of seven times that day, his sense of self-preservation was somewhat lacking. Fury huffed in irritation. It was when even the trees seemed out for your blood that maybe you start to wonder if pissing off a magician was perhaps not the best idea.

Oh there was no way to prove it of course, but Fury wasn’t an idiot. The sudden resignation of 78% of his staff, the corridors that never seemed to open out where they should, the fires that kept flaring up whenever he gave an order, the way his weapons vault now appeared to be underwater, with scary looking AK47 sharks patrolling the entrance, the floor that tripped him up wherever he went, the doors that refused to open for him, the searing pain that seized his forearm whenever he tried to pick up a gun. Even his eyepatch had turned a bright shade of pink.

In the lab, Fury stomped past a steaming pool of orange goo and stopped as he reached the central piece. This particular containment had not merely been carelessly shattered like the rest of them. It had been bloody nuked. What had once been a great artwork of glass tubing and great containers of simmering grey liquid was now a smoking stain on the pale floor. There was nothing to suggest it had ever been there in the first place, save for a small smudge on the ceiling that Fury knew read ‘phase three’.

It had been utterly destroyed.

Somehow, that bastard had managed to wipe out millions of dollars worth of research under the best security America had to offer in seven minutes. Seven fucking minutes whilst Fury had stepped outside for a smoke. He was ruddy playing with them, Fury thought furiously, taunting them like animals caught in a trap. Harry could have chosen any time at all to destroy the serum, but it had to be those seven minutes. An impossible task, one that said see that? I can be anywhere, everywhere, I can waltz right in under your nose and do whatever the hell I want and there’s nothing you can do about it. I can fuck your little organisation up without even trying, and you can do nothing to stop me.

Fury saw red. Pulling back his fist, he slammed it into the nearest glass container and didn’t flinch as it shattered and blood burst across his knuckles. Through the haze of fury, he almost missed the writing that had appeared in the ashes on the floor where phase three had once stood.

Director,

If you’ve not gathered by this point, I’ve taken the courtesy of vaporising your mistake. Do not be alarmed if you can no longer remember any information concerning it - I also took the liberty of taking the formula from your thoughts. Attempt to recreate it, and it won’t just be the formula I take from your memories.

Yours most kindly, Undesirable Number One.

p.s. might I suggest employing better security. At least make it a challenge.
The instant Fury had finished reading it, the writing burst into the flame and the ashes fizzled out into nothing. Fury was still for a moment or two longer, then he raised his hand and punched the glass once more.

“Why are you smiling?”

“Argh!” Harry fell out of his chair. He blinked up at Loki staring at him upside down.

“What are you doing?” Loki asked with a frown.

“Inspecting the ceiling.”

“You’re being sarcastic.”

“No, really?”

Loki blinked slowly, and he looked so tired and irritated in that moment that Harry sighed and got up. “It’s nothing, you startled me is all.”

Loki sniffed, “You were distracted, it is hardly my fault.”

Harry studied him for a moment. The God was leaning casually against the doorframe, or at least, attempting to make it look casual. Harry reckoned it was the only thing keeping him on his feet. “You know, I didn’t expect you to be up and about so soon.”

"Is that why you are so effectively evading telling me what you were doing?” Loki’s green eyes were piercing, "why you had to do it when you thought I was unconscious?"

“Look, if you must know, I was having a little fun with the counterstrike on phase three.”

The change was small - a sudden predatory stillness, a slight tensing around the shoulders, a sharpening of his green eyes, a thrumming energy that seemed to come off the God in waves. But the transformation from the careful indifference Loki usually wore was absolute. The rapport between them, already fragile, seemed to cool slightly.

“Is this but a game to you, then?” Loki said coldly, "you and Fury, having a little 'fun'" he sneered the word, "trying to outwit the other?"

"I'd have thought you, of all people, would recognise revenge when you saw it."

"Revenge?" Loki spat, "what right did you have to revenge on SHIELD?"

"It's quite the extensive list, actually" Harry said, irked, "not to mention when they decided to experiment on you-"

"I am perfectly capable of carrying out my own revenge, do not dare presume otherwise." Loki’s voice was rising heatedly, his green eyes bright against the dark flush rising in his cheeks, "you had no right to take it upon yourself to act in my stead."

"In your...?” Harry shook his head in disbelief, "what is your problem?"

"I don't want your revenge. I don't need your heroics. And I don't need your help."
Harry opened his mouth to snap back, when a sudden thought made him pause. In front of him, Loki looked exhausted and wrecked and thoroughly pissed off. But underneath that obstinate lift of his chin and the proud defiance flashing in his eyes, he saw the same stubborn pride that he saw in himself.

"You think I thought you weren't capable" Harry realised.

"I know it" Loki snapped, "what other reason is there?"

"Oh, I don't know, maybe that I actually care."

Loki's lip curled, "You made your opinion of me quite clear last we spoke; why the sudden change of heart?"

"Change of...?" Harry wanted to strangle him, "look, just because I don't agree with your shitty decisions doesn't mean I'm okay with SHIELD ruddy torturing you." He shook his head, "is that really what you thought of me?"

Loki opened his mouth to snarl a retort, and then seemed to realise what Harry said.

"I... do not have much experience in the matter" he said at last, a little stiffly.

Harry sighed, "look, I'd say I'm sorry for stealing your revenge, or whatever, but I'm not. SHIELD crossed a line, and I wasn't going to let that stand. They had no right, no right at all to abuse magic in such a way. The separation should have killed you."

“Funny that you should work that out in a second when all of SHIELD’s experts could not deduce for the life of them why their prisoner kept falling unconscious” Loki voice was as cool and brittle as cut glass.

“But magic is who we are” Harry said as though it was obvious, “what did they fucking expect was going to happen?”

For a moment, Loki just looked at Harry. His expression was strange, almost fleetingly vulnerable. Then he blinked and the mask was back. “I imagined they hoped I would die eventually, save them the trouble of doing it themselves.”

“Well, it was wrong” Harry said sharply, “It was wrong what they did to you, what they were trying to do. I’m sorry.”

Something dangerously close to tears shone in Loki’s brilliant eyes, “Save your pity” he snarled, “I have no use for it. Unless you can find a way to retrieve my abilities, then-”

“They’re not gone.” The words rang in the air.

“What?” Loki demanded, and his voice was hoarse.

“You’re magic was drained, right?” Harry took a step forward, “that doesn’t make you any less a magician. You’re body will naturally regenerate stores again, it’ll just take time.”

“If you’re lying to me, wizard…”

“Can’t you sense it? Every moment you're around me, around magic, your core is healing. I know they’re not gone” Harry said firmly, “I’m certain of it.”

Again, Loki looked at him for a long moment. He seemed to be doing that a lot recently, as though
Harry was some strange paradigm he could not understand, a star blazing just out of reach.
"You're being...nice" Loki looked mildly disgusted by the word, "why?"
"Well, I can't exactly be aloof and brooding the whole time can I?"
"Debatable."

Harry rolled his eyes, "Look, what about this is so hard for you to understand? You said once that we were kin, you and I. Did those words count for nothing?"

To Harry’s surprise, Loki actually flinched. “The last time I called someone kin, it did not end well.” he said almost to himself. “I won’t be making the same mistake again.”

Looking at him now, Harry thought he looked pale and tired and suddenly very young. This wasn’t the God of mischief in front of him. This was just a man who had nowhere to turn and no one to turn to.

“You miraculously appeared in my bedroom not a few days ago” Harry pointed out, “I have trouble believing that was by mistake..”

“It was coincidence, nothing more.”

“Convenient then that I’m one of a very few who wouldn’t have turned you in.”

Loki’s lip curled, “Don’t flatter yourself, I didn’t need any help.”

“Didn’t…” Harry shook his head. And we're back to square one. “You nearly died, you know that?”

“A minor setback.”

Harry gave a huff of disbelief, “alright, no thanks necessary. Glad we got that sorted.”

Loki opened his mouth, but flinched suddenly as a sharp pain throbbed in his head - his face draining of what little colour it had. With his hold now lost on the doorframe, he swayed sideways and would have fallen had Harry not wandlessly transfigured the ground to swell upwards like a wave and nudge him back towards the wall. Loki grabbed the doorframe, chest rising and falling shallowly. He glared at Harry somewhat half-heartedly.

Harry watched him, knowing full well that any attempt to aid non-magically would not be well received. “Still sure you don’t need help?”

“I’m fine” Loki snarled. He was still clutching the wall. “I don’t need anything from you.”

"Oh no, because Merlin-forbid the God of Mischief actually stoop so low as to accept help" Harry said sarcastically, “You know, keep pushing people away and you’ll have no one left.”

“Alone protects me. Alone is the only thing I can trust”

“No, friends protect you.” Harry said, “and from where I’m standing, you don’t seem to have too many of them.”

Loki laughed, and the sound was empty. “Are you really so desperate for company?”

“I should think you would be.”
All at once, his expression closed off, “So that’s all this is, pity…”

“Oh for the love of Merlin” Harry threw his hands up in the air, “believe it or not, not everything is about you.”

“Of course it is” Loki snapped, and pushed away from the wall, “do not take me for a fool. I’m the reason you’re here right now, a traitor to the state. It’s probably my fault Fury decided to torture me, I was too threatening, too powerful, too provoking. I invaded Earth. I turned them against magic. I corrupted SHIELD. I’m the villain, the monster parents tell their children about at night, the frost giant…”

As Harry watched, he saw Loki’s skin start turning blue before his eyes. He stared. “Loki-”

“Why can’t you be more like Thor?” Loki’s voice had gone distorted, echoing with voices that were not his own, “Why can’t you be a warrior? Magic is a coward’s tool.” He stumbled slightly, “You have no honour, no sense of duty. You are a liar and a trickster and that is all you shall ever be…”

“Loki!”

Loki looked at him, looked at Harry staring. Then his eyes flickered down to his blue hands and something close to a choked sob escaped his lips. He fell to his knees, trembling, struggling in vain to find the words of enchantment he would have used once to conceal his true form. But all magic was lost to him, the words slipping through his mind like water through his fingers. He could not remember how.

His breaths came faster, his scarlet eyes glowed feverishly, everything was too hot and suddenly he was back in that cursed room that burned like the sun, and his skin was on fire and he couldn’t breathe and he couldn’t think and the world was closing in on him and everything was burning BURNING

Cool, steady hands caught him, though he hadn’t been aware he was falling in the first place.

“Glacius tria” The syllables were smooth and musical, resounding with a quiet strength. A breeze of cool washed over him. Loki arched upwards, something dangerously close to a sob escaping his lips. The wave of aching relief was almost drowning. Loki took a deep, shuddering breath and sagged against the thing holding him up. Distantly, he heard a lilting voice rise and fall in a waterfall of soft consonants and bow shaped vowels, murmuring words he did not understand. They brushed against him curiously, and their touch was both alien and familiar. These words, he knew, would not harm him. They were words of binding, of healing and illusion and shielding, words that wove a web of magic around him.

Magic.

Oh how he had missed it. It set off a strange yearning in him, to feel it working so close and yet be unable to access it himself. It felt all-encompassing and fluid and familiar and home.

For the first time in weeks, Loki let himself fall away and surrendered to just how tired he was and how much everything hurt and how fucking sick he was of keeping up the pretence that everything was fine. Loki let himself slump against the thing holding him steady, and felt the wordless sobs shake through him and the tears that would not come burn in his eyes. He turned his face into the too-warm hollow of a shoulder and Loki let himself fall apart.

In the blur of it all, the hand sweeping his dark hair off his face pulled him back like a tether, a light, cool touch brushing against his forehead anchoring him to the earth, a perfect distinction between
what was real and what wasn't. Loki couldn't help it, he nudged his head against the touch, seeking blindly. It stilled. For a moment, Loki was abstractly terrified he had just done something wrong. Then the hand pushed into his hair and carded through the long locks, lightly trailing across his scalp, and just like that the burning stopped. A small exhale of what might have been relief escaped him.

*God; how long had it been since anyone had touched him like that?*

“You burn like this,” Loki whispered suddenly. “To me, now, your skin is as a furnace.”

Harry's hand stilled in its movements. “Does it hurt?”

“No. Yes.” Loki pushed his head into the cradle of Harry's palm, exhaling a breath of coldest winter, "Don't stop"

Harry traced absently over a rune-like marking upon the brilliant cobalt skin of his neck, and Loki eyelids flickered.

The two figures sat like that on the floor for some time, neither speaking, neither needing to. The improvised spell spun a thread of gold around them, Harry’s magic entwining with Odin’s ancient spell, and by the time Loki raised his head, he found pale skin and eyes that gleamed a steely green once more. A curious gesture from Harry, and his skin breathed with human warmth once more, a finishing touch.

Loki exhaled. Harry cleared his throat, and the sound was loud in the silence.

"Has anyone ever-"

"No." There was a downward quirk at Loki’s lips, "I despise this form."

"Pity." Harry trailed his fingers along Loki's pale throat, smiling slightly as he felt his pulse stutter, "that runic marking was kind of doing it for me."

Loki blinked.

Harry smiled faded, “Are you done fighting me now?”

Loki turned his head slightly, and his eyes met Harry’s. They really were the most spectacular green - not jaded and full like Harry’s, but lighter, harder, colder, almost blue at times. Unyielding as steel, brittle as glass. And looking at Loki in that moment, it was like it was the first time Harry was really seeing him. All of his pretences had fallen away, his smirk and his arrogance and his smooth words laced with spite; it was just him.

*Are you done fighting me?*

Loki looked at Harry, and his voice broke.

“I never was.”

“Stop…f**king me!”

“Then let me go!” Thor yelled, “You have no right…”

“I have the only right!” Odin caught Thor’s hammer as it came hurling towards him, a clumsy throw,
“As King of Asgard and your father, I have a duty to-”

“To protect your own!” Thor growled, “you have a duty to defend your kin.”

“This is not about your brother.”

“This is everything to do with Loki. They were torturing him, father, does that mean nothing to you?!”

“He brought this upon himself, not I.”

Thor’s face twisted, “you cannot mean that.”

“You are blinded by love, Thor. You cannot see what he has become…”

“I see only my brother.” Thor said defiantly. The words echoed across the underground halls like a promise, low and booming and true.

Odin looked at his son, standing stubborn and strong even in disarray, and sighed, “You love fiercely and recklessly, just like your mother.” He said at last, “and that I cannot hold against you.”

Thor looked up almost hopefully.

“Your actions speak for themselves however” Odin looked at the hammer in his hand, “I cannot let you return to Midgard, not in this state.”

“Father…”

“Enough.” Odin’s voice resounded with power, “I will not have you throw away your honour in such a careless manner. You will remain in Asgard until I deem your temper under control. Until then, Heimdall will inform you of Midgard’s happenings.”

“But-”

“That is my final word.” Odin’s voice was hard but not unkind. He smiled a little resignedly at his son, “One day, you will understand.” The king turned and made to leave, calling out as he did so, “feel free to wander the realm as you once did. This is no prison, after all.”

Thor watched his father leave. As the door closed, he absently punched the pillar next to him. It crumbled and buckled under the impact, but Thor didn’t really notice. His mind was on Loki’s words, spoken with so much disdained glee to Heimdall a lifetime ago; “You think the Bifrost is the only way in and out of this realm? There are secret paths between the worlds to which even you, with all your gifts, are blind.”

Secret paths. A way out. A way back in.

He may not have his brother’s sharp intellect, but with a weapon forged in the heart of a dying star and a will of iron; there might just be a chance he could find one such door. Plus, he could think of at least one equally sharp-minded person who might just want to help.

Thor flicked his wrist and Mjölnir found it’s way back into his hand. It hummed in anticipation. Thor raised his head. It was worth a shot.

After all; he wasn’t finished with SHIELD just yet.
The Avengers were fighting again.

Not in the spectacularly loud and adamant way one had come to expect when it came to the group, with barely restrained blows and yelling matches that made the ground tremble: hot volatile things that lived like flares, fleeting and furious. This was not like that. This conflict held neither reason nor intent, right nor wrong, one side or another.

Perhaps then, fighting was the wrong word. They were not fighting. They were simply not working anymore.

Things that were once effortless seemed hard and jarring, conversation was brief and tense, weapons began coming into their owners hands much more readily, as though they were always alert for something, as though the Tower was not their safe haven anymore. As though it was not home.

Clint supposed it was because they were all but on house arrest, cut off from SHIELD, pinned in by Fury ever since that day of Harry’s disappearance.

Steve thought it was because they no longer had something to fight for; no enemy to defeat, no task, no orders, no sense of unity.

Bruce was green most days, but on the rare occasion he was human he voiced that they were not a team anymore, not with two members on the kill list. They were a broken unit.

Natasha did not speak her thoughts, but they were not hard to decipher; phase 3, forging that weapon to be used against Harry. The thought of harming Harry…

And Tony’s was perhaps the simplest of all. He had only said it once, but it had struck a chord with everyone there. Harry may not have been there long, but his presence had filled a hole they had not realised was there. He made the team whole again, a unit, something easy and right and good and true that could do anything, be anything. Steve formed the point of their spear, but Harry was the one throwing it - the one behind the scenes.

And now he was gone. Worse, a deserter, a traitor, a criminal.

So what did that make them? Cowards for hesitating? Loyal for not deserting themselves? There was no right or wrong anymore, no good and evil. The world’s defenders were at war with one another. Loyalty had gone out the window. They were divided.

So when the portal tore open the fabrics of reality above the roaring skyscrapers of New York; it could not have been a worser time for humanity. With SHIELD scrambling to regroup and their heroes scattered, there was no one to see the dark figure emerge from the swirling window of chaos. There was no one to stop the last Titan as he stepped through into this new world.

Thanos smiled, and held the gauntlet high like a trophy.

Oh how they would burn.
“I could have stopped him-”

“No, you couldn’t” Loki snapped, “Thanos is not like Doom, or the Enchantress, or me. He will tear you limb from limb for sport. He will force you to kill that which you love because he wants to see you break. He will pull you out and play, changing everything you are, and then put you back in and watch you dance. He will keep you alive and let you watch your world burn and everything you hold dear destroyed and your friends get tortured into madness right in front of you, because he enjoys watching you suffer. And then, when you don’t think the pain can get any worse and you beg for release, only then will he finally kill you.”

Harry considered this for a moment, then nodded. "Sounds like fun"

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the wait, these chapters just keep getting longer and longer! A huge thank you for all your lovely comments, I'm getting round to replying to you all so please just be patient.

WARNING. I should let you know there will be some physical torture in this chapter, specifically in the fifth section.

Happy reading :)

“*The object of terrorism is terrorism. The object of oppression is oppression. The object of torture is torture. The object of murder is murder. The object of power is power. Now do you begin to understand me?*” — George Orwell, 1984

As much as the great stories will have you believe, the ‘villain’ of any tale is not just a grotesque, terrifying figure in black, training to be an evil mastermind from the time they were pulling the wings off flies when they were two, utterly devoid of any backstory, any emotions, anything that made them *human*.

Villains, you see, are not so different from us. The same hopes and dreams drive them, the same pain and loss haunts them, the same decisions face them. Indeed, how many ‘bad guys’ truly see themselves as villains? The answer is none. All of us believe we are in the right, that our actions are justified. We may not be ‘good’, but we are certainly *right*.
It is the most terrifying philosophy of all - that a man can commit all sorts of atrocities and yet emerge with a clear conscience, fully believing their actions were necessary. That when the sky is falling around you and the world screams itself into silence, when great cities fall and the oceans swell to the mountains; the one at it’s cause can sit there and look upon the chaos and smile.  

For in that sense, Thanos was no different from the great villains of story and myth. He knew he was not ‘good’, but that did not make him ‘bad’ in his own mind. None of us are the villains of our own story. He was not good, but Thanos knew he was right.  

And that perhaps, is when a villain is most dangerous.

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It was a terrible sight to see.  

Thanos’ mood was darker than usual as he stormed away from the wreckage that had been Stark Tower. Earth, he wasn’t particularly enamoured with. Humans were just so annoyingly fragile; they died too easily to give him any fun. But these…heroes, his mouth twisted distastefully, these god-like figures the realms had whispered about for years…he had at least expected some resistance.  

Thanos glanced down as he heard a crunch from beneath his foot. A flash of red caught his eye. Half buried under the wreckage, Tony Stark lay like a broken toy, bleeding and unconscious. Thanos tilted his head. After a moment, Tony’s eyelids fluttered. The Titan nudged him with his foot, and sighed resignedly. Lo and behold; they were just as fragile as the rest of them. Pathetic really. He only hoped they would be strong enough for the task he required of them.  

He signalled to the chituari behind him. “This one too. We may still have need of him yet.”  

It was the first thing he had said since the first blow had been struck in the attack on Stark Tower. The Avengers had never even seen it coming.  

The creature jumped at Thanos’ voice, hurrying to obey as it tugged Tony’s unconscious form out from the rubble. Around him, many Chituari were doing the same with the rest of them. His lip curled as he watched two Chituari pulling the man with the Shield out of the rubble. The red-headed woman was tossed carelessly from one of their shoulders. She tumbled down a small mountain of wreckage, the gash on her forehead red as the curls brushing her shoulders. At the foot of the slope, the man who never got the chance to get angry enough to transform was lying as though asleep. Another Chituari was dragging the archer along the ground, his bow lying discarded on the ground a few feet away, snapped clean through in the middle.  

Oh Thanos could have easily killed them - that wasn’t the point. He had in mind a much better use for these particular individuals. Of course, the Thunder God and the other, Harry, were not among them, but now he had five, the other two he was sure would not be far behind.  

Thanos turned his face to the sky and inhaled slowly, nostrils flaring. The city stank of death. It was exquisite. A poignant reminder of just how much his strength had grown in the long years in exile. Centuries of searching and failing; no more. This time the stones would finally be his.  

And he had just the people to get them for him.  

Ironically enough, it was Fury’s decision to outlaw Harry that saved him from the same fate that
day. In fact he was nowhere near Stark Tower when it happened. He and Loki were all but undetectable under Harry’s wards, great walls of enchantment that cast layer upon layer of protection and concealment. Harry had always been veiled from Thanos’ sight, but this was taking ‘underground’ to a whole new level.

And whilst the mad Titan stalked the Earth above, Harry sat in the kitchen of what was once Grimmald Place in another lifetime and glared at the scrying image in front of him. Every time it tried to focus on something, the surface would twist and ripple and blur before he could catch a proper glimpse. It was enough to make him want to throw the basin at the wall and apparate to Stark Tower just to see what all the fuss was about. *If Tony had been screwing with the magic-technology field again…*

“What, did someone spit in your soup?” Loki’s voice was amused as Harry glanced up. The God was standing half in shadow, his hair flitting across his cheekbones, a small smirk touching his lips. There was no armour today, no cloak or leather pads. Loki was wearing black on black, and the effect had his green eyes all but glowing. He looked a world away from the man with blue skin Harry had seen fall apart yesterday. There was almost something... warmer about him, like the barriers he placed between himself and the rest of the world had been cautiously lowered. The playful mischief dancing in his eyes was just that: *playful* - without malice nor ill-intent. The graceful mocking lilt to his words was teasing rather than harsh. And for the first time since Harry had made his acquaintance, Loki looked utterly at ease.

Harry didn't quite know what to make of this new casual Loki.

Realising he had been staring, he mentally shook himself. “I’m trying to get an image of Stark Tower. Somethings interfering.”

“You know the amount you check up on them is unhealthy.” The God remarked, “I mean really, save me the wistful staring into the bowl of water and join them already. It’s not like Fury can stop you.”

Harry cocked an eyebrow, “I didn’t realise you were so keen to be rid of me.”

For a moment, Loki stiffened, freezing in place. Then the sardonic smile was back, and Harry was left wondering whether he imagined it. “I think anyone would jump at the chance to be rid of the ungodly wake up explosions every morning.”

Harry rolled his eyes, “Yeah well, not all of us are born with divine power. Some of us have to *train*…”

“Is that what you call hurling hexes at the wall?”

Harry opened his mouth, then stopped as a thought occurred to him. “Does the magic bother you that much?”

“What?” Loki’s silver-tounge slipped for a moment as he was caught off guard.

“The magic. I know you can still sense it, and I’m not exactly restrained with it’s use.”

Loki didn’t reply. Closing his eyes, he lowered the barriers around his mind and breathed in the magic running like rivers through the air. Asgard did not look kindly upon the use of the Seidr’s tools. Where was the honour in outwitting your opponent, fighting with tricks and enchantment, manipulation and craft? Where was the warrior to be found in spells and illusion? Magic was a cowards tool, something to be seen with fear and suspicion.
But this… The way Harry used magic was with wonder and awe - something beautiful and free and alive. It was a gift, not a curse. And Loki was envious of that; the freedom.

*Does it bother you that much?*

Loki opened his eyes. “No” he said at last, “no it doesn’t.”

“You miss it” Harry stated. It was not a question.

"Make no mistake, I'm far from helpless" Loki replied blithely, "I could still crush your skull with one hand."

Harry rolled his eyes, "I didn't ask if you needed it, idiot. I asked if you missed it."

“Careful there, wizard. I might think you actually care.”

That would have been enough to deter most people from pressing on. The cool tone, the underlying bite in his words, the cold disdain in his eyes. Harry though, Harry would never cease surprising him. With a curious gesture, he touched a hand to his temple and came away with a wisp of silver, a thread of magic that grew until it consumed the entire room. Before he knew it Loki was falling into the pool of magic, the room around him fading away, until an entirely different scene met his eyes.

A different Harry stood in front of him, a storm of magic swirling around him in the heat of battle, a terrible expression on his face. Loki opened his mouth to kindly ask what the *hel* was going on when the Harry that was not Harry moved forward and he caught a glimpse of what was behind. It was him, or a version of him anyway. Thor clutched him with a fierce desperation, Loki’s name still a ghost upon his lips from when he had cried out not a moment before. Loki remembered it - he didn’t think he would ever forget the way Thor said his name. A mixture of desperation and fury and exasperation and love, and a fierceness that said he could pull Loki out of danger just by the steel in his voice.

This was a memory. The day he had been captured.

Struggling to not be impressed, Loki turned back to memory-Harry. He stopped, eyes widening a fraction. Before, he had not seen this moment. He had not seen the way Harry’s eyes blazed like a dying sun, the way his magic set the world on fire behind him, the way the trembling power in his voice was enough to bring an entire squad of agents to their knees.

“You should not have shot my friend.”

Loki did not watch the chaos that followed, he already knew how it ended. He had eyes only for the impossible figure in front of him, a man who defied every expectation, every attempt Loki had made to push him away.

“You see now?” A familiar voice made him turn. Harry, the real one, stood quietly behind him.

“You should not have shot my friend.”

Harry took a step forward, and the memory around them faded away with a wave of his hand. With a jolt Loki realised Harry was actually nearly as tall as him. Their faces were inches apart. Harry’s green eyes were fierce and unyielding, and *right there*. Loki stared, utterly ensnared by the force in his gaze. He could not look away even if he wished to.

“Because I see you, God of Mischief.” Harry's voice was quiet, but the sound of it so close seemed to have an odd effect on him. Loki shivered, something warm curling in his gut. "You play the part
of the villain so well, too well, you’ve even convinced yourself. But I don’t buy it, not for one second. That isn’t you, Loki. The mischief, yes. Lies? Trickery? They come to you as naturally as breathing. But malice? Tyranny? Murder?"

“All things I have done.” Loki answered with a cool that impressed even himself, “I care not about the world.”

“So if I told you Thor was dead?”

Loki flinched, “It matters not”

“Liar.”

“Why is this so important to you?” Loki demanded, “what are you trying to prove?”

“That you’re more than what you portray.” Harry said, “that you actually give a damn.”

“No one gives a damn if I live or die. Why should I grant them the same courtesy?”

“I do.”

Loki stilled. Harry met his gaze evenly. “Do you really think I would be here if I didn’t?”

At that point Loki couldn’t help it. Harry’s words still seemed to resonate across Loki’s skin and the fierce defiance in his gaze had a whole influx of unfamiliar emotions swirling inside him and Harry’s face was right there. Loki reached out and before he knew what he was doing he was touching Harry’s jaw with a gentleness that surprised both of them, hesitantly, as though he wasn’t quite sure Harry was real. A phantom burn tingled in Loki’s fingers.

“You shouldn’t.” Loki said in a low voice, and he hated himself for saying it, “death and pain follow me wherever I go.”

“Something else we have in common then.”

“Harry I’m being serious…”

“You think I’m not?”

Loki looked pained. The expression was oddly vulnerable on his face. “You cannot” he whispered, “it would destroy you.”

“It?”

“I…” Loki’s face twisted, the sudden surge of self-loathing almost drowning him, “I would destroy you.” Loki jerked his hand away like it had been burned. “You do not understand. I rip and tear and destroy friend and foe alike just so no one else can. I love and hate in equal measures. I’ll protect you one day and slit your throat the next. Chaos is my birthright and destruction is my ally. I…” he closed his eyes, “you cannot, Harry. Do not ask it of me.”

"Do not ask it of you?” Harry repeated quietly.

Maybe there was something in his voice, or Loki sensed something in the air. But in that moment, something changed. The authority in Harry's voice seemed to ripple out, triggering an influx of unfamiliar emotions in Loki. It was like something shifted inside of him, responding to Harry's words. As he spoke, Loki saw his jade eyes flash with speckled gold, burning away the green.
"As though I need permission to put my life at risk? As though, what, I can't handle it? That your not worth it?"

And then Harry was right in front of him, and Loki's breath was stolen by Harry's eyes, by passion and emotion, by hunger, by gold and green -

"I've died twice, you know that?" Harry said evenly, a quiet anger, "I've stared into the eyes of my death twice and welcomed it with open arms. I have seen what lies beyond the veil, and passed through without a scratch." His magic pressed against Loki, demanding, all-consuming. "So do not talk to me of death and destruction. I have lost more than you could possibly understand. I hold the power of life and death in my hands. I am probably the most dangerous person you will ever meet. And I, Loki Odinson, will not be so easily broken."

The words rang in the air, shivering between them. For the longest moment, the two of them stared at one another. Loki's his throat bobbed. He took an involuntary step forward, closer, so close Harry could see the darkening in his pupils and the slight slipping of the guarded mask he wore to reveal something much rawer underneath -

And a sudden shrieking noise exploded out from the walls, making them both jump.

Harry closed his eyes, frustrated. "If that's the gardener again I swear to God I am turning him into a cockroach."

"What is that?" Loki asked over the noise, wincing slightly with his enhanced hearing.

"Wards" Harry said grimly, "someone’s trying to get in."

"Are your wards that fallible?"

Harry gave Loki a withering look, "I said trying, not succeeding."

"So ignore it"

"I can't ignore it. It could be anyone."

The air shattered once again as the alarm tore through the walls.

"Oh of all the bloody, buggering fuck -"

Loki felt strangely off-balance when Harry stepped away, swearing softly under his breath. Harry's wand appeared in his hand, and with a few muttered words an image took shape in front of them. It was the front porch of Grimmald place, or at least, the porch of the houses neighbouring it. It had not taken Harry long to remake the wards that hid the property so neatly, after all. And standing on the front step, glaring at the door, was one Nick Fury.

Harry snorted derisively, "figures."

A strange noise came from beside him. Harry turned, and Loki was standing utterly frozen, eyes burning, a cold fury twisting his face. The transformation was startling. It was like Harry had turned away for a moment and his Loki had been switched for a double. Another blink of an eye, and Loki was gone, his steps barely a whisper as he hurled himself towards the front door.

Harry swore, and ran after him. It seemed to take forever for him to reach the door, and when he did it was to find Fury pinned against the wall by his throat, held aloft by one God of Mischief. Loki's words echoed through his mind I could crush your skull with one hand. A terrible gleam shone in his
eyes. Just because Loki’s magic was gone, it didn’t make the God any less dangerous. With inhuman strength, Loki held the director high above his head. Fury’s face seemed to be slowly turning purple.

“It was foolish to come here tonight, Director”, Loki’s voice was smooth and deadly, his signature smirk across his lips. He was the image of cool composure and deadly calm; it was like watching a different person. “Did you really think I would stand to let you live after what you did?”

Harry was sure Fury would have answered, had he not been struggling to breath under Loki’s grip. Harry cleared his throat, “ah, Loki…”

Loki’s head snapped round. Gone was the unguarded expression, the confused regard he held for Harry, the smouldering heat in his eyes not moments before. This Loki was all ice and fury, sharp angles and flashing gazes, something wild and volatile and dangerous.

“Do not ask me to spare his miserable life” Loki said through his teeth, “don’t you dare-”

“So I can watch you kill him on the front porch?” Harry took a step forward so they were face to face, “I want him dead just as much as you do, you know that. But we’re better than this, Loki. We’re better than him.”

Loki turned his piercing eyes to Fury. “I’d be inclined to disagree.”

“Loki.”

Loki paused. The unexpected softness in Harry's tone threw him. Usually at this point there would have been frustrated exclamations and snappish words - a steadily rising irritation as the God of Mischief continued to defy them. It was in his nature to push the boundaries of everyone's tolerance, to watch on with a thinly-veiled gleeful curiosity to see how long it would take for them to break when he pushed. Because that was what Loki did; he pushed and pushed until the other person couldn't help but push back.

Harry though... Loki knew he wouldn't just let him kill Fury - his heroics forbade it. But where Loki seemed to push, Harry only gave him room. With a jolt, Loki realised that Harry wasn't going to fight him on this. This was a request, not an order. After everything Fury had done, Harry was letting Loki make the choice.

He couldn't remember the last time someone had trusted him in such a way.

Bloody Potter.

Suddenly, with a muffled snarl, Loki threw Fury down onto the porch and stormed back into the house.

“H-Harry…” Fury rasped, trying to get to his feet.

With a flick of his wrist, Harry had Fury hovering in the air. “Shut up” Harry’s voice was like ice, “I’m not done with you yet.”

Behind him, Loki paused.

“You wouldn’t just come knocking on my door without any defence or backup unless you had a damn good reason” Harry continued, “so spill.”

He released his hand, and the director fell to the ground. Harry sensed Loki come to stand next to him, arms twitching as though he was fighting to keep them from wrapping round Fury’s throat.
When Fury finally looked up, his eyes were utterly defeated. It was then Harry actually looked at the director, saw how exhausted he was, how a certain fearful look seemed to hang about him. It was one of the first times he had seen the leader of SHIELD look so... *desperate.*

“It’s Thanos” he said in a hoarse voice, “he attacked Stark Tower earlier today.”

“What?” Harry said sharply, “what happened? Are they…”

“He took them. He took the Avengers.” And then Fury looked straight at Harry.

“They’re gone.”

“What do you mean they’re gone?” Thor demanded, “nothing is hidden from your sight - they can’t have just disappeared!”

“You think I am mistaken?” Heimdall said calmly, masking his irritation at the young prince, “one minute they were in this Tower you speak of, the next I saw a portal open above them and they disappeared from my sight.”

“I have to go back”

“The Allfather…”

“Father does not care for the lives of mortals!” Thor protested in his booming voice, “he would see Midgard fall before extending Asgard’s help.”

“And you would have me disobey my king?” Heimdall said quietly, “you would turn against your father’s wishes once more, forsaking the loyalty of your own people for a world that is not even your own?”

“Yes-”

“Good”

Heimdall swept passed him and began activating the Bifrost.

Thor stared at him, “I don’t understand”

“Very few are hidden from my sight, young prince, but those who are trouble me greatly.” He levelled his golden eyes at Thor, “It is time we learned who lingers in the shadows.”

“But who-”

“Go, my prince” Heimdall lowered his staff into the Bifrost and light exploded around them, “go to your friends. But be cautious…” Heimdall’s voice echoed around him as Thor hurtled into the abyss.

*“Not everything is as it seems.”*
When Natasha awoke, the world was on fire. Or at least, that was what it felt like from the pain burning through her nerves and the erratic panic flaring in her chest as she took the first gasping breath. She shot upwards, heart pounding. Her body was still in fight mode from the attack…

The attack. Natasha stifled the urge to cry out. The team…Thanos…where were they all? Tony had looked so broken lying on the ground…and Clint…

A sudden clanging noise jerked her thoughts back to the present. Get a grip, she told herself fiercely; you aren’t going to help anyone by panicking. Taking another breath, she closed her eyes and carefully pulled the familiar persona around her, slipping back into the Black Widow, the feared assassin, the fighter. Old instincts fitted into place easily. Her mindset was blank and indifferent, coldly calculating. This was her armour, just like Tony’s suit was his.

Her eyes scanned her surroundings. The ground was barren and hard - some kind of stone - and the sky was dark. There was nothing to be seen anywhere but rock and wasteland. Natasha shivered. It definitely wasn’t anywhere she recognised on Earth.

Biting back a gasp of pain, Natasha pulled herself shakily to her feet. Her head throbbed miserably in response. When she put a hand to her forehead, it came away red with blood.

“So sorry for that, I often underestimate my own strength.” The voice came from behind her. It was smooth and cultured, thick and rich and resounding; the sort of voice that demanded to be listened to, the sort of that made the hairs on the back of your neck stand on end.

Natasha recognised it instantly. She whipped round and started forward with a snarl but something froze her in place. With her gaze fixed on the ground, she sensed rather than saw the figure approach her. He was large, that was certain, as he cast a great shadow over her. The glimpse of skin she got was a startling purple.

“Do I get the pleasure of seeing your face? Or am I to stay fixated on this barren wasteland?” Natasha drawled, drawing on every shred of training to keep the fear from her voice.

Suddenly, there was a hand under her chin, jerking it upwards. His touch had her skin crawling, and all at once her mind was filled with images of chaos and pain and, oddly enough, of death. She flinched but his grip was firm. Then her eyes met his, and every ounce of her wanted to run screaming in the other direction. It wasn’t the purple skin, or the burning scarlet eyes, or even the ancient power that seemed to radiate off him. It was the expression on his face, the menacing gleam in his eyes as he looked at her. It was a cruel face, hard and twisted, a sadistic smirk on his face, a deadly malicious excitement ablaze in his eyes.

And it terrified her.

“You are afraid” Thanos said in that low thundering voice, “good.” Abruptly he let go of her and Natasha tumbled to the ground. “You are wiser than your fellow Midgardians.”

“Where are they?” she demanded, trying to keep the tremble from her voice, “what have you done to them?”

“Oh they’re alive” he dismissed coldly, “well, mostly anyway. I suppose that rather depends on you.”

“Me” her voice was flat. She knew where this was going.

Thanos narrowed his eyes at her, “I have a task for you, little spider.”
“Forget it.”

“You haven’t heard what I’m offering.”

“Not interested.”

“Oh, well, in that case…” Thanos made a strange gesture and two Chituari appeared. In their arms, barely conscious, was Clint.

“Clint!” Natasha cried before she could stop herself. She stumbled forward, but again the unseen force held her back. She glared at Thanos, “let him go.”

“Now why would I do that?” He said placidly. “so, about that job I need doing…”

“I’ll never help you, you tyrant” she spat at his feet.

For a moment he looked at her through slitted eyes. Then - “Twenty seven bones in the human hand” Thanos mused, strolling over to where Clint was being held, “how many do you think you need to shoot a bow and arrow?”

Natasha frowned, “what-”

CRACK. In one blindingly fast movement, the Titan moved faster than the eye could see and snapped something in Clint’s right hand. Clint gasped.

“One” Thanos said with an amused smirk.

Natasha’s eyes widened, “stop it” she said hoarsely.

“Having second thoughts?”

CRACK.

“Don’t…”

CRACK. CRACK.

“That’s four” Thanos remarked indifferently.

Clint looked like he was about to be sick. He still hadn’t cried out once.

“Stop it” Natasha pleaded, eyes filling with tears, “please stop it.”

“Do you think I can break two at once?”

CRACK. Clint convulsed where he was being held. His breaths were ragged and gasping.

“Natasha…” His voice was hoarse, “Tasha don’t!”

“Clint…” She whispered. She felt like she was breaking inside.

CRACK.

“Seven”

“You bastard” Natasha spat through trembling lips.
Clint cried out. It was a small, broken sound that tore straight through her.

“ALRIGHT, okay, just stop, please just stop…” she burst out, “I’ll do it. I’ll do whatever you want. Just…stop hurting him. Please.”

The air fell silent. Natasha realised she had fallen to her knees.

“There; that wasn’t so hard was it?” Thanos dropped Clint and he slumped to the ground, his mangled right hand held close to his chest. Natasha knew that he would never again be able to shoot, certainly not with the same deadly accuracy.

“Clint, I’m sorry…” tears made her throat tight, “I’m…”

“Don’t” the archer raised his head and gave her a tight lipped smile. “It’s okay”

“No, it’s not” her voice broke, and she tried to move forward but the invisible boundary stopped her.

“Come now,” Thanos reprimanded condescendingly, “me and you have business to attend to.”

Natasha wiped the blood from her face and glared at Thanos with all the fury she couldn’t convey. It only seemed to amuse him.

“What do you want?” She said flatly.

Thanos smiled, “when the God of Mischief invaded Earth last year, do you recall the weapon he wielded?”

“Loki’s scepter.”

“The very same. I have need of something inside it.”

“But the weapon’s with SHIELD, under their best security.” Natasha pointed out, “The vaults are nigh impossible to get into.”

“And that, my little spider, is why I need you.”

Thanos bent down to where she was on the ground, and once again lifted her chin with his finger. She recoiled, but his grip tightened. His eyes were burning.

“I need you to steal it for me.”

Please tell me you’re not doing what I think you’re doing, because do you have any idea how stupid that is?”

“They’re my friends, Loki.”

“Yeah, and this is Thanos” Loki stressed as he followed Harry, “this is not a fight you can win.”
“You sound like you’re speaking from experience” Harry remarked as he summoned his invisibility cloak.

“Our paths have crossed before.”

“And it didn’t end well? I’m shocked…”

“You aren’t listening!” Loki slammed his hand down on the table Harry was gathering his supplies. It cracked down the middle, sending objects flying everywhere.

Harry passed a hand over his eyes with an exasperated irritation. “Look, I appreciate your concern, but-

“Thanos is a Titan, did you know that?” Loki’s voice was strung with a fierce kind of emotion Harry couldn’t identify, “he’s murdered entire races, entire worlds just because something about them pissed him off. He’s stronger, smarter and more deadly than any opponent you’ll ever have faced, and you’re about to rush off into battle when you don’t know the first thing about him!” Loki’s voice had risen to a shout by the end, his face was flushed, his entire demeanour agitated and on edge.

“And I suppose you have all the answers?” Harry replied evenly.

“I know a great deal more than you, and I’m not the one who has it in their heads to face him one on one!” Loki snapped.

Harry ran a hand agitatedly through his hair, “alright, fine. If you know so much, what does he want with the Avengers?”

“Thanos wields the infinity gauntlet, it doesn’t take a genius to work out what he wants with your little band of heroes.”

At Harry’s raised eyebrows, Loki sighed. “Infinity stones, he wants the infinity stones. They’re like…imagine every power in the universe conserved into six objects of unthinkable power, six gems. Together, they grant the user complete control, the ultimate power.”

“Kind of like the hallows?” Harry muttered.

“The what?”

“Oh, um, nothing” Harry frowned, “but why does he need the team to get them for him? If he’s as powerful as you say…”

“Power doesn’t mean authority” Loki pointed out derisively, “he needs people who can get him into where the gems are kept. Places the Avengers can get access to. No one in their right mind would let Thanos anywhere near the stones, but Earth’s heroes?”

“They’ll never agree to it” Harry said without a trace of doubt, “they would die before helping him.”

“And that’s what he’ll use” Loki argued, “if you wanted Stark to do something for you, you wouldn’t threaten his life…”

Harry’s eyes widened, “you’d threaten the team’s.”

“Bingo” There was no smile on Loki’s face this time, “with the whole team, Thanos has got enough bargaining material to make a whole team of willing followers.”

Harry’s expression had gone hard. “I need to get them out. This is my fault.”
“And what sort of idiotic reasoning led you to that terrible conclusion?”

He looked at Loki, and his eyes were lost, “I left them. If I’d of been there when Thanos attacked…”

“Then you would be in the same situation” Loki dismissed.

“I could have stopped him”

“No, you couldn’t!” Loki snapped, “Thanos is not like Doom, or the Enchantress, or me.” Harry opened his mouth to protest, but Loki pressed on. “He will tear you limb from limb for sport’ Loki stressed, “He will force you to kill that which you love because he wants to see you break. He will pull you out and play, changing everything you are, and then put you back in and watch you dance. He will keep you alive and let you watch your world burn and everything you hold dear destroyed and your friends get tortured into madness right in front of you, because he enjoys watching you suffer. And then, when you don’t think the pain can get any worse and you beg for release, only then will he finally kill you.”

Harry, who hadn’t moved throughout the entire thing, considered this for a moment, then nodded. "Sounds like fun."

"Are you fucking deranged?!” Loki all but yelled. Another time, Harry might have been more shocked that a God had just sworn…”Thanos will kill you, and everybody you ever met just because he can…”

“And yet you worked for him.” Harry’s words were quiet, but they cut Loki straight through. Harry looked up when Loki didn’t answer, “I’m right, aren’t I? Tell me I’m right.”

“That was a long time ago” Loki couldn’t meet Harry’s gaze.

“Well, he certainly did a number on you” Harry said at last.

Again, Loki didn’t answer. It was then that Harry realised what the alien emotion surrounding Loki was: it was fear. Harry had never seen Loki look afraid before - not when Fury was torturing him, not even when he had lost his magic. Anger, yes. Doubt? Yes. But fear…

“You cannot win this, Harry” Loki said firmly, “it would be suicide.”

Harry’s eyes seemed to flash, “I’ve handled worse odds before.”

“Harry…”

“I can’t lose them!” Harry exploded, “whilst we’re sitting here arguing, Thanos might be torturing Tony, or Natasha, or Steve or Thor or Bruce or Clint, one of them might be dead, I don’t know.” He ran a hand shakily through his hair, “and maybe this isn’t a battle I can win. But you know what? I don’t care. I’m not losing anybody else.”

Loki just looked at him, “You would march to your death just to prove a point?”

“I would try and save my friends because I still have hope” Harry shot back, “something you seem to have forsaken.”

“Oh damn you with your hero complex!” Loki burst out suddenly, “Why is it up to you to save everyone, huh? You don’t even know where they are! Nobody asked you to save the world!”

And abruptly Harry was reminded of his last thoughts before he let a vampire sink it’s teeth into his
neck in another lifetime, moments before he appeared in this strange new world. Nobody asked him to save the world. And now, finally, he thought he got it.

“Nobody needed to” Harry said almost to himself.

“What?” Loki looked tired and confused and desperate.

Harry shook his head, “Look, I’m going to do whatever it takes to make sure my friends get out of there alive. Now are you with me or not?”

Loki looked at Harry for a long time. A war seemed to be going on in his eyes, and Harry felt like he could actually see the barriers go back up, see Loki retreating behind cold disdain and indifferent arrogance once more. The change from the soft amusement in his eyes, the confused wonder, the playful exchange of wits and the easy familiarity growing between them... it was devastating. After a minute or so, he could no longer meet Harry’s gaze and lowered his head.

“Right” Harry’s voice was a little flat, “well, I guess this is goodbye.”

“Harry-” Loki did not know what he would have said. A thousand words danced at his lips. In the end though, it didn’t really matter. Harry was already turning on the spot, summoning his possessions with a wave of his hand, and with a parting flash of green eyes he was gone, taking all the light in the room with him.

Alone in the living room, Loki’s face twisted into a yell and he punched the wall with one shaking hand. The wall collapsed straight through, but something - Harry’s wards maybe - kept the floor above from caving in. Loki bowed his head and cried out in frustration, and listened to the sound echo in the empty room.

His only reply was silence.

In amongst all the chaos, it was not hard to slip in to the underground vaults running under New York. A flash of red hair was the only give away. A stolen keycard and personal security clearance got her through the doors in her path. All cameras had been disabled twenty three minutes earlier. She had seven minutes before they came back online. When she reached the final vault, the full body scan verified her as SHIELD personnel, as an Avenger - one of the highest security clearances there was, and the door opened.

Natasha Romanoff stepped silently into the room and closed her hand around the sceptre. It glowed with a yellow light. Lifting it from it’s case, she braced herself for a shrieking alarm. Silence. She let herself have a small exhale of relief. Then, gripping the weapon tightly, Natasha melted back into the shadows.

By the time it’s absence was noted, Natasha was already half a world away, lifting a hand to shield her eyes as the portal opened in front of her. No one was there to see her step through and disappear once more.

Only one was there to greet her on the other side.

Thanos smiled, and accepted the weapon. “You were wise not to betray me, little spider.” He crooned, eyes greedily taking in the yellow glow inside the sceptre.
“I didn’t do it for you” she said tightly, “I did it for Clint.”

“Naturally.”

Natasha got the sense he wasn’t hearing a word she said. He seemed utterly transfixed by the sceptre.

“Anything else, oh mighty one?” She prompted snidely.

In a movement too fast for the eye to see, Thanos snapped his hand out and backhanded her across the face. Natasha was sent flying backwards from the blow, landing harshly on the ground. Her head smacked against the hard stone. She gasped into the ground, shaking.

“Do not think you are safe, spider” Thanos growled, “every one of you is replaceable, you hear? Every. One.”

Natasha didn’t reply, every effort focussed on staying conscious.

Above her, Thanos’ voice sounded distantly, “Put her back in the wards. Keep her alive for now.”

She looked up too quickly, and the world seemed to shimmer. “What…what about Clint? My friends? How do I know you haven’t… done something to them?”

Thanos’ lip curled into a cruel smile, “I guess you’ll just have to trust my word that they’re alive.”

“You…you bastard” She slurred, feeling herself fading, “we had a…we had a deal…”

Thanos scoffed, and his words haunted her long after they faded: “I don’t make deals with mortals.”

Natasha felt a sharp pain in her temple, and everything went black.

Thanos’ laughter still echoed in her ears.

Chapter End Notes

NOTE: unfortunately I am away for the next week, so no updates in that time. Fear not though, I shall be writing so when I return they’ll be lots to upload. Hang in there till then!
"It's alright" she said firmly, "Harry's coming for us. He's going to find us."

And Natasha ignored the silence at her back and the pressing darkness around her. If her voice shook a little, she didn't pay it any heed.

"...He promised."

For three days, Harry stood sentinel over the remains of stark tower. The city was eerily quiet, long abandoned after the devastation of Thanos' attack on the Tower. Winds whistled through the streets like voices, crying out in some long forgotten language. The city was a deadzone, no power, no coverage on the news, just one great expanse of nothingness - a ghost town if you would.

It's sole occupant stalked the empty streets by day and night without fail, never resting, dark robes billowing out behind him in the dry, dusty winds. Every few blocks he would stop, mutter something, perhaps with some strange gesture of his hand or a flick of his wand, then frown and continue on his way. Buildings moved out of his way with a wave of his hand, the ground flattened to allow him passage, even the skies obeyed his call.

“I have been and still am a seeker, but I have ceased to question stars and books; I have begun to listen to the teaching my blood whispers to me.” — Hermann Hesse, Demian: Die Geschichte von Emil Sinclairs Jugend
But never did he find what he was looking for. Some way or another, he would always end up back at the remains of Stark Tower, gaze fixed on the sky where endless spells insisted there was an opening, a paradox, something hiding behind the cover of the sky.

It would not show itself.

On the third day, Harry found the blood. It was long dry, a great pool stained upon the rubble like paint. He stopped, thoughts whirring to a halt. Harry performed a small wand movement with his hand. The identification spell glowed blue and a figure flickered amongst the light. It was Natasha's.

Harry sank to a crouch, cancelling the spell and running a hand agitatedly through his hair. Blood magic was technically straying into illegal territory as far as his world had been concerned. It went along with possession and demon summoning and all manner of dark magic. (Dark magic that Harry was worrying adept in in the few occasions he had been forced to use it. One did not live centuries without exploiting every branch of magic, after all.)

And sometimes, light magic just wouldn't cut it.

Harry closed his eyes. It wasn't even a choice. None of the other tracking spells had worked. Fuck that: NOTHING had worked. And this was Natasha. He had to try. Harry opened his eyes, and began tracing ancient symbols in the air with his wand, holding the words that would link his mind to hers, succumbing her will to his. And with any luck, saving her life.

Harry placed his hand upon the blood stain, and the world disappeared around him.

Clint could see that Natasha wasn't coping well.

He wanted to believe it was her concussion causing the hollow look in her eyes and the way she flinched from things he could not see. He wanted to think it was just lack of food causing the hallucinations. But more and more, he began to wonder. It was this place, always dark and barren and empty and cold and hopeless he could hardly bear it. And then there was him. The Titan. Clint didn't like calling him by name. That would imply he was in any way human. That creature was something else, playing with powers beyond his control, powers SHIELD had barely imagined. And Clint was sure he was doing something to them. Beyond the obvious kidnap-torture-crap anyway.

It had started when Natasha had returned with the sceptre. Clint was no stranger to its powers after all; he knew what it could do to your head. And as time went on (though he had lost all sense of time in this god-forsaken place) and the team drew further and further into themselves, Clint began to wonder how long it would take before they lost themselves all together.

"Clint?"

A small voice brought his inner ramblings to a halt. Clint turned his head slightly where he and Natasha were sitting back to back, chained to the ground, propping each other up. One small mercy that they had been kept together in this wasteland of a prison.

"Are you awake?" She whispered.

A stupid question. None of them had slept at all since they had been here.

He cleared his throat, "Yeah" Clint’s voice was hoarse from disuse. "what's wrong?"

Again, a stupid question. Everything was wrong.
Natasha shifted slightly, "we haven't heard anything from the others"

She didn't need to finish. Clint knew what she was asking.

"He probably has them out 'collecting' or whatever it is he calls it" Clint said quietly. Sound travelled out here.

"You don't think they're..."

"No." Clints voice was suddenly firm, "no they're not. We would know."

Silence.

"Do..." Natasha swallowed, "do you think Harry knows?"

Clint did not answer immediately. He had often found himself wondering what had happened to Harry ever since he had disappeared with Loki what seemed like a lifetime ago. Was he keeping tabs on them? Had Fury caught up with him yet? Had Loki and him killed each other yet? Worse: did Thanos have him?

"I don't know what's scarier" he said at last, "that Harry doesn't know, or that he does and there's something keeping him from bursting in and saving the day in typical-potter-fashion, scary magic and all."

Natasha gave a small huff of laughter. "You know, I used to think his obsession with keeping us safe was a little overboard." The smile fell from her face, "I guess he was right. Why is he always right?"

Wriggling through the manacles, he entwined his good hand with hers. "Right or not, I don't think there's anything in this world or ours that could stop Harry from coming once he finds where we are."

She gave him a small smile, "what happened to a friend of mine enemy is mine enemy?"

Clint's gaze took on a far-away quality as he remembered his words from that first day. A smile quirked his lips, "I guess people prove you wrong."

It was just then, that several things happened at once. Something shimmered in the air around them, a ball of light exploded into being above their heads, the ground trembled, a foreign presence touched their minds, and Natasha gasped, head snapping back so it collided harshly with Clint's. Suddenly the light vanished, and the ground stilled. The smell of burning hung heavily in the air. Irises blinded, Natasha and a Clint both peered into the gloom. Something moved about three feet from Natasha, and she stiffened. Her hand clenched tight around Clint's. Then, right in front of them, a silhouette of a figure slowly stood from a crouch. Mist curled around him, and his image seemed blurred as though he wasn't quite there. That messy hair atop his head, though; that was unmistakable.

"Harry?" She whispered.

'Really', Bruce thought, 'he should have seen it coming'. What else would a man a Thanos want with someone like him? Or more accurately, someone like the other guy. Bruce knew it was only a matter of time before the Hulk made himself known. He glanced round at his surroundings. A dark, barren wasteland with nothing to be seen but rock and ash. There didn't seem to be anything keeping him in. They hadn't even chained him down (not that that would have made any difference once the other guy decided to show). It was almost as though they had abandoned him on this forsaken rock.
So when Thanos' voice drifted out from the shadows, to say he was startled was an understatement. "Enjoying the solitude?"

Bruce leapt to the side, hand pressed to his chest as he fought to keep the other guy dormant. His heart thudded beneath his fingers. He glanced narrowly up at the Titan as he loomed over him.

"I imagine it should be a blessing" Thanos continued, a strange gleam in his eye, "not much to destroy on an already dead world is there?"

"What do you want?" Bruce spat out through clenched teeth, "where are the others?"

Thanos' mouth tightened into a displeased line, "predictable. Why is that always the first thing you people ask?"

"If you've hurt them in any way..." Bruce interrupted.

Thanos rolled his eyes, "and there's the second predictability. Honestly, you humans have no ingenuity..."

Bruce felt a coiling in his chest and suddenly he KNEW that it was happening, felt the fury washing over him in great waves...

BAM

Numbness.

In that one moment all feeling had completely extinguished. Bruce faltered, and looked around in confusion. What was he doing again?

"Now now" Thanos reprimanded, tossing something lightly in his hand, "we can't have you getting all riled up before the party starts can we? You'll need your strength if you're to destroy an entire planet."

"I..." Bruce shook his head in an attempt to clear it, not quite able to process 'destroy' and 'planet' in the same sentence, "I'm not going to help you."

"That's what they all said" Thanos tilted his head, "tell me, just how many of your friend's lives is your pride worth?"

Bruce looked up sharply, "you're bluffing"

"See for yourself" Thanos swept his arm in a wide arc, and in it's wake Bruce saw the whole team standing before him. He opened his mouth to cry out, but before the words could form there was a shiver in the air and then everyone was lying on the ground with dead, unseeing eyes. Standing above them, green face half in shadow, was a figure he'd never seen objectively but knew at a glance. Bruce recoiled. No, no he hadn't, he WOULDN'T, that wasn't him, that...

A blink, and the image vanished.

Thanos' voice was smooth, "Do we have an agreement?"

When Bruce looked up, he saw a glimpse of something small and glowing a brilliant yellow being passed casually between the Titan's hands. Even looking at the gem made his head spin. He shivered. What was wrong with him?

Thanos laughed, "nothing's wrong with you. I'm simply reordering your mind somewhat. It's terribly
cluttered in here..."

Bruce gasped as he felt something... SHIFT inside his head, like some sort of alteration of perception. The world spun dizzyingly around him, and suddenly he felt incredibly strange, not quite himself.

"What are you doing to me?" He demanded weakly.

Then Thanos smiled, and it was the most terrifying thing he had ever seen.

"I'm fixing you."

Then before Bruce could even blink Thanos was right there and forcing the gem against his forehead and all thought was wiped from Bruce’s mind but one.

DESTROY.

A portal opened in front of him, and the Hulk hurtled into the void.

Xandar was, by reputation, one of the safest places to reside in the Andromeda Galaxy, let alone the Tranta system. Ever since Ronan the Accuser had been defeated by the Guardians, the planet had entered one of its most peaceful turns it had seen in a long time.

So when the alien appeared out of a window in the sky, they were taken utterly unprepared.

Xandarians later would describe with an awe-struck terror how the beast had torn the cities apart with his bare hands, pausing only to roar with agonising fury to the sky before leaping down and wrecking further destruction. Evacuation ships were torn down from the sky, cities demolished, even the Nova Corps, Xandar's highest security, had their headquarters crumbled into the ground. The Hulk unleashed his anger upon this strange world, and the world burned.

It could have been hours or days later that he paused, breathing heavily, wild eyes beholding the destruction. For there was nothing left to destroy. Those who survived had fled, and those who did not lay in their masses upon the streets like toys upon a broken world. The Hulk gazed upon the wreck, and heard the command still pulsing in his head: DESTROY. It trembled through him like a wave of compulsion, a roaring swell that he had to obey. DESTROY. But he no longer knew HOW to. The Hulk's head whipped from side to side as his mind fought against himself, a raging internal battle that refused to let him be, until with a sudden yell that sounded oddly human he clawed at his head and sank to the ground, tearing at his skin and slamming his fists into the ground until they bled.

He did not see the portal open above his head, nor sense the figure who slipped through it. Thanos ignored the Hulk, his eyes fixated on the one thing that couldn't be destroyed, that continued to evade the Hulk's grasp. The one thing that had until today been under the Nova Corps' protection. Thanos reached out his hand, and the Orb pulsed with sizzling energy, cracking open to reveal a blinding purple glow. Moments before it could explode, Thanos whipped out his hand and the Orb struck the gauntlet. It shivered, then the outer shell dissolved, opening to allow the purple light to stream into one of the round hollows until it formed a perfect violet gem. The power stone. At its side sat an identical yellow one.

Thanos' eyes glinted with pleasure. Then, with one parting satisfied glance at the shattered world at his feet, he turned through the portal and vanished, leaving one very human Bruce Banner sobbing...
brokenly into the ground.

Natasha thought she had been dreaming when the figure stepped forward and Harry's face appeared out of the gloom.

"Harry?" She whispered.

"Natasha" Harry sounded astonished. He took a hesitant step forward, "is that you?"

"Harry" for some reason Natasha couldn't think of anything else to say. Harry was here, and everything was going to be alright. Harry had found them. Harry-

"Shh, it's alright" Harry's voice was soft, and Natasha realised she had been repeating his name for some time. "I'm coming for you, I promise. I just need you to tell me where you are."

"I don't understand" she said, frowning, "you're... here, aren't you?"

A tight smile crossed Harry's face, "not quite."

"Natasha?" Clint sounded worried, "Nat who are you talking to?"

Natasha opened her mouth to retort that she was talking to Harry thank-you-very-much and couldn't be see that? When Harry held up a hand to stop her.

"He can't see or hear me, Red, I'm only linked with you."

"Linked?"

Harry shook his head, "look, I don't have time to explain. This spell won't last long. Are the others close?"

"I don't know, we haven't seen them" her voice trembled slightly.

Harry closed his eyes for a moment. "Okay, just hang in there a little longer alright? I'll find you, whatever it takes. I promise."

"Harry-" Natasha reached out a hand but the Harry-image was already gone, as though it was never there in the first place.

"Nat?" Clint sounded wretched, "Nat you're scaring me."

She found his hand again and squeezed. "It's alright" she said firmly, "Harry's coming for us. He's going to find us."

And Natasha ignored the silence at her back and the pressing darkness around her. If her voice shook a little, she didn't pay it any heed.

"He promised."

Harry came back to himself with a gasp, hand jerking away from the stain on the ground. The
strange, wild magic swirled around him hypnotically. With a scowl, he jabbed out with his own magic and the swarm recoiled and dispersed, obviously sensing something they really didn't want to mess with. Harry huffed derisively. *Ruddy black magic.*

He straightened from where he had been crouching, hands brushing his trousers off absently. A strange, sticky sensation met his fingers. Glancing down, Harry stopped. His right hand was covered in blood. Harry raised an unimpressed eyebrow, and flicked his wrist. The blood disappeared, leaving a small line across the length of his palm. Blood for blood. He knew the cut wouldn't heal by magical means. Really he should be grateful the price hadn't been higher. Harry dropped his hand to his side. *Just another lovely quirk of using blood magic.*

His gaze flitted up to the sky. There HAD to be something there, and now he knew what to look for. With any luck, he could focus the vision he had with Natasha's blood to apparate straight there. The price would be heavy, he knew, certainly more so than a paper cut, but if it worked...

Closing his eyes, Harry mentally checked his magical shields. A faint golden barrier shimmered around him. He wasn't at full strength, three days without sleep would do that to a person, but now he knew what to do he couldn't wait another moment. Harry once again placed his hand on the blood on the ground, ignoring the way the dark magic responded so readily at his call, and *FOCUSED*...

It was just then, as his image blurred and began to fade, that something large and blindingly bright shot down from the sky above him. Harry's eyes flew open, and he could do nothing but gape as the large thing hurtled down and he promptly got hit in the face by a falling Norse God.

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Beneath the hieroglyphics of the Bifrost, Natasha's blood cracked and dissolved under the heat, scattering upwards like ash in the wind.
"Oh… thank god" Tony exclaimed, "so you can swear just as profanely as the rest of us."

Through his tears, Steve burst out laughing.

Chapter Notes

Here it is, instalment number 17!
Firstly, I cannot thank enough all the readers who have left comments or begged me for more instalments - they are coming! I'm back into writing zone after holidays, so it should be full speed ahead from now on.
Secondly, there is a mild warning for some pretty hard shit pain for some of our babies (not to cause any alarm) so a little heads up for that.
As always, thank you for your continued support, and enjoy!
Till next time,
L

"I DON’T CARE!" Harry yelled at them, snatching up a lunascope and throwing it into the fireplace. "I'VE HAD ENOUGH, I'VE SEEN ENOUGH, I WANT OUT, I WANT IT TO END, I DON'T CARE ANYMORE!"

"You do care," said Dumbledore. He had not flinched or made a single move to stop Harry demolishing his office. His expression was calm, almost detached. "You care so much you feel as though you will bleed to death with the pain of it."

— J.K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix

It took a full seven minutes before Harry could look at him properly again. Thor knew, because he had been counting.

“Harry…” Thor said quietly, “Harry I can’t tell you how-”

“Don’t” Harry stood with a wince, “you don’t need to apologise. You couldn’t have known what I was doing.”

“But-”

“No.”
“Harry-”

“Not going to happen” Harry smiled faintly, “besides, I should really be the one apologising.”

Thor shifted, “You didn’t hit me that hard…”

“You flew fifty feet in the air and took out an entire building.”

“Half a building. Don’t blow things out of proportion.”

Harry rolled his eyes, “you’re insufferable.”

Thor’s lips twitched, “thank you.”

“That wasn’t a compliment.”

“Yes it was.”

Their eyes met, and the two sniggered. Then they seemed to remember they shouldn’t be laughing, not now, not here, and the laughter died quickly. Across from him, Thor released a breath. He looked exhausted, and his eyes were hollow as he gazed out across the destruction of the remains of Stark Tower.

“It looks like a battlefield” He said quietly.

“It was” Harry said, following his gaze, “I should be thankful I wasn’t there when it happened, but… all I can think about is that I could have stopped this. And if Thanos has hurt even one of them, and I wasn't there to save them…” He closed his eyes, throat drying up.

“I was in Asgard for the attack” Thor’s words were quick and flat, “my father shielded me from Thanos’ gaze.”

“Remind me to thank him” Harry said absently. He opened his eyes and looked at his friend, really looked. A hint of a smile curled his lips, “God am I glad to see you.”

Thor’s gaze softened, “I knew you would come back.”

“I never should have left” Harry leant back against the ally and closed his eyes, “I abandoned you guys when you needed me most.”

“You were saving my brother’s life” Thor said sharply, “do not slight the honour of your decision to leave.”

Harry smiled slightly, “the others may not look upon it so kindly.”

“I think you underestimate their affections.” Thor tilted his head, “they all care about you a great deal.”

“Yeah, and look where that’s gotten them” Harry sighed, “it doesn’t matter anyhow. I’m getting them out whether they like it or not.”

Thor stilled, “You know where they are? You…you can find them?”

Harry smiled grimly, “better: I can take us there. Now, where is that…” Harry froze, staring at the ground where the blood had been.
“Harry?” Thor said a little hesitantly.

Harry took a slow breath like he was trying particularly hard not to punch something.

“You have got to be fucking kidding me.”

“You’d better have some good news for me, Collector. This venture is taking far longer than it should, and I am not a patient man.”

“No no, of course” Taneleer Tivan’s voice quivered slightly. He cleared his throat, “these items are one of the most closely guarded secrets of history. Finding them…it will take time.”

Thanos’ eyes flashed impatiently, “enough of your rambling. Have you located the last two gems or not?”

Tivan cringed, “the power, mind and space were where I specified?”

Thanos’ lip curled almost derisively, “your information…was correct. I already posses two of the gems, and I have plans for the third.”

Tivan’s eyes widened slightly, and any who were paying attention might have seen the way his gaze flickered to the Titan’s wrist as though looking for the gauntlet. If it was there, it was concealed well.

“Indeed?” The Collector said faintly, “those artefacts were well protected, but not very well hidden. The time and soul however,” the man swallowed, “you must understand they have not been seen for centuries…”

“Do you know something or not, old man?” Thanos thundered, his eyes aglow with an impossible purple and yellow light.

Tivan’s eyes glazed over slightly, and his voice took on a monotonic quality. “The soul gem was rumoured to have left this realm a few centuries ago, and by left, I mean vanished. Unless there is some universe we are not aware of, it is unlikely you will find it among these stars.”

Thanos’ jaw twitched, “And the Time stone?”

“There is a myth, much older than my own years, that spoke of an amber gem being stolen from my predecessors. Stolen by a boy, no less.”

His eyes sharpened, “A boy?”

“He came out of a door that appeared from nowhere, in a flash of blue light and a great shrieking noise like the skies were falling above us. It only took a moment for the gem to be taken, and then he leaped back through the door and vanished.”

“And?” Thanos demanded, “who was the stranger?”

Tivan shrugged helplessly, “there was no record of his appearance. No features of significance, other than a strange scar on his forehead.”

“A… scar.” Thanos’ voice had gone dangerously quiet.

“Clear as the lightning bolt it resembled, and glimpsed just as fleetingly” the last part was mumbled,
but Thanos had stopped listening.

*How in bloody fucking buggering hell had the boy managed it?* He felt anger seething in his veins. No one would stand against him, not now, not when he was so close. If this...Harry was interfering with his plans, it would be the last thing he ever did. Struggling to restrain from blowing up, Thanos turned to the Collector once more, and let a predatory gleam come into his eyes.

“If I’m not mistaken, you seem to have forgotten to mention the final gem.”

“F-Final?” Tivan’s face had gone white.

“The Reality gem - you do know where it is?” Thanos took a step closer.

“I-I told you” Tivan’s eyes flitted around in a panic, “the gem is...it’s mine”

“You think so, do you?”

Tivan trembled as Thanos took another step towards him. “We had a deal” The Collector said faintly, “the other infinity stones for my continued possession of the Aether.”

Thanos tilted his head, “did you really think I would settle for only five stones?”

“Please...” Tivan was begging now, backing away with a terrified expression on his face as Thanos’ eyes once more began to glow, “The All-Father trusted me with its safekeeping himself, Odin will kill me if he finds out!”

Thanos smiled, “I’ll save him the trouble then.”

And then in one blindingly fast motion he tossed the Collector into the air and broke the man’s spine clean in two. Tivan spasmed and screamed, then went limp. He was dead before he hit the ground.

Just then, someone entered the room carrying a large cube of what looked like a strange kind of mental containment. The figure froze when he saw the Collector lying disfigured on the ground.

“I thought you weren’t going to kill him” Tony’s voice sounded tight and strung out from inside his suit.

“Then you clearly don’t know me at all”, Thanos glanced at him, “was the security an issue?”

The Iron Man seemed to tear his gaze away from the body with a great effort, “You knew it wouldn’t be.”

“The famous Tony Stark” Thanos smiled sadistically, “give him a computer, and watch him dance.”

Almost imperceptibly, Tony flinched. “Why me?” He demanded with a hint of his usual defiance, “why not just waltz in and smash the place to smithereens like you did with us?”

Thanos glanced at the Collector, “he had information I needed. Information I didn’t trust anyone else to get for me.”

“And you wonder why you have to threaten to kill someone to get them to do anything for you.”

Thanos snarled and suddenly he was right in Tony’s face. “I think it’s time you handed that over, don’t you?”

The Iron Man shot away from him with a blast from his thrusters. “Not until I see Steve is safe.” He
said stubbornly.

Thanos’ eyes narrowed, flickering violet and yellow, “I’m afraid you’re not really in a position to make demands.”

Waving his hand, the gauntlet suddenly appeared on his wrist and the mind stone flared. Tony screamed. Body spasming, he fell to the ground like a puppet with it’s strings cut, landing in a mangled heap on the floor. The cube fell to the ground, and Thanos plucked it deftly from the air. He smirked down at Tony, whose face was twisted with agony and dripping with sweat through the broken mask.

“What…did…you…and” He gasped through laboured breaths. “How…”

“Oh, you didn’t think I actually healed you did you?” Thanos taunted, “I’m afraid you were much too damaged from the little showdown at your Tower to be of much use to me. I simply told your mind there was nothing wrong with your body. It’s hardly my fault you then walked around and blasted through security walls, thereby endangering your condition quite drastically.”

“You…bastard…” Tony was clearly struggling to stay conscious as the waves of pain rolled over him.

“And now I’ve given you back the pain” Thanos told him indifferently, “along with my thanks. It would have been most inconvenient attempting to remove the Aether without raising the alarm of intergalactic authorities on my own. They don’t call you a genius for nothing do they?”

And then, with a parting sneer, the Titan turned and began opening a portal. “Well come along then” he called back, “I’m sure your patriotic friend is simply dying to see you.”

With a gasp that sounded more like a sob, Tony heaved his broken body across the floor and threw himself with any last remaining strength headfirst into the portal as it closed. He was already unconscious by the time he reached the other side.

This time, Harry did not speak for a full twenty three minutes, aside from cursing colourfully under his breath as he paced back and forth. Thor, wisely, kept silent.

As it hit twenty four minutes, Harry suddenly let out a wordless yell of frustration and punched the wall nearest to him. A slight glow encompassed his hand, and his fist never even made contact with the brick. The wall, however, that exploded into dust. Thor winced. Harry scowled.

“The Bifrost you use” He spoke suddenly, “could we use it to get to Thanos?”

Thor shook his head, “Heimdall could not find his location. We’d be hurtling into the void blind.”

“That’s a no then.”

“That’s assuming we even get to Heimdall. Odin would stop us the moment we set foot on Asgardian soil.”

Harry frowned, “remind me to have a word with your dad when this is all over. He could have prevented this long before Thanos even considered coming to Earth.”

Thor, God of Thunder, paled, “you want to…have a word with the Allfather. Yell at the Allfather…”
“Mood I’m in right now? Yelling would be the least of his worries”

Thor inwardly cringed at the steel in Harry’s voice. If and when such a meeting were to occur, he would definitely not be hiding on some long forgotten world the other side of the universe. Under a rock. Humming loudly.

“Is there any other way you guys can get around?” Harry’s voice jolted him back to the present, “some magic portal or secret door or…something”

Thor opened his mouth to voice the negative, then paused at the desperate look in Harry’s eyes. He cast his mind back, straining to think of anything that he might have missed, was there another way?

“There might be something” Thor said slowly, “but it’s…hopelessly unstable and dangerous, very dangerous.”

Harry paused in his frantic pacing. “I think we’ve moved dangerous long ago don’t you?” His voice was calm, carefully controlled, but his eyes were fixed on Thor’s with a desperate hope.

“We’ll need to get into Asgard.”

“I can keep us under the radar” Harry’s wand twirled about his fingers absentmindedly, “although that would be a hell of a lot easier if there was a way in that’s slightly more inconspicuous than a bloody rainbow bridge.”

“There are secret passageways between the worlds, I found one when Odin kept me from Midgard.” Thor declared, “that’s our best shot.”

“So we have a way in” Harry let out a breath, “what are we finding?”

“An object of great power, power we don’t yet fully understand.”

Harry looked at him questionably, not missing the way Thor’s hand tightened involuntarily on his hammer.

And this time, there was no humour in Thor’s voice;

“It’s called the tesseract.”

“Tony?!”

Captain America was not panicking. He did not feel his veins turn to ice the moment he saw Tony fall through a hole in the universe and fail to get up. And he certainly did not stumble blindly to the man’s side and fall to his knees with a ragged sob, lips mouthing Tony’s name but unable to force the words past his throat.

Beneath the battered ruin of his armour, Tony shivered, feeling a throbbing echo of the blinding pain he had felt searing through his body. It felt like the suit was the only thing holding him together.

“Goddamit Tony come on…just…just wake the fuck up you useless piece of shit…”

Steve. Steve was…crying? The idea was so absurd that Tony had to open his eyes and see for sure. Steve’s face came into focus above him, almost unrecognisable for the anguish twisting his features.
“Oh… thank god” It took a moment for Tony to form the words he wanted, “so you *can* swear just as profanely as the rest of us.”

Through his tears, Steve burst out laughing. “Tony you…” he shook his head, “you’re an utter idiot you know that?”

“Hey, you’re the one looking like someone just killed your puppy.” Tony winced as he tried to move, “I mean seriously, who died?”

Steve just looked at him, “you did.”

“I am 79% that’s not true” Tony paused, and then frowned, “or at least, 76%.”

Steve didn’t reply. He stretched out his hand and lightly touched the arc reactor in Tony’s chest.

Tony stilled underneath him, “it…” he swallowed, “it’s still functioning?”

“I don’t know” For the millionth time, Steve cursed his lack of modern knowledge, “it flickered back then for a moment and I-”

The words stuck in his throat. He felt Tony’s eyes on him.

“Jeez cap, I didn’t know you cared” Tony’s voice was light and teasing, but Steve had learned to tell when it was fake.

He looked Tony straight in the eye, realising with a jolt that his hand was still resting almost protectively on the arc reactor.

“Then you really are an idiot” Steve said quietly.

For a moment, Tony looked so confused that it made something ache inside Steve, an urge to do something to clear that expression that was so alien from his face. Then Tony blinked, and the expression vanished.

“Have you heard anything from the others?” Tony seemed to be making an effort to keep his words coherent.

Steve pretended not to notice, “no. I’m sure Thanos still has them somewhere, though, ready to use for leverage at a moments notice.”

His voice was bitter, and Tony’s eyes flickered with understanding. “There was nothing you could have done, Cap.”

“He used me to get to you, used me to get that stone or whatever the hell it was.” Steve’s voice was tense, “and now he’s only stronger because of it.”

“Would you rather I’d have let you die?” Tony challenged quietly. At Steve’s silence, his eyes flashed, “sure, okay, great idea. Now he only has Natasha, Clint and Bruce to use against me. That’s a great plan.”

Steve looked like he wanted to argue, but then realised he had absolutely nothing to say. Thanos had them right where he wanted them, and there was nothing they could do. Not unless it meant sacrificing everyone he cared about.

“We can’t let this happen” Steve said at last, “we can’t just…*sit here* and let him get away with this.”
Tony was silent for so long Steve thought maybe he had lost consciousness again. Then, almost hesitantly, he spoke.

“Steve…he already has gotten away with it. Defeating him back at Stark Tower when he wasn’t as strong was our only hope.”

And at that, Steve’s blue eyes flickered to the darkening sky.

“Not our only hope.”

The vaults were still and silent as two figures slipped in - as they should be. Harry had already branched his magical senses out and found no one, aside from the four guards they had taken out. The Asgardian warriors were currently snoring softly just inside the entrance.

Thor’s face was half in shadow as he nodded at Harry, “This way.”

Harry flanked him without question, green eyes bright in the darkness. They walked in silence, Thor’s red cape billowing out behind him, Harry’s lithe figure but a wraith in his wake. No alarm sounded, no army appeared to take them out, and soon enough they were approaching a grand looking door with hinges that leaked an unnatural blue light. At Thor’s nod, Harry stepped forward and performed a complex wand movement in silence. After a second or two, a shimmer passed through the door, and the wall before them morphed and faded away to reveal a second, smaller opening about three feet to the right. Had they tried the first door, they may have been met with something somewhat less pleasant. Thor raised his eyebrows, but didn’t comment.

The two passed through the door cautiously, eyes scanning the room for any sign of further tests or barriers. Then Harry’s eyes fell on the tesseract, and he stopped. He stared.

“Incredible” he breathed.

Thor glanced at it. He did not see any great difference to any of the previous times he had seen the strange cube. Harry, though, Harry was transfixed. He took a step forward, and closed his eyes as a wave of raw, unadulterated power swept over him. It was unlike anything he had ever felt. His magical senses were going haywire, sensing something ancient and very distinctly alive. The cube was all but humming with pleasure as it connected with Harry’s mind. At the contact, Harry gasped, stumbling back and slamming down his mental walls. The presence disappeared.

“Harry?”

His wide eyes turned to Thor, “That’s the tesseract?”

“It’s just a cube of energy.”

Harry shook his head, “no, no I can definitely sense something different there. It…” he tilted his head, “it almost feels…pleased, like it’s happy to see me or something.”

Thor looked uncomfortable, “it… has…. feelings.” He clarified slowly.

“Not so much as a feeling, more of a…presence almost, I don’t know” Harry ran a hand through his hair, “what did you say it did?”

“Originally we thought it was just an energy source, but then my brother used it to portal to Midgard
last year.” Thor paused, “I know not how he managed it, but the cube was then used to transport an entire army above New York. I am certain you could do the same.”

“Right” Harry squared his shoulders, “so…supercharged apparation. I can do that.”

He stepped forward, and the Tesseract flared blue. Harry swallowed, forcing himself to lower his mental barriers, and his hand brushed the outer rims of the light…

CRACK

Harry jerked his hand back, but the sound had not come from the cube in front of him. It had come from behind him. Thor’s face was slack with shock as he stared at whatever it was.

With a growing sense of foreboding, Harry turned around.

A great porthole-like door had appeared in the air, portal, his thoughts supplied. On the other side was darkness and a dry, dusty ground. A cold wind blasted through the opening. It was then, that a shadow of a figure appeared on the other side. Harry’s hand found his wand, feet taking a defensive position. Behind him, Thor began spinning his hammer, and the winds morphed into his own weapon.

The figure’s face was turned away, saying something to someone on the other side. He was still smirking as he stepped through the portal. He did not see the two already waiting for him. Harry raised his wand, a spell at his lips, then froze as the stranger laughed.

He knew that laugh.

There was a deafening thud from behind him as Thor dropped his hammer.

The light hit the figure’s face, and Harry could only stare as the stranger who was not, in fact, a stranger all, stepped through the portal and saw Harry at the exact time Harry saw him. The figure froze, his face one of utter shock, of complete and utter terror. Green eyes met green.

Loki’s eyes.

BAM

Harry felt like his entire world was crumbling before him as he stared at Loki, as he saw a great purple hand stretch through the portal and grip Loki’s shoulder to help pull himself through, as Loki closed his eyes as though he couldn’t bear to meet Harry’s a moment longer, as the Titan’s hand rested easily on the God’s shoulder with unmistakable familiarity, as Loki let him.

And then Thanos stepped fully through the portal to stand beside Loki, and all hell broke loose.

Chapter End Notes

I know, bombshells and cliffhangers, I'm horrible.
But fear not, next instalment up tomorrow, I promise!
L
Thanos was all but spitting with fury, “you would dare” he demanded, “you would dare presume to have the right to call authority over Death?”

Harry met his gaze evenly, and both Loki and Thor had to look away at the glimmer of Death still resounding in his eyes.

“I am the Master of Death.” He said simply, and his voice was hard, uncompromising:

“I have the ONLY right.”

Then Thanos snarled, and leapt for Harry.

“You think I’m a fool?” demanded Harry.

“No, I think you’re like James,” said Lupin, "who would have regarded it as the height of dishonor to mistrust his friends.”

— J.K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows

“You know, when you said you were willing to betray your friends, I didn’t literally think you meant you would deliver them to me on a silver platter” Thanos remarked blithely.

Harry’s heartbeat seemed to echo in his ears. He could do nothing but stare at Loki. The bastard wouldn’t even meet his gaze.

“An additional bonus, I assure you” Loki’s voice was smooth and unaffected, and Harry hated it, “I was unaware of this particular development.”

Thanos laughed shortly, “of that I have no doubt. Your body betrays you, God of lies. You were as taken aback as I was to find we had company.”

“How did you get in here?” Thor’s voice thundered from behind him, “the way is sealed to all but-”
“But the Asgardians, yes” Thanos smirked, turning to Thor, “but I have an Asgardian right here, do I not? Albeit only by adoption, but the wards around this place still recognise him as their own.”

His words were directed at Loki, but his red eyes were fixated on Harry. Harry met his gaze evenly, green eyes ablaze. This was the man who had taken from him everything he loved. This was the one thing standing in between him and the Avengers. Harry’s hand tightened around his wand.

“How are getting others to do your dirty work for you?” he said coolly, “I don’t know why I expected any less.”

Thanos opened his mouth, and then paused, narrowing his eyes at Harry. Beside Thanos, Loki almost seemed to shrink in his shadow, image blurring behind the Titan’s forceful presence.

“You are not afraid” Thanos said at last, rolling his tongue about the syllables like they were a foreign taste in his mouth. “I can taste your fury, your *betrayal*…” His eyes flickered to Loki, who flinched, “but you do not fear me” his scarlet eyes bored into Harry’s, “why?”

Harry cocked an eyebrow, “forgive me, but, well…” his eyes scanned Thanos up and down, “you’re not particularly frightening. Am I right, Thor?”

Silence.

“Thor?” Harry turned his head ever so slightly to see the God of Thunder staring at Thanos with wide eyes. It was almost like…no. No, Thor wouldn’t be scared of this purple grinch. But the God’s eyes were not looking at Harry, but staring at things Harry could not see. Frowning, Harry turned back around, and suddenly it wasn’t floor he was standing on but *bodies*, hundreds and hundreds of people lying still and bloody, their eyes blank and glazed.

Something yellow flared on Thanos’ wrist.

Then he saw Ron on the heap. Hermione. Ginny. Sirius. His parents. His kids. His *grandkids* oh *God*…

“*Expecto Patronum!*”

Harry didn’t know why the spell leapt to his lips. Maybe it was because the images reminded him so much of the Dementors back in his world, of the nightmares he used to fight off every night. But whatever the instinct was, it worked *marvellously*.

BAM

The Elder Wand blazed with light and Prongs leapt out of its tip, charging the image and shattering the illusion with a toss of its magnificent antlers. It swept past Thanos, sending him stumbling back, and then returned to Harry’s side, flanking him protectively.

A small sound made Harry’s gaze flick to Loki. It was barely an intake of breath, a hitch in his voice, but it seemed incredibly loud to Harry’s ears. Loki was staring at the patronus with a stunned realisation, as though he had found something precious, something thought lost to him. His mask of cool indifference had cracked, and this Loki looked utterly sickened.

“An interesting power you wield” Thanos’ voice tore Harry’s attention back to the Titan, whose eyes followed the Elder wand greedily, “I can sense Death’s hand on it.”

Harry raised an unimpressed eyebrow, letting the patronus fade, “And what would you know about Death’s work?”
“What would I…?” Thanos laughed, and the sound was cold, “I am Death’s chosen consort you pathetic excuse for an immortal, I possess the power of Life and Death itself! I—"

“Okay no” Harry interrupted frankly.

Thanos was so surprised to have been cut in mid-rant that he did actually shut up.

Harry glared at him, “first of all, Death doesn’t have a chosen consort. She’s Death, I mean seriously, have some respect. Secondly, power of Life and Death?” Harry twirled the Elder wand absently in his hand, “not all it’s cracked up to be. And third; you say you have a, what, sense of Death?"

For the first time, Harry smirked a little, “you don’t know half of it.”

And then Harry reached into the innermost part of himself that he barely ever touched, that was not his to use on a whim, that lay dormant and sleeping but unmistakably there. Harry lowered his mental barriers, and for the first time let every ounce of his true nature be shown. It rippled out like a wave of a radiant darkness, like a solid wall of ancient, terrible power.

Death had marked him as her own. And as Harry’s aura crashed over their minds like a storm, he made sure they goddamn knew it.

All three men stumbled back, eyes stunned as they beheld the power living inside this…boy. It was ashes to ashes and dust to dust and the last light of twilight and the final breath you took: it was inconceivably and irrevocably Death.

And it was a dark power, there was no denying it. But there was also a kind of beauty in it - a memory of everything that was, an ancient sentience keeping watch over the world, a familiar hand in the darkness.

Harry let the power simmer for a moment longer, then swept it in with a wave of his hand, shutting his mental barriers firmly down.

Silence. The air seemed utterly empty and hollow all of a sudden, like something was missing. Harry raised his gaze to meet Thanos’, a silent challenge.

Thanos was all but spitting with fury, “you would dare” he demanded, “you would dare presume to have the right to call authority over Death?”

Harry met his gaze evenly, and both Loki and Thor had to look away at the glimmer of Death still resounding in his eyes.

“I am the Master of Death.” He said simply, and his voice was hard, uncompromising. “I have the only right.”

Then Thanos snarled, and leapt for Harry.

Not Harry.

In the blur of chaos and confusion, that was the only coherent thought that pierced Loki’s mind. The roar in his ears subsided for the first time since stepping through that portal. Seeing Harry’s face, seeing the confused betrayal in his eyes, the momentary lapse of composure, the hurt…
Wrong - all of this was wrong. This wasn’t part of the plan. They weren’t supposed to be here when he opened the portal. Harry was not meant to find the Tesseract. Fuck that; they weren’t supposed to get within a hundred miles of Thanos.

“You know, when you said you were willing to betray your friends, I didn’t literally think you meant you would deliver them to me on a silver platter”

No not Harry, never Harry…

“An additional bonus, I assure you”

Loki heard his own voice speak as though from a great distance away. Outside was a mask of cold indifference, but inside he was slipping. He couldn’t think he couldn’t…

“EXPECTO PATRONUM”

Light, blinding light. Loki held a hand up to shield his eyes. In the depths of it, a silhouette of something with horns appeared out of Harry’s wand.

No.

Loki’s mouth fell open.

Not horns, antlers.

Lying in that god-forsaken room a lifetime ago, feeling his life bleed out into a test tube, seeing a light take form beside him, tear him free, radiating home and safe and light and life and hope when he had none… It had been him.

It had bloody been Harry all along.

Loki stared at the paronus, and felt the last wall of his resistance crumble down. A startling heat seared through his veins, electric and wild, power broiling in his blood to give way to-

-Loki took in a strangled breath...

Magic.

It sprung to his fingers like a caged animal, snarling and sizzling to protect what was his.

He began to pull around him the shrouds of illusion, waiting until Thanos was distracted to slip out of his body, or rather, the image of his body, and melt into the shadows. Hidden, he stared at Harry openly. The wizard was looking straight at the illusion-Loki, eyes tight and hard as though he could make the image look at him from the strength of his gaze. Thanos was speaking again, but Loki tuned out. His eyes flickered between Harry and the Tesseract.

“…like death?” Harry’s voice drew Loki’s attention, “you don’t know half of it.”

And then Harry changed. Dark power rippled out like curtains billowing in the night air, and an ancient, sleeping power stirred in their midst. Loki gaped, his own magical aura submitting immediately, instinctively, in recognition of a higher supernatural authority. For a moment, he could have sworn he saw Hela staring at him piercingly from behind Harry.

But he did not have time to wonder at when Harry would stop surprising him. With a flick of his
eyes, he made the illusion—Loki stumble back, and then used the distraction to move closer to the Tesseract. The cube flared, clearly recognising him…

“You would dare…” Thanos was speaking again, and Loki almost tripped in his haste. His hands hovered either side of the cube, and he began to weave his enchantments into it’s ethereal depths…

“…I have the only right.” Harry’s voice, ringing with conviction, strong and familiar and home…

A roar of fury. Thanos.

Loki’s head snapped up, and he took it all in at once, Harry standing firm and unyielding, Thor starting to move forward, a cry of warning upon his lips, and Thanos, huge and deadly, body contracting as he made to leap for Harry…

Not Harry.

Loki did not stop to think. He thought, move, and then he was standing in front of Harry. The illusion flickered and disappeared. Harry stared at him, eyes widening, hesitating as he had been about to cast a spell.

And then before anyone could react Loki stepped forward and brought one hand about Harry’s waist and one behind his neck and pulled him towards him with enough force Harry stumbled into him, and then Loki was bringing Harry’s face down to his and their lips crashed together and Loki was kissing him fiercely like there was no tomorrow, pouring out everything he couldn’t say against Harry’s lips. Harry froze. The world seemed to stop around them, and as their fates hung in the balance, waiting, spiralling…something shifted.

Then as quickly as it had happened it was over. Loki broke away and pressed something hard into Harry’s hand and put his lips to Harry’s ear.

“Don’t be a hero” he whispered fiercely, “it’s you he wants.”

Then suddenly he shoved Harry away from him with inhuman strength just as Thanos crashed into him, where Harry had just been. The two collided, and Loki slammed into the ground, head cracking against the stone. Later, Loki would remember Harry had yelled his name. On top of him, Thanos roared with fury. His head snapped up and scarlet eyes found Harry, stumbling to his feet across the room.

Thanos’ eyes widened. Thor yelled something. Loki lay still and unmoving under Thanos’ bulk, green eyes struggling to focus on Harry, who was now encased in a blinding blue light…

“No!” Thanos roared, and almost fell over himself trying to get to Harry, a gauntlet appearing on his wrist…

Harry glanced down. In his hand, the Tesseract shone like a beacon.

Loki.

His gaze flew up, and the last thing he saw was the three men staring at him slack-jawed, Thanos furious, Thor stunned and Loki with a sad smile on his lips, before the blue light exploded around him and Harry vanished.
An hour later, Thor was oddly silent as Thanos chained him down to the barren ground, his back pressed against his brother. Both were still breathing heavily. They had not gone quietly.

None the less, they did not speak until Thanos waved a hand and a red gem glowed on his wrist, encasing a shimmering scarlet prison over the two God’s. Without a backwards glance, the Titan strode away into the darkness, not even waiting to call some gloating remark. That in itself, showed how thrown he was by Harry’s appearance. Behind him, the red cage faded, but they both knew it still held strong.

Again, silence.

“Tell me…” Thor’s voice was hoarse, “tell me you knew what you were doing. Tell me this wasn’t you trying to take Thanos out from the inside. Tell me you weren’t that stupid-”

“I knew what I was doing” Loki snapped, “and it would have worked too, had you two not come stumbling in like idiots and ruined everything.”

“Ruined?!” Thor tried to shift round to look at him, but their hands were tied, “you shouldn’t have even been going it alone in the first place!”

“And who else would Thanos have even let close?” Loki demanded, “You - the golden boy of Asgard, steal the Tesseract? I think not.”

“You risked our world for this endeavour” Thor growled, “our people. You opened a door that never should have been opened…”

“Our people?” Loki interrupted snidely, “you are mistaken, brother. My people are rotting on a frozen wasteland, courtesy of yours truly.”

“Asgard is your home whether you like it or not” Thor said firmly, “and you risked a great deal today. What were you going to do when Thanos got the Tesseract, hmm? Flatter him to death? Give him another illusion?”

Loki all but snarled behind him, “do not make the mistake of underestimating me, dear brother. You may be the God of Thunder but I am the God of Lies; I had it under control.”

“Control?” Thor repeated, “is that why you gave Harry the Tesseract and transported him out of Thanos’ grasp? Why you took the blow meant for him so he could get away? You call that control?”

For the first time, Loki seemed to deflate slightly. Thor couldn’t see his face, but his voice was thick with an emotion he could not identify.

“I…I made an error in judgement” Loki’s voice was tight and strung out, as though it might snap.

“An error in judgement?” Thor was losing patience. His voice dripped with sarcasm, “god-forbid. What was this error?”

Loki went still against him, and he did not speak for so long Thor thought maybe he wasn't going to answer. Then-

“...I was ready to sacrifice anything, anyone, to take Thanos out. It was a perfect plan. It was the greatest deceit of all, and I had to see it done. I had to see him destroyed.” Loki’s voice broke a little, “but I didn’t anticipate you being there. I didn’t foresee that…that…” the words stuck in his throat.

Thor closed his eyes, “Harry” he finished quietly, “you didn’t foresee Harry.”
“I couldn’t let Thanos have him” Loki whispered, and the sound was so confused and lost Thor wanted to wrap his little brother tight in his arms and never let him go, “all that planning, and then one glimpse of the stag Harry conjured and it was all for nought. All I could think was not him; Hell, anyone but him.”

Thor stilled suddenly, hearing something he never thought he’d hear in his brother’s voice again, something he had feared Loki had lost forever.

“You…this isn’t a trick” he said slowly, “that…when you kissed him, I mean you knew Harry wouldn’t take the Tesseract by choice, and you had to distract him…but it wasn’t just a distraction, was it? It was something more. It meant something.”

Loki didn’t answer for a moment. Then, “I don’t see how it matters now anyway” he said flatly, “I doubt his most high purple-ness will let us live long enough to find out.”

Thor lapsed into silence. “Why didn’t you go with him?” He asked quietly, “you had a chance to, yet you didn’t take it.”

“Well someone had to stay behind and make sure you didn’t get yourself killed.” Loki said frankly, “I’d never hear the end of it if you did.”

Thor smiled slightly at his brother’s indifferent tone. In Loki-speech, that was practically a declaration of brotherly-love.

“You know, I never apologised for not realising sooner what was happening under SHIELD” Thor turned his head, “If it hadn’t been for Harry…”

Loki went quiet for a moment, “Harry told me you went after SHIELD after I escaped. Why?”

“Why?” Thor repeated, “because I was there the night you appeared in front of Harry looking like you’d been to Hell and back, I saw you. And if there’s one thing about being an Asgardian, it’s that we protect our own.”

“And revenge”

Thor looked at him blankly.

“We do revenge particularly well, if I recall.” A slight smirk was playing at Loki’s lips.

“Oh naturally.” Thor nodded.

“War.”

“Hmm.”

“Pride.”

“I’d have gone with honour myself…”

“An innate stupidity…” Loki mused.

“Now you’re just being mean.”

They sniggered, and for a moment it was like nothing had ever changed between them, and they were still the two boys who used to get into the worst sorts of trouble at the palace.
“Well, whatever happens” Thor leant back against Loki’s slight form, “I’m glad you’re here, brother. Here at the end of all things.”

After a slight hesitation, Loki leant back in turn against his bigger brother. “And I you…brother.”

The title sounded rough and awkward in Loki’s mouth, but Thor didn’t care. They both stared contemplatively at the endless night above them, lost in thought.

“What did you send him?” Thor asked curiously.

Loki didn’t have to ask to know who he meant. His green eyes turned to the stars, hands clinking against the chains.

“Somewhere safe” he answered quietly, “the safest place I know.”

It could have been seconds or years after Harry was sucked into the portal that he saw the world unfold out like a book before him and he was spat out of the void. All he had was one glimpse of a grand marble floor before he face-planted spectacularly. Harry groaned, and the Tesseract tumbled across the floor, blinking at him owlishly.

“Loki?” A woman’s voice, stunned and hopeful.

Harry raised his head, and his gaze met a pair of strangely familiar green eyes, eyes so clear and sharp they could cut you down just by looking at them. Eyes that were now narrowing at him. Before he could even blink, Harry felt a wave of force slam into him and he flew backwards, his back hitting the wall.

He groaned; first a Titan, now an angry witch. *His day just kept getting better and better.*

The woman had her hand raised, a calm, cold expression on her face. Harry noted she was wearing almost medieval clothes, great swathes of cloth and tapestry that gave her the appearance and demeanour of a queen. Around him, the room was large and grand, Norse-like in it’s architecture.

*Where the Gods had Loki sent him?*

“Who are you?” Medieval-bitch-queen demanded coolly, “how did you get here?”

“Forgive me,” Harry answered, “but that might be somewhat easier to answer if I knew where here was.”

The woman’s mouth tightened, and she raised her hand again, but this time Harry was faster. With a flick of his left wrist, he deflected her emerald spell and countered with his right, transfiguring the drapes about the grand four poster bed behind her to surge forward and wrap around her, snakelike, to then transfigure once again to small golden chains that bolted her to the marble floor. All this happened in less time than it took her to step forward. She tugged at the flimsy looking restraints, but they glowed a brilliant gold and held firm. She glared at him.

“Well met magician” she said, her voice regal and icy even as she stood chained to the ground.

Harry stilled. “What did you say?”

The woman looked confused, but Harry’s mind was in another time, seeing a delighted smirk, sharp, angular features and even sharper green eyes, framed with aristocratic eyebrows and long black
Those words…

The man laughed, “Well met, magician.”

“Who are you?” Harry’s voice was hard and unyielding.

“A friend.”

“Hmm, no. Try again.”

“Tut tut. So distrusting!”

Well met magician. The first words Loki had ever said to him.

Harry’s eyes flew to the woman, seeing the aristocratic tilt to her chin, the sharpness in her green eyes, the subtle currents of wordplay she dipped into, the emerald tint to her spells, the way she held herself, aloof but not quite arrogant, regal and cool and understatedly dangerous.

Harry didn’t know why he hadn’t seen it straight away.

He met her gaze evenly, “I’m here because your son saved my life” he said simply. With a wave of his hand, the chains disappeared. The woman had gone very still at the mention of Loki, and Harry knew he had guessed right at her relation to him.

Harry smiled slightly, holding out a hand, “My name is Harry Potter. And now I’m going to need your help to save his.”

Frigga could only listen with growing astonishment as the boy explained the events of the past few days. He talked quickly and simply, leaving no room for embellishment, spinning a tale of battles and betrayal just as one might comment on the weather.

“You were in the vaults?” She interrupted incredulously, “how? Why?”

“Thor got us through.”

Frigga closed her eyes and sighed like she was trying particularly hard not to throw something, “of course he did.”

“So when Loki appeared with Thanos-”

“You didn’t mention he was with the Titan.”

And so the story continued, until Harry got to the part where Loki appeared out of thin air, kissed the living daylights out of him, shoved the pre-spelled-Tesseract into his hand and then got flattened by Thanos whilst Harry was whisked away. Harry opened his mouth, but found the words stuck in his throat. He swallowed, eyes burning. He did not realise he was crying until he saw Frigga looking at him with a painful understanding in her eyes.

“My son must have known what he was doing” she said at last. Her eyes flickered to him, and the look she gave him was almost perplexed, “and he must have cared about you a great deal.”
“Don’t talk about him like he’s dead” Harry couldn’t help but snap, “I’m going to fix this. I’m going to save them.”

“At what cost?” she replied evenly, “getting yourself killed in some pointless endeavour would only be an insult to his memory.”

“Don’t you care?” Harry demanded, “don’t you want them safe?”

Frigga’s eyes flashed with anger, “I want you to pull yourself together and think, Harry Potter. I want my sons back more than anything, more than my own life. But Loki chose this. He chose you.” Her voice broke a little, “And I want you to make sure my son’s sacrifice was not for nothing.”

Harry was silent for a moment, “I’m sorry” he said at last, “I shouldn’t have-”

“He would have said the same” Frigga looked at him quietly, “You are the fire to his ice, I see that now. You are alike in that respect.”

Harry sighed, “what should I do?”

“Whatever you deem to be right, naturally” she said, annoyingly vague, “though I would suggest you would not be so quick to discard the thing that saved you in the first place.”

“The Tesseract?”

“That is what the Midgardians call it.”

Harry summoned it with a wave of his hand. It hummed contentedly in his palm. “And you?”

“It is one of six” she replied, “you know, I think, of what I speak.”

Harry blinked, “it’s an infinity stone?”

“And here I was thinking my son had chosen someone intelligent,” she said wryly, “yes, it is, rather unimaginatively named, the ‘space gem’ in your tongue. It is an object of great and terrible power.”

Harry turned it over in his hand, “it doesn’t look so terrible.”

“The ‘Tesseract’ is just a shell, the real stone is contained inside.” She eyed it warily, “Were it not, it is unlikely you would be able to wield it without succumbing to it’s power.”

Harry raised an eyebrow, but didn’t question her on it.

“So this is what Thanos was after?” He clarified.

“Undoubtedly.”

Harry nodded, “then I know what to do.”

Frigga looked at him questionably, and Harry smirked.

“We’re going to give Thanos exactly what he wants.”

That night saw the two scheming over the fire, heads drawn together in intense conversation. Unfortunately, as much as she tried to hate him (the boy had gotten her sons captured after all), Frigga found herself warming to Harry. A quiet strength seem to hang about him, a power she
suspected he was keeping under wraps, and his manner was calm and unflinching. His remarks were quick and cutting, softened by the small smirk that told you he was teasing. He had a certain charm about him, made only more endearing by the fact he was utterly unaware of it. Unlike Loki, who used every weapon in his arsenal, including his looks and charm, for his own ends.

Harry was a paradigm. And more and more, Frigga began to see what her son had seen in him.

So when it came to the moment to say goodbye, she was strangely reluctant.

“Don’t antagonise him” she warned, for what felt like the tenth time, “Thanos is unstable enough on a good day, and you don’t want to rile him up.”

“Me? Antagonise?” Harry gave her a crooked smile, “honestly, your majesty. It’s like you don’t know me at all.”

Her mouth twitched, “here, take this” in her hand was a blade about as long as his forearm with a simply leather hilt, entwined with some sort of green metal that resembled Loki’s armour, the silver carved with runic engravings.

Harry raised an eyebrow, “I don’t think-”

“First rule of Asgard” she interrupted, eyes glinting, “never question a seer.”

Harry paused. Then, almost hesitantly, he took the blade. It fitted easily into his hand, and the edge of the blade almost seemed to glow.

“It’s Loki’s” she told him, “he would want you to have it.”

Harry inclined his head, “then it’s only right I should return it to him, don’t you think?”

She smiled, “quite.” Then she took a step towards him and, to his surprise, took his face in both her hands in a way that was oddly motherly. “Remember: trust your instincts, and do not hesitate” her voice rang with conviction, “you were sent here for a reason Harry Potter. You cannot fail.”

Harry did not flinch from her gaze, “thank you. You have done me a great service.”

“One more thing” And this time her eyes were distant as though she was seeing something else. “Wait a minute or so after I leave. It is imperative you make this meeting.”

Harry frowned, “Meeting with who?”

But Frigga was already gone, the ghost of her lips upon his forehead lingering like a blessing. Harry signed resignedly. Bloody seers. He was just considering how long he could get away with saying was a minute when a voice spoke up from behind him.

“Oh Merlin, is that really what my hair looks like from the back?”

Harry froze.

\[\text{Soundtrack suggestion - (right click, new tab)}\]

It was him. Or at least, nearly him. The hair was a little longer and curlier, and he could have sworn this version of him was taller, but it was still unmistakably him.
Harry stared, “You’re…”

“You” The other-Harry grinned, “or rather, me. The better looking half anyway.”

“You look… different.”

“Yeah well, reincarnation’s a bitch.”

"You're... taller."

Other-him smirked, "I take the precaution of a good coat and a small friend"

Harry blinked, “I’m not even going to try and work out what that means.”

The not-Harry shrugged, “come on, aren't you in the least bit curious why I'm here?”

"I think I'm more preoccupied with the bright blue police box behind you actually" Harry tilted his head, certain that it hadn't been there when he looked last.

"Okay look ignore the police box” his double exclaimed, exasperated, "I have come to bestow my epic words of wisdom and you're making it incredibly difficult to stay focussed."

“Surely that’s kind of cheating” Harry remarked, tugging his gaze with some effort from the police box, “I mean, being from the future and all, messing with the space-time-continuum…”

“You mean that crap Dumbledore sprouted in third year?” Other-Harry waved his hand dismissively, “People assume that time is a strict progression of cause to effect, but, as a wise man once said - it's more like a big ball of wibbly wobbly... time-y wimey... stuff."

Harry blinked, "do I know this man?"

He thought he would remember someone who used the word 'timey-wimey' in an actual sentence.

Future him smirked as though Harry had said something funny, "you will."

*Great, more riddles.*

"Anyway, getting off the point" his double sobered, “you can’t win, not like this.”

“That’s good to know.”

“You don’t think I’m serious?”

“Well you’re not exactly filling me with confidence.”

Future-Harry huffed, “Thanos is a fanatic. He won’t just take the space gem, he wants *all* of them, and he won’t rest until he does.”

“Well, that’s great, only we have no clue where the others are. They’re lost, remember?”

And then, other-Harry smirked.

Harry groaned, “I know that look. What have you done?”

“You mean what have *you* done. I’m you, remember?”

“I’m starting to wish I didn’t” Harry muttered.
His double ignored him. “I took the liberty of…borrowing some things in your name.”

“By 'borrow', I take it you’re not referring to a library book.”

The other-Harry rolled his eyes, then tossed something small and amber casually towards him. Harry didn’t even blink, stretching out a hand to pluck it from the air with the deft agility of a seeker. Then he froze, every muscle going rigid. His hand went cold and then hot, scalding and blinding and power, holy fuck so much raw power coursing through him, he could see everything, every star in the sky, when it was born, when it would die, hundreds of lifespans in the blink of an eye, he saw entire civilisations rise and fall, worlds spinning and stopping, fast-forward and rewind, pause and play, the entirety of time in the palm of his hand...

**Thud.**

Harry dropped the small round thing, and it clattered to the floor. He stared at the amber gem, breathing heavily, eyes a little frantic.

*Time gem.*

Gasping, Harry pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes and simply told himself to breathe, *come on Harry, don’t freak out.*

Across from him, other-Harry watched him calmly, unsurprised. “Are you finished?”

“Am I...” Harry growled, “what the hell were you thinking? *Oh here, catch, it’s only an infinity stone.* It’s only limitless power. It’s only the kind of exposure that would have killed a normal man.”

“But we’re not normal,” other-Harry said simply, “are we?”

Harry glared at him, “this was to prove a point, wasn’t it?”

“Obviously.”

Harry was silent for a moment. Then, very slowly, he bent down and picked the amber gem carefully from the ground. It was opal-sized, about the size of his hand. It felt heavy and warm in his palm, humming with some unknown energy. The entire stone seemed to literally buzz, and it took a visible effort for Harry not to get sucked into the visions once more.

“How?” he managed.

His future self did not have to ask what he meant. “I don’t know” he said honestly, “I have theories, but...we’re not like anyone or thing else in this universe. We’re immortal, but we can die. But we can’t really die, because we get reborn. We’re a wizard, and a bloody good one, but we’re still human, with all the weaknesses that entails. We can’t be classified, so I honestly cannot say what it is that makes us different.”

“We can withstand holding any of the stones?” Harry clarified, eyes still fixed on the gem.

“In theory.” There was an edge to the other-Harry’s voice that he did not like.

“In theory?” he repeated slowly.

A sad sort of smile crossed the other’s face, “now that *would* be cheating.”

Harry huffed, “how did you even get hold of this anyway?”
“Right” future-him brightened, “that’s important. After all this is over, you need get yourself back to the year 1372 in Earth years to a place now called Knowhere. Steal the gem, do it fast, and look like yourself, that’s imperative.”

"Mind giving me a 'how' in any of that?"

"Remember that sexy police box I told you not to think about? She'll give you a lift."

Harry stared at him, “…I’m still waiting for the part where this all makes sense.”

Future-Harry rolled his eyes, “as for the Soul gem, well, our ancestors had that one covered long ago.”

“Huh?” Harry said brilliantly.

“Can you honestly not guess?”

Harry just stared at him for a moment or two. Then, his gaze shifted.

“No way.”

“Yep”

“You’re kidding.”

“See for yourself.”

With a expression of disbelief, Harry made a quick gesture with his wrist, and the Hallows appeared in the air before him. He ignored the cloak and the wand. His eyes fixed on the Resurrection Stone.

“If you’re fucking messing with me…” he warned.

Other-Harry gave him a look, then plucked the Elder wand from the air and muttered something under his breath. The Resurrection Stone cracked in the middle, and a brilliant green light shone through the crevices.

“I don’t believe it” Harry whispered, “all this time. This whole time it was in the Wizarding world?”

“Kept safe a universe away from people like Thanos” other-Harry said quietly, “it’s the stone with the closest affinity to Death. She couldn’t risk it falling into his hands.”

“And now we’re going to hand it straight to him” Harry said a little hoarsely. He passed a hand across his eyes, “is this…” he swallowed, looking at his double, “You’re from the future. You’ve done all of this already. Is this the right thing to do? Will this work?”

Other-Harry just looked at him for a long moment, and Harry thought he saw something achingly sad in his green eyes. Then, his mirror image smiled slightly, and whispered a single word.

“Spoilers.”

Harry blinked, and when he looked again the other Harry was gone. He released a breath he hadn’t realised he had been holding. Running a hand agitatedly through his hair, Harry stared at the three stones in front of him.

Time. Soul. Space.
Thanos had Power. Mind. Reality.

Three verses three.

Thanos was a Titan, the Titan. Strength, speed, agility, power, invulnerability...all playing to his advantage.

Harry was the Master of Death. Armed only with the Hallows, a magical powerhouse and a blade.

In the end, it was always going to be just them. That was why Death had brought him here - because he was the only one who even stood a chance. Flicking his wrist, Harry summoned the stones and they hovered above his hand, thrumming with an ancient and terrible power. The Hallows flanked him, their presence comforting and familiar.

Thanos had sent out a challenge. And now, it was Harry’s turn to answer it. Across all of time and space, the planes of reality shuddered for a moment, shifting and turning to the solitary light in the darkness. The planets aligned, the realms brushed against each other, veins of the universe’s energy raced between the worlds in anticipation. The stars were converging: it was time.

On a dark, forgotten world, the Avengers lay exhausted and broken, propping each other up with whatever strength they had left, gazes upturned with a reckless, foolish hope to the sky.

This was it now, no more running, no more searching. Just him, and Thanos. Harry looked up, and sent his answering challenge shooting out among the stars. His eyes glowed.

*Game on.*

Chapter End Notes

*drumroll* Yes, our next chapter will indeed be the much anticipated confrontation. Be prepared to buckle up ;}


Chapter Summary

“Because there is no one coming to save you.”

And from the depths of the smoke, walking through the flames that could not touch him, a dark, hooded figure stepped out. Harry pulled back the hood of his dragon-hide armour, and his green eyes pierced Thanos more sharply than a blade ever could. He looked dark, and dangerous, and seriously pissed.

“I’m sorry”, Harry said coolly, “you were saying?”

Chapter Notes

Huge apologies, I know it's been too long! I won't say much so you can get right along and read, but thanks again for all your supportive feedback and comments, it makes one writer very happy :) As always, let me know what you think.

Happy reading!

PS quick note: I’d highly recommend listening to some of the Deathly Hallows soundtrack whilst you read, just to give it some extra oomph with the atmosphere. In particular the Courtyard Apocalypse from part 2. That track just gives me shivers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

_Demons run when a good man goes to war_

_Night will fall and drown the sun_

_When a good man goes to war_

_Friendship dies and true love lies_

_Night will fall and the dark will rise_

_When a good man goes to war_

_Demons run, but count the cost_

_The battle's won, but the child is lost”_

― Steven Moffat

_Soundtrack suggestion: the Battle of Hogwarts_ - (remember to right click and open a new tab)
Darkness had fallen over the deep. Great cavalries of mist and ice were billowing overhead, giving the planet the appearance of a withering corpse. On the ground, it was cold and desolate, silent but for the nervous clicking of the Chituari. Hundreds of thousands in number, yet struck mute in mindless terror of the oncoming presence. It crashed upon their minds like the oncoming storm, like wave upon wave of otherworldly, terrible power.

Out of the mist, a ghostly figure began to emerge. His silhouette was a wraith in the gloom, moving soundless and unseen, a dark cloak shrouding him from sight. His face was hooded, but two cat-like green eyes blazed out from the shadows. The wind howled, and Harry raised his head, his cloak rippling out behind him. Chituari ranks stretched out before him, as far as the eye could see. They could sense something wasn’t right, that something walked among them that was not quite mortal. Harry narrowed his eyes. With a calculating nod, he slowly and deliberately lowered the barriers around his mind. Their nervous shifting now turned into a blind terror. The creatures shrunk back, hissing, falling over each other in a scramble to escape that burning touch of a foreign presence in their minds, made all the more poignant by the stones he carried. The faint, icy tang of death that had caused such unease earlier now swamped them mercilessly, entwining with the Soul Stone to hit each of them exactly where it hurt, it’s touch clinging to the creatures like leeches. Chaos reigned, ranks broke, and the Chituari cowered from this…this God walking among them.

A flash of Harry’s eyes, and the illusion spell settled about him like a cloak. Without another glance at the panicked mess of an army, he strode straight into their ranks and they parted with muted cries, too far gone into the reaches of their own minds to notice the lithe figure slip through. Harry ignored them. His gaze fixed on the rocky outcrop looming ahead of him, where his eyes assured him was nothing by rock. The Space Gem hidden in the fold of his robe told him otherwise. Layers and layers of enchantment hung about the outcrop like a twisted veil, a web of wards telling of trapping and binding. Harry didn’t even need to think the spell, his eyes glowed green and his vision bloomed in front of him like the sun had come up, the wards falling away from his eyes.

There they were; seven hunched figures chained to the ground on the rocky outpost, oblivious to their fellow prisoners sat not three feet away from them. The Avengers. Loki was there too, dark head bowed, his figure slumped against Thor’s.

They were alive.

For a moment Harry’s breath caught and his vision wavered in the sudden wave of relief that was as startling as it was overwhelming. He wasn’t too late. They were alive.

Suddenly unable to restrain himself, Harry apparated the last stretch so he now stood at the rock’s peak, his figure hidden in shadow. He stilled at the sight before him. Up close, the Avengers looked utterly spent. Old wounds merged with new ones, the blood still wet on their skin. Their faces were drawn and exhausted, and their eyes were hollow and empty. They looked…broken. Fury blazed through him, volatile and startling in its intensity. His throat seemed almost to choke on it. His magic flared, and he fought to keep it under control. It would not do to give himself away just yet.

Across the clearing, voices drifted towards him.

“…and yet you were still foolish as to defy me. Did you not learn?” It was a voice he instantly recognised. A voice of grating, rumbling resonance, a voice that spoke of thunder and discord. “Do you remember how it felt, Laufeyson? Do you remember how I made you bleed?”

“As fond as the recollections are, is there a point to all this?” A second voice drawled. Loki. “Or are you just going to keep rambling on about your unhealthy relationship with pain?”
SMACK. The rock beneath him shook, and Harry heard someone bit back a gasp of pain.

“I’d be careful how I used that Silver-tongue of yours, Trickster. Interrupt me again and I’ll cut it off.”

Loki didn’t even have the chance to reply, as Thanos (for it was undoubtably Thanos) was speaking again, “now; where did you send him?”

“Him?”

Another smack. Harry bit back a growl and made to start forward, but the sound of his name made him halt.

“The boy. Harry. Where did you send him?”

Harry shifted slightly and his gaze fell upon Loki kneeling on the ground at the feet of the Titan. Blood was smeared across his face, and he held himself oddly, as though it caused him too much pain to hold himself upright. In spite of it all, though, Loki smirked.

“Far beyond your reach.”

This time Thanos grabbed him by the throat and lifted him clean into the air. His purple face was twisted with malice.

“Enough of your words” he snarled, “ENOUGH OF THIS. I am THANOS, I am the last Titan, and I will not be made a mockery of!”

He threw Loki to the ground and slammed his fist into the air. A shudder of force cascaded out, and the wards keeping the Avengers trapped suddenly yanked on them like a leash. With another tug of his hand, and a scarlet gleam on his wrist, they were all flung across the ground and piled together so they all lay in a heap. The team scrambled to their feet, faces tight with pain, barely standing. Thanos laughed at them. It was the sound of a madman.

“How the realms feared you!” He sneered, “how your stories were whispered reverently across the worlds. You are NOTHING. You were no match for me then, and you are no match for me now. I have won, do you understand?” His voice was rising with a frantic kind of fervour, “Those who said I was unworthy, I was weak. Those who doubted I could do it. They who EXILED ME.”

Extending his forearm, the Titan levelled his gaze along his wrist, which had begun to glow with a blinding purple light. His breathing came heavily, and his eyes were burning scarlet. “Let them see what I had become. Let them feel my power raze the universe to ashes. Let them BURN as I burned. You” he spat, looking at the Avengers with disgust, “You are powerless. You are alone. You are NOTHING. Let you serve as an example.”

The Power stone flared a violent purple. Thanos eyes flashed with a wild glee.

“Because there is no one coming to save you.”

The purple beam shot forward, a deadly ray of the universe’s energy, a bolt to crack planets in half and incinerate galaxies in one hit. Time seemed to slow down. The Avengers looked not at their death hurtling towards them, but at each other. In their eyes they saw the same terrified acceptance that they knew was reflected in their own. Without a sound, they closed their eyes and their hands found each other’s. On the edge of the circle, Natasha reached out and grasped Loki’s hand. And just like that, the group held onto one another and braced themselves for the death they knew was coming.
Or at least, *would* have come, had something not gotten in the way first.

Out of the darkness, the piercing cry of a phoenix swept over them like a call to arms, and there was a flash of scarlet and gold above their heads. Then with a shimmering CRACK, a great shield of golden flame erupted in the air between them and Thanos. There was a blinding flash. The violet beam glowed blisteringly hot, and with a shudder that shook the ground, it dissolved into ash upon the shield. The fire flared. The silhouette of the phoenix could be seen just behind it.

The Avengers gaped in wonder. Thanos snarled with astonished fury.

And from the depths of the smoke, wings shifting into a much more familiar form, walking through the flames that could not touch him, a dark, hooded figure stepped out. Harry pulled back the hood of his dragon-hide armour, and his green eyes pierced Thanos more sharply than a blade ever could. He looked dark, and dangerous, and *seriously* pissed.

“I’m sorry”, Harry said coolly, “you were saying?”

Had this been your average story, this would have been the moment the two engaged in a deadly battle of wits, the hero delivering noble lines laid with subtle sark, and Thanos launching into an epic, predictable monologue of his extensive diabolical plans.

Of course, Harry Potter was not your average hero. He’d fought enough ‘evil overlords’ and ‘great masterminds’ over the centuries to know the inevitable outburst of evil-world-domination when he saw it. And quite frankly, Harry was done listening to their stereotypical crap.

So the moment Thanos opened his mouth, he waved his hand and cast a wandless lip-locker curse on the Titan. Thanos stilled. Silence. Harry was twirling his wand over his fingers casually, unaware of the *oh-fuck-what-is-he-doing-he-did-not-just* running through everyone’s heads.

“Sorry to cut you off there,” Harry said placidly, “the whole hero/villain scripted exchange? Been there, done that. Not a fan.”

Thanos seemed to be…*vibrating*?

“I mean, we hate each other enough, why spend any longer hurling witty lines at each other and prolonging the inevitable when we could be just getting on with it and blowing each other up?” Harry continued.

Thanos’ face now seemed to be adopted a new shade of purple. Murder burned in his scarlet eyes. Harry realised they had begun to circle one another, gazes locked, completely on guard should the other make any sudden movement.

“My thoughts exactly” Harry nodded, “so, to cut straight to the chase. You took something of mine. I’d like them back.”

Thanos’ gaze flickered to the Avengers, trapped and helpless and utterly at his mercy, who were still gaping openly at Harry like he had sprouted another head.

“In return, I believe I have something much more valuable to you.” And Harry flicked back the folds of his robe to reveal three blazing stones set about his waist like the three stars of Orion’s belt. “What say you?”
A glint of Harry’s eyes, and the lip-locking curse cancelled. Thanos inhaled sharply. A chorus of voices erupted from the Avengers.

“Harry don’t!”

“Harry, what the hell?!” That was Tony.

“Harry-”

“SILENCE” Thanos roared, and he sent a poorly-aimed blast from the Power gem in their direction. It missed, but they scattered, flying away and landed harshly onto the hard, unforgiving ground.


A voice like an oncoming storm thundered into everyone’s heads. The winds whipped Harry’s cloak into a void of blackness behind him. His face was contorted with rage. And in that moment, he was not the golden-boy of the past, the wizard saviour; this was a creature of nightmare.

“Or what?” Thanos cocked his head, “you think I need the infinity stones to beat you?”

“I think you need all the infinity stones to even stand a chance” Harry said coolly. “So I warn you now, though you don’t deserve any such courtesy, that should you choose to go against me, I will not do you the mercy of killing you.” And Harry’s eyes burned, “I’ll fucking tear you to pieces.”

And that was the cue he needed. With a snarl, Thanos attacked, twisting his arm and warping the air with blinding violet explosions that shot towards Harry like lightning. This wasn’t a calculated attack, this was just pure, unthinking rage. Without blinking, Harry sidestepped the blasts and sent an array of explosive spells back in kind with nothing more than a flash of his eyes. An ear-splitting BOOM thundered out as the spells collided. Heat blasted into the sky. The Avengers were thrown back from the shockwave, ears ringing. Thanos only took a step back. His nostrils flared with surprise.

The flurry of attacks from the Power gem now quickened, and Harry found himself on the defence. Violet streaks invaded him from all sides. Thanos was throwing himself into the attack with total abandon, not knowing nor caring for aim or strategy, just hurling blunt power at him. It would have been enough to kill any lesser man.

Harry simply took it all in in a glance, then span on the spot and let an amber power flood into his palms. He leapt just as the Power attacks hit. Midair, he opened his palms, and the light exploded outwards.

The world froze. It was as though Harry had hit the pause button. Everything just…stopped.

The Time gem flared on his belt.

Harry landed with a soft thud, robes falling about him. In the air, the violet attacks trembled, as though straining to break through the time barrier. The air seemed to be fragmenting around them. He narrowed his eyes. This time it was the Elder Wand that jumped into Harry’s hand. He knew he didn’t have long. He doubted he could just deflect blasts from the most powerful gem in the universe.

No, he thought suddenly, not stop, change. McGonagall’s words echoed in his head from a lifetime ago…the closer the transfiguration, the better the results… Right. Keep it simple. What’s similar to a nuclear-power-level-bolt-of-energy? Harry’s eyes glowed. The Elder Wand sang as it whistled through the air with the wordless transfiguration. The stones at his belt flooded power into the spell. Around him, the attacks from the Power gem glowed a blinding white, and with a smell like burning
rubber, they transformed.

When time started again, though no one else had been aware it had stopped in the first place, everyone found themselves staring absurdly up the fireworks lighting up the sky above their heads. A golden ‘W’ constructed of exploding stars shone where the violet attacks had been. Harry smiled fondly, saluted the ‘W’, then promptly hurled another wave of deadly spells at the Titan.

Every attack made by the Titan was countered. When he thrust the gauntlet to the darkening sky and the Aether swarmed out, stretching out tendrils of blood-red to taste the air, Harry simply touched the Space gem at his belt and a portal opened up, sucking the scarlet into a void of nothingness. The Power stone blasts were continually cast aside using the Time stone. And when Thanos attempted using the Mind stone to get into Harry’s head... well. After living with a horcrux in your head for the best part of seventeen years, sharing your thoughts with the darkest wizard of the time, let’s just say Harry didn’t take too well to the Titan attempting it. His mental defences reared up, striking back at Thanos like a red-hot knife. The Titan had fallen back, screaming in pain.

Thanos had not tried that particular trick again.

After what felt like centuries later, though it could have only been minutes, Thanos fell to his knees with a cry of fury. Harry paused to wipe the sweat from his brow, breathing heavily. Between them, the smoke began to clear and he could see the destruction of their fight carved into the ground.

“Don’t you see?” Harry exclaimed into the silence, “the stones cannot truly beat one another. They are brothers - you can’t just set three against three and expect to win.”

Thanos snapped his head up. His eyes were cold. “You knew.”

“Of course I fucking knew” Harry nonchalantly brushed the ash off his robe, “did you not get the ‘Master of Death’ thing the first time?”

Thanos spat on the ground.

“So, now that you’ve gotten your head out of your arse, I’m going to say this again. Release the Avengers, and you can have the stones.”

“Harry” this time it was just Loki who spoke, and that was the hardest to ignore. “Harry you can’t.”

But ignore it Harry did. “What say you?”

The Titan’s lip curled. Then, with a vague wave of his hand, the invisible barriers chaining the Avengers fell away, and a red glow returned to Thanos’ gauntlet. Harry’s eyes found Loki’s. The God looked simultaneously furious and terrified for him.

“Take them, they’re too broken to be of much use anymore anyway” Thanos said dismissively.

Harry didn’t wait for him to change his mind. His friends were much too vulnerable where they were, still within arms reach of the Titan. In the blink of an eye, he sent a blinding orb of blue light shooting over to them, and an instant later the team appeared behind him. The Space Gem hummed at his waist.

Harry looked at the people he loved, and they looked at him, and suddenly he had absolutely no idea what to say to them. That he was terrified he would be late. That the guilt he hadn’t been there sooner was choking him. That he had no idea what he would have done had they not been alive when he found them. That he couldn’t bear to lose anyone else. Harry thought of all this, but the only thing that came out was -
“Are you alright?” His voice was strangely hoarse.

Natasha looked at him. Then she stepped forward and flung her arms around him. “You idiot” she whispered against him, “you fucking idiot, Harry.”

Harry could feel her trembling, whether from fear or exhaustion he didn’t know. He held her tightly.

“We’re fine, you clotpole” Tony said dryly over her shoulder, though he looked about ready to pass out, “it’s you we need to worry about.”

Harry smiled, but it didn’t quite meet his eyes, “not we. I need to finish this alone.”

Natasha pulled back and glared at him. “Bullshit.”

“You’ve been through enough-”

“And you haven’t?” That was Steve.

“You’re in pain, you’re barely keeping on your feet and you can barely focus you’re so exhausted” Harry pointed out, “I can hardly ask any more of you.”

As he spoke, he sent a wave of healing magic across the team. They gasped, eyes falling half shut in relief as the agonising pain they had been under suddenly eased, soothed over by the balm of Harry’s familiar magic.

“I failed you last time” Harry’s voice was firm, “I’m not losing you again.”

“You can’t stop us.” Natasha said defiantly.

Harry smiled sadly, “actually I can”

Tony shook his head, “Harry don’t-”

His green eyes flashed. A golden shield erupted between them, keeping them apart. Loki, who had been strangely silent throughout the exchange, only stared piercingly at him.

“HARRY!” Tony’s yell was heart-breaking, but Harry’s couldn’t break away from Loki’s smouldering gaze. Loki didn't need to cry Harry’s name - it was all written in his eyes.

Swallowing, Harry forced himself to turn away. He was never watching anyone die for him ever again. He did not see the image of Loki flicker slightly, as though the Loki standing on the other side of the shield was not quite there.

His gaze met Thanos’.

“The stones” he demanded.

Harry flicked his wrist, and the stones came away from his waist to hover in the air in front of him.

“If I give you these, you must give your word no harm will come to the Avengers.” His voice was quiet, dangerous.

Thanos bowed, albeit mockingly, “my word.”

Another movement of Harry’s wrist, and the three infinity stones, green, blue and amber, shot across the air towards the Titan. He raised a purple hand, and they stopped just before hitting him. Thanos’
red eyes seemed to glow with a feverish desire. Raising his purple wrist, the stones flared, then slotted into the gauntlet like magnets. The air trembled and seemed to CRACK, as though the laws of the universe had suddenly shifted. Stars everywhere flickered. Time stuttered. Far away, Odin fell to the ground. The gauntlet exploded into blinding white light.

Thanos’ smile was terrible to behold.

“At last” he whispered.

\[\text{Harry couldn’t win.}\]

It was impossible - it defied every lore ever written about the stones. They and the universe were one and the same. Limitless power…

And Harry had just given them up. Given in a heartbeat to save his precious friends. Loki wanted to kill something in that moment. Bloody hero. Bloody fucking Harry Potter for making him care and then casting himself so casually aside as though his own life didn’t matter at all. As though he hadn’t become Loki’s entire life the past few days.

And yet.

Loki watched him fight from the shadows, watched him start to counter the Titan’s world-breaking power with equally earth-shattering magic. It was impossible.

But was Harry…

Winning?

This time Harry was the one to attack first, and he set the world on fire. His demeanour was calm and unhesitant, his spells cast with a cold, ruthless fury. The time for stunning and disarming was way past. And as the duel between these…these Gods among men, grew fiercer and faster, it hit the Avengers just how restrained Harry had been in their previous confrontations, even when he had had the stones. His spells had been powerful, yes, but now they were deadly. Darker magic now mixed in with the light, spells of chaos and ruin and pain. Thanos was fighting dirty, but Harry was fighting ruthlessly.

And possibly for the first time in the time they had known him, Harry was fighting to kill.

“HARRY!”

“Tony-”

“HARRY LET US OUT!”

“Tony-”

“HARRY”
“Tony for fucks sake just shut the hell up” Steve roared.

Tony was so surprised in that moment he actually did shut up.

“Look, Harry knew what he was doing—”

“He needs us—”

“Yes. He needs us to shut up and let him kill the bastard.”

Tony sagged. “I feel so fucking useless.”

Clint put his good hand on his shoulder, “Tony, look at Harry.” He did. “What do you see?”

“Someone whose going to get a kick up the ass if he survives this.” Tony muttered.

“You know what I see?” Clint continued as though Tony hadn’t spoken, “I see someone who's winning.”

They looked at the dark figure on the other side of the shield, hands ever-moving, eyes focussed and determined and burning a brilliant green, spells setting the world ablaze around him.

“What…” Bruce shook his head, “what is he?”

Never before had Harry been pushed to his limits like this. Never had he been forced to unleash that part of him that burned like a dying sun, that terrible void of death’s power, brimming at his fingertips, a whispered word away…

And of course it was terrible. Just awful. Fighting for his life, adrenaline surging through him hot and blazing, breath coming faster, dusty ground scraping beneath his feet as he dodged another attack…his magic coming fiercer and faster and more, streaming straight through him without even conscious thought anymore like he was just a vessel for the universe’s energy, a channel, a part of nature…he was a creature of magic.

Absently, Harry realised he did not even know if he had a limit.

Oh who was he kidding. Harry was loving every moment of it.

Thanos was quickly realising something was going very, very wrong. The Infinity stones possessed power beyond reckoning, but they were just that; infinite. He would thrust his palm to the sky expecting it to rain fire down upon them, only to end up merely transporting them with a slip portal. World’s blurred around them, flicking like pages of a magazine, and suddenly it wasn’t just them fighting.

There was Asgard, and golden warriors began flooding out to defend the breach in defences.

There was Alfheim and the light elves joined the fray.

There was Jodunheim, Vanaheim, Midgard…
Suddenly this wasn’t just about them anymore. The stones were quite literally shifting the entire battle through different realities, and Thanos had lost control. He might have had the strength to wield the stones, but none of the skill. They just…wouldn’t listen to him.

Growling, he held up the gauntlet to deflect whatever horror the boy released upon him next, and promptly transported them all to New York. The space gem hummed innocently in the gauntlet. Across from him, Harry’s eyelids flickered in surprise. That was the only reaction before he was once more hurling spells at the Titan. Thanos threw back his head and snarled with fury as the spells pummelled into him.

_He would kill the boy. He would fucking tear him apart and then put him back together just so he could kill him again. He would-

- A breathless laugh escaped him as Harry leapt into the air, narrowly missing the blast of scarlet rushing past him. He had already hurled a curse at the Titan before he hit the ground. Thanos snarled in pain. Bone-breaking curse. One Harry had used sparingly in the past for the agonising pain it caused. He held no such moral restrictions now. Curse after curse shot from his wand and left hand both, casting spells simultaneously, often hurling a spell with his right only to keep a shield aloft with his left. Evermore the power surged through him like a well of energy.

Thanos was getting careless now. He favoured the Power gem above all others, all but disregarding the others. For the moment, that was in Harry’s favour. He knew if the Titan decided to start utilising the Time or even the Space gem, he might be in trouble. Of course, if he did use them, Harry might not even see them coming.

So when the onslaught of attacks began to lessen, Harry only become more on guard. His eyes flitted about. He did not see the blue glow of the Space gem as Thanos appeared behind him. He did not see the Titan raise his hand…

CLANG. Steel met steel. Harry whipped around, and his mouth fell open as he saw Loki, who should have been safely stuck behind his shield, standing in full battle armour, sword raised against Thanos. He had stopped the gauntlet before it could come crashing down on Harry.

“Loki!” Before Thanos could react, Harry had yanked on Loki’s arm and blasted Thanos momentarily away with an explosive spell. He gripped Loki’s arm tightly, “are you fucking insane?” he yelled, “what part of I’m not losing anyone else didn’t you understand!?”

Loki glared at him, “save it. I’m not going to watch you get yourself killed.”

“So you’re going to make me watch you get killed?!” Harry hissed, “goddamit Loki.”

“I’m not leaving you.”

Harry opened his mouth, then saw the look in Loki’s eyes. Never before had he seen such fierce conviction in the God’s eyes. Loki had been running all his life, but now he was choosing to stay at Harry’s side. Stay, because, well. He couldn’t bear to leave.

Harry groaned, “fine. But if you die, I’m going to fucking kill you.”

Loki’s lip twitched, “duly noted.”

Then Harry saw Thanos get up, and their time was up.
In the chaos of the battle with Thanos, everyone seemed to forget the army of Chitauri sitting on their doorstep. Harry may have scared them shitless when he had walked in, but now Thanos had the Soul stone. And said army was waking up to their master’s call.

“Um, guys…” The Avengers turned away from watching Harry to look at Clint. They followed his gaze, and stilled. Hundreds upon hundreds of Chitauri were drawing their weapons, eyes fixed greedily upon Harry where he was battling Thanos. In the background, they saw the Asgardians fighting their way through. Thor raised his hammer, and they roared an answer to their prince.

“We can’t let them get to Harry” Steve said firmly.

Thor nodded, already swinging his hammer, “Agreed”

“So I blew them up with the nuke last year” Tony drawled. He flipped his mask down, and the lights lit up, “think we can make them extinct?”

The Avengers cast a final glance at Harry. Then, weapons flying with renewed determination into their hands, they turned away from him and the shield that kept them from him, and threw themselves once more into the fray.

This time, when they fought, something was different. Harry and Loki’s magic seemed to entwine, binding together to whip out more lethal spells than Harry had ever imagined. His gaze flickered to Loki ever now and then as the spells grew more and more deadly. What the hell had the God been through to learn magic like that? He didn’t have time to think on it.

The battle was heating, morphing into something beyond either of their control, like a caged dragon that had suddenly been set free. Harry stopped thinking, it was slowing him down too much. The magic flowed through him like a tsunami, and he let it go, directing it with a flick of his thoughts. This was no manipulation of intricate spell-casting. This was no longer a battle of magicians. This was just pure, raw, unrelenting power hammering into one another, seeing who would break first.

The battle swelled in the cries of the Chitauri and the bellows of the Avengers, the explosions lighting up the sky and the powers shaking the earth, and suddenly Harry wasn’t on some godforsaken planet battling monsters and aliens, but back running through the crumbling courtyard of Hogwarts as the castle fell around him.

The world had ended, so why had the battle not ceased, the castle fallen silent in horror, and every combatant laid down their arms?

There's was nothing to do, but keep fighting.

This wasn’t just about them anymore.

This was war.

Chapter End Notes
Next chapter up very shortly, never fear!
All's fair in love and war

Chapter Summary

“Okay listen up, and don’t interrupt”, he spoke quickly and quietly, all too aware of the time slipping through his fingers. “We don’t have long.”

Chapter Notes

Here it is, prompt as promised!
Again I don't want to say to much - let the work speak for itself. This chapter was incredibly hard to write.
A huge thanks though to all those who have stuck with this story from the beginning, we've been going through this together and I must confess I never dreamed this would get such a reaction! Thank you for your continued support, and your never-ceasing enthusiasm.
Seriously, I appreciate each and every one of you.
So what are you reading this for? Go ahead and read!

(music suggestion still counts - anything from Deathly hallows part 2, in particular the battle scenes at the end. Knock yourself out!)

You are the true master of death, because the true master does not seek to run away from Death. He accepts that be must die, and understands that there are far, far worse things in the living world than dying.”

— J.K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows

-Three days previous-

The two men faced one another across the room, two stark silhouettes against the sky-view window. The taller was standing stiff and upright, hands clasped tightly behind his back. The second man glanced back idly, absenting twirling a slender wand across his fingers.

“You knew I would go after them.” Harry said. It was not a question.

“Yes.”

“See that’s what I don’t get. The whole world at your fingertips and you come to me for help.”

“No one else would have stood a chance, you know that.”

“Ah but you didn’t, did you?” Harry stared at him piercingly, “not then. You had no idea what you
were up against.”

Silence.

“‘I’ll tell you why you came to me’ Harry said into the silence, “because I’m expendable. Powerful, expendable, and willing to die for the team.”

“Is there a reason you’re telling me this, Mr Potter?”

Harry laughed, but there was no humour in the sound, “I bet you were even hoping I’d die along the way. God you must hate me.”

“You may be surprised to know that I don’t, actually” Fury stared out the window across New York. “You are a powerful man, Mr Potter. And power, regardless of whom or what, demands to be feared.”

“And do you? Fear me?”

Fury looked at him steadily. “It’s my job to.”

“So what about the Avengers?” Harry said, “are they all just a job to you as well?”

Again, silence. Then Fury turned his face away from Harry, and he suddenly looked incredible old.

“Look, I came to you for help because you care about the team just as much as I do, alright? They can’t do this alone. And Harry, as much as it… literally pains me to admit it” Fury grimaced, “you’re the best chance they’ve got.”

Harry quirked an eyebrow, as if to say what, you’re only just getting this now? He flicked his wand back into his pocket, “if I do this, and if by some miracle I come out alive, I want your resignation from SHIELD.”

Fury was silent for a moment. "I didn't realise saving the world came with conditions."

"It doesn't" Harry said, "call it a favour. You don't even have to leave completely, just step down from Director."

"Is this because I exiled you?"

"Actually it's because you're an arse, but that too."

Absurdly, Fury chuckled, "you're something else, Potter."

"Is that a yes?"

"Call it a favour." Fury held out a hand, "You have my word."

After a moment, Harry took it. "Thank you", he nodded, "though, for the record, I still fucking hate the sight of you."

Fury snorted, “On that, Mr Potter, we are completely agreed.”

“Good. Well, now that’s all cleared up…” Harry flicked his wrist, and his clothes transformed into his dragon-hide armour under his cloak. He ignored Fury’s stare, turning to stride out, cloak billowing out behind him as he spoke. “I best be off.”
His eyes glowed.

“I’ve got a Titan to kill.”

-Soundtrack suggestion: Voldemort's end - (remember to right click and open a new tab)-

-Present day: The Battle-

It could have been seconds or days later that he saw an opening.

Harry ducked an incoming blast and began to run. Above his head, he saw green flashes of light as Loki covered him. They did not need to communicate. Harry tore across the darkling plain towards the Titan, and Loki cleared the way for him. All around them, the Avengers formed a perimeter, keeping any of the Chituari from getting through.

This was it.

Time slowed down. The sky was exploding around him. Heat blasted in waves, trying to knock him off his feet.

A burning streak of magic shot past his cheek.

Harry shot forward. His heart thudded in his ears.

For a moment, everything seemed to click as the entire team leapt to the air at the same time, the cry of battle upon their lips, the perfect harmony in a world of chaos.

Thud. Harry leapt in the air.

Thud. He raised the Elder wand high above his head.

Thud. The words danced on his tongue…

He had a moment to see Thanos’ scarlet eyes flash with panic, an actual flicker of genuine fear. The Titan knew he was staring into the eyes of his death. He knew this was it.

But Thanos had one final card to play.

With an almighty CRACK, the Titan disappeared once more. Chilling laughter came from behind him. Harry’s feet hit the ground, and he spun in the same movement, cloak billowing out behind him. He paused in a crouch, wand trembling with the repressed spell.

He froze at the sight before him. A strange ringing was in his ears.

Thanos stood breathing heavily. In his outstretched hand, Loki was held by the throat. The Titan was so large Loki was lifted full off the ground. The purple fist was clenched tightly. Loki writhed in his grip, green eyes furious.

“Now”, Thanos panted, “let’s just all calm down shall we?”

Harry’s eyes seemed to burn, “You swore no harm would come to anyone.”
“No, I swore no harm would come to the Avengers” Thanos corrected, malice glinting in his eyes, “and, last I checked, this stray is no Avenger.”

And then Thanos squeezed. Loki convulsed, his breath stopping in his throat. He twisted in his grip, but his efforts soon began to falter. He made have been a God, but Thanos was a Titan. And Thanos had nothing left to lose. A horrible choking sound rasped from Loki’s throat. Then Thanos twisted his wrist and Loki went limp in his grip, eyes fluttering closed…

“CRUCIO”

Harry did not remember casting the spell. Later he mused he must have felt real rage in that moment to cast it, rage like he had never felt before.

Harry did not recall it.

He only remembered that everything had gone white, and hard, and blazing hot.

Abstractly, he thought he remembered a scream. It wasn’t a normal scream. This was…the sound of your heart ripping through your chest, the sound of entire planets, entire civilisations crashing around you. This was the sound of raw, unadulterated agony like nothing else.

Oh yes, he remembered. That was Thanos screaming. Which meant that hand extended out, palm blazing with light, channelling so much desire to hurt like he had never felt before, was his.

Everything after that seemed to happen very fast.

Harry remembered reaching back, hand hovering over his wand before closing instinctively on Loki’s blade. For some reason it felt right in his hand. Frigga’s words echoed in his head…never question a seer.

Harry had a jolt of realisation. Thanos would be looking to defend from a magical attack. He would not expect to counter earth-made steel.

“Interesting theory. Has anyone ever tried sticking a sword in Voldemort? Maybe the Ministry should put some people onto that, instead of wasting their time stripping down Deluminators or covering up breakouts from Azkaban…”

Harry felt a flicker of amusement at the irony.

Then Harry was running again. He coiled back his arm and flung the blade with that same abstract instinct that directed its path. It span through the air, the edge of the blade set ablaze by the reflections of spells exploding around it. A flash of Harry’s eyes, and its aim set true.

It hurtled forward, and sliced straight through Thanos’ forearm.

BAM

Total darkness.

Everything seemed to stop. The void of blazing power swirling around Thanos blinked out of existence. The world’s stop flickering around them. The sky fell dark and silent. The Chitauri shrank back. The Avengers paused.

For up in the stone clearing, the Titan was howling.
The gauntlet fell with a clatter to the ground, still attached to the purple limb.

Loki dropped like a stone.

The gems flared a brilliant white.

Harry apparated forward, appearing just in time to catch Loki who fell semi-unconscious from Thanos’ grip. Loki opened his mouth to tell Harry he was fine, goddamnit, it wasn't like this was his first time being strangled, worry about the angry Titan you just pissed off, there isn't time...

He sagged. Harry's arms encircled him immediately, strong, unyielding, safe, and Loki allowed himself a moment to slump against him and let Harry take his weight. He wasn't quite sure which one of them was shaking. Over his shoulder, Harry had the other palm outstretched at Thanos.

The Titan did not even notice. His left hand was clutching the stump of his right. The Crucius was still ripping through his insides. Terrible, whimpering snarls of agony escaped from his lips. The sight was absurd, a world away from the terrifying figure who dwelt in the shadows.

Harry looked at him coldly. He was so far gone into the burning hurt kill destroy at that point he didn’t even think to lift the cruciatus curse.

“I warned you what would happen if you hurt those under my protection, but you chose not to listen.” His voice was terrible. It rang out across the darkling plains with something unearthly and ominous and unforgiving and hollow with trembling power.

The battleground had fallen utterly silent. No one dared breathe too loudly, not when the person who had a voice like death was speaking. Even Thanos did not answer, but recoiled from Harry’s voice.

With the same feeling of detachment, like he was watching himself from a distance, Harry raised a hand almost lazily, and the gauntlet flew towards him. He did not put it on. With another flick of his wrist, the golden constraints of the gauntlet seemed to dissolve, leaving six blazing gems hovering in the air before him.

“You cannot wield them…” Thanos rasped, raising his great head, “you do not… have the… strength”

His head fell forward and he coughed, spitting black blood onto the ground, fighting the tremors that racked through him from the cruciatus curse. It was a pitiful sight.

Harry only narrowed his eyes. “You just don’t get it, do you? It was never to do with strength.” Harry looked at the Elder Wand in his hand, looked at Mjölnir in Thor’s hand, and Dumbledoor’s words from a lifetime ago rang through his head...

“Maybe a man in a million could unite the Hallows, Harry. I was fit only to possess the meanest of them, the least extraordinary. I was fit to own the Elder Wand, and not to boast of it, and not to kill with it. I was permitted to tame and to use it, because I took it, not for gain, but to save others from it.”

“Artefacts of great power do not just submit their allegiance to anyone. Can you imagine what the universe would be like if they did?” Harry shook his head, “you do not have the right to wield any such object. The stones were never yours to take.”

“And I suppose you claim that right?” Thanos sneered, staggering to his feet. His entire body trembled with rage, “you?”
“Well”, Harry said placidly, “I am the Master of Death”

BAM

A red-gold glow burst suddenly across the enchanted sky above them as an edge of dazzling sun appeared over the sill of the nearest window. The light hit both of their faces at the same time, so that Voldemort's was suddenly a flaming blur. Harry heard the high voice shriek as he too yelled his best hope to the heavens, pointing Draco's wand:

"Avada Kedavra!"

"Expelliarmus!"

The bang was like a cannon blast, and the golden flames that erupted between them, at the dead center of the circle they had been treading, marked the point where the spells collided. Harry saw Voldemort's green jet meet his own spell, saw the Elder Wand fly high, dark against the sunrise, spinning across the enchanted ceiling, spinning through the air toward the master it would not kill, who had come to take full possession of it at last.

The Titan launched himself at Harry.

Harry raised a hand. “Avada Kedavra” He said flatly.

The stones blazed blisteringly hot. The Hallows sang.

And the entire world watched as the last Titan fell to the ground and moved no more.

There was a moment, just then. A moment before the inevitable euphoria of jubilation and victory, where the lines of reality seemed to blur, an infinity of universes pressing against each other. From beyond the horizon, a red-gold blaze burst suddenly across the sky like a beacon, a dazzling wall of flame. Dawn was breaking. It's light soaked into the battle-torn-wasteland.

Harry Potter lowered his wand. His cloak billowed out behind him in slow, rippling fluidity around him, like the old heroes of legend. The sun set his silhouette ablaze. Every eye turned to his solitary figure atop the rock peak.

He had never seemed more unreachable, so utterly and completely other to those standing below him. Because now, at long last, the universe was really seeing him, seeing what the name Harry Potter really was.

He was fire and ice and rage. He was the night and the storm in the heart of the sun. He’s ancient and forever. He burns at the centre of time and can see the turn of the universe.

And… he’s wonderful.

From a shadow of a shadow, Hela smiled.

(Soundtrack suggestion: Letting go) - remember to right click and open on a new tab
The bastard had done it.

Tony yelled a fierce shout of victory. Around him, the Avengers echoed him. They tore across the battlefield, hardly noticing the Chitauri fleeing in the other direction. They only had eyes for the dark haired miracle standing atop the devastation.

It was impossible. It defied all the odds.

But Harry had done it.

“Harry!”

They cried his name as they drew near. The golden shield keeping them ‘safe’ was still up, and they paused by it.

“Harry?”

He didn’t seem to hear them. Harry stood very still, staring at the infinity stones still hovering around him. Their uncanny blaze was reflected in his eyes. He looked like a figure lost in time.

Next to him, Loki appeared to be arguing with growing desperation. His hands flew animatedly, and his breath made small plumes of smoke in the cold air. Harry did not look at him as he answered. His troubled gaze was fixed on the stones. His voice was soft, too low for them to make out.

“Harry!” Tony’s shout seemed to finally break through.

Both Harry and Loki looked up. Harry’s gaze softened at the sight of them. Loki only looked mildly irritated.

“Yes, you, idiot” Tony said exasperatedly, “honestly, for a moment I thought Thanos had rendered you deaf as well as freakishly-powerful.”

“Ever the charmer, eh Tony?” Harry said dryly.

Natasha rolled her eyes, “So now our impending death’s are no longer a problem, mind lowering this nifty shield that’s oh-so-conveniently keeping us from kicking your ass?”

To everyone’s surprise, Harry’s answering smile looked oddly forced. “I’m afraid it’ll have to stay for the time being.”

“And what the hell’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means” Harry emphasised, “that I’m going to have to ask you to trust me one last time. This isn’t over.”

At that Loki seemed to flinch, and he turned away from Harry with a barely repressed retort. It was then that they noticed how Harry was standing - where he had been wicked fast and at ease with the assured power, Harry now looked incredibly tense and on edge. His face was drawn with exhaustion. His hands trembled slightly.

“Harry?” Natasha prompted softly, “Harry what is it?”

Harry glanced back, “The Infinity stones. They’re… um…how should I put it…”

“Six budding time bombs” Loki said curtly. His voice was trembling with an intensity they couldn’t place. “They react to the influx of power. Without the gauntlet, the stones are set to go nuclear. We
have hours, minutes even…”

“Wait, what?”

“Harry…”

“Can we stop it?”

“We need to leave-”

“Harry lower the shield, we can-”

“Are you insane?”

“You got a better idea?”

“Enough” Harry’s voice silenced the chorus of exclamations that had risen up. He ran a hand wearily through his hair. “I’m containing the point of implosion now. We don’t have long, but…” he bit his lip, looking oddly vulnerable, “it’s long enough.”

“Long enough for what?” Natasha’s voice was small.

“For him to say goodbye” Loki snarled. He turned to storm away, but not before they could see the tears that sparked in his eyes.

There was no outburst this time. The Avengers stared at Harry, frozen. He did not deny Loki’s words.

“You’re…you’re kidding, right?” Tony’s voice sounded a little strangled, “you don’t mean that.”

“Tony…”

“No” he shook his head, and it broke something in Harry to see his composure start to crack, “no you can’t just leave, you…”

“The stones are imploding right now, Tony, I can’t hold it in for much longer.”

“So don’t” Natasha burst out, “let it go, magic us all out of here, do something…” Clint put a hand on her shoulder, but she shrugged him off. “You can’t just give up,” she said fiercely. “Not now. Not after everything we’ve been through.”

“And where would I take us?” Harry said quietly, “another planet, another realm, an alternate reality?” He shook his head, “Nowhere’s far enough. The stones are collapsing, and the universe will follow. I haven’t got a choice.”

“So what will you do?” Thor demanded, his voice a crackle of hoarse anger, “how does you throwing your life away stop all that destruction?”

“Because I can absorb the impact into myself” Harry stepped forward so he stood just in front of them, close enough to touch had the shield not been there. His eyes were still blazing a brilliant green. “I have enough power in my blood to provide a gateway, an escape route if you like, for all that energy. Kind of like a lightning-rod. I can destroy the stones, and the energy will be returned to the stars as it once was, as it should have been. Don’t you see? No one has to die!”

“You will” That was Bruce. His eyes were haunted.
Finally, the truth. Lying with his face pressed into the dusty carpet of the office where he had once thought he was learning the secrets of victory, Harry understood at last that he was not supposed to survive.

A strange expression crossed Harry’s face; “That’s a price I’m willing to pay”

“Well, I’m not!” Tony burst out. He took in a choked breath, wavering on his feet, fighting to get words out through the onslaught of emotion. “Goddamit Harry, I won’t let you do this.”

Tony stumbled and Harry took an involuntary step forward, aching to tear down the shield between them and fuck the universe, because there was no way the end of time could hurt as much as that look in Tony’s eyes...

“Is there no other way?” Thor asked quietly.

Harry caught himself, took a breath. He looked at Thor, “I think you already know the answer to that.”

Just then a light began to radiate softly from Harry’s chest just as the stones began to dim. He squeezed his eyes shut, carefully controlling his breathing.

He felt his heart pounding fiercely in his chest. How strange that in his dread of death, it pumped all the harder, valiantly keeping him alive. But it would have to stop, and soon. Its beats were numbered. How many would there be time for, as he rose and walked through the castle for the last time, out into the grounds and into the forest?

“Harry…” Natasha’s voice was hoarse. Tears streamed down her face.

Harry opened his eyes with an effort. “It’s alright” He said softly, “don’t worry about me. In fact, I absolutely forbid you to feel sorry for me. My life was lonely and meaningless, and you guys gave me a new purpose, a home, a family.” Harry felt burning pricks in his eyes, and he blinked the tears away furiously, “You’ve saved my life in so many ways. And we had the time of our lives. So take it easy, aright?” he laughed shakily.

"Because it has been...totally awesome."

The light flared. Then there was an almighty CRACK, and the world dissolved around them as Harry transported them to safety with his last remaining strength.

Harry’s last laugh still echoed in their ears.

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Alternative soundtrack - Into eternity (right click, you know the drill)

Loki was not going to watch Harry throw away his life in another maddeningly heroic act of self-sacrifice. He was done. It was over.

All of a sudden the death of Thanos became utterly meaningless; Harry was wrong, they had not won.

Not if it meant they would lose him along the way.

He stumbled away from the clearing, the back of his hand pressed to his mouth to prevent any sound from escaping. Tears blinded him. Ridiculous things, tears; what use were they? They didn’t take away the hollow agony tearing through his insides. Stupid, human emotions. Stupid…
Darkness pressed against him from all sides. Loki stumbled again. The feeling of isolation was almost drowning him.

_Loki._

Loki shut his eyes, suddenly unable to go on. Everything was crushing down on him and oh _god_ he couldn’t bear it-

“Loki.”

_Silence._

Loki opened his eyes, and realised he had done a full circle. Harry stood in front of him, barely visible through the brilliant aura of light that encased him.

Loki had never loved and hated someone so much in that moment.

“Why?” Loki rasped.

Harry looked confused, and Loki realised he would have to be a little more specific.

“Did you make me care just so you could break me when the time came? Is that it?” He demanded hoarsely, “did you know this would happen?”

“Oh yes, I’ve been planning my untimely demise for quite some time now” Harry said sarcastically, “all on the off chance you would fall in love with me. I sound quite dedicated don’t I?”

Loki flinched. He looked wretched.

Harry sighed. He couldn’t find the energy to be angry when Loki looked so broken.

“Come here.”

Loki did. Harry wordlessly pulled him close, one hand threading through his hair to cup his neck, pressing their foreheads together. He let out a breath, closing his eyes. It was the exhale of someone who had been strong for so long, and that now that it was just them, he could let himself go. Because no matter he said or how strong he looked, Harry was still _scared_. Because this time, just as he stood in the forest all those years ago, Harry had something to lose - someone to leave behind.

Loki closed his eyes tightly. Harry was warm and solid and _real_ against him, and after a moment, Loki trembled and all the tension drained out of him. He grabbed onto Harry tightly, as though Harry would disappear any moment. It was with the same childlike desperation with which he had clutched onto the stag patronus all that time ago.

“Why…” his voice was very small, “why does it _hurt so much_?”

Harry was silent for a moment. Then his voice rippled over them, low and musical and solid and familiar and _home_.

“Because it was _real_.”

The light flared, and sparks crackled in the air around Harry. The light was so bright now Loki had to shut his eyes.

“You should go” Harry sounded slightly strained, “I’m not sure how much longer I can hold it.”
“I’m not going anywhere.”

“Loki-”

“I’m NOT LEAVING YOU” He growled, “I can’t. Do not ask it of me.”

And then Harry looked at Loki, really looked. Panic, desperation, terror, and something dangerously unstable lingered in his eyes. And abruptly Harry knew Loki wouldn’t survive this, not really. Not as the man he saw before him. He would fall, and there would be no one to pull his back from the edge.

Loki would lose himself.

The Avengers at least had each other. They would get through this.

Who did Loki have?

So, inwardly offering a silent apology to Death, Harry made a split second decision.

“Okay listen up, and don’t interrupt”, he spoke quickly and quietly, all too aware of the time slipping through his fingers. “We don’t have long. Do you remember how I appeared out of nowhere a few months ago?”

Loki blinked.

“When I arrived on Earth, that wasn’t by accident. I wasn’t travelling through a portal or a door or anything like that. I was **reborn**.”

“What-”

“Shut up and listen” Harry said sharply, “now - I’m going to tell you something. When I call myself ‘Master of Death’, it’s not just a fancy super-hero alias. I call authority over the realm of death and all her powers in both life **and** death. Do you understand?” The light was getting so bright now Harry could barely see. A burning heat began to blaze in his chest. “I cannot ever truly die, because **I am** Death.”

Loki looked utterly bewildered, “but, you’re **human**…”

“Physically? Yeah…” Harry laughed. He had never been so aware of his body’s weakness. The burning was becoming painful now, scorching liquid fire through his veins, “so my lives are scattered. I will die, and then I will live, again and again until the end of time. That is my gift and my curse. But that’s not the point.”

Blinking furiously past the white spots in his vision, Harry found Loki’s panicked green eyes. He was shaking his head, small mumblings escaping his lips. Harry realised belatedly it was his name, repeated over and over.

“Loki listen to me” Harry said firmly, “it’s going to be okay, do you understand? I won’t really die. Somewhere, sometime, some distant reality, I'll regenerate.”

“But I need you **here**” The words slipped out of Loki’s mouth, such a deference to his usual reserved demeanour it almost came as a surprise to himself, but he pressed on. “I can’t do this alone…”

"Yes, you can" Harry said fiercely, "Never give up, Loki - you hear? Never cruel or cowardly. Never give up. Never give in. Because the world is beautiful and strange and dark and spectacular and so **worth** living in. And because you are so, **so** loved  ”
The thin body in his arms shakes, “Harry-”

The light was so bright Harry disappeared from view, and it was just his voice that Loki hung onto.

“Loki get out of here!”

“Harry-”

“That wasn’t a bloody request!”

“I’ll find you” Loki swore. His voice trembled, “I swear to you, Harry Potter, even if it takes me eternity. Wherever you are, whoever you are, I will find you. I-”

Harry kissed him. Once, twice, again, as though he was committing it to memory. Loki made a sound something between a moan and a growl and arched into Harry's touch, hands entangling in his messy hair. This wasn't a nice, loving kiss. This was fire and desperation and the bitter tang of farewell. When they finally broke apart, both were gasping for air.

"This isn't goodbye" Harry said roughly, "Somehow, somewhere, our paths will cross again."

Loki leant weakly against him, "I'll find you Harry Potter, whatever it takes."

And then in spite of everything, Harry laughed.

“Don't you dare be late.”

Then the light swelled impossibly bright, and the entire planet began to crumble beneath their feet. Loki kept his eyes fixed on Harry until his vision blurred and the heat began to burn him. Loki left it until the very last second before he disappeared.

Then when, from some dark corner of Asgard, Loki saw several hundreds of unborn stars simultaneously go nebula, and the universe just seemed a little brighter for a moment, Loki knew.

The God fell to his knees, and did not arise for a very long time. His hand touched his lips, where Harry's imprint still burned. Three unspoken words still hovered on his tongue.

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To this day, astrologists speculate over what happened in that moment, at 00:15am on a Tuesday night GMT.

When the moon bloomed blood-red, when the sun flared hot enough to cause worry on more than one level, when thousands of stars in our galaxy suddenly chose that precise moment to turn red and go super-nova, exploding outwards in the biggest firework display the world had ever seen. Comets lit up the sky for nights on end, never passing close enough to collide, but streaking past in all their glory.

It was breathtaking chaos, a harmless, beautiful destruction. It was an astronomical phenomenon. It was life and beauty and hope.

The billions of lives across the galaxies whom had been saved gazed up in wonder.

They did not know they owed it all to one man.

In amongst all the elation and mystery, one small group of people did not join in with the revelries. They stood in the ruins of the place they had once called home, and silently raised a glass to the boy who changed it all.
He couldn't know that at this very moment, people meeting in secret all over the country were holding up their glasses and saying in hushed voices: "To Harry Potter - the boy who lived!"

The Avengers bowed their heads.

To Harry Potter.

- The man who saved the world.

“And then he greeted Death as an old friend, and went with him gladly, and, equals, they departed this life.”

Chapter End Notes

“Harry, you wonderful boy, you brave, brave man.”
— J.K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows

*slowly drowns under the feels*
I hardly know what to say, other than this is not the end.
I REPEAT: Ce n'est pas la fin!

(note: all of the quotes from this chapter were taken from JK's Deathly Hallows, if you hadn't gotten that already).

So until next time, dear reader. May we meet under better circumstance.
If nothing else, I can promise you the worst has passed.
Epilogue part I: A promise

Chapter Summary

“Never cruel or cowardly. Never give up. Never give in.”

The promise had been kept. His work here was done.

It was time to come home.

Chapter Notes

And at long last, we meet again - I'm sorry it's been longer than I anticipated!
Maybe you've been waiting months for an update (apologies) or maybe you only just
discovered this story yesterday. Either way, here's a belated christmas present for you to
read. Part II will be up shortly (promise!)
A huge thank you again to everyone who's read, left kudos or comments, bookmarked
and subscribed and supported me throughout. After all, a story is nothing without
someone to read it.
So here it is: Epilogue part I.
Happy reading!

(Warning: shameless reworking of Doctor Who canon.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Soundtrack suggestion: A promise

“The realisation of what would happen next settled gradually over Harry in the long minutes, like
softly falling snow.

"I've got to go back, haven't I?"

"That is up to you."

"I've got a choice?"

"Oh yes." Dumbledore smiled at him. "We are in King's Cross, you say? I think that if you decided
not to go back, you would be able to...let's say...board a train."

"And where would it take me?"

"On," said Dumbledore simply."
It seemed that the world did keep turning, after all.

Sunlight streaked through the panes of glass in the morning glare, bathing the tower in hazy warmth. It’s tip was lit like a torch, burning a solitary light into the sky before the sun hit lower buildings. Dawn was breaking. But to the six figures staring out across New York, the world might as well have been ending all over again.

“Despite the devastation, what has been confirmed as an Extra-Terrestrial attack, the extraordinary heroics of the group known as ‘the Avengers’ is now brought to light a year on from that fateful day above New York. The entire world watched an astrological phenomenon unfold in the sky, what scientists are now calling a pivotal moment in history, unaware they were watching a battle for humanity.

...Recent footage reveals shocking evidence...

“Mr President, sir! Were you aware your secret services were going behind your back?”

...The mysterious figure known only as ‘Harry’
How is it no one knows who this guy is?

...Rumoured to have single-handedly killed the so called, ‘Last Titan’, Thanos...

...Known associations with the War-criminal, Loki of Asgard

So what, we’re supposed to feel safe with him at the head of our defence? He isn’t even from our world!

...Governments accuse world leaders for the cover up...

“How the Avengers will not be available to comment”

...Citizens all over the world are paying tribute on this anniversary...

"Mr president - is it true he saved the world?"

...Who is this stranger? Where did he come from?
And the question on everybody’s mind:

Where is he now?"

Suddenly one of the figures broke from his stupor.

Tony Stark threw his glass at the television, and it shattered. Blood-red wine dripped across the news footage.

The screen went black.
A year had passed before they knew it.

The media moved on, the case was closed, and the world slowly forgot.

SHIELD found itself under a new Director after Fury’s abrupt resignation the day they returned one year previous. Nobody knew the exact reason, but they suspected it had something to do with a certain dark-haired wizard.

The Avengers continued living in the Tower. Banner shut himself up for about a month before Natasha went in and kicked his ass for moping. The destruction of Zandar lay heavily on his mind. Steve trained hard. Clint spent most nights on the roof, Harry’s forgotten broom keeping him company as he stared across the stars. Tony built stuff. Thor went back with Loki to Asgard, where he was put on temporary house-arrest.

The Avengers fought bad guys.

It wasn’t the same, but then, neither were they.

It was business as usual, and business was good.

More or less.

__________________________________________________________

Soundtrack suggestion - Children of Gallifrey (new tab to listen)

__________________________________________________________

...I’ll be a story in your head.

That's okay.

We're all stories in the end.

...Just make it a good one, eh?

'Cause it was, you know.

It was the best.

It’s a funny thing, time.

A year had passed in one world.

In another, Harry Potter had seen the dawn of time right up to it’s dying breath. He had lived a thousand lifetimes and saved billions of lives, worn twelve different faces before finally reclaiming his own, changed the lives of so many.

Once, he had been the boy-who-lived. Then he was the Master of Death.
Now?

I am and always will be the optimist, the hoper of far-flung hopes and the dreamer of improbable dreams. My name, my real name. That’s not the point. The name you choose it’s like, it’s like a promise you make.

There was a certain power in a name. That was why he concealed it so fiercely. His identity lay shrouded in mystery, his abilities hidden behind words and science.

Impossible acts were explained away with rapid explanations that made absolutely no sense and dazzling grins that caught you by surprise just long enough to distract you. Impossible victories where the only weapon was a screwdriver of all things. A handheld sonic stick that seemed to solve any problem, magically saving the day. (Needless to say the Elder Wand concealed in glamour). And always impossible knowledge - knowledge that was dismissed with a casual, I’m 908 years old - you pick up a few things.

People came and went like mayflies, fiercely protected, but always kept at arms length. Always alone.

He’s like fire. Get too close and people get burnt.

Every time he died, whether by bullet or big bang, inwardly bursting with selfish hope, thinking this is it, I’m done here, I can come home, Death sent him back. ‘Regeneration’ they called it. ‘Time Lord’ they called him.

Harry never contradicted them.

The truth was even more unbelievable.

But every so often, something would slip out, hinting at something so much more behind those blazing green eyes.

I’ve lived a long life and I’ve seen a few things. I walked away from the Last Great Time War. I defeated the darkest wizard of all time. I marked the passing of the Time Lords. I saw the birth of the universe and I watched as time ran out, moment by moment, until nothing remained. No time. No space.

Just me.

Even those who claimed to know him, those who travelled alongside him, would look at him sometimes and see a stranger, a fantastic, terrible force of nature they knew they could never truly understand, not really.

I walked in universes where the laws of physics were devised by the mind of a madman. I’ve watched universes freeze and creations burn. I have seen things you wouldn’t believe.

I have lost things you will never understand.

And I know things, secrets that must never be told and knowledge that must never be spoken. Knowledge that will make parasite gods blaze.

Reckless, brave, loyal, cuttingly sarcastic, unbearably kind. Eyes heavy with loss, a smile brighter than the stars he travelled amongst. Something ridiculous and impossible and brilliant.
So come on then! Come on! Look at me - no plan, no back-up, no weapons. Oh, and something else I don't have: Anything. To. Lose. So! If you're sitting up there in your silly little spaceships with all your silly little guns and you've got any plans on taking the Pandorica tonight, just remember who's standing in your way! Remember every black day I ever stopped you and then, and then... do the smart thing:

Let somebody else try first.

A legend was born. The man who walked in starlight, blazing and brilliant, saving the world time and time again. Just a madman with a box, wandering until he could find his way home again.

It had been a very long year.

"Oh Merlin, is that really what my hair looks like from the back?"

And now. Finally. Harry smiled a little nostalgically at his past double. God it felt like a lifetime ago he had stood in these halls, the night he had been given the time gem, before he had battled Thanos and said goodbye to this life.

"After all this is over, you need get yourself back to the year 1372 in Earth years to a place now called Knowhere. Steal the gem, do it fast, and look like yourself, that's imperative."

‘Look like yourself’. That was the important bit. Harry had had to wait until his regenerations gave him back his original face - his thirteenth life as the Doctor. He had waited over 900 years.

I've been running all my lives... through time and space. Every second of every minute of every day for over nine hundred years.

But the Doctor’s time was coming to an end. Time to shed the wandering Time Lord and reclaim his title as Master of Death, become Harry Potter once again.

"We're all stories in the end."

Harry smiled as he felt himself fade away, the image of his own face staring back at him, time gem clutched tightly in his hand.

"You told me the name you chose was a promise. What was the promise?"

908 years the name Harry Potter had not been spoken out loud. 908 years living as someone else.

"Everybody knows that everybody dies. But not every day. Not today. Some days are special. Some days are so, so blessed. Some days, nobody dies at all. Now and then, every once in a very long while, every day in a million days, when the wind stands fair, and the Doctor comes to call... everybody lives."

"Never cruel or cowardly. Never give up. Never give in."

The promise had been kept. His work here was done.

It was time to come home.

Far away, in 1930’s Philadelphia, a paradox opened in the cracks of the universe. A man - a boy
really. Born almost 90 years too early; a boy with eyes as old as the universe, and a strange symbol etched into the ground at his feet.

They called him Strange - Doctor, Sorcerer Supreme.

He did not contradict them.


Soundtrack suggestion: science and magic

“Loki get out of here!”

“Harry-”

“That wasn’t a bloody request!”

“I’ll find you” Loki swore. His voice trembled, “I swear to you, Harry, even if it takes me eternity. Wherever you are, whoever you are, I will find you.”

Always.

Crackling power exploding across the battlefield. A cry of snarling agony. Six stones held aloft, ablaze, aglow. Ancient green eyes flash. Chaos and burning and darkness and thunder ripping the universe apart at the seams…

“It’s long enough”

“Long enough for what?”

Knees fall on the dusty ground. Someone is holding him. He is breaking.

“To say goodbye”

Pain splits his head open and he claws at it, willing the noise to stop please just STOP-

- burning in his veins, screaming in his ears, blood and dust and a hand holding him by the throat, can’t breathe can’t…

“Loki listen to me. It’s going to be okay, do you understand?”

He curls up, hands clenched tightly around his head, Harry’s words echoing in his head. Panic begins to seize his every breath when he realises he can no longer remember the exact look in Harry’s eyes as he said them. He can’t forget, not ever, not one moment, he can’t…

To say goodbye - "This isn’t goodbye, Loki."

Please.

“The stones are collapsing, and the universe will follow. I haven’t got a choice.”

Eyes meet and NO no you CAN’T-

Screaming and thunder and blood…
Please don’t leave.

“I’ll find you Harry Potter, whatever it takes.”

Always.

“Don’t you dare be late.”

“Harry!”

The cry tore from Loki’s lips and he awoke with a gasp. A hidden blade whipped out in his hand, a confused impulse as his wild eyes struggled to atone for the frantic pounding of his heart. When he saw no immediate threat in the moonlit room, Loki slumped back against the pillows, chest rising and falling shallowly. The remnants of the nightmare still lingered in the adrenaline coursing through his veins. The knife fell slack from his hand. He noticed distractedly his throat was hoarse. He must have been screaming too then.

Loki’s gaze flickered to the door, but thankfully no one came in to investigate. Attitudes towards him returning to Asgard had been hostile enough as it was without him waking up the entire castle in a fit of PTSD. Loki glared at his hands, still shaking with an almost imperceptible tremor. He clenched them so tightly his veins stood out against his knuckles. Blood pressure was down again, he noted. He tried to remember the last time he ate, and came out with a blank. He knew his magic couldn’t sustain him indefinitely, but right then Loki couldn’t bring himself to care.

It had been a year. A year of inexhaustible wandering, following every ghost to countless dead ends, a lone figure searching for a fools hope whilst everyone else mourned.

Don’t you dare be late.

In a sudden fit of anger Loki threw himself to his feet and the blade clattered to the ground. The sound was loud in the silence of the night.

A year, and nothing. Not one sign.

Loki stared up at the great expanse of rippling darkness above him, at the scattering of stars lighting up the sky, remembering how they blazed in the moment Harry died. It had been one of the most beautiful and horrifying things he had ever seen.

Loki stared at the stars, and wondered just how long he could keep doing this.

Whether he was already too late.

A soft sound outside his room interrupted his thoughts. Loki sighed; perhaps his episode hadn’t gone as unnoticed as he had first thought.

“Are you going to hover at the door all night or are you going to come in?” He called without turning.

A pause. Then sure enough, the door opened. Loki knew if he turned round he would see Thor entering sheepishly.

“Your hearing is keen, brother”

“And your footsteps are as subtle as a Bilgesnipe” Loki replied off-handedly, “what are you doing
“I heard you wake” Thor said quietly, joining him at the overlook. “I only thought-”

“You’d check I haven’t hurled myself off the Bifrost?”

“That you were okay” he corrected, sounding hurt that Loki would suggest such a thing.

Loki didn’t look at him. “How thoughtful of you” he said flatly.

None of them understood - none of them knew. They mourned, buried themselves in work, strove to forget the impossible boy with the green eyes. They thought Loki was running from it. Idiots. Loki wasn’t running; he was chasing.

“I will die, and then I will live, again and again until the end of time. Do you understand? I cannot ever truly die, because I am Death. And somehow, somewhere, our paths will cross again.”

Somewhere out there Harry Potter was alive, and he’d be damned if he was going to mourn with the rest of them.

“Loki-”

“Look, I don’t want your careful words and pitying looks when you think I’m not looking” he said curtly, “so if that be the only reason you’re here, might I suggest you-”

“I have a proposition for you.”

Loki raised an eyebrow, “You have an entire team back on Midgard and a kingdom at your disposal. Go and bother them.”

“She asked specifically for you”

“She?”

“Director Hill.”

Loki looked at him blankly.

“Fury’s second?” Thor prompted, “brown hair, some skill with Midgardian weaponry, always snarking at Fury?”

“Ah, the less stupid one” Loki nodded and turned away, already losing interest, “what does she want with a War Criminal?”

“Council, as far as I believe. You are wanted for your magical expertise and attendance at a summit on Midgard.”

Loki laughed, “What, they didn’t get enough information out of me when they were experimenting on me?”

“You know as well as I do that Harry destroyed everything they had on you.”

Loki went still at the name, a sharp pain throbbing in his head. He endeavoured to pronounce the name, but could not manage it. An all-but-imperceptible tremor shook his thin frame as gripped the banister, defying, meanwhile, Thor's sympathy with an unflinching, ferocious stare. He cleared his throat, “none the less, if you think I would ever willingly help that blasted organisation that you are
sadly mistaken.” His voice was rough and coarse.

“It’ll get you out of this room.”

“I can do that already.”

“Not without Heimdal turning a blind eye you can’t, and you know he only does that on my request. As far as Asgard knows, you’ve been on room-arrest all year.”

Loki narrowed his eyes, “is this blackmail I detect brother?”

Thor looked offended, “I would have thought you’d jump at the chance to swoosh around the elite on Midgard, all mysterious, casting your whims on unsuspecting victims…”

Loki’s mouth twitched, “I do not swoosh.”

“Green cloak and cheekbones and all” Thor looked like he was fighting a smile.

“You’re attempts at manipulation are blundering and incompetent.” Loki said disdainfully.

Thor grinned a little impishly, “I learnt from the best.”

“And flattery will get you nowhere.”

“So… you’ll come?”

Thor looked so hopeful in that moment that Loki knew he could crush the expression with one word. He did not want to go to Midgard in the slightest, no matter who was there. Midgard was where he had gained and lost everything, where he had caught a glimpse of the future he might have had before everything went wrong, before he was cruelly snatched away. Not once had he returned to the god-forsaken planet in the year he had been searching. Why should he deem to walk it’s surface now?

Loki even opened his mouth to utter the snark reply, when something stopped him.

Never cruel or cowardly. Never give up. Never give in.

Behind him, the stars seemed to simmer, subtle currents of magic shifting in the night. His magic flared up in response. Loki frowned.

“Nine help me” he muttered, “fine. Fine. I’ll hold ‘council’ with the humans for a night.” He hastily amended at the grin stretching across Thor’s face, “But don’t think I’m doing you a favour. This is purely for selfish, diabolical motives…”

Thor rolled his eyes, but his smile didn’t falter, “whatever you say, brother. We leave at first light.”

And then with a thumping slap on the back that was probably meant to be affectionate, Thor turned and left.

Loki shook his head at his brothers pitiful attempts at stealth. With any luck, the entire castle would all be awake within the minute. Idiot.

He turned away with a word and his gaze fell upon the blade gleaming in the moonlight on the floor where he had thrown it earlier. In his mind’s eye, he saw it hurtling through the air and slicing through Thanos’ arm, forcing the Titan to release Loki from the chokehold grip. He felt strong arms catch him, a voice harder than steel vibrating against his chest. He saw Harry Potter save the world.
Loki plucked the blade from the floor, then retreated back into the dark depths of the empty room.

Behind him, the stars blazed.

“Okay I take it back, this is the single most worst idea SHIELD has ever had.”

“You’ve said that already.”

“I mean a diplomatic summit inviting every freak who isn’t already on their pay roll?” Tony flicked his wrist mid-pace and the email from SHIELD appeared on the big screen, “What do they expect to happen, kumbaya round the bonfire?”

Steve watched Tony stomping back and forth with faint amusement, “SHIELD’s run a background check on every one of them, I hardly doubt they’ll be hatching diabolical plans over desert.”

Tony nodded seriously, “No you’re right. I’ll probably be in the bonfire.”

Steve's lips twitched, “it’s just dinner, Tony. We’re going to turn up, parade around like SHIELD’s prized cattle, rub shoulders with a few powerful names, and you’re gonna love every goddamn minute of it.”

“An entire evening of flaunting my tech under the noses of the very people who want to get their sticky hands on it?” Tony waved his hand dismissively, “not my idea of a fun night.”

“It’s a peace gathering—”

“Oh come on” Tony brought up another hologram as he spoke, “it’s a ruddy weapons demonstration and you know it. A military deterrent in case any of these ‘talented people’ get any ideas on one-upping SHIELD.”

“We parade round defeating bad-guys left right and centre, how is this any different?”

“I tend not to make a habit of sitting down to dinner with my enemies” Tony pointed out dryly, “I’ve done more of these conferences than I care to count, selling weapons, demonstrating weapons, it doesn’t matter. All it does is show the opposition exactly what they don’t have, and what they’ll need to beat it.”

Steve paused for a moment, “you actually think these people are a threat?”

“JARVIS?” Tony waved his hand in a vague sort of gesture that in Tony-speak probably went something along the lines of explain to this idiot why I’m right.

If AI’s could sigh…

“Upon connection with my network, the data contained on SHIELD’s records became accessible—as did its connection to the CIA’s private server. I conducted an extensive search on all individuals attending.”

Steve opened his mouth, then closed it. “Isn’t that illegal?”

“I should very much enjoy experiencing law enforcement’s attempt to apprehend me,” JARVIS replied.

Tony’s lip quirked. “Don’t be ridiculous, I’d scramble the signal before they got within a hundred miles of here.”
“Why sir, I didn’t know you cared.”

“Less of the humour, Jarvis. I’m the funny one, remember?”

“You never let me forget, sir”

“I’m sorry, shall I leave you two alone?” Steve interrupted.

Tony rolled his eyes. “JARVIS, put the Captain’s mind at ease. Are you intending to take over the world with your newfound ability to crack any code and insert yourself into any security system, military weaponry or intelligence organisation?”

“No, sir.” He sounded affronted by the very idea.

“Cool. Just checking.” Tony gave Steve a scolding look, as if to accuse him of hurting JARVIS’ feelings, “so what intel did you get on our guests?”

“Bringing profiles up now, sir”

Tony flicked his hand at one of the holograms and profiles began whizzing round the room.

“Wanda Maximoff, known as ‘Scarlet Witch’. Mystic energy manipulation of reality-disrupting quasi-psionic force to cause molecular disturbances in a target's probability field, resulting in spontaneous combustion, deflection of objects in flight, etc etc. Ooh, mind manipulation too, sounds like the real life of the party.”

Tony waved his hand lazily and the image changed

Steve looked at him blankly, “do you even breathe when you talk?”

“Pietro Maximoff, twin brother”, Tony continued, ignoring him, “superhuman speed, used to create cyclones, dodge machine gun and laser fire, and run up walls and across water, apparently even fly, though I doubt that’s true”

Steve opened his mouth, “but-”

“Doctor Stephan Strange” Tony announced with a flourish, “now this guy’s one to watch. ‘Sorcerer Supreme’ in some circles, Strange's magical repertoire includes energy projection and manipulation, matter transformation, animation of inanimate objects, teleportation, illusion-casting, mesmerism, thought projection, astral projection, dimensional travel, time travel and mental possession, and that’s just what we know.” And here Tony read out from the profile, “The full range of his abilities is unknown. Well that’s just fantastic. Anyone fancy rubbing shoulders with the most powerful sorcerer in existence?”

“Okay, I think you might be overreacting a tiny bit-”

“Black panther, Falcon, Antman…” Tony paused, “okay bit of an animal fetish going on here, but point is; SHIELD is cooking up one hell of a superhero cocktail, and I don’t want to be there when it blows.”

Steve ran a hand tiredly across his forehead, “orders are orders Tony, we don’t get to pick and chose missions.”

“Please, this isn’t a mission; it’s a publicity stunt”

“And you’re not familiar with them at all.”
Tony gave him a look, “Don’t get sarky with me, poster boy. We both know it interferes with your indigestion.”

Steve somehow managed to look simultaneously offended and bewildered in the space of two seconds. The effect had his eyebrows doing a twitchy version of the Macarena on his forehead, and Tony’s reserve nearly cracked.

“Am I interrupting a moment?” The voice made them both jump to see Clint leaning against the doorway.

Tony rolled his eyes, “please tell me your not on board with this whole summit-do?”

“Something which can only lead to disaster and hilarity? Of course not, I’ll be up top with popcorn and a camera” Clint remarked, “Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“Come on, Tony” Steve pressed as Tony wavered, “Do it for your old friend Captain America.”

Tony gave him a withering look. “Don’t bring my childhood fixation of you into this.”

“I’ll let you handle my shield,” Steve cajoled, waggling his eyebrows again.

In the background, Clint choked on his drink.

Tony let out a startled laugh, “Oh my God.” That was when he knew he had lost. Few things would hold up against Steve Rogers when he attempted awkward innuendo. “Fine, fine, I’ll do it.”

Steve grinned like it was Christmas, looking utterly unperturbed. “You’re the best.”

“Yeah, yeah. But if you really wanted results you should’ve said you’d rub down my helmet.”

To Tony’s delight, and nobody’s surprise, Steve blushed furiously. But then, his lips were turning up at the corners, which Tony counted as a personal success. He still couldn’t get the man to say anything worse than ‘ass’ and ‘damn’, (language!) but there was always hope. The 21st century would corrupt Steve eventually… With a little help from him, of course.

Grinning at Steve’s still-flushed cheeks, Tony sauntered off to go put on a suit as the rest of the Team began to filter in to see what all the fuss was about.

Behind him, Clint was still laughing.

Soundtrack suggestion: Harry's sacrifice

As the Avengers boarded the jet, they did not see the figure that watched them from the shadows. Harry Potter stood frozen, trembling as he fought the urge to tear across the flight deck towards them. 908 years he had waited. And now he had absolutely no idea what to say. Doubt gripped him with fierce uncertainty - what right did he have to come trampling back into their lives? Because of him, they had all nearly died. Would they even want to see him?

He barely breathed as Tony swept past him, close enough to touch. Harry opened his mouth, but Tony’s name caught. Tears burned in his eyes. Oh Gods.
The team looked worn out, but they can’t have been that much older. God knows how long it had been in this reality. Months, years? For all he knew the Avengers wouldn’t even remember him anymore. For all he knew, they had moved on.

Well why shouldn’t they? They thought he was dead, after all.

For the first time, he glanced down at the envelope clutched in his hand - an unassuming slip of paper that he’d found sitting on his table that morning. He knew what it contained; an invitation to a diplomatic summit hosted by SHIELD, his alias stamped upon the address. A new name, a new life. Even now he was still living a lie. SHIELD had no clue who they had actually invited.

But the Avengers would be there.

Would he dare? It had been almost a millennium by his reckoning, and time had changed him from the man the Avengers had known. An evening of political pleasantry with the people he had died for, and they might not even recognise him.

Harry watched the jet take to the air feeling like someone had punched him in the stomach. He didn’t make any move to stop them leaving.

He just stood there, a lone stranger on the deck, fighting back the words that had been haunting him for a millennium.

Wondering perhaps, if they would be better off without him.

*For what did the name Harry Potter bring really, but chaos and ruin?*

In his hand, a flicker of a thought sent the letter bursting into flame. Ashes burnt through his fingers, crumbling away into the wind. Harry let the cinders scatter. Then he turned on the spot and disappeared.

As the jet circled to head back to New York, Clint happened to glance down at a flicker of movement on the Tower roof below. He narrowed his eyes, but when he looked again there was nothing. Just the ghost of a shadow, flickering in the pale sunlight.
Epilogue Part II: Of Wizards and Heroes

Chapter Summary

They stared at Harry, and Harry stared at them, and this was it - this was the moment of revelation, the moment he’d been both fighting towards and running from for almost a millennium.
And suddenly he had no idea what to say. That he’d missed them every day for hundreds of years. That he’d fought monsters and demons and the end of the universe just to get back to their side. That he’d do it a thousand times more if it meant they would all be safe.

Harry thought all of this, but all that came out was a choked, “hi.”

Steve dropped his shield.

Chapter Notes

And thus we meet for the final time, dear reader.
If someone had told me six months ago that the story in my head would get the incredible feedback it has, I wouldn't have believed them. It was a whim, posting that first chapter on my first fan fiction, an impulse to see what it was like to post something online.
And by God was it worth it, and that is all down to you.
Thank you for reading, for sticking with it even with my shoddy updates (sorry again about that last one), for leaving kudos and bookmarking and subscribing and leaving beautiful comments - all of which contributed towards getting this story out there.
Some stories just demand to be told, and this was one of them.
So thanks again, and farewell for now!
It's been one hell of a ride.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“And Death spoke to them —”

“Sorry,” interjected Harry, “but Death spoke to them?”

“It’s a fairy tale, Harry!”

“Right, sorry. Go on.”

— J.K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows

Soundtrack suggestion - Kingdom Come (Merlin compilation)
That night, for the first time in years, Harry dreamed. Echoing voices and tear-streaked promises, the achingly sad smiles of those he had lost yet could never truly join, and the terrified bone-crushing hug of a red-haired boy and a bushy-haired girl.

“Harry, it’s you that’s got to go on, I know it! Not me, not Hermione, you.”

“If you want to kill Harry you’ll have to kill us too!”

“You have friends here, Harry. You’re not alone.”

Doomed to walk the earth for eternity, never ageing, cursed to watch as everyone he loved lived and died in their time and he endured, a lone figure battling the forces of darkness because that was all that he knew how to…

“It’s an awfully lonely existence after all”

Alone.

“No, Harry, you listen”. Hermione. ”We're coming with you. That was decided months ago - years, really.”

“We’re coming with you”


- I don’t want to play anymore. All it does is make you care too much, and the more you care the more you have to lose”

“When are you going to get it into your head? We’re in this together!”

“HARRY!”

“I’ll go with you”

“We’ve had our chance to turn back haven’t we?”

“Maybe you don’t have to do this all by yourself mate”

“You need us, Harry.”

Standing defiantly by his side again and again.

“He must have known I’d want to leave you.”

“No: he must have known you would always want to come back.”

Coming back. Coming home.

“You think the dead we loved truly ever leave us? You think that we don’t recall them more clearly in times of great trouble?”

Dumbledore’s words. But that voice...
Harry awoke with a strangled gasp. He flung out his palm and his magic recoiled, tearing through his restraints to set the room trembling and ablaze with light. His green eyes blazed dangerously as he beheld the figure at the foot of his bed, whose hand had raised to shield her eyes from the blinding light. A flicker of recognition. He paused, chest rising and falling shallowly.

“You should know better than to try and sneak up on me, Hela” Harry said at last, lowering his hand.

“I’m Death” she said with an unapologetic shrug, “sneaking up on people is all I have.”

Harry slumped back against the headboard, running a hand through his hair tiredly; “What do you want?”

“Charming. And hello to you, too.”

“Oh, spare me the pleasantries” Harry pushed himself out of bed, “you can’t have expected a warm welcome after forcing your way into my head.”

The two looked at one another for a moment. Hela flinched at the accusation in Harry’s eyes. The voices of Ron and Hermione seemed to still hang between them.

“Why?” Harry asked roughly, “why did you show me that?”

He thought Hela wouldn’t answer, but then-

“You had to be reminded.”

“Reminded of what?”

“That you were wrong” she exclaimed, “you were wrong then, and you’re making the same mistake now. Going at it alone…it doesn’t save anyone, particularly those you love. You can self-destruct all you like, but it won’t protect them from harm, won’t make their association with you any less dangerous.”

Harry stilled, “You’re talking about the summit.”

“You need to be there, Harry.” She said firmly, “Look, I know you’re upset, but punishing yourself won’t change what hap-”

Harry laughed, cutting her off. The sound was empty, like he’d forgotten how to. “Oh this is rich,” he said slowly, “this is… a thousand years, and you show up now to lecture me on my decisions?”

He took a step forward. Even in disarray - hair outgrown into ragged curls, sweat glistening on his bare skin, wearing nothing but pyjama pants - Hela took a step back.

“You want to talk about mistakes?” He said quietly, temper simmering, “You want to reprimand me about going at it alone? The Avengers were tortured - they almost fucking died because of me.”

“Harry-”

And abruptly, Harry exploded. “I have waited…lifetimes…to get back to where I was - where I left them thinking I was dead. You think I don’t want to go back?” Angry tears sparked in his eyes, “You think I want to continue letting them think I’m dead? I miss them. Gods, I miss them every fucking day, just as I miss everyone else who’s gone.” Harry tore a hand through his hair, his expression wretched, “I lose…everyone…everyone leaves, and everyone dies…and I am going to
keep losing them because no matter how strong I get, how many spells I learn, how many people I save... it's never. Going. To be. ENOUGH...” his voice broke on a sob and Harry stumbled backwards, hand flying to his mouth as though to wrench his pain back by force of will.

Hela stared at him, seeming as shocked as he was by the outburst. “Harry…”

“I can’t.” Harry cut across her, his voice harsh and broken, “I’m sorry Hela, but I’m done. I can’t… live in the knowledge that everyone I meet, everyone I grow to care about... I’ll outlive them all. One day they’ll all be dead, and whether that’s tomorrow or a hundred years from now... they’ll be gone. And I’ll be alone. And I... I can’t…”

He turned half away from her, one hand raising to brush tears angrily from his eyes, when suddenly small, cold hands wrapped tight around his waist and Hela was clinging onto him tightly. Her head barely reached his chest. Harry froze. Death was embracing him. As in, literally. There she was, faun-like limbs enfolding him tightly.

“I’m sorry, Harry” She said wretchedly, and this wasn’t the voice of a child. This was the voice of Death, and out of anyone in the universe, she understood like no one else could. “I am so, so sorry.”

Harry closed his eyes, feeling the tears burn behind closed lids, like he was slowly breaking inside.

“How do you do it?” He rasped, “how do you... live like this?”

She gave a choked kind of laugh, “I don’t, remember?”

And abruptly Harry was struck by how young she was, how small she must have been to have been cursed to such an existence. To always be looking down, eyes wide at the life she beheld, drawing as near to the light as she dared but never touching it. Always living in the darkness. Alive, but never living.

And then Harry’s arms moved of their own accord and they were clutching one another, so different in many ways but in this alike. Her touch was ice, but he accepted it anyway.

“I’m sorry” he said at last.

She laughed shakily against his chest, “honestly, of all the insensitive, prattish things to say...”

“I’m fairly sure ‘prattish’ isn’t a word.”

“You’re an exception. You were being exceptionally prat-like.”

“You can’t just... make up a word.”

“I’m Death. You can’t tell me what to do.”

“Remind me again what my title is?”

She shoved him half-heartedly, and he laughed.

“There - that’s the first time I’ve seen you smile in a long time” she noted.

“You can’t convince me to put them in danger again.”

“Put them in danger?” She repeated, “Harry - they’re hurting.”

He flinched, “all the more reason to-”
“Harry.” She interrupted. He stopped. Swallowed.

“Look, you don’t get to choose if you get hurt in this world….but you do have some say in who hurts you. There’s a choice” she stressed, “and you can’t make it for anyone else. Ron and Hermione understood that, and they stood with you to the end.”

“When are you going to get it into your head? We’re in this together!”

Harry’s eyes went hollow.

“I… miss them” he admitted, in a voice so low Hela thought she hadn’t heard him right.

“I know,” she said quietly.

Silence.

“Why did you burn the letter?”

“What?”

“The invitation from SHIELD. The one addressed to Dr Strange. Why did you burn it?”

“Maybe the font offended me.”

She gave him a withering look. It was a good withering look. Being Death, one had the withering look down to a ‘t’.

Harry sighed, “I can’t do that again - bring that kind of chaos into their lives. They deserve better than that.”

“I think you bring exactly the kind of chaos they need, actually” she said, “and when it comes down to it, I think that you need them as much as they need you.”

Harry choked on something resembling like a sob, “I’ll hurt them, if I go. I always do.”

“You’ll hurt them more by staying away.”

They looked at each other.

“You can’t keep running from this, Harry” she said softly, “I think you know that.”

The stars blazed overhead. The fates hung in the balance.

Then, after what seemed like an age, Harry’s shoulders slumped.

“You…” He cleared his throat, “you wouldn’t happen to have a spare invitation, would you?”

Hela smiled, and her entire face transformed, “you’re Sorcerer Supreme now, Harry. I’m sure you’ll think of something.”

Her hand brushed his cheek like a strange kind of farewell. Then she turned and began to fade.

“Hela?” Harry called after her. She stopped, pale dress drifting about her with a wind that didn’t exist. “You…Who are you, really?”
“I am no one.” She said softly, turning her head slightly, “I am the beginning and the end. I am the open at the close. I am the hand in the darkness, and the light in the shade. And Harry, you cannot save me.”

“I…what?”

“You heard me” she sounded like she was smiling, “Until the next time, then.”

Harry shook his head, “you know, sometimes it feels like I’m just another piece on the board, a tool for you to place where you will.”

“Oh Harry” she gave him a look like he was being particularly dim, “don’t you get it? You’ve always been in control. I’m just another piece on the board.”

Harry looked up, a retort on his lips, but she was already gone, vanished as though she was never there in the first place.

Harry smiled, and went to get his cloak.

Soundtrack suggestion (change to this one now): Dumbledoor's army

“Director Hill? The Avengers have arrived.”

Director (formerly agent) Hill raised her head with a start. She was still getting used to that title belonging to her - ever since Fury’s abrupt resignation the day after Harry died. It had been a long time coming by many accounts.

She inclined her head towards the agent, “Have they suited up?”

“All except Mr Banner, I believe, though Mr Stark’s suit appears to be leaning more towards the Burberry kind than his usual scarlet armoured attire.”

Hill rolled her eyes, “naturally. The day that man actually does as he’s told will be a blessing to us all.”

“Shall I send them in?”

“Please.”

The door swung upon and the Team filtered in silently onto the flight deck. That in itself didn’t sit right with her. She remembered a time when it was a miracle to get them to shut up in briefings, when an inexhaustible energy seemed to spark off them. Tony would most likely have been arguing with Steve, probably absent-mindedly cracking SHIELD’s latest systems on his mobile. Bruce would interject every now and then, supporting whichever side he thought was losing. Thor would be rolling his eyes at their antics and attempting to lure Steve away from the conversation. Clint and Natasha would have been talking animatedly, so well in sync they could have been conversing in code, eyes dancing with amusement. The group had been bursting with vitality.

That had been before Harry died.

When the words “suit up” weren’t met with dull resignation. When the briefing room wasn’t just another reminder of who should have been sitting there with them. When saving the world was something to be idealised, not feared for what cost it might have.
Hell, even their snapping at each other would have been better than this. It was like the life had just gone out of them.

Hill sighed. They had all lost people - it was part of the life they led. But this…losing Harry…it had hit them hard. It had been a year since that day, but it might as well have been yesterday for the haunted look that still lingered in their eyes. They were lost, all of them.

So Hill did the only thing she could. She kept them busy.

“I’ll keep this brief’ she told them briskly, “you all know why you’re here. Your mission is simple. Play nice, make friends, and for Gods sake don’t kill anyone before the night’s out.”

“Does that include him?” Tony pointed at Loki, standing slightly to one side and watching the gathering with an abstract sort of amusement, “because my self-control has limits. Sometimes I just…punch people by accident. It happens. People’s faces just…attract my fist…”

Loki’s green eyes sharpened, “by all means, I welcome you to try. Perhaps it may provide some entertainment for the evening when I acquaint your face with the floor.”

Clint snorted, quickly disguised as a cough when Tony turned round to glare at him.

“Remind me again why he’s here?” Tony turned exasperatedly to Hill.

“He’s here because I invited him” Hill said firmly, “and I don’t take too kindly to my guests killing each other. We’ve got some serious power-houses turning up in an hour, and no one with any magical-knowledge to consult with; Loki is our best bet. So whatever shit you’ve got between you, I suggest you get over it quickly.”

Tony raised an eyebrow, but surprisingly didn’t retort.

In the silence, Loki cleared his throat.

“Why am I your best bet?” he tilted his head, “you have consultants, do you not?”

And then Hill looked him straight in the eye, “not in magic we don’t. Not since any knowledge of the sort was destroyed with phase 3.”

Bruce choked on his water.

“So Dr Strange…” Natasha trailed off.

“Strange, the Scarlet Witch, God knows who else…” Hill stood, and met each of their gazes one by one. “I think that’s as good an excuse as any to call in an expert, don’t you?”

“So I’m your expert?” Loki said drolly.

“Since Harry is no longer around, yes” Hill said bluntly, “problem?”

The air seemed to go hollow at the sound of Harry’s name. Loki’s eyes darkened for a moment.

“Not at all” he said flatly. Then he turned and stalked out.

“I’ll expect you to be stationed in the conference room in an hour.” Hill informed the team, but her eyes followed Loki, “You are not there to threaten, kill or in any way be aggressive to the people there. You are there to observe, and to extend an offering of friendship. If they initiate conflict, you retaliate, but only as a defence.” Hill’s tone was uncompromising, “the last time we dealt with
someone with Strange’s kind of power, Fury fucked it up so badly the universe almost ended. We won’t be making the same mistake again. Understood?”

“Understood ma’am” Steve said.

“Good, you’re dismissed.”

Just as the team left, Hill called out.

“Oh, and Steve?”

The Captain turned.

“Keep an eye on Loki, would you?”

“With respect, Director, I don’t think he’s a threat.”

“With respect, Captain, that’s not what I meant” the small smile curving her lips softened the rebuttal, “you’re still thinking like a soldier. I’m asking you as a friend. You know what PSTD looks like. You know what it’s like to lose someone you love. Do you honestly think Loki’s doing as well as he appears?”

Steve looked at her appraisingly for a moment. “It would have taken the world to end for Fury to even consider what you just said.”

Hill’s eyes flashed with amusement, “the world nearly did end, Captain. People change.”

“Yes they do” Steve said with a slight smile, “I’ll look out for him, Director.”

“That’s all I’m asking.”

Steve almost made it to the door this time before Hill called out again.

“Oh, and Rogers?”

He turned with a raised eyebrow.

“Compare me to Fury again and I will personally shove that Shield up your self-righteous arse and mount you my wall as a tribute to the our good nation.”

Steve gave a startled laugh and hurriedly ducked out.

Director Hill was one scary woman.

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Soundtrack suggestion - Merlin kingdom come

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Tony was right. Steve thought grimly, this was a terrible idea.

Barely half an hour into the meet-and-greet and the atmosphere was sharp enough to cut glass. Forced pleasantries and narrow-eyed stare-offs, fingers itching for weapons and eyes darting hungrily from person to person, shrewdly calculating weaknesses.

The team looked at each other, suddenly longing for the cover of night and a good sniper covering
their backs. It was not in their nature to approach a mission so...civilly.

“Oh for the...Useless, the lot of you” Loki growled. He pushed past where Tony was verbally sparring with the Scarlet Witch, heated gestures and words stringing increasing length and scientific-ness as it became a *my-brain-is-bigger-than-yours* contest. Of course, Tony had failed to notice the red lighting crackling about Wanda’s palms and the heated glow in her eyes.

Pushing Tony aside (quite literally, there was a yelp as he crashed into the floor) Loki held out his hand to the intriguing witch with the red hair and freaky eyes. They darted to him suspiciously.

“And who are you supposed to be?” She demanded, her voice heavily accented.

Loki tilted his head, and Tony started as he seemed to...change somehow. The predatory ice in his eyes heated, green irises smouldering. The rigid set to his shoulders smoothed, his movements became fluid, with an abstract sort of grace. His mouth curved into a devastating smile. The Avengers stared as Loki raised her hand to his lips. His lidded eyes remained fixed on her, and she flushed slightly.

“Loki of Asgard, at your service.” His voice was low and pitched just right, a voice that conjured dizzying images of Egyptian silk against your skin or burying your hands in the coarse fur of a Tiger...

*Christ.*

Tony shook his head to clear it. *I am not attracted to Loki. I am not attracted to Loki.*

Around him, many appeared to be having the same problem. This was Loki as they had never seen him before - Wordsmith, Seducer, Politician. The genius part was, he wasn’t even using any magic or illusion to do it. For the first time, they were struck by how *dangerous* he actually was. Where, perhaps, his true threat lingered not in his skill with magic or weaponry, but his skill in *people.* Reading you at a glance, shifting to play to your weaknesses, the master-manipulator.

That is, aside from Natasha. She was staring at Loki with one eyebrow raised, surprise, forced nonchalance, and perhaps just a tiny bit of respect.

Wanda, who was getting the full-blast of Loki’s piercing gaze and voice of sex, rocked back slightly, blinked a few times, the red glow fading from her eyes.

*“Bloody hell”* Steve whispered.

Suddenly there was a blur at her side and a blonde boy appeared. If looks could kill, Loki would be a smouldering pile on the floor right now.

“I know you” he interjected, eyes flashing between Loki and his sister. His accent grew thicker in his agitation, “you are the *psychopath* who tried to take over the world two years back.”

*“Pietro...”* Wanda scolded lightly.

“I prefer high-functioning sociopath, if you don’t mind” Loki said wryly.

Wanda looked at him appraisingly, “you have...nice manners for a villain.”

Loki inclined his head slightly, a wry smile curving his lips. The look he gave her spoke volumes.

"Long have I been told that my true talent lies in my tongue."
Wanda’s entire demeanour changed in that second. It was like watching a train-wreck in slow motion. Her cheeks pinked, her eyes flickered helplessly to Loki’s lips and back to his eyes, and the scarlet lighting around her hands fizzled out in a snap.

Tony stared.

Two minutes. Not even two minutes and Loki had her completely wrapped around his little finger. That silver-tongued son of a bitch.

“Leave it Stark” Steve’s low voice interrupted his inner musings.

Tony paused, thrusters which had been powering up now dimming. “He’s compromising the situation.” Tony protested.

“From what I can see, he’s diffusing it” Steve said placidly, “which you, by the way, did nothing to help. Did you even notice the glowing red hands?”

Tony made a noncommittal noise, “I had it under control.”

“Sure you did,” Steve rubbed his forehead tiredly, “just…do me a favour and don’t piss anyone else off? I don’t think my sanity can take it.”

Tony rolled his eyes, “I’m getting a drink.”

“Tony…”

“I know! I know…play nice, don’t fight with the other children, make the world a better place.” He gave Steve his best charming smile, “Got it, Cap.”

Steve restrained the urge to bang his head against the wall. Of all the times to get cocky…Just as Tony swept past him, however, he clasped Steve’s shoulder and put his mouth to his ear.

“Don’t look. That Dr Strange guy hasn’t taken his eyes off us since the moment he arrived.”

Steve’s mouth set in a grim line, “Rodger that. Get hold of Clint, I want eyes up high.”

“Already done.” Tony pressed something small and hard into his hand, “I’ve rigged the comms line too - switch to J channel and it’s secure, JARVIS’ servers only.”

“Good man.” Steve ran a hand through his hair, casually inserting the ear-piece.

Tony squeezed his shoulder, then strolled off - every bit the cool, arrogant genius everyone had come to see.

“Anything more than scotch and you can get it yourself” he called back to Steve, “I’m on a strictly whisky-based diet.”

Steve shook his head, hiding his smile. Undercover suited Tony better than he expected. Casually, he let his gaze wander across the crowds until he found a pair of arresting green eyes staring right back into his.

Shit, Steve thought, jerking his gaze away. Adrenaline hummed in his veins. That look had been—piercing.

When he looked again, Strange’s gaze had flitted to Loki, who was still engaged with the Scarlet Witch and her brother. Steve blinked. It now appeared Loki had turned his devastating charm to
Pietro, who was looking increasingly confused and flushed as something that was definitely not a gun protruded from his pocket.

Steve stifled a snigger - clearly it wasn’t enough that Loki could charm the pants off any female, now he was seducing the guys too. The bastard could probably have anyone in the world if he so wished.

Strange didn’t look so amused. His mouth had a downward quirk, and his eyes were troubled. Loki’s absurd flirtation had been meant to lift the mood in the room, prevent the guests from killing each other, but if anything the eyes that switched to his seemed to further drain of all light and emotion. He looked…sad. It didn’t make sense, but there was no other word that fit.

Steve put his hand to his ear, “Clint, you getting this?”

“Loki’s creepy flirting or Mr Tall-Dark-and-Broody’s pining?” Clint’s dry voice spoke into his ear, “Because both are kind of freaking me out.”

Steve raised an eyebrow, “Pining?”

“Or inwardly plotting murder, I haven’t quite decided.”

Steve signed, “has anyone made contact with Strange yet?”

“I have” Natasha’s voice spoke up on the comms line. Steve jumped. Apparently she had worked out what channel they were on and invited herself in. Ruddy spies.

“And?” Steve prompted.

“He appeared out of thin air not three inches from may face - which for the record was impossible as Loki assured us the room was warded with anti-teleportation whatnots. I, naturally, hurled a steak knife at his face, he waved his hand and it turned into a tulip. It was the smoothest thing -you know that’s my favourite flower?”

Steve froze, “You…what?”

“Tulips” she supplied helpfully. In the background, Steve thought he heard Clint laughing.

Steve forced himself not to freak out, “Right, so going back to the part where you threw a steak knife at the most powerful sorcerer in existence…”

“He popped in three inches from my face” Natasha defended, “it’s hardly my fault I reacted.”

Steve frowned. Something tugged at his memory -

“Jumpy today aren’t we? Exactly how much coffee have you had?”

“Not enough” Tony grumbled, “would it hurt for you to you know, walk?”

“You said there was coffee” Harry said, as though it was obvious.

The image was as clear as though it were yesterday. Harry apparating into the kitchen, a wide, imploring smile on his face. Tony grumbling good-naturedly.

“Fine. But no popping in my face.”

Harry’s lips twitched, “no popping in your face.”
Steve’s breath caught. The physical pain that clawed at his stomach was startling, grief long buried rearing its ugly head.

“Incoming” Clint interrupted sharply, shattering Steve’s inner-freak-out, “Strange is heading straight for you. Stop frowning, Cap, you look like someone pissed in your scotch.”

“Language” Steve muttered absently, pasting on a smile as Strange approached. The man was attired in long robes of scarlet and cerulean that billowed out as he walked, revealing glimpses of dark clothes (some sort of armour?) underneath. His body was lithe but strong - not to be underestimated. He moved with an easy kind of grace, not quite predatory like Loki’s stride, but fluid, effortless. Steve’s eyes strayed up to his face, and there he froze.

Just then, just for a moment, he could have sworn it was someone else - someone desperately familiar with the same blazing green eyes…

“Dr Stephan Strange.” Steve was relieved his voice was steady, “Glad you could make it.”

“Captain” he shook Steve’s hand, green eyes watchful. They regarded each other for a long moment, still clasping hands. Steve had the unpleasant sensation that he was the butt of a personal joke. Something about the knowing look in that green gaze was raising the hairs on the back of his neck, as though Strange was reading him like a book.

“I have to admit I’m a little surprised you accepted the invitation.” Steve broke the silence, “we were under the impression you preferred not to get involved in SHIELD’s affairs.”

“You mean that was what my file told you” Strange replied. He smiled at Steve’s innocently blank face, “your information is correct. I prefer not to get involved in any governmental affairs, secret or otherwise.”

“How that working out for you then?”

“I’m sorry?”

“The not-getting-involved.”

“Oh” Strange smiled wryly, “terribly.”

Steve laughed. There was something about Strange’s cynical honestly that had an inextricable charm to it, and Steve found himself warming to the man.

“You show us great courtesy in turning up tonight then” Steve said.

Strange inclined his head, “Tonight is an exception.”

“Might I ask why?”

Strange looked at something over Steve’s shoulder. His smile faded slightly, “As convenient as not-getting-involved can be… you can’t run forever. I know that better than most.”

Steve risked a glance back, but there was nothing unusual - just Loki greeting the newcomers, his expression blandly pleasant as he exchanged one mask for another. Politician my arse.

“I can’t imagine someone with your…abilities would have cause to run from something.” Steve observed carefully.

Strange’s green eyes flickered back to his - strong, unyielding. “Who says I’m running from
something?"

“Abort! Abort!” Clint muttered down the comms line.

Steve ignored him. “Are you?”

Strange opened his mouth, eyes bright as though he was about to say something important, then seemed to think better of it. He sighed, “It is of no consequence. Enough of me, though. The other guests have been quite eager to impress upon me tales of their heroic deeds. What of the Avengers these days?”

“Less of the avenging then we would like” Steve said resignedly, “tell you the truth, it’s been hard. We lost a member last year, and it…” he blinked, startled at the sudden tight feeling in his throat, “it hasn’t been the same.”

*Where did that come from?* Steve wondered absently.

Voices on the comms line seemed to be thinking the same thing.

“What, so we’re confiding in complete strangers now?” Natasha grumbled.

“I’m sorry” Strange said quietly, his voice a little hoarse.

Steve looked at him oddly, “it’s not your fault.”

Again Strange seemed to be on the verge of saying something, words hovering on his tongue, eyes wide and uncertain and desperate, before something stopped him and his face shut off, unused breath exhaling.

He ran his hand through his hair agitatedly in what seemed like a movement of habit, and Steve froze for a moment. For the first time, he realised his hair was the only unkempt thing about him. Dressed head to toe in what looked like ceremonial robes of scarlet and deep blue, he was every inch the perfect example but for his hair. It hung in ragged curls over his neck, cascading across his forehead in careless layers. Something about him was—

“You can tell Clint to stand down” Strange’s flat voice shook him from his inner-monologue, “I pose no threat to you or your friends. Thank you for your time, Captain.”

And without another word he was already walking off, easy grace hindered by the slump in his shoulders.

“Well that was weird” Natasha’s voice said.

Steve stared after him, then his eyes met Clint’s where he was stationed up top.

Clint cleared his throat awkwardly, “so…should I come down?”

“He called you Clint” Steve said slowly.

“What?”

“Strange. He didn’t call you Agent, or Hawkeye, or even Barton.” Steve realised, “he called you Clint. No one calls you Clint, no one except—”

“The team.” Clint said quietly. Silence. “What does it mean?”
“It means”, Tony’s voice rang out suddenly in their ears, making them all jump, “that we’ve got one hell of a security leak. JARVIS - run another check on Strange. I want footage of last 24 hours, data on his phone, his goddamn heating bill, anything that might be relevant.”

“Yes sir”

“Sorry Tony, but what exactly are we looking for?” Natasha’s voice asked.

Tony’s eyes met Steve’s across the room, “anything to suggest he knows more than he should.” Tony said at last, “I’ll keep you posted. For now, lay low, we’ve only got an hour or so left, so if you can try not to cause any world wars by then, that’d be great.”

“That’s my line” Steve muttered, but Tony had already signed off.

He sighed, instinctively scanning the room. It took a few moments - too slow - to realise something was wrong. He put his hand to his ear.

“Clint? Please tell me you’ve got eyes on Strange?”

It seemed to take forever for him to reply.

“Negative, no LOS on Strange.” Clint hesitated, “Also, Loki’s gone.”

Soundtrack suggestion - Merlin, ‘Freya’

It was not difficult to slip away - a flash of green, a few carefully placed misdirection impulses - and Loki was out of the room before anyone had even noticed he was gone. The door shut behind him, snapping out the bustle of light and noise into a startling darkness. He paused, eyes adjusting.

Just ahead of him, a figure strode away, robes billowing behind him.

Strange.

He probably should have left it there. So one of the most powerful people on this godforsaken planet had gone roaming about their top-secret facility. Big deal. He held no lingering loyalty for SHIELD.

But Loki had never been particularly good at staying out of matters that didn’t concern him.

And there was something about this man - something unsettling about the way he moved and the way he looked at them all, watching with the starving eyes of someone who wanted something he knew he couldn’t have. He had been avoiding Loki all evening, but Loki had still felt his arresting green eyes on him when he wasn’t looking.

It didn’t make any sense.

So pulling the seams of illusion about him, Loki melted into the shadows in his wake.

Instead of heading for the exit as he expected, Strange veered left and opened the doors onto a balcony overlooking the facility. He strode out and then stopped at the railing, eyes turning up to the stars overhead. Loki studied him curiously. He was standing remarkably still, apparently lost in whatever thoughts occupied him, but for the troubled downward quirk to his mouth.
Loki was just resolving to turn away and return before he was missed when Strange spoke suddenly.

“You, of all people, should know better than to sneak up on a magician, Odinson.”

His voice was low and measured, but it might as well have been a shout. Loki froze. Strange hadn’t even moved from his position.

Well. That was embarrassing.

“How long have you known I was there?” Loki asked casually, giving up any pretence and letting the illusion fizzle out.

“Honestly?” Strange turned his head, smiling slightly, “I wasn’t entirely sure until just now.”

Loki stifled a snort.

“I guessed that someone would follow me, and you were the only one who could have done it completely undetected without raising any suspicion upon your exit. Process of elimination, no more.”

“You don’t sound very alarmed.”

“That I was followed?”

“That it was me following you.” Loki stepped out onto the balcony, “you know who I am. I could have all sorts of nefarious motives for getting you out here alone.”

Strange raised an eyebrow, “if you were intending to take me on this sweeping balcony under the moonlight then whilst terribly flattered, I’m afraid I’m spoken for.”

Loki blinked, caught off guard, “that’s… not what people usually say.”

“Oh? And what do people usually say?”

“Some manner of curse, maybe a death threat or two. Usually we’re a bit busy fighting to the death by this point.”

“Do people… usually assume you intend to murder them when you start up a conversation?”

Loki inclined his head thoughtfully, “now and again, yes.”

Strange laughed. It was a startled laugh, genuine and rich and a little hoarse, as though he had forgotten how to. Loki stared, distracted by the way it completely transformed his face. For a moment there, it was almost like-

“I’ll admit I was surprised on seeing you were to be attending tonight” Strange continued, interrupting his inner-monologue, “I heard you and SHIELD have not been on the best of terms in the past.”

Loki’s gaze sharpened, but it wasn’t exactly a secret he had invaded Earth two years back. “Quite.”

“So you’re… consulting for them now?” Strange wondered aloud, “Even after everything they’ve done?”

Everything they’ve done. Loki stilled, feeling the phantom agony of his magic being torn away from
him. ‘They’ve’ done.

Now that definitely wasn’t public knowledge.

“That’s none of your business” Loki replied shortly. He turned away, “I should get back before my absence is noted. Good to meet you, Dr Strange.”


Don’t go.

The words were pleading, desperate even.

Loki paused. The man obviously knew something; leaving now would be wasting an opportunity to find out what. With an inward sigh, he turned back. The relief in Strange’s eyes was almost tangible.

“You are known to some as ‘Sorcerer Supreme’” Loki said measuredly, “how did you come by such a title?”

“Chance, really” Strange seemed happy just to be answering a question, “I knew the previous Sorcerer Supreme, and when he was killed I set out to avenge him. It was justice for a friend, no more, but apparently that earned me the right to take up his mantel. I didn’t have much say in the matter.”

Loki raised an eyebrow in mild disbelief, “I would not dismiss it so lightly - the role is seen as the highest aspiration for any magician. There are many who would give their sword arm for such a position.”

Strange made a noncommittal noise, “yeah, well they’re welcome to it. I’ve had enough of the spotlight to last a lifetime.”

When Loki didn’t reply for several minutes, Strange turned, a little confused.

“What?”

“I’m trying to work you out” Loki confessed, tilting his head, “most people are easy to read, but you…you do not make sense.”

“Cheers.”

“It wasn’t a compliment.”

“Yes it was.”

“Okay, yeah, it was” Loki sighed. “Don’t look so pleased about it.”

“I’m trying not to.”

“Try harder.”

Strange’s mouth quirked. They stood there in companionable silence for a while, both lost in thought under the star-dusted sky. The night was still and silent but for the faint murmur of conversation that could still be heard through the walls.

“I…” Strange cleared his throat, “I understand you've been involved in your fair share of battles yourself. Your Captain... mentioned you lost someone.” He looked fixedly at one point in the sky as
though it held all the answers, missing how Loki went completely still, “someone in my position… we have ways of finding things that have been lost. I may be able to help you.”

Loki’s stomach bottomed out. Suddenly he couldn’t get enough air. There was a strange ringing in his ears.

*How the Gods did he know about Harry?*

First the disturbing connotations of his knowledge of Loki’s affairs with SHIELD, now he was digging into Harry’s past? *This was a test,* he realised with a rush of fury, a ploy to gauge his reaction, to see if the rumours were true.

*Avenger. Magician. Master of Death.*

Well, to hell with that. Harry had divulged his true nature to *him* - a Trickster, Liesmith, Traitor - put his trust in Loki when no one else had. And he was damned if he was going to sell out Harry’s secrets to this *Dr Stephan Strange.*

**Soundtrack suggestion - fifteen hundred years**

“You were misinformed, Dr Strange” Loki said icily. Strange’s head jerked up. “We did not *lose* anyone - certainly none that could be found. I don’t know where you got your information, but I would be very, very careful. It is unwise to go meddling in matters that do not concern you. Last year’s events hold no consequence, and you should treat them as such.”

Strange flinched like Loki had struck him. Loki was too busy trying to wrestle his inner freak-out under control to notice. It was through blurred vision that he saw Strange drop his head for moment and draw in a shaky breath. When he glanced up at Loki again, he was trying to smile.

“Of course, you’re perfectly right” he said lightly. “Please accept my apologies; we all have people in our past who are best forgotten. I understand that.” Strange’s expression flickered, and for a moment Loki thought he caught a glimpse of something unbearably anguished before the mask came back. “Perhaps, it is for the best then, that some things… remain lost.”

Loki frowned, “Dr Strange-”

“Thank you for your time, Odinson.” His smile was almost painful to witness, “I will not detain you any longer. Please, it has been a pleasure.”

Confused, Loki took his hand and they shook. Then with a whirl of scarlet and blue Strange turned and strode off back down the corridor. In his haste, he didn’t appear to notice he was going the wrong way.

Loki stared after him with the strangest feeling that he’d just completely crushed the guy.

*Huh.*

That was when a yell-bordering-on-hysterical that would put a banshee to shame shattered the silence of the night air, and Loki almost fell over in shock.

“Oh for the love of all that is *good and sane* in this world, will you two just *stop pissing about* and *elope already%!*

His head snapped round, eyes beholding but not believing, his mouth falling open.
…you!” He managed in a strangled voice.

Hela glared at him, arms crossed as she stood on the balcony railing, “close your mouth, father. Surprise does not become you.”

To his credit, Loki recovered quickly. “What in the Nine Realms are you doing here?” He hissed, eyes darting around as though Odin himself was hiding behind a hedgerow, “You know Odin banned any contact between us…”

“Oh please” she waved her hand dismissively, “this goes way above Odin’s authority.”

“Above Odin’s…” Loki shook his head, “this is ridiculous. Now get out of here before someone sees you-”

“And let you make the biggest mistake of your life?” She raised an eyebrow, looking remarkably like her father, “sorry, dad. You forwent the opportunity to lecture me when your father cursed me to this hellish existence. And I’m being entirely literal when I say hell.”

“Look” Loki said shortly, patience hanging by a thread, “I have had a really bad night, and I am not reliving years of missed father-daughter confrontation just to tend to your whims. So either tell me why you’re here, or stop bothering me.”

She rolled her eyes, “I’ve already told you why I’m here. Weren’t you listening?”

“Hela…” he growled.

She huffed, “you know, I never blamed you for Odin’s curse. But all these years, and I still can’t see why you insist on being alone.”

“Alone protects me.” He said curtly, “alone is all I have.”

“Is that what you told Harry?” She asked pointedly.

He opened his mouth, then froze. I’ve already told you why I’m here. I’ve already told you why I’m here.

“You…you said above Odin’s authority…” he said slowly.

Her eyes glinted. “I’m Death” she said simply, “No one has any authority over me. None but-”

“The Master of Death” Loki finished. He closed his eyes, and his voice went hoarse, “Oh my God.”

“Bit slow aren’t you?”

“He’s here?”

Hela looked at him piercingly, “You tell me.”

Hauntingly familiar green eyes.

Your Captain mentioned you lost someone.

Watching with the starving eyes of someone who wanted something he knew he couldn’t have.

Don’t go.

“I’ll find you, Harry Potter.”
He ran his hand through his hair agitatedly in what seemed like a movement of habit…

“We all have people in our past who are best forgotten. I understand that.”

*Don’t you dare be late.*

“Perhaps, it is for the best then, that some things… remain lost.”

*Don’t you dare be late.*

Loki swore.

Then he was running. The corridor became a mere stride in his haste and a flash of green had the door to the conference room blasting off its hinges as he burst in. Shouts hammered into him from all sides, he thought he heard the click as hidden SHIELD agents locked their weapons onto him. He ignored them. His rapidly-adjusting eyes swept the room in a directionless rush, desperately seeking the tall figure in red and blue.

*Please still be here.*

It was just as Loki was beginning to panic and start looking for the exits that there was a break in the crowd in the centre of the room, leaving Dr Strange—Harry—standing in the middle of the deserted floor.

Loki froze. It was him. Somewhere beneath those fine clothes and smooth voice was the man who'd promised to come back, who'd died for them all that time ago on a distant world. Loki watched him standing perfectly at ease, the picture of formality and poise as he surveyed the room. The perfect actor.

Then he saw Loki.

Even from this distance the change in Harry's demeanour was stunning. His eyes hollowed out and his expression opened up, the polite smile flaking away like a layer of paint. This Harry didn't look like Dr Strange - calm and composed and controlled. He looked like he was suffering somewhere no one else could see.

Loki was moving forward before he even knew what he was doing, pushing past the crowds without breaking his gaze.

Across from him, Harry ran a hand through the ragged curls flitting across his forehead, and Loki’s breath caught. The movement was so Harry, he couldn’t see how he had missed it before.

He stopped just in front of him.

Harry cleared his throat, “if a dramatic entrance was what you were going for, I’d say a little brighter with the green flash.” He managed roughly, “I don’t think the plane overhead quite caught that.”

Up close, Harry looked utterly wretched, but his eyes were clear and blazing and brilliant as they beheld him, as though he saw the world in Loki’s eyes.

Those eyes hadn’t changed.

“You bastard” Loki breathed. Then shoving his fingers through layers of dark curls, Loki pulled Harry in and kissed him like they were back on those blasted plains and Harry had the energy of the universe coursing through him, like it was their last.
The entire room erupted into cries of shock and protest, but neither of them seemed to notice. The moment Loki kissed him it was like a dam had broken inside Harry, and everything rushed out with a single, sobbing gasp against Loki's mouth. Then Loki was being kissed back so hard and so deeply that he would have fallen had Harry’s arms not enfolded him in a crushing embrace - a desperate need to hold him as close as he could possibly get.

“'A year’ Loki’s voice trembled, ‘a year and you were just going to walk away.’

“You didn’t see me.” Harry said breathlessly, “You said it yourself-

“I lied” Loki kissed his neck, “of course I lied. I thought you were a stranger.”

Harry stilled a little, pulling back, “I might as well be, Loki… who I was, what I’ve done…”

“Don’t you dare” he growled against Harry’s mouth, “just…don’t. You insufferable, self-sacrificing-”

Anything he might have said after that was swallowed up as Harry pressed small, desperate kisses over his mouth and jaw. His breath was a shuddering gust of warmth across Loki’s skin and it felt so good it hurt. God, he’d missed him. It’s the first time in years that he's felt safe. Harry's scent - cheap soap and smouldering cinders, that burnt smell that magic leaves, leather and cotton and something distinctly Harry; pine needles and spice and the smell of rain after a storm - sweeps over him like the first rain in a drought. It calms his madness. Soothes the tattered shreds of his thoughts into calm order. He can think again. He can breathe.

“Never” Loki panted, “do that to me again.”

Harry laughed hoarsely, “done.”

They stood there for a moment, foreheads touching, breathing against each other, when the unmistakable sound of pistol slides being racked broke through their ecstatic haze. Loki froze, distantly recalling the SHIELD agent’s frantic radio-ing as he burst into the room.

Over Harry’s shoulder, he saw the same agents training sights on Harry’s back.

His eyes slitted with rage.

He'd already lost Harry once. He'd be damned if anyone was going to snatch him away. Before Harry could even turn around, Loki had coiled one hand around his waist and swept Harry behind him, shielding him with his own body.

“Fire those weapons, and I will slaughter everyone in this room.” His voice was ice and death.

Harry huffed against his neck, “Loki…”

“Step away from Dr Strange, please” One of the agents stepped forward. His own sights were trained between Loki’s eyes.

Behind him, Thor was looking between Loki and Harry in bewilderment, “brother, what-”

“Dr Strange” Steve put his hands up, “for your own safety, might I suggest you-”

“Suggest that he what?” Loki snarled, eyes flying to the Captain.

“This is your last warning” That was the agent, “Step away from Dr Strange.”
“Wait, since when do you like guys?” That was Tony.

And then suddenly the air was awash with voices, an impending crescendo of confusion and anger and noise...

“Captain-”

“Tony...”

“Step away-”

“ENOUGH” Harry’s voice rang out like a gong, and the room fell utterly silent. No one could deny the thundering power in that voice.

He stepped out of the circle of Loki’s arms, giving him a fond, exasperated look when Loki only tightened his hold, and faced the crowd. Then the entire room gaped as he seemed to...shimmer, somehow, and his face began to change. It was only slight. His hair and his eyes were untouched, but the cheekbones suddenly seemed sharper, his ivory skin darkening to a light gold, his slanted eyebrows softening, his jaw hardening, and suddenly the face they were looking at wasn’t that of Dr Stephan Strange, but of someone much, much more familiar.

Natasha’s glass shattered.

“Stand down” Steve spoke hoarsely into the silence. He turned piercing blue eyes on the agents, “lower your weapons for christ’s sake.”

“But sir-”

“Captain” He barked, his voice a whip-crack of cold anger, "you will address me as Captain. I am Captain Steve Rogers, and in the absence of Director Hill, your commanding officer." He glared at them, "and I just gave you an order, Corporal."

Guns were holstered so fast Harry wondered if he’d hallucinated them to begin with. Against his side, Loki was almost humming with tension.

“Shut this place down” Steve was saying firmly, “the summit’s over. I thank you all for coming, if you could now leave through that door there, I’m sure the agents will be happy to show you out.”

With Captain America, national icon, standing there with shield in hand and voice in full-command-mode, the room was empty in minutes but for the team.

Soundtrack - Leaving Hogwarts

They stared at Harry, and Harry stared at them, and this was it - this was the moment of revelation, the moment he’d been both fighting towards and running from for almost a millennium.

And suddenly he had no idea what to say. That he’d missed them every day for hundreds of years. That he’d fought monsters and demons and the end of the universe just to get back to their side. That he’d do it a thousand times more if it meant they would all be safe.

Harry thought all of this, but all that came out was a choked, “hi.”

Steve dropped his shield. It clattered to the ground with a ringing gong that echoed piercingly into the silence.

“It cannot be” Thor whispered.
Tony had gone very pale, “How is this possible?” He demanded.

Harry held up a hand, and they all took a hasty step back. Beside him, Loki let out something resembling a snarl. Green eyes or red, the feral flatness in his gaze was frankly terrifying. And it was for him. Harry couldn’t remember ever being the object of that much protective anger.

Slowly, very slowly, Harry turned his hand over, and a silver light danced on his palm. His eyes flashed. Then a blinding silver stag leapt out of thin air and landed lightly on the ground. A collective intake of breath seemed to ripple around the room.

“It…” Harry cleared his throat, smiling a little hesitantly, “it really is me.”

A beat of silence.

Then there was a flash of scarlet in the corner of his eye, and Harry grabbed Loki’s wrist to stop him from intercepting as a Natasha-sized-tornado crashed into him.

“You complete…and utter… arse Harry Potter!” She growled, thumping his chest with her clutch bag to punctuate it, “You turn up here after 13 months… and you say ‘hi’?!”

Harry’s chest shook with laughter, and he drew her close, enfolding her tightly in his arms.

“I missed you too, Red.” He said into her hair. He pretended not to notice the damp patches in his shirt as her tears soaked into his shoulder.

She mumbled a protest, but her arms wrapped around him in a vice-like hold. Over her shoulder, Harry raised two shining green eyes to the rest of the team, and just like that the spell broke. They broke free of their rigid stances and rushed towards him, crushing him in a suffocating embrace.

Nestled in the middle of their arms, in the middle of their cries of jubilation and astonishment and love, Harry was shaking, unshed tears brimming in jade green eyes.

“I’m so sorry” he managed, “Gods, I am so, so sorry…”

Steve swatted his head, “now now, none of that.”

“But-”

“Just accept the hug, would you?”

“Aren’t you angry?”

“Oh believe me, we’re furious” Clint assured him with a smirk, “just let us work up to it, alright?”

The others laughed, idiotic grins on their faces.

Harry shook his head, “but-”

“Harry, I love you and all, but for christ’s sake can you just listen?” The words were teasing, but Tony's voice sounded strung up with fragile emotion, “I don’t know how you’re alive, or why you didn’t tell us, and I’m sure Cap’ll make you suffer for it on the training matts later, but right now?” He spread his arms, “None of us care. I couldn’t give a flying toss. And do you know why?”

His heart broke at the confused look on Harry’s face.

“Because you’ve come home” he said, voice breaking, “we’ve got you back, and we’re never letting
“Fury.”

director Hill.”

Neither of them spoke for a moment or two, silence apart from the faint crackling over the phone line.

“As fulfilling as a silent phone call punctuated only by heavy breathing is, did you have a reason for calling?” Fury sounded put-upon, but no more than he usually did.

Hill rolled her eyes, “Don’t sass me, Nick. I was thinking.”

He made a ‘hmmf’ kind of sound, “how’s was the summit?”

Hill opened her mouth, then closed it again. Her eyes narrowed at Fury’s innocent tone. “There was a complete media blackout on the entire thing. What do you know?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Oh don’t give me that, I worked with you for years, I can tell when you’re bullshitting.”

Silence.

Hill sighed, “you knew, didn’t you. You knew he was alive. I bet you even knew he was going to be there tonight, you bastard.”

“Once a spy, always a spy” Fury sounded amused, “I’ve still got some people in the right places.”

“You’re not really getting the point of this whole ‘retiring’ idea, are you?”

He ignored her, “How did the team take it?”

“Well Loki figured it out first…”

“Loki?” Fury cursed, “Damn, I had my money on Tony.”

“I’m going to ignore that.” She said pointedly, “then Dr Strange magically transformed into Harry, Steve called a shut down, and I haven’t heard from them since.”

“Like a prince in a fairy tale” Fury muttered, “he did always like to be dramatic.”

“Well thank God you’re above all that” Hill said.

“I presume you’ve got a feed on the room, though?”

“Of course, who’d you take me for?” she scoffed. In front of her, she watched the team surround Harry in a flurry of laughter and tears.

“And?” Fury said impatiently, “What are they doing?”
“Talking.” She rolled her eyes, “now shh, I need to witness Tony cry like a baby.”

He huffed, but Hill ignored him. Her lips tugged into a smile as she saw the team wrap Harry up like a cocoon, clutching him like a dog dragging a toy back into its den.

“How do they look?” Fury asked quietly.

A cascade of laughter rippled out of the monitor - a spontaneous, infectious giggle that had her wishing she recorded it. She stifled a laugh as she saw Loki’s scandalised face when he too was dragged into the heap.

“Happy” she said at last, and for the first time, it felt like the truth. She grinned at the monitor.

“They look happy.”

Soundtrack suggestion: Loved ones and leaving

Obviously there was a lot to catch up on. As the night stretched on into the early hours of the morning, Harry’s low, musical voice wove a dazzling narrative of his life those past 908 years, spinning impossible tales of time travel and worlds beyond count, monsters and magic and war. His hands flew animatedly, pulling images out of his head and casting echoes of the fantasies he was describing when it became too hard to explain. They shimmered around them like patches of sky, glimpses of another life.

It was ridiculous and bewildering and mad. But then, this was Harry.

He must have transfigured the marble floor at one point, for it seemed unusually comfortable and rippled at the touch like water. The Avengers settled down absently, fascinated eyes fixed on the dark-haired wizard as he spoke throughout the night. Loki largely ignored them in favour of curling up at Harry’s side. He didn’t ask any questions, but the odd flicker of his eyes or incredulous raised eyebrow had Harry elaborating or explaining something mid-story.

As stories grew scarcer and the questions stopped coming, one by one the Avengers began to drop off. Harry had warded the room hours ago against any intrusion, and with a wave of his hand the floating candles he had conjured began to dim.

A smile tugged at Harry’s lips as he saw Tony’s head fall onto Steve’s shoulder, and Steve’s arm automatically wind around him in a half-asleep doze. It seemed he too, had a lot to catch up on.

Soon it was just him and Loki awake, and Harry cast a quick privacy charm so as not to wake the others.

Loki hadn’t left his side the entire time. His head was currently in Harry’s lap, eyes closed as Harry absently trailed his fingers through the long, dark locks. Despite appearances, Harry knew he wasn’t asleep. Every now and again his breath would hitch and his hand would fly out, searching until he brushed against Harry’s arm or his chest, as though reminding himself Harry was still there. The next time it happened Harry caught the pale wrist, thumb tracing the veins that stood out like rivers.

“I’m not going anywhere, you know.” He murmured, just loud enough for Loki to hear.

Loki huffed, a small breath of warmth against Harry’s stomach, “I know that.”
“Do you?”

Blue-green eyes opened. Watchful, considering. “Say…say you don’t do something idiotically martyr-like in the next hundred years or so…”

Harry raised an eyebrow, “Quite ambitious of you, my average is 80 years tops-”

“-Would you live forever?”

Harry stilled. He let go of Loki’s wrist. “Not forever, no” he said at last, “I technically stopped aging at seventeen, and I’ll live a very long time, possibly to the end of time as we know it, but I won’t live forever. Nothing does.”

Loki considered this, “so basically you’re telling me I’ve been consorting with a seventeen-year-old?”

Harry tugged his hair playfully, “please, I was seventeen before you were even toddling.”

“Oh?” And there was the glint of mischief in Loki’s eyes, “Try me.”

“Galifrey. 309,306 CE.”

“Boring. I was sneaking off to Earth years before that.”

“Beginning of the universe.”

“Watched it from my bedroom window when I was twelve. I wasn’t that impressed.”

“Birth of Time itself.”

Loki opened his mouth, then closed it. “Seriously?”

Harry laughed, impulsively bending down to kiss Loki’s forehead. Loki, however, had other ideas. Tilting back his head, he caught Harry’s lips in the middle, earning a small hum of approval that Loki immediately wanted to chase with his tongue. He lifted his head enough to draw Harry into a deep kiss, fingers slipping through dark curls of hair to tug Harry’s head down for better access to his mouth. Harry, of course, was more than willing to oblige. Loki still kissed like he’d never get enough, like he was making up for decades of being unable to take what he needed. Harry was more than happy to give it to him.

“Who’s fraternising now?” Harry breathed against his lips.

“Fraternising” Loki made a face, “I despise the word.”

“I don’t see you offering an alternative.”

“…Consorting?”

“This isn’t the fifteenth century. Believe me, I was there.”

“By God, time-travel has made you cocky” Loki rolled his eyes, “go on, what are we then?”

“Partners?”

“Too cold” Loki rebuked.
“Lovers?”
“Too intimate.”
“Boyfriends?”
“Don’t insult me.”

Harry giggled, a small, ridiculous sound that was abruptly the best sound in the world. Loki wanted to bottle it up, analyse it to see what it was that made it so fantastic. It was startled and affectionate and irrevocably delighted, as though Loki was being particularly clever and brilliant, and it was all because of him. Loki resolved suddenly to get Harry to laugh like that again, every day if he could, just to see that light go on in his eyes.

That was when he knew he was well and truly fucked.

“Guess you’ll just have to marry me then” Harry said offhandedly, slumping back next to him with a contended sigh.

“All right.” Loki said.

He felt Harry still next to him. “All right what?” He said warily.

Loki turned over to face him, “not for a few years, of course. I still have to convince Odin to let me off house-arrest and mother will strangle me if I don’t ask her first, she’ll insist on holding it on Asgard which will take a miracle to clear with the council, me being a criminal mastermind and all, not to mention the whole peace treaty business with Jotunheim which I’m still negotiating with my half-brother - I mean talk about awkward family reunions - and I probably should warn you there are an infinite number of people who would very much like to kill me, and you’d become a targe—”

“Loki” Harry said patiently, “shut up. Did you just propose to me?”

Loki paused, “I thought that was obvious.”

Harry gave a choked kind of laugh, “but…why?”

“Because I love you” Loki said, giving him a look like he was being particularly dim, “you quiet me, make the screaming in my head go away. You made me want to live again, and I can think of no other I would rather have at my side to weather away eternity with.” He cleared his throat, “and, of course, I think you’d look incredibly sexy in a tux—”

His next words were cut off by Harry’s fierce lips on his.

“Is that…a yes then?” Loki panted in between kisses.

Harry laughed against his lips, “this is insane. Yes, yes I’ll marry you. Asgard, Midgard, the moon… I don’t care. So long as I get to keep you this time.”

“Always” Loki promised, and kissed him again.

Thanks to Harry’s privacy ward, (and a handy clothing glamour) they got away with it until morning.

"Oh dear God" Tony's voice drifted into their quiet reverie, sounding mildly horrified, "tell me you were not shagging a few feet away from my face."
There was the low thump as someone hit him. Harry thought it would have been Steve.

Harry opened his eyes blearily, confused for a moment why he appeared to have fallen asleep on the floor with someone’s long limbs wrapped tightly around him. Then the events of last night caught up to him. He smiled. They must have fallen asleep like this, Loki lying against Harry’s side, his temple on Harry’s shoulder; Harry’s arm around him to hold him close. He’d startled himself awake a few times, but each time he would drift back to a profound sleep, reassured that Loki was still there, still in his arms.

Loki’s dark head was nestled in the hollow between his shoulder and his collarbone, his breath exhaling small gusts across his skin. His face was young in sleep, all hard lines stripped away, trusting and peaceful and still.

At Tony’s sigh, Harry pulled away slightly where he was entwined with Loki, smiling as Loki made a sleepy hum of disapproval.

“Make him go away” Loki grumbled, burrowing petulantly into Harry's chest. It was adorable.

Harry’s lips quirked, "You're supposed to be the scary, diabolical one. Can't you give him an evil look or something?"

"Oh please" Tony's voice drawled, "we both know Harry's the scariest motherfucker in the room."

Loki opened an eye and Clint shifted. "I trust Harry not to murder us all horribly in our sleep. Loki on the other hand..."

"Have you seen this? The man goes soft every time Harry's around. He was actually nice to me last night." Tony rebuked.

Thor barked a startled laugh. Loki mumbled against Harry's chest, something between fuck off you wankers and there appears to be a screeching pterodactyl in the room, someone kill it. Harry's guess was as good as any.

“Go back to sleep, Tony.” Harry said without looking.

“Your faith in my ability to sleep through you shagging is astounding and overestimated” Tony replied, “save it for the honeymoon.”

So much for keeping it under wraps.

Harry turned his face into Loki’s chest to hide his groan.

Loki chuckled and raised his head. “Is this where you tell me if I break his heart you’ll break my spine?” His voice was low and husky from sleep. It didn't do anything for Harry's concentration.

“No” Tony said, “if you break his heart Harry is quite capable of killing you himself, in a disturbing and inventive number of ways.”

Loki looked pleased by the thought.

"I think you're quite high on the kill list right now, actually" Harry muttered to Tony.

Tony winked at him, "I'm still your best man though, right?"

There were several muffled noises of indignation and protest from around the room from the guys. Unbidden, a smile tugged at Harry's lips, "You may have to fight for that one, Stark. I do believe you
may have some competition.”

“Alright people, look alive” Steve clapped his hands, and all those still asleep groaned, “the world’s not going to save itself.”

“Wanna bet?” Nat grumbled.

“I’ll make coffee?” Harry offered innocently, “that Jamaican-blue-mountain-bean one I used to do back at the Tower?”

Silence.

Then Loki shrieked and scrambled out of the way as six Avengers leapt up like they had been shot with adrenaline and stampeded towards Harry.

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*Soundtrack suggestion: Aeon*

*To die would be an awfully big adventure*

- *J.M.Barrie, Peter Pan*

Well, in the case of Harry Potter that was certainly true.

Harry just didn’t think the next adventure would be so…*final*.

The one to bring him home again.

Dawn was just breaking when they stepped outside. Their silhouettes cast flickering shadows on the grass, merging into one as they fell into step with one another as though they had never been apart. At their centre strode Harry, his left hand entwined with Loki’s, his right held up to light the way.

Perhaps tomorrow there would be battles and villains, victories and defeats, the attack of the media and the inevitable return of the spotlight. There would be Frost giants and Gods and the Avengers. Fury and his impending heart attack. SHIELD and their secrets.

Wizards and Heroes.

Maybe there would be danger.

At his side, Loki caught his eye and smirked. *Definitely danger*, Harry amended.

But today? Today was *theirs*.

And as the sun rose on the new day, all that remained was to put one foot in front of the other, and start living it.

*After all: this was just the beginning.*
'This was just the beginning'.
And that couldn't be more true!
As my first work, I welcome any and all feedback, as well as any requests. It is unlikely there will be a sequel to this work, but my writing is ongoing, so watch this space! You can contact me by messaging my account, or leaving a comment.

You can also now follow me on tumblr for new updates, thoughts, and writing tidbits at https://storyforsomeone.tumblr.com

So there we are; the end, for now.
Thanks again for making it all possible!
Yours ever,
littlelightsinourheart

NOTE - to any confused who read this when it was first published, my prior username has now changed to 'storyforsomeone' in order for me to keep all my pseuds together. (For some reason, that change also resulted in the previous account registering as 'deleted'). Different name, still me!

Works inspired by this one
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!