Summary

When Tony Stark, Steve Rogers, Natasha Romanov, Clint Barton, Bruce Banner, James Rhodes and Matt Murdock somehow become friends, and then the bunch of asshole teenagers become vigilantes, the world doesn’t know what it’s in for. It really doesn’t.

- Inspired by Smells like Teen Vigilantism by AKA_Green
TONY

Tony sat in silence as Howard joked with the soldiers in the Humvee. He just stared out of the window, ignoring Howard talk about his numerous affairs and laughing around. One of soldiers asked to take a photo, and Howard joked more and then –

The car in front of them blew up. Gunfire rattled the Humvee. Tony’s head snapped up.

“What’s going on?” Howard asked, alarm growing across his usually calm face.

Soldiers rushed around them, and they fell to the ground, lifeless as ragdolls.

A moment later, a bomb struck them.

Tony stumbled out of the Humvee, knowing he needed to find better shelter. He dove behind a rock. He pulled out his phone, to try and call someone, anyone. A bomb landed a few feet away. Tony’s eyes widened. The label read, ‘Stark Industries.’

Tony tried to dive away from the bomb, but the explosion pushed him to the ground, pulling away his dress shirt to reveal a bulletproof vest underneath. Blood was seeping through it. Tony winced, and then the wave of pain hit him, and he fell into darkness.

He didn’t know how much time had passed. He vaguely remembered voices yelling in languages he didn’t know. He remembered blood. And he remembered pain, a lot of pain. He remembered hearing screams, not quite realizing they were his own. He remembered faces, staring down at him. He remembered darkness.

Tony woke groggily, blinking away the dust around his eyes. The first thing he realized is that he didn’t know where he was.

The second thing he realized was the pain, a constant pain in his chest and arms and all over and he couldn’t breath and there was something in his lungs and he was drowning suffocating –

A man ran over to him, patted him on the back, whispered soothing words and slowly, slowly, Tony began to calm down. He didn’t know how long it took, but after a while he opened his eyes and stared at his surroundings. He was in a cave of some sort, with weapons and tools everywhere.

“They want you to build the Jericho missile,” the man said, “Your father was killed when he refused to do so.”

So he told them he would build the missile. Instead, he built a suit. A suit that could make him fly, set off explosions, help him escape. It was not a suit of armor. It wasn’t meant to defend him. It was meant to set him free.

And it did. He was free, but Yinsen was dead and he was in the middle of a desert and he’d been walking for what felt like days and he just wanted to sleep but he couldn’t he had to keep walking
and – He paused, pulling his shirt over his head to block out the beating sun. He kept going.

The sun was high in the sky. He’d been walking for an eternity, the ever-present heat beating down on his skin. He’d started hallucinating early on. He’d seen images of Jarvis, telling him he was a disappointment, leaving him alone in the endless desert. Yinsen, turning around and leaving, giving him up to the Ten Rings.

He thought he was hallucinating when the helicopters appeared. He’d looked up to the sky and seen them and heard them, but he could have been imagining it. It wasn’t until he felt the sound of the helicopters rattling through his chest – and boy was that a bad feeling, with the arc reactor in its metal casing – that he realized it was real, and that he might have a chance at getting out of here.

He waved his arms as best he could, with the exhaustion and the pain in his chest, but they saw him and landed. The soldiers ran towards him, and he had one moment of crippling fear at the thought that maybe it was them, and they’d found him. Until he saw the American flag, and he collapsed into the arms of the nearest soldier.

“Thank you,” he muttered, “Thank you.” Over and over again.

STEVE AND BUCKY

When he’d told Bucky that he’d wanted to join the military, in 1943 at age 14, Bucky nearly shot him. All of his illnesses made his age a bit ambiguous, so all he had to do was lie on the enlistment forms, say he was 18 and get drafted for the army. Simple. Bucky’d managed it, after all. Bucky was only a year older than him, but he looked like he was 23, and boy did that cause a lot of confusion. But then again, Bucky was gone now, off in a training camp somewhere, and Steve was stuck in Brooklyn with nothing but a drafty apartment, a chip on his shoulder the size of New York State and no Bucky to keep him there.

The next time he tried to sign up, Dr Erskine found him.

And then he was part of the super soldier program.

And then, by some miracle, he became Captain America. At age 14.

Bucky was going to be so pissed at him.

Bucky was so pissed at him. He’d turned up, all tall and not ill and strong for such a skinny guy, saved Bucky’s ass (as well as the rest of the 107th), and then carted them off back to base. They’d had a little time to talk on the march back. Mostly they’d just been happy to see each other again, that neither of them were dead. They’d barely touched on the topic of Steve’s sudden health and strength, but that was okay because they were both alive and relatively safe and together. Bucky didn’t really
take in much of what they’d talked about. He’d felt terrible, with all the drugs he was pumped with. He didn’t tell Steve.

They picked a couple of guys from the 107th, tentative friends that Bucky had made in the training camp, all young, strong fellas. There was Jim Morita, Gabe Jones, Dum Dum Dugan, Montgomery Falsworth and Jacques Dernier. They were all pretty young, for soldiers, but Bucky and Steve were still the youngest.

They became the Howling Commandos, blitzing their way through Europe, setting Nazi bases ablaze. They raised hell.

They weren’t always setting off explosions though. They spent most of their time trekking through woods, walking or by motorbike, complaining about the rations, planning, and having a laugh. It didn’t take long for the Howling Commandos to realize how young Steve and Bucky were, but it didn’t matter to them.

“What the hell are we doin’ here, Stevie” Bucky muttered, in the middle of the night, when they were on watch, somewhere in the depths of Nazi occupied France.

“I dunno, Buck. I honestly don’t know.”

“Fuckin’ hate the cold,” Jacques grumbled, shivering in his over-large boots.

Bucky turned to Steve, looking at the zip line they’d rigged, “This ain’t payback for the time I made you ride the Cyclone, is it?”

“Now why would I do that?” Steve asked, grinning.

Gabe was on Radio, Monty on binoculars.

The train grew closer.

“We got about... a ten second window. We miss that window, we’re bugs on a windshield.”

“Mind the gap,” Monty added dryly.

“Better get moving, bugs,” Dum Dum said with a cheerful grin, winking at Bucky and Steve.

Steve rolled his eyes and hooked up the zip line equipment and waited for the signal.

“Maintenant!” Jaques announced and Steve pushed off, holding on tight to the zip wire.

The roaring of wind in his ears was overwhelming, and he fought the urge to look down in the chasm below. He landed lightly, and along with a rush of screamed expletives Bucky joined him.

“That was fuckin’ terrifying, Stevie. Don’t ever make me do anything like that again, you hear me?”
“Fuckin’ freezin’, Cap. Why the fuck did we decide to this?” Gabe said as he joined them, and they all began to crouch against the wind. They made their way inside as quickly as possible, trying to get out of the cold.

But, the car was empty. Silent. A trap.

“Fuck!” Steve and Bucky rolled behind some boxes to escape the enemy fire.

They fought for what seemed like hours, but was probably only minutes, seconds.

“I had him on the ropes,” Bucky grumbled.

“Sure, Buck.”

He looked over his shoulder and shoved Bucky behind him. “Geddown!”

The blast caught them off guard, hitting the side of the train and blowing it into the canyon.

Bucky grabbed Steve’s shield and put it up in front of him, shooting at the armored man.

It all happened in a second after that, but to Steve, it felt like years.

An energy beam hit the shield dead center.

The shield when flying off to the side, and Bucky…

Bucky fell straight through the hole out into the abyss below.

In slow motion, Steve saw Bucky’s face go from determination, to horror to endless fear. The snowflakes falling through the window froze in midair, stopped falling, for one brief eternity. And then, suddenly, he was gone, the snowflakes kept falling, and time resumed. Steve grabbed his shield and threw it as hard as he could at the armored man, but he didn’t give him a second thought as he ran to the opening in the wall.

Bucky was there, dangling from a broken rail on the side of the train.

“Bucky!”

He reached out, trying to grab the rail, Bucky’s hand, anything.

Bucky looked into his eyes one final time, and whispered so quietly Steve could barely hear “I love you,” and oh so slowly Steve saw the rail bend, begin to shear, break, and Bucky was falling again. Falling down, down, down.

Steve didn’t even hear his own screams. All could hear was Bucky whispering those three words.

He didn’t really register anything else from then on. He tried to drink his sorrows away, but the serum stopped him from getting any more than slightly warm inside. It didn’t help. He always felt cold now that Bucky was gone. All he saw when he tried to close his eyes was Bucky, staring at him, with death below and nothing but one final “I love you”. When Peggy sent him on a suicide mission, he didn’t care. Like he said to Peggy, his last words over the radio: “It’s ok. I’ll be with Bucky again”. All he could think of when the ice was filling his lungs and turning him cold was that he’d see that sunrise smile again.
NATASHA

Designation: Black Widow

Age: 8

Kill count: 0

She'd never killed before. Not people, at least. She'd killed animals, of course, as practice, but she'd never killed a person. But she knew the sight of lifeless eyes staring up at her, the light fading from them. She remembered as if it were yesterday, (faded green eyes staring up at her, "Run, Natshka", blood and burning, fire, but ice in her veins, heart ready to shatter, fire, and everywhere bloodbloodbloodblood), but she shook her head. Now was not the time for memories of lost family.

She took a deep, steadying breath, and entered the building. The plan was to clamber through the air vents, enter the targets room while he was sleeping, eliminate the target, then leave via the air vents. Mission complete.

It was simple: something she'd practiced a million times.

So why was she so nervous?

She shook her head, tied back her hair, and pulled herself up into a vent. She slid through it near silently, removed the grate at the other end, and slipped into the targets room. He was unconscious; her peers in the Red Room had slipped a sedative in his drink earlier that evening. She pulled out the needle from the pouch at her belt, and weighed it in her hand. It felt heavy, even though it must have only been a few hundred grams. She'd gone over this in planning. Inject the poison into the neck. Leaves no traces, but can only be given in a lethal does through injection.

It wasn't until she was shimmying back through the air vents to the exit that she realized what she'd just done. The thought made her sick, that she'd just killed a man, stopped his heart. Did he have a family? She'd never know. She almost threw up right there, but quelled the feeling and kept going.

For Russia, her instructors had reassured her. For the Red Room.

Designation: Black Widow

Age: 8

Kill count: 1

A gunshot to a head in Washington D. C. She barely felt the nausea in her gut. Only the blank, unfeeling that the Red Room wanted, needed her to have.

"I did it for the Red Room" she muttered, "For the Red Room"
Designation: Black Widow

Kill count: 2

A stab wound to a woman’s heart in Paris. For the Red Room.

Designation: Black Widow

Kill count: 12

A slit throat in a hotel room in Moscow. Blood everywhere. She didn't care anymore.

It was all for the Red Room.

Designation: Black Widow

Age: 14

Kill count: 36

She didn't want to do it for the Red Room anymore.

CLINT

He was so excited. He was on the way back from getting his first pair of hearing aids, and he could actually hear for the first time in months. His hearing had come back slightly, in the months after the accident, but not enough for him to get by. So he’d got hearing aids, and for the first time in months he could hear Barney’s voice calling, hear his parents telling him how patient he’d been with them, hear the hum of the cars engine instead of feeling it. He could hear them talking, and it was amazing.

His father turned round in his seat to face Clint, giving him the brightest smile he could, and his mother looked away from the road for a single second, and in that single second a tractor came out of nowhere and slammed head on into the car.

Clint could hear it, in perfect clarity. The tractor hitting the car, and the crumple of the metal of the hood. He could hear his parents bones snap as their seatbelts crushed their ribcages. He himself jolted forward, feeling a bone snap, and then pressed back into the seat. And then, suddenly, the car was on
its side and Barney was wheezing beside him and he couldn’t breath and he couldn’t hear his parents breathing. And suddenly, he hated his hearing. He wished he hadn’t got hearing aids. Because then he wouldn’t have had to hear his parents’ shaky breaths stop in front of him, hear Barney try to reassure him that everything was ok.

It was Barney who dragged him out of the wreckage. They had to wait an hour before an ambulance arrived. Their parents were pronounced dead on the scene.

Clint sat up in his bed with a start. He hated that dream. He flopped back onto his bed, and waited for his breathing to slow, for his heart to stop beating it’s way out of his chest. He rolled out of bed silently, trying to be as silent as possible on the creaky floorboards of his foster home. The foster-dad would get angry if he made any noise. The foster-dad was not a nice man.

Barney always talked about getting out of there as soon as possible. They didn’t really have a reason to, and it was a roof over their heads and food in their stomachs. They both wanted to go, though. They wanted to leave and never return.

Clint got to the kitchen, silently opened the fridge, and poured himself a glass of water. He drank it as quietly as possible, and made his way back up the stairs, skipping the creaky fifth step.

Another day, he thought, just another day. Then they’d be gone.

It wasn’t until they had gone out exploring one day, and come back late, that they ran. The man had tried to hurt Barney and Clint, and Barney had told Clint to get on his bike and keep going until they couldn’t go any more. They’d gone for so long that Clint thought he was going to fall over and sleep for a year, but then they found something.

It was colourful and magical and loud and lively and everything the foster-home wasn’t. He was entranced, and so was Barney.

They were so lucky that the circus took them in.

After a while, they fell into a routine. They would wake at 6am, to Clint’s chagrin, eat breakfast, train until 3pm, and then they would open the attractions. At 6pm there would be the main event in the tent, and then at 8pm they would pack away, eat dinner and go to bed. They stayed in each town for only a few days, never the same place twice, and before Clint and Barney knew it they’d travelled across half of America.

It was a complete accident when he picked up a bow, but he was a natural. He liked the feel of the arrow between his fingers, and the bite of the string against his fingertips. He quickly grew strong with both hands, and so accurate he could split a straw in half. He became part of the circus attraction: the Archer, never missing a shot. He became one of the acts in the tent, firing arrows at a woman who span on a wheel, firing from a trapeze. After a time it became easy, second nature.

But it wasn’t all fun and games. The only way they could make money at the circus was to steal from the people who watched their shows. Clint hated it, trying to ignore the dark side of his new home. Barney, however, reveled in it. He quickly learnt how to lie and cheat and pickpocket and steal. After a time, Clint had to pick up the skills as well. He hated every minute.
But then, over 3 years after they’d joined, Barney went a step too far, stealing from one of the circus itself, and ran away. Leaving Clint alone.

The lone archer.

It wasn’t long before he ran away as well, when they were close to New York City. It wasn’t long before he was found by the child protection services and put back into the foster system. He hated it. He went back to school, for the first time in 4 years. He half wished that he hadn’t left the carnival, but every time he thought that he would shake himself, and remind himself that he had nothing there.

But then again, he had nothing in New York.

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**BRUCE**

Robert Bruce Banner’s mother had died when he was 7 years old. He never found out how, or why. All he knew was that his mother walked him to school that morning, with her kind words and sunny smile, but his father came to pick him up that afternoon, face like a thundercloud.

He didn’t understand why his father started hitting him, not really, but he was a smart child and he knew it had something to do with his mother’s death. All he knew was that when he got hit, he’d fall back into the depths of his mind and something else would come out. It took his pain for him, protected him, but it wasn’t enough. He still woke up every morning with an empty stomach, and bruises all over his body.

He didn’t know how long it kept going. He’d wake up every morning, try to cover up the bruises, then go to school and try to pretend that nothing had happened, that he was ok. Every day was the same.

Until his father pulled him out of his bed one morning, shoved him into the back of the car, and started driving. He drove them to the middle of the wilderness, and then got out. Bruce was going to ask why they were there, what were they going to do, but he thought better of it.

His father pulled him out of the car, and put him down on the ground. He told Bruce to go look for sticks, and as Bruce turned around his father leapt back into the car and drove away without a word.

Bruce tried to run after him, put his short legs were no match for the car. He stopped running, falling to his knees. He didn’t understand why it had happened.

After a time, he stood again and followed the path that his father had used to drive into the woods. He followed it for so long he felt like his feet were about to drop off, but he kept going.

And going.
And going.

Until he fell to the ground and everything went black.

When he woke, he wasn’t in the woods any more. He wasn’t in his bedroom either. He was on a bed in the middle of a room, with a man sitting at the end of his bed. He looked up as Bruce began to stir.

“Oh good, you’re awake.” He said, “Now we can begin.”

A horde of doctors streamed into the room, surrounding him and making him feel scared. The doctors strapped him to the bed with rope that hurt his wrists. They stuck needles in his arms and took measurements and he didn’t know what they were doing and he was scared and afraid what was going on –

They injected something into him.

Their hands vanished.

The bed vanished.

All there was was pain. A fire burning through him, lighting up every nerve like tinder, setting him ablaze. It was like he was being rewritten, word by word, parts of him being ripped out and replaced again, piece by piece, until all that was left was… anger. And darkness.

When he woke, he was sitting in the remains of a building, with nothing but rubble around him. His clothes were in shreds. He stood, and made his way out onto the streets. He didn’t know it, but he was in Calcutta, India. Slowly, he began to pick up the local dialect of Hindi. He became apprenticed to a local doctor so that he didn’t have to live on the streets. He had a kind of calm happiness there.

It took three years before someone found him.

They took him as he was walking back from the market, snatching him up and injecting him with something. He saw his skin turn green slightly, then fade back to it’s normal tone. He saw the red octopus insignia on their clothes. He had barely enough time to think “What?” before he was falling into unconsciousness again.

They put him in a box. Trapped him. He could feel the anxiety growing, building within him, pulling the monster within him out, shoving the real him away.

When he next woke, he was on a shore, wearing only his ripped trousers. There were pieces of the airplane he’d flown in lying washed up on the shore. The growing noise of a helicopter came from behind him, and he stood up and turned around to watch the plane land.

A one eyed man dressed in black stepped out.

“Robert Banner?”
“I prefer Bruce.”

“I’m Nick Fury, head of SHIELD. I’m here to help clean up this mess.”

For the first time in over 4 years, Bruce finally felt relief.

MATT

It was the muffled screams, the pleas for help, the suppressed punches and the silent kicks that kept him up at night. He’d been in Hell’s Kitchen all his life, but this had only started bothering him recently, when he’d been able to hear it. He lay in the orphanage bed, staring at the ceiling, trying not to flinch every time a car horn honked loudly on the other side of the block, or when a woman six alleys away got brutally beaten up by a gang of thugs.

It wasn’t right.

He had to help, dammit.

But he couldn’t, not just then. He had to wait, and plan.

One month later, he’d gathered enough equipment to be safe on the streets. He’d stayed up late every evening for two weeks to figure out the sister’s schedules. They never checked in on him after he’d gone to bed, so he could do whatever he wanted between 10pm and 6am.

So one night, he snuck out of the window and fought crime.

He had to be careful though. He got a lot of cuts and bruises from fighting muggers in back alleys, and he had to work hard to keep the sisters from noticing. Mostly he managed to get by. It was winter, so all he had to do was wear long-sleeved clothing. The long, scratchy fabric of winter jumpers hurt his over-sensitive skin and dug into the many cuts that littered his arms, but he sat through the discomfort. He was a Murdock. He wouldn’t be brought down by a jumper.

Some days, hardly anyone was out, and Matt was able to go home early and sleep. But other days, he could hear three robberies going on at once and had to decide which ones to help. It was difficult. It hurt. But it also helped people.

After two months, he sat at the breakfast table one morning, eating toast and listening to Sister Maria tell him about the weather that day.

“It’s sunny,” she said. “Not quite winter any more, I should think.”

Sister Abigail was reading the paper, when suddenly she exclaimed, “Oh goodness!” She began to read that morning story aloud.

“There’s a new vigilante in town. Starting two months ago, Police have reported that a number of in-progress robberies were stopped a mysterious man in black. Clips from various security cameras in the area, as well as eyewitness reports, show this man stopping the robbers using physical force and brutality. In a complete 180, he’s also seen protecting victims and helping them to their feet after a
robbery. He often returns to them money or personal items, then vanishes to the rooftops to look for his next fight. Media outlets around town are starting to call him ‘The Devil of Hells Kitchen’. Who is this man in the mask? Is here to help us, or something more?”

The nuns around Matt burst into chatter. He caught the words “devil”, “sinner” and “evil”. Sister Abigail turned to Matt. “What on God’s good earth do you think is going on, Matthew?”

“It’s a good thing though, right?” Matt said, “He’s helping people. The way he’s doing it is very wrong, but he’s saved a lot of people.”

Yes, Matt thought, he was wrong. But he was helping the people of Hell’s Kitchen. He was protecting his city. And that’s what mattered.

He was the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen. Its protector. Nothing was going to stop him.

RHODEY

So military school sucked. It was in the Middle of Nowhere, New Jersey. There were strict hours for everything, he couldn’t use his computer unless he asked permission, and worst of all they’d taken away one of his projects because they thought that he was trying to make a bomb.

He’d been trying to make a Wi-Fi router, thank you very much.

On the upside, the next month was going to have a whole bunch of universities visit to show off and attempt to get him to sign up. It could be a little fun, maybe, a little. He could probably make it fun, right?

He could not, in fact, make it fun.

The entire thing was just a bunch of dull lectures about what each university offered and how great they were. It was so dull and he hated every minute of it. He itched to make something, anything, if only to keep his hands busy and elevate the boredom of sitting around in lecture halls all day.

He pulled out his homework and started on the physics equations, just as the dude at the front of the room announced that the next university would be MIT, and some other boring stuff that Rhodes didn’t listen to. He kept doing his homework, not looking up or even listening that hard.

Well, until Tony bloody Stark stepped up to the podium.

How had he forgotten that Tony freakin’ Stark went to MIT?

It didn’t matter anyway. The Stark kid, who was only 14, proceeded to give a funny, engaging, and mostly off topic lecture about MIT and the shenanigans that happened there. James stayed enraptured for the entire thing, not missing a word. The rest of the hall was silent as well. Every single teacher, student and organizer was caught in the kids spell.

With a final wave, Stark finished his lecture and stepped off the podium. As soon as he left the room,
the entire audience started talking. Rhodes just sat at the back of the room, thinking. The next lecturer stood at the podium, and Rhodes turned back to his homework, once again bored.

He escaped the lectures as quickly as he could, practically running to be first out of the room. He was ahead of the crowds, so he headed to the science department to check on one of his pet projects and maybe start a new one with the ideas he’d come up with during all the boring-ass lectures.

He walked into the tech room and was halfway to his station before he realized that someone else was in there.

“Oh shit, sorry. I got lost and… Who am I kidding; I didn’t get lost. Those last few talks were so boring I sneaked out to build something. You know, this place has a pretty decent tech department.”

Rhodes stared.

And stared some more.

“What the fuck.”

Tony snorted, “Yeah, I tend have that effect on people.”

“What the hell is Tony Stark doing in my science room?”

“Well I was, ugh, fiddling with wires here to see if I could make anything interesting. I think if I reconfigure one of my robots to use this set of wiring instead the one it has now, it will have better efficiency and maybe be a bit faster. I dunno, he’s a slow bugger anyway and- wait, am I rambling again?”

“Yes. It’s chill. Keep going.”

So they sat there for an hour, debating how to better improve the systems in some of Tony’s bots. By the time Tony’s bodyguard found them, Tony and Rhodes had a sheaf of notes each and grins the size of Texas.

“Sorry, what was your name again?”

“James Rhodes.”

Tony muttered the name under his breath, and nodded. “Well, James Rhodes, it was good to meet you.”

Rhodes grinned, “Good to meet you too, Stark.”

“Bye!” He yelled over his shoulder as his guard escorted him away, leaving Rhodes standing in the middle of the room, with a sheaf of notes in his hand and a sudden emptiness in his heart.

Until, a week later, an interactive watch appeared in his mailbox with a note reading:

Rhodey,

I forgot to ask your number.
You know who I am.

He gazed down at the letter, then the watch, and grinned.

Chapter End Notes

So, welcome to my first fanfic! I hope you enjoyed. Updates will be irregular, probably whenever i’ve finished the next chapter. Thank you for reading!

This Fic is dedicated to my friend Tony, because she's always there for me when i'm stuck on ideas, or when i think my writing sucks.
Chapter Summary

Making friends. Or, in Rhodey's case, losing them.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**RHODEY AND TONY**

12:32 08.05.2009 Tony: Rhodey
12:32 08.05.2009 Tony: Rhodey
12:32 08.05.2009 Tony: Rhodey
12:32 08.05.2009 Tony: Rhodey
12:32 08.05.2009 Tony: Rhodey
12:32 08.05.2009 Tony: Rhodey
12:33 08.05.2009 Rhodey: Goddammit Tony
12:33 08.05.2009 Rhodey: I'm in lessons
12:34 08.05.2009 Rhodey: What's up?
12:34 08.05.2009 Tony: I'm boooooored
12:34 08.05.2009 Rhodey: Make something
12:35 08.05.2009 Tony: can't
12:35 08.05.2009 Tony: On a plane
12:36 08.05.2009 Rhodey: idk gimme 2 mins
12:42 08.05.2009 Rhodey: ok i'm out of lessons wassup
12:42 08.05.2009 Tony: BOOOOOREEEED
12:43 08.05.2009 Rhodey: look i have an hour for lunch break lemme get my laptop and we can play 3D chess?
12:43 08.05.2009 Tony: You're a saint
13:37 08.05.2009 Tony: Plane landing gtg thx for the game. I'll be back in like 2 hours

17:52 08.05.2009 Rhodey: Hey Tony?

17:57 08.05.2009 Rhodey: Tooony

18:02 08.05.2009 Rhodey: Tony?

21:13 08.05.2009 Rhodey: Ok i gotta go to bed. Please reply soon.

07:32 09.05.2009 Rhodey: Tony

07:33 09.05.2009 Rhodey: Tony i'm actually worried rn

07:35 09.05.2009 Rhodey: Tony?

07:39 09.05.2009 Rhodey: TONY!?

07:46 09.05.2009 Rhodey: You haven't locked yourself in your workshop again, have you?

"Breaking News: Howard and Anthony Stark vanished in Afghanistan. Their current location is unknown, but they were last reported at Gulmira Military Base doing a weapons demonstration..."

Stark Industries @starkindustries

Search parties out to find Starks. Will be found soon. Don't panic.

"The locations of the Starks are still unknown, a week after their sudden disappearance..."

"Three weeks since Howard and Anthony Stark disappeared, and searches are still ongoing..."

"Father and son Starks presumed dead after disappearance in Afghanistan"

"Maria Stark and Butler killed in freak car accident."

Stark Industries @starkindustries

All members of Stark Industries and @mstarkfoundation mourning death of @mariastark. RIP.

"Anthony Stark found in Afghanistan desert!"

"A month and a half since the disappearance of Howard and Anthony Stark, the younger was found in the middle of an Afghanistan desert. He has yet to be interviewed, and is currently staying at a hospital in France."

11:47 25.06.2009 Rhodey: Tony?

11:56 25.06.2009 Tony: Yo

11:56 25.06.2009 Rhodey: Holy shit. I thought you were dead, you bastard!

11:57 25.06.2009 Tony: Everyone did, apparently
11:57 25.06.2009 Rhodey: So what the fuck happened?

11:57 25.06.2009 Tony: Don't even ask

11:58 25.06.2009 Rhodey: Ok. You ok, though?

12:02 25.06.2009 Tony: Maybe

12:03 25.06.2009 Tony: Gtg it's night here in Paris and i'm tired af. Talk tomorrow?

12:03 25.06.2009 Rhodey: Of course. Night

"EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW! ANTHONY STARK REVEALS ALL."

"Howard Stark killed in Afghanistan. Death of a national idol."

Stark Industries @starkindustries

So glad to have Tony Stark back in business. We mourn the death of @HowardStark, RIP.

08:13 26.06.2009 Rhodey: Oh tones

"Anthony Stark back in america! Many rejoice the return of America's technological prodigy."

"Stark Insustries stock on the rise after Stark Sons return to USA"

03:52 29.06.2009 Tony: I'm back bitches

03:53 29.06.2009 Tony: I'm also bored. You up?

03:53 29.06.2009 Tony: Rhodey

03:53 29.06.2009 Tony: Rhodey

03:53 29.06.2009 Tony: Rhodey

03:53 29.06.2009 Tony: Rhodey

03:55 29.06.2009 Tony: Rhodey

04:12 29.06.2009 Tony: Rhodey

04:12 29.06.2009 Tony: Rhodey

04:12 29.06.2009 Tony: R

04:12 29.06.2009 Tony: H

04:12 29.06.2009 Tony: O
04:13 29.06.2009 Tony: D

04:13 29.06.2009 Tony: E

04:14 29.06.2009 Tony: Ok that's it i'm bored imma make something

07:05 29.06.2009 Rhody: Jfc Tony. You ok?

08:01 29.06.2009 Rhody: Please don't lock yourself in your workshop

17:22 29.06.2009 Tony: Too late :P

09:35 30.06/2009 Rhody: Goddammit Tony.

"The question on everyone's lips this week: who's going to become young genius Anthony Stark's guardian? Most suspect that new head of Stark Industries, Obadiah Stane, will step up to the task. An exclusive interview with Mr Stane confirms rumours that he will be taking part in Mr Starks custody battle. Mr Stark, however, hasn't been seen in public for over a week. Speculations as to his whereabouts..."

INPUT: keyStroke_Enter

Initiating Program/JARVIS

Loading...

Loading...

Loading...

BootUp Complete

Creator <= "Anthony_Edward_Stark", "Tony", "Sir"

Importing Preferences/Screen

Importing Preferences/Manner

Importing Preferences/Vocal

Starting System Checks

Loading...

Loading...

Program/JARVIS initiation complete.

"Hello Sir. It appears that i've been booted up for the first time."
STEVE AND MATT

He woke up to blindingly bright florescent lights. He let out a groan, rolling onto his side and pulling the blanket that covered him over his head.

"Captain Rogers?"

He shot up, looking at the woman who was sitting at the end of his bed. She was obviously a nurse, wearing what seemed to be medical scrubs. They looked different, though. Their material was odd, nothing he'd ever seen before, and the room he was in… He didn't even recognize some of the machines.

"Where am I?" He asked hurriedly. He began to assess the room around him. There were no windows, one door, and three... What were those? They were black, sitting at the top corners of the room.

"You're in hospital, Captain."

"Where?" His voice was more forceful that time, slipping into the tone he usually used when soldiers were being insubordinate.

The nurse didn't look at all phased, "New York, Captain. Near Times Square."

He sighed. At least he wasn't behind enemy lines, unless the woman was lying. "So I got found?"

"Yes. Captain Rogers, there is one other thing."

He looked at her imperiously.

"Finding you, in the Valkyrie, it took a while."

His eyes widened, "How long?"
She paused, faltering.

"How long?" He asked again, softly.

"64 years."

They discharged him from the hospital pretty quickly, handing him over to a bumbling SHIELD agent who tripped over his own feet to impress Steve. He hated it, but realized that it was going to become a common occurrence. He’d been in the ice for 65 years, and that had given America time to idolize its lost hero.

The Agent, after tripping over his words every sentence for half an hour, handed Steve a stack of books on history and recent developments, a portable computer, and a portable telephone. After a quick tour of how to use the laptop and the phone, the agent left alone in his room: a standard, one bed, one window, and one bathroom apartment.

He spent the next two weeks scrolling down Wikipedia articles and reading the books given to him. It took a while. A lot had happened in 64 years. He would go to the SHIELD canteen for meals, and try to ignore the stares of the agents as the watched Captain America walk down the halls. Then he’d go back to his room and hit the books.

It took him a little over a month to discover that gay marriage was legal.

He’d seen a lot of things before that, but it took him a while to realize that they’d changed the word from “queer” to “gay”. He read a day’s worth of articles on the matter. He didn’t leave his room. Eventually, he put down his laptop and watched the sun set over the city. He stood there for hours. And then, just like that, it all came crashing down, and he fell to the floor in tears.

All his friends were dead. He’d never be able to see Monty or Dum Dum or Dernier or Gabe or Peggy ever again. Peggy could have married her gal. And Bucky…

He could have saved him, dammit. If he’d thought a little quicker, moved a little faster, he and Bucky could have survived into this century, and be in a relationship that wasn’t illegal. If only…

Agent Coulson walked in and saw Steve on the floor. Coulson looked dumbstruck for a moment, deliberating what to do, then sat on the floor next to Steve. He didn't say anything, or ask what was wrong, he just sat, with an arm around Steve's shoulders. Eventually, Steve's shudders stopped, and the tears stopped flowing from his eyes.

He looked up at Agent Coulson. "Thank you."

Agent Coulson left without a sound, leaving Steve to the privacy of his room. He fell into his bed, and curled around a pillow. It still didn't feel right. The bed was soft as a marshmallow, and he just couldn't sleep there. He pulled his pillow and blanket off the bed, and made himself a bed in the corner of the room. He fell into it, and was out like a light.

BAM! A door slammed just across the hallway, and Steve started awake with a jolt. He didn't hear a door slam, he heard gunfire. It took him a while to realise where he was. He wasn't in Europe during a war. He was in america, 60 years in the future.

He rubbed his eyes, and stood up. He found a bag underneath the bed, and put the laptop, phone and a few notepads he'd got in it. A few spare changes of clothes. Some money that Agent Coulson had given him. Chargers for the computer and phone. Some granola bars he's been keeping. His...
He slung the bag over his shoulder, walked over to the window, opened it, and then climbed out. He scaled the building, dropping to the ground in an alleyway. He went out onto the street, and walked until he was far, far away from SHIELD.

He slept on the streets, in back alleys. The cold, hard ground didn’t bother him. He’d slept in worse, back in the cold European winters. He remembered sleeping in nothing but mud and sticks. It felt like it had only happened a month ago, but it had been sixty years.

Matt was out at midnight. It was a slow day, so he was sitting on a rooftop listening to the sounds of the city at night. A woman in the apartment below was shushing her child to sleep. A man three blocks away was having a coughing fit. A boy sleeping in an alleyway one block away had an unreasonably slow heart beat. The night was fairly cold. The boy could be dying. And Matt had nothing better to do.

"Hey, are you ok?"

The boy stirred, blinking up at him. He rubbed his eyes, and nodded.

"Oh, um, ok. You looked a bit cold, is all. Just making sure you were ok."

The teen smiled, "Nah, i'm pretty warm. You're nice, for a vigilante. You're on the news a fair bit, aren't ya?"

Matt chuckled, sitting on the floor next to the teen. "Yeah. Wasn't the kind of thing i expected. You been sleeping put here long?"

The other boy shrugged, "I dunno, a month or so. Not too long. I've slept in worse."

"Wow. Where're you from?"

"Brooklyn. And yourself?"

"I'm a local boy: Hells Kitchen. Gotta keep it safe, you know."

The boy nodded. "Yeah, I get you."

Matt's head snapped up, hearing a mugging start a block over, "On that note, I've gotta head off. What's your name?"

"Steve."

"Good to meet you, Steve. The people around here call me the Devil of Hells kitchen. Gotta run."

And with that, Matt ran off down the street.

Steve sat and watched after him. He smiled, and curled back up in his makeshift bed.

It was three days before they met again. They chatted for a bit, about a whole bunch of stuff in the news, and then Matt had to leave again. After that, it became a regular thing. Matt would find Steve, they'd talk for a while, and then Matt would hear something going on nearby and would leave.
"My ma'd be rolling in her grave if she knew i was talking with the Devil on a nightly basis." Steve said one evening.

"My dad'd be rolling over too, 'cept his nickname was 'the devil', so he wouldn't be able to say much." Matt said around his sandwich.

Matt sat down next to Steve, and handed him half a sandwich. Steve raised an eyebrow, and Matt shrugged. "I'm not gonna eat it all, i had dinner an hour ago."

Steve accepted his half, and ate it quickly. Matt listened carefully.

"How much do you actually eat out here?"

Steve shifted slightly, then sighed. "Not as much as I should, really."

Matt hummed in thought, and they sat in silence until Matt heard a robbery and ran off into the night.

"So when's your birthday?" Matt said, sitting down next to Steve with a thump.

"Fourth of July." Steve said, handing Matt some of the blanket he was curled under.

Matt chuckled, "Very patriotic."

Steve rolled his eyes and punched Matt lightly in the shoulder. "You don't say. When's yours?"

"Sixteenth of February. So how old are you?"

Steve smiled sadly, "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

That made Matt pause. "Seriously?"

Steve nodded.

"Wow."

Matt started to visit most nights after that. They'd sit and chat while Matt wasn't busy beating people up, and sometimes Steve would show off his own fighting skills. They made a pretty efficient team, but nearly died laughing when the local paper had an article the next day titled "DAREDEVIL TEAMING UP? A NEW VIGILANTE ON THE LOOSE?".

Matt was walking down the street, cane tapping rhythmically against the pavement. It was daytime, no need for his Daredevil regalia. He was passing Steve's alleyway when he heard Steve's usually steady, slow heartbeat picked up, and his breathing ragged. He turned into the alleyway, instantly rushing over to his friend.

"Steve? You ok?"

Steve groaned from his position on the floor. He opened one eye briefly. "Who're you?" He said, exhausted.
"The Devil. Come on, lets get you someplace decent."

"You're the Devil?"

Steve stared.

"Yep. Come on, up! We might be able to make it home before you collapse." Steve stood slowly, and Matt could taste the coppery blood in the air. Three stab wounds and a lot of bruises.

"My place is only a block from here," Matt explained, "But we'll have to tell the sisters a decent story. If anyone asks, you got beat up last night and I tripped over you this morning."

Steve stumbled as they walked down the street. "You... I... What? You're helping me?"

"Of course. Gotta keep my friends safe."

Steve smiled weakly. "Ok. So, Mr Devil, what's your name?"

"Matt. Nice to officially meet you, Steve."

Steve nearly fell over again, and Matt huffed. "If you grab my arm - yep, like that - then i can guide you back home. What happened to you, anyway?"

"Saw a lady gettin' beat up. That don't sit well with me. So I stepped in ta help her, and the bastard pulled out a knife. Not very pleasant, lemme tell ya." Steve said, "An' since we're playin' twenty questions, you're blind?"

Matt chuckled, "Yup."

Steve shook his head. "That's it, i'm not even goin' to question it. Weirder shit has happened."

"What can be weirder than a blind catholic vigilante teenager?"

Steve shrugged, "You wouldn't believe me if i told you."

Matt started complaining about how many times Steve said that as they turned into a side-street. Matt knocked on a door, and explained to the Sister that met them how he'd tripped over Steve on the street. Sister Angela nodded, and let them inside. Matt ushered Steve to his room, and then went to get the first aid kit. By the time he was back, Steve had fallen into a chair, his breathing shallow.

"You ok, Steve?"

Steve swallowed, and shook his head. Matt sat on the bed, opposite Steve, and began pulling out the stitching kit, threading the needle.

Steve tiredly raised an eyebrow. "Your blind, right? How're ya gonna stitch me up if you ain't got workin' eyes."

Matt chuckled. "I used to do this for my dad, way back when. He got hurt a fair bit. I'd stitch it up. I'm still pretty good."

"Your pa, huh? Tell me about 'im."

"Well, he was a boxer..."

And before they new it, Matt was done with the stitches. They sat in Matt's room for a while,
chatting about nothing. Steve's Brooklyn accent was still strong, and it didn't fade until he saw Matt two days later. Matt noticed it came back when he was tired. He didn't question it.

After all, they were friends now.

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**CLINT AND MATT**

Matt’s was fighting a mugger the night he fell into a dumpster. He’d been out, as usual, punching a man twice his age in the face to let the girl he’d been trying to mug run free. He’d put the man down, completely unconscious, and dropped him of outside the local police station. He’d gone back out, to see if there was anyone else worth fighting, and as he’d been climbing up a ladder to the top of the roof his foot slipped, and he fell straight into a dumpster.

He realised then that he probably had a concussion from when the man hit him in the head, but the world is spinning too fast for him to really think about it. He lay there for quite a while, until his head stopped spinning, at least. He groaned, and tried not to think about the smell of the trash he was lying in.

It wasn’t long after that, when he tried to sit up, that someone landed on his legs.

The boy rolled over, groaning, and nearly nailed Matt in the head with his elbow. He seemed to realize Matt was there, and he scrambled backwards instantly.

Matt sat up, clutching his head, “Ow. What are you doing in here?”

Matt could feel the air around the boys face moving into a frown. “Huh?”

“I asked what are you doing in here?”

The boy sighed in defeat, his shoulders sagging. “I’m sorry, I can’t hear you, my hearing aids have fallen out, and it’s too dark to lip-read. Any chance you could help me outta this dumpster?”

Matt shuffled for a bit, then stood, helping the other boy crawl out of the dumpster. They landed on the floor in a heap, and then helped each other get up. The boy started looking in the dumpster, and then came back out with something clutched in his fist. He dusted it off, then reached up to his ear to clip it on. The slight whirring noise that accompanied the boy’s sigh of relief told Matt that the hearing aid had turned on.

“Sorry about that,” the boy said, “I’m Clint. I’ve seen you in the news, right? The Devil of Hell’s Kitchen? Or is it Daredevil?”

Matt nodded. “Sweet. I’m doing some similar stuff to that, as well. Some Russians are trying to take over the building that I’m living in. I was in a bit of a fight with them and then they threw me off a roof. Wait, does your mask have eyeholes in it?”

Matt got thrown off guard by the sudden change in topic. “Uh, no they don’t. I’m, uh, I’m actually blind.”

Clint’s eyes widened. “You’re kidding. Dude, how are you doing all of that cartwheel shit blind?”
Matt shrugged, “The stuff that blinded me enhanced my senses.”

Clint gave a grin, “Do you know what this means?”

Matt shook his head, trying to loosen the headache that had settled there, “No.”

“We can complain about ableist jerks together and fight crime!”

Matt couldn’t help it. He laughed. “Maybe so, Clint. Listen, I’ve got to head home before this concussion makes me fall over.”

“Fair enough. Why don’t we meet up some time?”

“How about Emmy’s Bubble Tea? Tomorrow at 11?”

Clint smiled, “Sounds great. I’ll see you there.”

Matt began to stumble away down the street, but Clint called after him, “Wait, what’s your name?”

“Matt.”

He turned down the street corner, and then nearly fell over. Clint ran after him.

“Dude, I’m sorry. I can’t let you walk home like this. Lemme help.”

CLINT AND NATASHA

The Red Room was placing her in a school as a project, to see if interacting with students her age would give her a better idea of how to blend in. She was placed in a school only a few blocks from the Red Room's New York ballet studio, which was convenient for her trip to school.

She was taken to a few orientation days, and then it was her first day. She was excited but she had a jumbled ball of nerves sitting in her stomach. She'd never spoken to children her own age before.

She was introduced to the class, which was a new and slightly terrifying experience. She was asked to sit in the only spare seat available; next to a boy with sandy blonde hair and a disinterested attitude. She sat down next to him, and he looked up at her, gave a small smile and a wave, then snagged a piece of paper from a notebook. He handed it to her.

*I'm Clint*, it read.

She opened her mouth to speak aloud, but he shushed her and tapped the paper.

*Natasha*, she wrote.

He smiled. *Nice to meet you.*

*Nice to meet you too. Why are we writing?*

*I woke up late this morning. Didn't have time to find my hearing aids.*

*Does that happen often?*
Clint chuckled, a small thing, and wrote, *Yeah, unfortunately. I'm not much of a morning person.*

Natasha smiled, *Me neither.*

*Addicted to coffee?*

*Always.*

*An excellent choice. This is the beginning of a beautiful friendship, Natasha.*

Over time, he taught her sign language so that they didn't have to write their conversations down when he didn't have his hearing aids. He often lost them, or broke them, or had some other excuse not to wear them. Once, he couldn't even be bothered to come up with an excuse, and just told her that he "can't be bothered to listen to all the idiots in class today."

It got pretty exasperating very quickly, especially when her sign language wasn't very good.

"Clint, why do you only have one hearing aid?"

"Lost one in a dumpster" Clint shrugged sheepishly.

"What about the spare pair?"

"This is the spare."

Natasha put her head in her hands. "That's it. I give up."

"You up for coffee after school today?"

"Sure."

"Have you ever been to Starbucks, Nat? Do they have those in Russia?"

"Yes, there are Starbucks in Russia."

"Cool, because we aren't going to Starbucks. There's this place down the block called Emmy's Bubble Tea, but it does coffee and stuff as well. It's amazing. I may be addicted. Wanna come?"

Natasha grinned back at him. "Yep."

"Oh my goodness this coffee is to die for."

"I know, right! I could live on this stuff"

"Could Jared just leave our school and never come back?" Natasha said threateningly as she stalked into Emmy's that afternoon. "Actually, no. Can i brutally murder him?"
Clint suddenly looked up from the doodles he was doing, staring at Natasha in horror. "Oh god, will we have to hide a body? I don't want to deal with dead people today."

"I don't know. We could, i guess..."

"Nat: if we do this, we do it right. No wishy-washy 'but we're good people' crap. If we become super-villains, we're becoming super-villains."

Natasha cracked a small smile.

"What did Jared do?"

Natasha's small smile shifted back to a scowl. "He tried to hit on me. Repeatedly. And now i want to hit him. Repeatedly. Until he dies. Slowly. Painfully. Maybe i could rip out his intestines through his mouth, that would be great."

"You could always castrate him with a rusty spoon? That seems to be a favourite."

"Clint, i may not say this often, but that is a genuinely good idea."

Clint grinned, and sipped his coffee. "Ugh, i hate Jared. Does he even know how to read? I swear he's nineteen or something and he's still in school."

Natasha nodded, then stood up to order her bubble tea. She came back, sat down, and pulled out a notepad and paper.

"So, how many brutal ways are there to kill someone?"

The list was four double-sided pages before Natasha even got to the bottom of her drink. They were sitting on the roof of the building, being bored during their lunch break. Clint was lying on his back, throwing a ball to himself. Natasha was writing a history essay that she had to do before their next lesson.

"Hey, is it ok if I bring a friend round to Emmy's this afternoon?" Clint said, sitting up suddenly, startling Natasha into dropping her pen.

"Sure," Natasha said, picking up her pain gracefully. "What're they like?"

"He's cool. He's blind, so on Saturdays we sit around and complain about the world being cruel to us poor disabled folk." Clint gestured dramatically, almost falling over in his enthusiasm.

"What's his name?"

"Matt."

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**BRUCE AND TONY**

Tony leaned back in his seat, tapping his watch absently, staring at the ceiling. Being back in school again was so boring. The English teacher was droning on and on about poetry that he'd learnt six years ago and hated with a passion. The teacher asked a question, and Tony saw his opportunity. He stuck his hand up.

"Yes?"

"Can I go to the restroom?"

The teacher nodded, and he stood up and left the class. As soon as he was out of the classroom, he wandered along corridors pretending to look lost, peeking through classroom doors to see if anything interesting was happening.

Normal school was so boring. He remembered why he'd gone into university so early now.

After a while of walking, he finally found an interesting classroom. Physics. Perfect.

He opened the door, and stepped inside the classroom.

The teacher turned around as he did so, and as soon as she caught sight of him she did a double-take. He waved a hand as if to say "Keep going", and sat down next to the lonely looking kid at the back: the only kid in the classroom without a partner.

"So, what's going on today?"

The boy glanced up from the electrical wiring he was focusing on. He blinked at Tony, then explained the work they were doing in class that day. He didn't even seem to realise that Tony Stark was sitting next to him. At the end of the class, he helped The boy pack up.

"What's your name?"

"Bruce. And you?"

Tony stood dumfounded. This kid - Bruce - genuinely had no idea who he was. Tony grinned. "I'm Tony. I'll see you around, Bruce."

After that, Tony would chat with Bruce whenever he saw him. Even if it was just a passing glance in the corridor, Tony would attach himself to Bruce's side and stay there for at least an hour. He didn't care about lessons. He'd done them all anyway.

It didn't take long for Bruce to realise that he was Tony Stark, but he didn't particularly care. It didn't matter much to him.

"Hey, Tony?"

"Yes, my dear Brucie?"

"Do you want to go to this place a block away tomorrow?"

"Uh, sure. Why?"

"Well it does this really nice tea, the best in the city, at least. And it'd be nice to meet up outside of
"Yeah, I get you." Tony put a hand on Bruce's shoulder. "I'll meet you outside?"

"Sure."

"Tony. Why are you wearing a cat t-shirt with a suit."

"It works, ok!"

Bruce face-palmed. "It doesn't work."

Hi again. So updates will probably be on Sundays / Mondays from now on, now that i've got a schedule. Thanks so much for reading! Comments and Kudos are much appreciated. How'd you guys like Eurovision? That was cool.

Again, special thanks to my bro Tony, for being the ultimate best friend to end all best friends.
Respite

Chapter Summary

Avengers get together (finally!), and Steve hasn't seen Harry Potter.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"No Tony. That wouldn’t work at all."

"Bruce, cat shirts work with fucking everything."

"First: no they don’t. Second: you can't wear a cat t-shirt with a suit."

The two boys were sitting at a table in Emmy's Bubble Tea, arguing.

"I do what I want, Bruce." Tony stood up and walked over to the group of teenagers at the next table along.

"Excuse me, hi. Do you agree that cat t-shirts can go with every type of clothing."

Clint immediately said "yes", just as Natasha said "no", and Matt shrugged. Steve just sort of sat there and looked bewildered. Tony turned back to Bruce.

"Aha! I told you! At least one person on this planet agrees with me!" He turned back to Clint. "New best friend, what's your name?"

"I'm Clint, that's Natasha, Matt and Steve."

Tony nodded, looking each of them over. "Well, I'm Tony, and that's Bruce over there. He's of the opinion that I can't wear a cat t-shirt with a suit if I want to. He is wrong."

Tony pulled up a chair, and sat down with them. "So, what do you guys like doing?"

"Uh, well, usually Matt and I talk about ableist bastards. Natasha and I go to the same school, so we talk about that. Also effective ways to murder classmates and then dispose of their bodies. Steve is surprisingly knowledgable about disposal, actually," Clint said, eyeing Steve thoughtfully, "What's up with that?"

Steve grinned, "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

Matt threw his hands up in the air, "Right, that's it. That's the fiftieth time you've said that. I'm giving up. Who wants more coffee?"

Before they knew it, they'd whiled away all morning and half the afternoon. They'd laughed and talked and laughed more, and had so much fun they didn't want to leave.

"Do we have to go? I don't want to. I want to live here for the rest of my life drinking coffee and hanging out with you guys." Tony said, mournfully putting down his coffee cup.
They all nodded and voiced their agreement, but they couldn't sit around all day chatting. They all arranged to meet the next week.

"What's up, rockstar?" Tony said, wondering into Emmy's and ordering an espresso.

Clint shrugged. "Not a whole lot."

"And you, princess, how are you today?"

"Don't call me that." Natasha said.

"Whatever, princess."

"You have a death wish, I swear." Clint said, rocking back in his chair.

Matt walked through the door, a grin on his face, "What's this about Tony having a death wish?"

"Tony's being an idiot." Clint said, sipping his coffee.

"Oh yeah? No different from normal then." Matt ignored Tony's complaints and continued, "What did he say this time?"

"He keeps calling me princess. Listen, I'm not your princess. I'm your damn queen."

Tony raised an eyebrow, "Oh yeah? In what way?"

"In the ‘if you piss me off I'll have you decapitated’ way."

"That's pretty accurate." Matt said, and Clint nodded along.

"All hail Queen Natasha." Clint bowed.

Nat punched him in the arm, "Do you know when to shut up?"

Clint sipped his coffee and grinned, "Nope!"

She turned to Matt, "Why am I friends with these idiots?"

Matt shrugged, "I don't know. Maybe their stupidity encourages you to not be an idiot?"

"I think you've hit the mark there, Matt." She stood, taking her empty cup to the cashier. As she came back and sat down, a cheeky smile on her face, her phone buzzed. The smile dropped off her face as she read, and she swore in Russian.

"I'm sorry guys, I've got to go. See you soon."

And with that, she rushed out of the door, leaving the rest of them sitting at the table, slightly confused.
"If we’re not supposed to have midnight snacks, why is there a light in the fridge?" Tony said.

"That's a good point, actually." Bruce muttered, putting away his homework.

Clint sat up instantly, "I am destined for midnight snacks, guys. The fridge wills it so."

Natasha sighed, "That's not how these things work, Clint."

Matt and Steve both looked startled.

"Fridges have lights? Since when?" Matt said. Steve nodded.

"You... Fridges have always had lights, Matt. Did you just never notice? Steve, you have no excuse for why you don't know."

Steve sighed, "You probably wouldn't believe me if I told you."

Matt banged his head on the table, "Damn you, Steve. Damn you."

"You could always use vibranium." Steve muttered, interrupting Tony and Bruce's conversation; discussing Tony's robots was a past-time of theirs, and Tony was thinking about giving Dummy a few hardware updates.

Tony's head whipped round. "We could... What? I mean, great idea, but how does a guy who doesn't know about lights in fridges know about vibranium?"

Steve shrugged, "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"I'm starting to understand Murdock's hatred of that line. You use it so often it could be your new catchphrase." Tony said, shaking his head. "It's a fair point though, if we used vibranium we could..."

Tony dove back into his conversation with Bruce, forgetting the exchange almost immediately. Bruce listened, though, and made a mental note to ask Steve about it. How on earth could Steve, technological dummy, know about the rarest element on earth?
"Who's excited?" Tony said as he strolled into Emmy's that afternoon.

Clint instantly looked up, "Excited for what?"

Tony frowned at him, "Heathen. The new Harry Potter movie, of course! It's going to be released next year! Who's excited?"

"Me!" Everyone shouted, except Steve.

"What's Harry Potter?"

There was silence.

"You... You don't know what Harry Potter is?" Matt said, looking astounded.

"Even I've read Harry Potter, and I was in India when most of them came out." Bruce chipped in.

"Where have you been living, under a rock?" Tony said, flopping down into a chair, "I might actually faint. My heart is weak." He put his hand over his heart dramatically.

"We need to make you watch it, stat." Clint said, and the rest of them nodded in agreement. "Wanna come to my house? I could ask my foster parents?"

"When?"

"Anyone good for next Saturday?"

They all agreed, and the next Saturday saw them at Clint's house, sitting on the floor in their pyjamas, watching the first Harry Potter movie.

Steve had managed to find and read the first two books, but he watched the movie absolutely entranced. The style was wildly different to what little he'd seen back in the day, and there was colour and effects and the music was brilliant. He loved every second.

Clint paused at the end of the movie, bringing in the take-out they'd ordered. They started the next movie, their chatting dying down to small comments every few minutes as they ate and watched.

By the time they were at the Half-Blood prince, everyone except for Steve was fast asleep on the mattresses they had lain out.

Steve stood silently, stepping over the sleeping forms to the DVD player. He quietly slid out the film and put it back in its box. He made his way back to his pile of blankets, and lay down.

Steve sighed, looking at his sleeping friends. It had been the best evening he'd had for months: a full stomach, good company, good films. He was happy, for once, but it was bittersweet. He thought, not for the first time, if only Bucky had been here. Bucky would have loved the future. Steve shook his head, trying to dispel the thoughts. He was with his friends: now was not the time to be thinking about Bucky. But he couldn't help it. Bucky had been his life for years, and now he was gone. It barely seemed like six months ago now.
"You okay there, Steve? You look like a love-sick angsty teenager." Tony said rolling over slightly to look at him.

Steve gave a sad smile, staring at the ceiling, "I am an angsty love-sick teenager."

Tony, Natasha, Bruce, Matt and Clint all sat up.

"Who is it? Spill."

Steve rolled over to face the wall, pulling up the blankets around him, "He's dead."

They fell silent.

Tony tried to stutter out an apology, but Natasha shushed him.

"Do you... Do you want to talk about it?"

Steve turned back to face them. "Maybe. I dunno."

Bruce nodded, "It might help, you know."

Steve looked at them all, nodding. "Well, we met when we were about 4, at primary school. We live in the same apartment block, so we'd play together a lot. He was always there for me, even when I was ill or in hospital every other week. He'd always come visit as soon as school was out, even if he had chores to do or somethin' like that. And he'd always make sure I had something to do: a book or a drawing or something. Sometimes he'd skip school for me, just sit at my bedside an' talk to me. An' after Ma died he looked after me: let me share his room for a while. He was a funny fella, even back then. He'd get me dying of laughter in under a minute, even when i was grumpy as hell. An' his eyes were the clearest blue you'd ever see, like the sky on a cloudless day. He was the light of my life. We spent years together, me and him. And it wasn't until- until about a year before he died that I realised I was in love with him."

He was crying by that point, silent tears streaming down his face, into the blanket tightly wrapped around his scrunched fist.

"Oh lord," he said, wiping away his tears, "you must think I'm a right sap."

"No, we don't." Said Bruce, "We've all had depressing pasts. Yours is just as sad as some of ours."

Steve nodded, "Thanks, Bruce. You're the best."

"How- How did he die?" Matt said carefully, "If you don't mind me asking."

Steve paused for a second, debating how to answer. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

Matt fell backwards onto the mattress, covering his eyes with his arms. "That's it. I'm done. You just lost all my sympathy."

Steve chuckled weakly.

"Oh come on, Matt, give him a break." Clint said, "The love of his life died not too long ago. Wait, how long ago was it?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I-"

Matt sat up and raised his fists, "Fight me."
Steve laughed again, stronger this time. "Just kidding. About six months ago, I guess. Feels like less, though. Feels like a lot less." He stared at the floor, his blue eyes filled with sadness and longing.

"Nope nope nope nope!" Tony said, shuffling over to Steve. "We cannot have this frowny face at our sleepover. Nope. I will not stand for it."

And with that, Tony reached over and slapped Steve in the face with a pillow. Steve sat, dumbstruck, for a moment, then grabbed the nearest pillow and hit Tony with it. After that, a full scale pillow fight erupted between them.

They quickly became tired, and collapsed into a heap on the mattress. They pulled some blankets over themselves, and with that fell asleep.

Steve stayed awake a little longer than the rest of them, happily thinking on his new friends, but eventually he too fell asleep.

He slept better than he had in 65 years.

Chapter End Notes

So, hi! I know this chapter is short, and i'm not really happy with it, but next few chapters are going to be super long. Thanks so much for all your kudos and comments! Special thanks, again, to my ultimate bro Tony, for being the best. I hope you enjoyed the chapter!
Chapter Summary

Rhodey joins the gang, stories are told and they all decide to do very reckless things.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Okay, I’ll warn you now. My friends are crazy.” Tony said to Rhodey as they walked along the street to the café.

“So who is there?” Rhodey asked, stepping around a lamppost.

“Well, there’s Bruce, who I met at school. He’s chill, but don’t bring up family around him. Actually, don’t bring up family around anyone. It could end badly. Anyway, Bruce has split personality disorder or whatever, so don’t make him angry. Then there’s Clint, a total nerd, Natasha, a badass Russian ballet dancer, Matt, he’s blind and he likes making all the puns that go along with it, and Steve, Matt’s friend who sort of tags around with him. I don’t know what the deal is with any of them. They’re all insane and there is no excuse for them, but they’re my friends and I wouldn’t trade them for the world.”

Rhodey nodded along, trying to take in the rapid stream of words.

"This is it!” Tony muttered as they neared the shop. He stepped through the door, and his face broke into a grin as he saw his friends. "Guys, this is my good friend Rhodey."

Rhodey shook his head fondly. "James Rhodes, nice to meet you all."

Tony pulled up two extra chairs to the table, and fell down onto one. Rhodey sat on the other.

"So, the redhead lady is Nat, the redhead blind dude is Matt, grungy blond and beautiful in the corner is Steve, blond and disaster over here is Clint, and Mr. Chill and Green tea is Bruce."

They all waved at Rhodey.

"Yeah, hi. I'm gonna be staying here over Christmas. My parents are on tour at the moment, so my Aunt Debbie is looking after me.” Rhodey said, shuffling in his seat.

The group nodded, and went back to their conversations. Rhodey got roped into a conversation about science with Bruce and Tony, and the rest of the table seemed to be talking about the best way to dispose of dead bodies.

Rhodey overheard Natasha say loudly "But incineration only leaves behind bones!" and shot Tony a worried look, but Tony shrugged and waved it off, as if the group did it often.

After a while, the topic of conversation changed to school work, and how annoying it was, so Rhodey, Tony and Bruce joined in on the group complaining.

By the end of the afternoon, Rhodey and the gang were firm friends, even if they disagreed on some
They all stopped and stared at Clint as he walked into Emmy's that day.

The gang, including their new addition Rhody, were sitting at their normal spot in Emmy's Bubble Tea. They'd pulled up an extra chair, and they were all crammed round the table, drinking tea to keep away the winter chill that was settling and chatting amongst themselves. Until Clint had walked in from the snow, looking cold, damp and downtrodden.

"Clint. Are you okay?" Steve said gently.

"Of course he's not okay, have you seen the look on his face- what? Why are you all looking at me like that? It's true!" The glares his friends were sending him shut Tony up pretty quickly.

Clint ignored Tony. "No, I'm not okay. I'm really not." He pulled up a chair, crossing his arms on the table and putting his head in them. He paused, then sighed. "My foster parents want to move to Chicago."

There was silence.

"They what?"

"Oh, Clint." Natasha said, "When?"

"End of the semester." He grumbled.

"Well, it could be worse. It's only just gone Christmas. June's six months away, not next week." Matt said.

"It still sucks though. I'm gonna have to leave you guys. To go to Chicago!" Clint looked up from the table, and they saw that his runny nose wasn't from the cold. He'd been crying.

"Oh, Clint." Nat said, wrapping an arm around him awkwardly.

"It'll be ok, Clint. We'll figure something out." Bruce said, filling up a mug of coffee and pushing it into his hands.

He sniffed. "Thanks guys. You're the best."

Before long, Clint was laughing along with the rest of them, all thoughts of leaving banished from his mind.

A little while later, Tony's phone buzzed, and he read the text quickly. He put his head in his hands and groaned.

“Ugh. I wish I could just run away from all my problems.” Tony grumbled into his arms.

“Same,” said Clint, “That would be great.”
Steve chuckled, a sad and tired rumble from deep in his chest, “I tried that, it didn’t work. SHIELD is still searching for me.”

Matt looked up. “Wait, why is SHEILD searching for you-”

Steve smirked at him, “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“It’s a good idea, though.” Said Natasha, poking with a straw at the bottom of her bubble tea, trying to get the last few bubbles.

"What would we do, though?" Tony said head lolling back onto one of the pillows he was lying on.

"Maybe we could... Uh... Join the military?" Rhodey suggested.

The chorus of “Boooooring” had him ducking his head and mumbling apologies.

"Oh, I have an idea!" Clint said mock-excitedly, "Why don't we become kickass superheroes and destroy all evil!"

"That's... Not a bad idea, actually..." Tony said, side-eying Matt.

Natasha grinned and started spurting ideas at Tony, while Matt and sat in the corner and grinned. Rhodey’s head perked up, and soon everyone was talking about what they could do once they became superheroes.

"Guys, you do know that I was joking, right? Right? Oh my god you are actually taking this seriously." Clint put his head in his hands, “We’re all doomed.”

Bruce patted him on the shoulder consolingly, and nodded.

Rhodey went back to military school the next week, and everyone noticed the drop in Tony's mood, and how he poured himself into his projects. They made sure to stick with him, be a little more supportive. They looked after him.

Natasha had looked uncomfortable all day when Clint decided to ask her what was wrong. It was the little things, the crease in her brow, her distracted tone, but Clint noticed.

"Look, about the Red Room, my ballet studio, they- they... teach me things."

"What, like ballet?"

She glared at Tony, but continued, "It's not... It's - I -" She stopped suddenly, glancing around the table. "They... It's not just a ballet school."

"So what else do they teach you," Tony joked, "Murder?"

Natasha hung her head, but everyone at the table heard the whispered "Yes."

The grin slipped off Tony's face. "Oh Nat, i'm sorry-"

"Don't be," She cut him off, "The Red Room used to be part of the KGB. I've been learning how to be an assassin since I was four. I'm Russian. I don't need apologies."
"Okay, okay. We won't apologise. We just want to know if you're okay."

"I'm fine, it's just - it's okay if you don't want to be friends with me anymo-

"Nat, we'd never stop being your friends," Bruce cut in, resting a hand on her shoulder. "You're still you."

Tony suddenly looked up, "You know what this means."

"What?"

"Our Natasha is a Russian spy. I called it, guys. I fucking called it."

They all groaned.

"Goddammit Tony."

"Right, ok. I have a question." Tony asked a few days later, resting his chin on his hand and sipping a coffee.

"Shoot."

"If you had to run away or fake your death or whatever, what would you do?"

The group sat, and considered.

"That is a good question." Matt said, putting his chin on the table. "I'm blind, so i couldn't really run away. I'd probably have to fake my death or fake a kidnapping or something. I like being Matt Murdock, so kidnapping? And i guess i'd just hide out in another city for a bit while Hell's Kitchen flipped out."

Tony nodded, and wrote something on his phone. "Anyone else?"

"Fake kidnapping is a good idea." Nat said, sipping a mango bubble tea.

Tony snorted, "Yeah, well, I can't kidnap all of you."

"Wait, what?" Clint spluttered, nearly choking on his coffee.

"Well, you know how we said we should run away and become vigilantes? It's a great idea. Lets do it."

"Tony, that may be the worst thing you've said today."

"Well, what's wrong with it? Matt's already there, Clint and Steve do some stuff too, and Natasha-you hate the red room, right? You could use your assassin skills for good."

They thought for a while.

"Well, when you put it like that, it doesn't seem like such a bad plan." Matt said, resting his chin on his hands.
"Yeah. I mean, we all have crappy lives. We might as well."

"Matt and Bruce, I'm thinking kidnaping for the two of you. That okay?" Tony said, taking a swig of coffee and tapping a notepad with the pen he was holding.

"Are we planning our disappearances?"

"Yup. Steve and I have already decided to run away, and Clint, I think you should too. Since you're blind, Matt, and you've got a disorder that no-one cares about, Bruce. No offense."

"None taken."

"So, Nat, what should we do for you? Fake death?" Tony said, tapping his pen against a pad of paper, mulling over the options.

"The Red Room won't stop until they find a body. Also too difficult." Natasha muttered, quick and to the point.

"Okaaay then. What about kidnapping?"

"They wouldn't stop until they found me and killed you."

"Which leaves running away." Tony said

"They'd want to find me, but I guess it's the best option."

Tony nodded, "It would seem so. Now, we should get you out of there as soon as possible, so the week after Steve and I hop it, you're going to go, okay?"

"Sounds good." Natasha muttered, staring intensely at the wall, brow furrowed.

"I'll write up a plan for you, see what you think."

"Nice."

"Cool. I'll get that written up for you then."

"So, here's the plan." Tony said, shuffling some of the papers he had on the table. "Steve and I will go first, 'cause no-one will notice Steve leaving and i'm the one who knows where it is. Then, three days after that, Nat will go. Then you, Clint, we need to get you out of there pretty soon. Bruce and Matt can go last, because you're blind and we don't love you - just kidding, you two are easiest to get out. We're gonna kidnap you, ok?"

"I've set up a few fake identities, with credit cards and shit. Technically, you're now SI employees. I'm your Boss, do my bidding o' foul heathens- OW! Right, sorry. Anyway, you've all been filed for homeschooling, except me. Steve, we can sort yours out later. I need some more personal details, and I can't find you on any government systems for some reason… anyway, it's chill, and we can start
next week, if you want. Any questions?"

"Those are our files, right?" Bruce said, looking at the stack of papers on the desk.

"Yeah. They've got everything planned out; there are instructions and everything. Oh, wait, one more thing!"

He gave everyone their files, then rummaged in his bag for something. He pulled out twelve tissue packets, and put two in front of each person except Matt. Tony rummaged a bit more, then pulled out six pencil cases.

"What are these?" Matt said curiously, poking at Natasha's tissues and pencil case.

"They're disguises. You take out the 'tissue', put it over your face and activate it with this sensor right, uh, here. It changes your face structure and stuff. I made it for fun last year. And then this," he pointed at the fake pencil case, "has a whole bunch of stuff in it."

He pulled out a ball-point pen, a rubber, and a highlighter.

"The rubber and highlighter have this powder stuff in them, so when you put it in your hair it changes colour. A lot like that colourful chalk stuff you throw at people. And the pen is only to be used in emergencies. It has a tracker in it, so we know where you are, and if you click it, it sends out a distress beacon. Any more questions?"

They shook their heads.

Matt took a deep breath from across the table. "This is really happening."

Steve nodded, a determined fire in his eyes, "No turning back now."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for reading, as well as your kudos and comments. What did you think of this chapter?
Special thanks again to Tony, for being my sounding board and inspiration.
Chapter Summary

Running away happens. As does kidnapping. What a month.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Steve had read through the file twice, checking to make sure he knew what to do. He ran a hand through his hair, and scowled when some of the chalk he'd put in it came off. His hand was stained with red. He quickly washed the chalk off with some water, and stood up.

It was simple, really. He had a unforgettable manner, wore unforgettable clothing. He didn’t stand out unless he was Captain America. He was silent; he could fade into the walls. He’d had so much practice avoiding trouble (or not) as a kid in Brooklyn.

He walked out of the alley he was in. He crossed a few blocks to the nearby Starbucks, and bought himself a coffee. He sat in the shop until he’d finished, then walked out and went to the nearby Barnes & Nobles. He checked the time, 11:24. Tony would be there in roughly ten minutes, so he browsed his way to the history section: their chosen meeting place. He flinched at the number of books about Captain America there, and instead looked at books with more ancient history. Apparently, they’d discovered much more about the romans than when he had been in schoo-

Tony tapped on his shoulder. He looked radically different with the glasses and blonde hair. They said their hellos, then left the book shop and went to a nearby toilet. They washed the chalk out of their hair and put in another colour, then put on the face masking technology that Tony had invented.

Steve couldn't help but think that Bucky would have loved something like this. He always did love technology: the radio, the Stark Expo just before they left. He would have loved to be in the future, with all this technology. He would have loved every goddamned second.

"You okay, Steve?" The question was out of the blue, and it shook Steve out of his spiralling thoughts.

"Yeah. It's just- I miss him."

Tony nodded knowingly, "It'll get better."

Steve nodded. That was what people kept telling him.

"It won't get any easier, the pain will still be there, but you'll feel it less, you know. But some days it'll be hard. You'll feel it like a brick to the chest. But it'll get better."

Steve sighed, "I know, but it's hard to believe sometimes. I keep turnin' round an' expecting him ta be there."

Tony nodded, and they left the toilets. They walked to a parked car half a block away, and drove it to the closest parking lot to Tony's house. They walked the last few hundred metres, and let themselves in to the secret back entrance of Tony's house.
"You're only seventeen. How'd'ya have the keys already?"

"Nicked 'em off Obie."

Steve shook his head in exasperation, "Only you, Tony."

They stepped inside the building.

"Uh, Tony?"

"Yes, Steve?"

"You said this was a house, not a mansion."

Tony laughed.

That evening, they called Natasha, Clint, Matt and Bruce, who were sitting in Emmy's Bubble Tea in a much smaller group than usual.

"Hey, folks, how y'all doing?" Asked Tony, sitting amongst a gigantic pile of pillows they had scavenged from Tony's old bedroom.

"We're good," said Bruce, "Did you get there okay? No trouble?"

"We're cool, Brucie, no trouble. Can't wait for you guys to come visit, I might die alone and celibate with only Steve for company."

There was a scrabbling noise over the phone, followed by a pained "OW!", and then Steve was on the line. "Sorry about that, guys. Tony was making the face at me, you know the one, where he wiggles his eyebrows or whatever. How was school?"

"It was okay. Slightly boring, dare I say it, without Tony there. Why am I going last?" Bruce muttered.

"'Cause you're probably easiest to get out, besides Matt and Clint. Sorry." Tony said.

"Nah, it's okay." Bruce muttered.

"We should probably go, guys. It's about time we should get home."

"Okay, nice. See you all soon!"


Nick Fury put his head in his hands. "You have got to be shitting me."
The two spent the next week exploring the mansion and setting up a suitable base.

The first thing Tony had done was installing JARVIS to the intercom and security systems, so that he could have his friend around to help. After freaking out Steve and the subsequent introduction, Steve and Tony found that the sassy comments were the best thing that could possibly happen when working.

They converted one of the empty rooms in the basement to a temporary communications base, filled with computers, laptops and tablets.

They found a kitchen, which they quickly cleaned and asked JARVIS to buy some things online to stock it with.

They found an empty swimming pool in the basement-basement, and as soon as they saw it Tony got the look in his eyes that screamed ‘I’m going to invent something that is possibly dangerous’.

“Come with me, Steve. I’ve got a plan.”

They spent the next day finding as many blankets, mattresses and pillows as possible and throwing them into the drained swimming pool. They strung up blankets over the top, leaving holes for the ladders. They squished all the mattresses so that they fitted in a grid, and then covered it in layers of pillows and blankets. Somehow, Tony managed to cover the walls in pillows as well, but Steve wasn't quite sure how.

After they had finished, there was nothing but a bouncy, fluffy, soft heaven for them to use as a bedroom. Tony managed to set up a portable projector in there, as well as a fridge and microwave in the surrounding room.

They spent the next few days in Tony's workshop, cleaning up the leftover mess and organising the tools, then setting up Tony's hologram technology and the bots DUM-E, U and BUTTERFINGERS.

They spent the remaining three days either in Tony's workshop, drawing and designing things they would need as vigilantes. Tony had already fabricated comm units that fitted into their ears or helmets, goggles for the people that needed them, and shoes that were almost completely silent, hardwearing and comfortable. Steve drew sketches of random objects, and some designs for his new suit, which was no-where near as flashy as the old one. It was a deep, almost midnight blue, with the central star made of metal - hopefully it contain lock-picks or similar - and very little red and white.

The two teenagers spent their evenings watching crappy TV on the projector in the swimming pool, and chatting over pizza. It wasn't long before Tuesday arrived, and with it their anticipation for Natasha to join them.

Natasha gripped the rim of the porcelain sink, trying to steady her shaking hands.

"One last time," she whispered to herself.

One. Last. Time.
After today - after this mission - she'd never have to kill for the Red Room again. Never have to slit a throat without knowing why. Never have to shoot a man for no reason. Never have to kill for a country she no longer cared for.

She'd be free.

Except she couldn't remember what free was anymore.

She could barely remember a life without the Red Room, a life without them controlling her every move. The closest she had been in the last few years was going to school, talking to Clint, making her own friends without them being involved.

But what would her life be life without them?

She didn't know. They'd been there for so long, teaching her, guiding her; she could barely remember a life without ballet and murder.

But she knew that whatever she did, anything would be better than the Red Room.

(Months later, she would read a file, and discover she was wrong. There was something worse. She was lucky not to have that fate.)

She was going to live with her friends, be free of the Red Room. And that was what mattered.

She released her grip on the porcelain sink, shakily exhaled, and smiled. One last time, she thought, one last time.

It was easy to slip out of the Red Room's grasp, really. It was harder staying out.

She headed towards Emmy's Bubble Tea, like she normally did on non-mission week days. Half way there, she slipped into a Starbucks, going straight to the loo. She locked the door, and instantly pulled out a folded duffel bag from within her school bag. She took off her hoodie and changed into a different pair of jeans, then quickly covered her hair with black chalk and pulled it up in a bun. She put the face-changing technology that Tony had designed over her face, activating it, and slid on a pair of glasses.

She stepped out of the bathroom barely three minutes after she went in, looking like a completely different person. She ordered a coffee to go, then took a taxi to a random apartment building on the other side of the city.

She repeated this twice more, each with a different hair colour and style and each time changing an item of clothing. She was fairly sure she lost at least two tails with the first switch, and another with the second. She caught the subway as close as she could to Tony's mansion, then walked the last half-block to her destination.

"Nat, you're here!"

She arrived at the secret entrance bang on time, at six o' clock that Tuesday, a week after Steve and Tony had arrived. After an introduction to JARVIS and a quick tour of the basement and basement-basement, they settled down for bed in the converted swimming pool.
"A swimming pool? Really?"

Tony shrugged, "It's a good idea, okay. It works."

The rest of the week found Natasha, Steve and Tony lying amongst the pillows, talking about weapons they could use and what their suits could look like. Tony usually wandered off to go work on a project in the workshop, and Natasha and Steve found a gym on the third floor that they could use. It had a high ceiling, and there was enough equipment to keep them busy for years. Steve immediately gravitated towards the punching bags and the boxing ring, and started to get familiar with them. He quickly got bored of the light bags. He wanted to train with some weapons, but there weren’t any.

Well, before they found the weapons vault.

They had been exploring the first basement when they'd come across a locked room. It was the first they’d seen, but Steve used his lock-picking skills to open the door. They were surprised, to say the least, when they found an entire room full of weapons. They were also surprised that Steve had lock-picking skills, but more at the weapons than Steve.

There were handguns, shotguns, rifles, knives for throwing and cutting and stabbing, nun chucks, a bo staff, Billy clubs, a bow and arrows, retractable blades, katanas, swords, and a whole range of other offensive weapons.

Natasha instantly started testing the collection of knives, and halfway through doing some test moves with a smaller blade turned to Tony and asked, "Hey, is it okay if i keep some of these?"

Tony looked over and thought for a moment. "Knives, sure, as long as you tell me which ones you take out. Write it on some paper on the door or tell JARVIS or something. Guns, I'd rather you didn't, really: only for missions and stuff."

Natasha nodded, putting the knife back in its sheath and attaching it to her leg. "Cool, thanks."

By the time Clint arrived at the mansion, in much the same way Natasha had, it had been two and a half weeks since Steve and Tony had vanished. The ruckus in the media over Tony's disappearance had been long enough to cover up Natasha, who earned only a small column in the local newspapers over the disappearance of a ballet student at the Red Room Academy of Dance.

He arrived on the Friday a week after Natasha, and was quickly given a tour of the mansion as well as an introduction to JARVIS. Clint also got shown the newly discovered weapons vault, and the four teens spent a whole afternoon sitting in there examining weapons. Clint took his favourites, a throwing knife, a bow and a short sword to try out in the training room.

It had been a while, but there, then, with the pull of the string, the fletching of the arrow between his fingers, the quiver at his hip and on his back. It was like coming home. He was an archer.

His skills were a little rusty from disuse, as his foster parents hadn't let him practise, but he soon got back into it, hitting every target (moving or stationary) dead centre. He loved the training room, and spent most of the week there practising his archery.

He spent the rest of his time in the kitchen, eating or drinking coffee, or talking with the other teens.
around the house. Tony spent most of his time in his lab, doing who-knows-what, and Natasha spent her days trying to teach Steve boxing and martial arts that weren't learnt off the streets.

They all spent their evenings in the den among the blankets, sitting, watching bad TV and chatting. Tony started doodling some schematics for a bow, and spent most of his time with Clint rambling about different types of arrows he could use, with Clint chipping in every so often.

They started fabrication of Natasha, Steve and Tony's suits, since they had figured out their details the week before. Everything was going surprisingly to plan.

Tony started doodling some schematics for a bow, and spent most of his time with Clint rambling about different types of arrows he could use, with Clint chipping in every so often.

Tony spent all of that Sunday preparing for their next great escape, down in the garage preparing the van. The other teens barely saw any of him that day.

"Hey, guys," Tony yelled, early on Monday morning, wandering out of the room and pulling a set of keys out his pocket, handing them to Clint, "We're gonna go kidnap Matt. We'll be back this afternoon. Bye!"

The others waved back, as if it was completely normal to go out and kidnap someone.

"You ok, Clint?"

"Oh yeah, I'm chill. Just gonna go kidnap my best friend for this morning. Maybe hang out in a swimming pool at an abandoned mansion this afternoon. Normal stuff."

Tony snorted.

He drove the van close to Matt's school, just round the corner from where he would normally walk. Clint climbed into the back, pulling the door so that it would take only a spilt second to open.

They pulled their ski masks over their faces, and waited, Tony drumming his fingers on the steering wheel in boredom.

Suddenly, Matt rounded the corner, and Tony hit the accelerator, swinging round the corner. Clint flung open the door, grabbing Matt and hauling him into the back of the van. Clint tried to ignore his friend's strangled cry, slamming the door shut, and Tony hit the accelerator again, speeding down the street.

"Sorry," Clint said, sitting down next to Matt on the floor, as if they were chilling instead of taking part in a kidnapping. "You okay?"

"I'm fine. I've got my stuff, just like you asked me."

"Nice," Tony said from the front seat. Tony and Clint pulled off their masks, and they all quickly put on their disguises, as usual: different hair colour, different clothing style, and the face modifiers.

Tony slid the van neatly into a garage, ordering them to get out and into the next car. Tony quickly pulled off the number plate of the old van and screwed on a different one, then leapt into the next car.

"All buckled up? Right, lets hit the road."

They drove the car around New York for a bit, then arrived at a garage close to the mansion just before noon. The three walked the rest of the way, and soon they were introducing Matt to their new abode.

Matt was very surprised at JARVIS, but took to the AI well. He quickly learnt his way around the
mansion, and even told them about a billiard room they hadn't known about, as well as a wine cellar that Howard had had on the second floor.

They spent that evening playing snooker at the snooker table, with Matt showing off horrifically and winning by miles, and Clint at a close second.

"I have lost to a blind man," Tony groaned dramatically, "I am doomed."

"Yeah, but only because you're crap at snooker," Natasha laughed, "Even I did better than you, and I've never played before."

Tony grumbled about unfairness, but then quickly ran downstairs and came back up with a deck of playing cards and some poker chips.

"Who's unfair now," Matt grinned, "you're inviting a blind man to play cards."

"Actually, these cards have slightly raised numbers and suits. I recon you should be able to tell, right?"

Matt felt over some of the cards, and agreed that he could tell what each card was. They sat down at the circular table, and began to play a friendly game of poker.

Before long, it became apparent that Steve could not be trusted with dealing, at all. While his shuffles looked completely normal, he won every hand he dealt as well as the next two hands. He bankrupted Tony, Clint and Natasha, and got into a two player game with Matt that was very evenly matched, given that they could both cheat and card count to high heaven.

They stopped the game after another two hours, when it had got to the point of so much cheating between both of them they had reached a stalemate. The collapsed into the den, and fell asleep near instantly.

They spent the rest of the week playing cards or snooker, or in the training room testing the facilities. Matt and Natasha both agreed that Steve was a terrible fighter. He was strong and fast, but his technique was terrible; it relied on being stronger than the opponent. Matt taught him boxing and a little muai thai, and Natasha taught him some kung fu and mixed martial arts moves.

Tony, as usual, spent most of his time in the workshop, emerging only for coffee and meals. Sometimes they didn't even see him before they fell asleep in the den. By the last few days, Steve had started dragging or carrying him from the workshop, quite literally, and throwing him into the den. The gang often pinned him to the ground by sitting on him so that he couldn't leave, but it usually ended up with a massive sleeping pile of teenagers.

The evening before they were supposed to collect Bruce, Steve woke everyone up with a nightmare. He was curled up in the blankets, muttering under his breath in at least three languages, shaking, and occasionally screaming or crying out.

It took Natasha, Tony and JARVIS to wake him and calm him down, though none of them asked what the nightmare was about. In the time they had been there everyone had had at least one nightmare, and no-one asked what they were about.

Most of the teens quickly settled back to sleep, and were out within minutes, but Steve stayed awake, staring at the blanket ceiling, thinking about Bucky, and wondering if any of the Howling Commandos were still alive. Eventually he nodded off, sleeping peacefully until morning.

The next day saw Tony running around like a headless chicken, trying to find Steve and Natasha.
"Steve, Nat? Where are you? We need to kidnap Bruce!" Tony yelled.

Matt looked up from the braille book he was reading. "They're in the training room upstairs. I don't think they can hear you."

Tony nodded, muttered a quick thanks, and ran upstairs. "Guys, we were meant to be outta here five minutes ago."

There was some rather impressive swearing in no less than twelve languages between the two teens, and they all ran to the basement, grabbing the stuff they would need along the way.

They leaped into the van, and Tony hit the gas before any of them had time to put on their seat-belts. They raced through the New York traffic, just getting to Bruce as he was walking past. Steve and Natasha pulled black ski masks over their heads and leaped out of the van, grabbing Bruce and covering his mouth. They slammed the door of the van closed, and Tony hit the gas.

"You okay? Got your stuff?" Steve said, putting Bruce down.

Bruce nodded, looking slightly shaken and ill.

They arrived at the mansion a little over an hour later.

Clint and Matt ran to meet them in the entrance hall, and there were hugs and cries of joy all round.

Tony and Matt gave Bruce the tour, and introduced him to JARVIS.

"Sirs and Lady, Mr Rogers would like to invite you to the kitchen." Came the soft british tone of JARVIS from the intercom, as they were sitting in the converted swimming pool den three hours later.

The group made confused faces at each other, but shrugged and wandered to the kitchen. By the time they were halfway there, a wide grin had made it's way onto Matt's face, and he took off running, pursued by the other four teens. They skidded into the kitchen to find Steve, with streaks of flour on his face and in his hair, with a large, homemade apple pie in front of him and a proud grin plastered on his face.

"Apple pie, to celebrate us all being here. My ma's recipe."

"Nice!"

The teens all sat down, quickly eating the massive apple pie.

"So, who knew that our Steve could bake? Where'd'ya learn, Mary Berry?" Clint said around a large mouthful.

Steve shrugged, "My Ma taught me, before she… before she died. I was never much good, but it's a fair sight easier with good ingredients and a steady oven."

They all nodded silently. All of them knew the pain of loosing a parent.

Tony cracked the awkward silence, "Well, that was bloody brilliant. Who's gonna fight me for seconds?"

The scrabble for second helpings was a short but furious battle, as Steve quickly pulled out a second pie from the oven. Cheers filled the table, and the teenagers sat happily, and ate.
"Sir, we have a problem."

The junior SHIELD agent stood in the doorway of Nick Fury's office, looking slightly terrified of the directors wrath, and with good reason.

Nick Fury sighed irritably, "When do we not? Come on, give it to me. Is it an update on Stark? Or Captain Rogers?"

The junior agent handed over a file, and coughed slightly. "No, sir. You asked the department to keep you apprised on the Robert Banner situation. We got reports from the agent tailing him that he vanished."

Fury's head snapped up from the report. "Are you telling me that we lost Bruce Banner, along with Captain Rogers, Anthony Stark and the suspected assassin?"

The junior agent shook slightly, "Yes Sir."

Fury scowled, "Then fucking find them!"

The young agent practically ran from the room.

Chapter End Notes

SHIELD losing its shit is a favourite of mine. Be prepared for a lot of that over the coming chapters.

Tony is basically my beta at this point, and I'm sorry for her. She has to read all of my shit out of order with no context. Props to you, bro.
They were all happily sitting in the den, lying relaxed amongst the blankets. Friends re-runs were playing from the projector, even though no-one was watching, too busy chatting amongst themselves, and Tony had just brought in some pizza.

"So, let's get down to it," Tony spoke up excitedly, clapping his hands together in glee, "Names! Who's got suggestions?"

"You mean, for us as vigilantes?" Steve asked thoughtfully.

Clint looked up slightly, "I was thinking something like Bullseye or Deadshot. They used to say I was a real hawkeye back at the circus, and, you know, I do love archery."

Tony shook his head slightly, "I think Bullseye is a little obvious. Maybe more subtle?"

"And Deadshot makes it sound like you're a shitty backstreet killer. Don't go with that." Matt chimed in.

Clint nodded, taking in the advice.

"What about Hawkeye? That's what they called you at the circus, right?" Bruce spoke up, quietly.

Clint's head snapped up. "Hawkeye. Yeah, I like it. Hawkeye." He said the name a few times, getting used to the sound of it on his lounge. "Anyone opposed to that?"

They shook their heads.

"So, Hawkeye. Anyone else?"

Matt perked up slightly, "They call me the Devil of Hells Kitchen in the papers, or Daredevil. My pa used to be a boxer, and he was called the Devil, and my nan always used to say that the Murdock boys had the devil in 'em. I'd quite like sticking to one of those."

Tony nodded thoughtfully, "Stick with Daredevil, I think, 'cause it's shorter."

Matt nodded, and Tony asked if anyone else had ideas.

Natasha shifted slightly among the pillows she was sitting in. "In the Red Room they would call me the Black Widow. I- I don't want that name to be for an assassin anymore."

They all nodded thoughtfully, and agreed that the name would be good for her.

"I think I might go with some family roots. Howard always used to say that Stark men were made of Iron, so I kind of want to be Iron Man. I guess it kind of fits, as well, 'cause my suit looked like iron when I first made it."

They all agreed to that one too.

"So, Steve, we have Daredevil, Hawkeye, Iron Man and the Black Widow, who are you gonna be?"
Steve paused, hesitant, and as he stared at the ground determination sharpened in his eyes. "Captain America."

"Dude, why would you want to be Captain fucking America?" Tony said bitterly, "He died years ago. It'd be too much of a legacy to live up to, and the people would throw a shit fit."

"You're not gonna believe me, even if I tell you."

"Is that what this is?" said Matt, who looked offended at the sentence.

Steve took a deep breath, and said, "My full name is Steven Grant Rogers, I was born on July Fourth, 1929, and I became Captain America at age fourteen."

There was a stunned silence. Seconds ticked past, with the teens staring at Steve in shock. He sat defiantly, staring back at them, unmoving.

"You were right, I don't believe you." Matt said shakily.

"You're trying to tell us that you're an eighty year old national icon, who, if you hadn't noticed, is dead."

Steve pulled his shield out of the bag at his side.

There was another stunned silence.

"Holy shit, you're Captain America."

Steve nodded silently.

"So the man that you were hopelessly in love with - that was James Barnes?" Bruce murmured softly.

"Bucky," Steve said, "His name was Bucky."

There was a pause, as Steve stared sadly at the floor, the pain evident in his misty eyes.

"Wasn't homophobia a real thing back then?" Tony pointed out.

Steve nodded, and explained, "It was illegal. Massive shock when I found out it was okay nowadays. I ran away from SHIELD just after that."

"James Buchanan Barnes, huh?"

Steve's eyes bored into the floor, growing misty at the thought. "Even when I had nothing, I had Bucky."

Steve's tears were completely silent, but the team noticed his shaking shoulders. Clint immediately wrapped his arms around Steve, as he was closest, and before long the entire team was group-hugging him.

He gave a weak, teary chuckle. "Thanks, guys."

Half an hour later, Steve had stopped crying, and they were all getting cramps from hugging so long, they separated.

Tony shuffled awkwardly, and spoke up "I guess today is secret spilling day." Tony began pulling of his shirt, revealing the multitude of scars littering his torso, as well as the arc reactor lodged in his
"Is that... Is that inside you?" Bruce said, nervously, poking at the rim of the blue glow.

Tony nodded tersely. "When I disappeared in Afghanistan... I got kidnapped by these bastards called the ten rings. They ordered my father to build the Jericho missile, then killed him when he refused. And then they asked me to do it. I got tortured for a bit. Then I build this suit that blew up the place and flew me out of there. In the process, the third friend I'd ever made died. So yeah, that was traumatising. But I got hit with a whole bunch of shrapnel from a bomb, so I had to make this magnet that stops it from reaching my heart. This little battery is what's keeping me alive."

They stared in shock at the light in his chest, while Matt cocked his head to one side, listening to a noise only he could hear, and frowning.

"So that's what that buzzing was. Doesn't it restrict your breathing? I've been meaning to ask, really, but it sounds like it causes a whole bunch of problems." Matt said.

Tony tensed his shoulders, but relaxed again fairly quickly. "It... Yeah, a little. It's not too bad, so I can't really complain."

Steve shuffled a bit, and before they knew it they had settled down for the night, a massive tangle of long, teenage limbs and blankets. They pulled up some crappy TV show, and sat watching for about half an hour before Bruce spoke up.

"You... you know how my fa- my biological father, he abandoned me. In the woods. When I was seven. It was- was just after my mother passed away, and he- he hated me. I have dissociative identity disorder, so when he- he hit me, I'd never feel it. It was always the other guy. And when he left me there, in the woods, I got found by these... people. They experimented on me, except it didn't go as planned. The other guy - that is my other personality - whenever I get angry he sort of... comes out. Except the genetic modification they did, it only worked on him. So when we get angry there's this blank space in my head, and he... he hurts people. Except, the thing is, he doesn't look like me. He's big, and green, and he's violent and angry. And... I don't know what to do, sometimes, because I can't control him when I get angry. Just... I know this changes things, and I'll understand if you don't want me to be part of the team."

Matt, who was lying closest to Bruce, pushed a blanket over him, and wrapped his arms around Bruce's shaking shoulders. They lay there for a moment, silent.

"We don't think any less of you, Bruce. You're still our friend. You haven't changed just because we know a bit more about you." Natasha said, leaning over and wrapping an arm around his leg in comfort.

The rest of the team voiced their support, and eventually they drifted off to sleep to the sound of crappy TV and each others breathing.

"We didn't finish names yesterday," Tony said chirpily after his fourth cup of coffee that morning.

They all nodded over their breakfast of cereal and toast.
"So we had Iron Man, Hawkeye, Black Widow, Daredevil and Captain Frickin' America, which just leaves you, Brucie. Any ideas?"

Bruce stared contemplatively into his tea, before looking up to say, "The… other guy. He- he calls himself Hulk. I guess it's as close to a name as I'll ever get."

Tony's grin was bright enough to light the room. "Yay! We're all named now! Black Widow, Iron Man, Captain America, Hawkeye, Daredevil and the Hulk. I like it. All we need now is a team name, or whatever. Any ideas?"

They fired off quite a few very quickly, but most were bad ideas. There were suggestions like the Justice League, but that was disqualified since it was a comic series, the Revengers, which everyone agreed sounded odd, the Iron Legion, which Tony thought was a great idea even though no-one else agreed, and finally:

"How about the Avengers? We've all had someone close to us die, haven't we? Maybe we could be avenging everyone who's died because of crime?" Bruce said.

"That," exclaimed Tony, who was rather hyper at coffee cup number seven, "is the best idea I've heard out of the bunch."

"Who here votes in favour of the Avengers?" Matt cried dramatically, using his spoon as a judge's gavel on a drinks mat. All of the teens raised their hands. "Then I here declare that we are the Avengers!"

They clinked their mugs and glasses together, as if they had celebrated a victory after a battle, and giggled their way up to the training room, leaving Tony space in his lab to design and make their suits.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter looked longer when it was on my phone, i swear. What did you think? We're getting along to the more expositional chapters, but if you hang on until chapter 9 we'll start to see some action.

Special thanks to my friend Tony, for being my inspiration.
"So this," Tony said, sitting at the massive table in his workshop with the other teens, holding up a small device that looked a lot like a hearing aid, "is a comm unit. We're gonna use them to talk to each other during missions, right? They're pretty simple. You turn them on like this, and turn them off like this, and it'll auto-tune to our frequency. They muffle outside noise if there explosions or gunshots, so that you don't damage your ears too much. Clint and Matt, I've made special ones for you. They'll fit over the tiny hearing aids I gave you, Clint, and for Matt they'll play super quiet. Any questions? No? Okay, cool. Now we can move onto suits and weapons."

He pulled out a sheaf of papers from the folder at side, then stood up and rummaged through his desk, grinning as he pulled out a few more papers. He wandered back to the table and pulled up some holographic files.

"All right," he grinned, sitting back down, "so I have all of your suit designs from Steve, and some weapon designs that I want to show you."

He opened the holographic files, and then there were six suits lined up in a row. Five of them had very similar bases: covering every part of the body, with lots of protection, and sturdy gloves and boots. They all had multiple lock-picks and tracking devices sown throughout. The last seemed to only have that as an under suit, covered with a metallic suit.

The first design had the base, with a helmet that covered the eyes and had tiny devil horns coming off the helmet.

"Matt, sorry you can't see this, I can't get hard light holograms to work, so… I have this instead," Tony handed over a piece of paper with raised lines in the outline of the suit. "Smooth bits, which are black, are stab proof, but I could only make the bumpy bits bullet proof. They're the red bits."

"Cool, thanks."

Tony swiped away that hologram, and brought up the next one: Clint's. It had an extra coat, and a helmet and goggles. Tony explained that it had built in padding on the forearms for archery, as well as arrowheads stored in extra pockets and in the lining. There were also multiple knives in sheaths throughout the design, and a holster for a hand-gun if necessary. The paper version of the design had the same features, but coloured with black and purple. Clint nodded in approval.

The next design was Natasha's, and it had the same boots, helmet and goggles as the rest of them, but with more knives and daggers throughout. There was an extra pair of lock-picks, as well as two extra gun holsters. Built into the gloves were tasers that she could turn on when she wished. Tony explained that everything would be black, except for a few red sections.

Bruce's suit was slightly different. It had the same protective qualities as the others, but the material was far stretchier and the top half was made to rip if Bruce hulked out. There were only weapons for self defence, at Bruce's request: a taser, and a gun with stunning bullets in it.

Steve's suit was heavily based on his old Captain America regalia, being predominantly navy blue, with red gloves and boots. The helmet had been modified to more of a hood, and the star in the centre was made of dull metal. There were a few white stripes throughout, but few other colours.
There were magnets on the back and arms for the shield, and lock-picks in every item of clothing.

Finally, Tony grinned as he explained his suit. The weapons were designed to incapacitate, not kill, and it could fly, as well as being sleek and dangerous. It was obvious to the team that Tony was proud of his new creation. The schematics were slightly more detailed than the others, but that was because it was far more specialised equipment than what the others used.

"So, this armour of yours-" Steve started.

"It's not armour, it's a suit." Tony cut off vehemently.

"Sorry, Tones, this suit. Does it have a power source?"

Tony paused, then rapped his knuckle against the metal in his chest. "Battery, remember? It'll power the suit."

Steve nodded in understanding.

Everyone asked a few more questions, which Tony answered as best he could. Eventually, he told them that the suits would be ready in three days, and shooed everyone but Bruce out of his workshop.

Clint and Steve had had no formal training, even though Steve was raised in Brooklyn with a fighting attitude and had joined the army. Natasha and Matt had taken it upon themselves to teach them proper hand to hand combat skills, and after a week they were doing fairly well.

"So, how’m I doin’?" Steve asked Natasha after a sparring match one afternoon.

"Well, your technique is definitely not better. You don't rely on your own strength and agility anymore, and you're leaving less openings for attackers. But I think you still take a lot of hits, just because they don't hurt you as much. We'll work on that for now." Natasha answered.

Matt took a moment to consider Clint as well. "Clint, your balance and defence are good and you hit pretty hard, but your technique is sloppy. Needs a bit of work. You have a high chance of breaking a wrist in a real fight situation, so maybe we should teach you some more unorthodox moves, throw in some elbows, flips and headlocks. Pretty good otherwise."

Clint smiled, "Cool. Let's get to it, then."

"So, what's the plan for this vigilante stuff? Who are we going after first?" Steve said that night, as they were lounging around eating pizza and watching crappy TV.

"I dunno, maybe we should do a few small weapons caches first, maybe bust a drug ring or two."
You know, the simple stuff.” Matt mumbled around a slice of pizza.

Clint raised a finger, reaching for another slice, “Can I just take a moment to point out that you’re calling taking down fucking criminal activity the ‘simple stuff’.”

They laughed, while Matt made excuses about being ‘a vigilante already, guys’

“So after the simple stuff, what next?” Natasha said, trying to keep her food out of Clint's reach.

Matt finished a mouthful of pizza, “I dunno, any ideas?”

“What about Stark Industries? They’re pretty corrupt, right? No offense, Tony.” Bruce pointed out.

Tony waved it off, reaching for a slice of pepperoni pizza, “Nah, it’s chill. And I don’t think we should take my company down yet. My master plan was going to be to wait until I’m 21 and then clean it out from the inside.”

“Nice. That’s your business, I guess. Wouldn’t want to ruin it.” Steve shrugged.

“So who’re we going to take down instead?” Clint asked.

“Maybe AIM industrial? They’ve got a pretty shifty record, right?” Bruce suggested quietly.

“They’re the bastards that experimented on you, right?” Tony muttered darkly.

“And me.” Matt spoke up softly.

“Seriously? The chemical shit that went in your eyes?” Clint asked.

Matt nodded in confirmation.

“Oh, yeah! If you give us a bit of time, JARVIS and I can do some hacking and see what they’ve got going on under the table. While I’m on that, anyone else?” Tony said, pulling his laptop towards him and tapping into the keyboard.

“Maybe a few terrorist groups? What about the guys who went after you, Tony?” Natasha suggested.

“The Ten Rings? Fuckers,” Tony spat out, “Yeah, we should destroy them as soon as possible. Maybe some of my company’s illegal weapons caches as well, just to be on the safe side.”

“How about Hammer Industries?” Clint chipped in.

“Good idea. I’ll hack them as well. Give me five minutes.”

They finished off their pizza in silence as Tony tapped furiously at the keyboard.

“So, on the list of shit that Aim’s been doing: human experimentation, obviously, a whole bunch of bad for the environment stuff, like chemical dumps, eco-terrorism and whatever, illegal biological weapons development, and sale of said weapons,” Tony kept listing, “Death, because a whole bunch of stuff is getting destroyed in the human experimentation and weapons development, property damage, and connections to the terrorist organization the Mandarin. Who the fuck is the Mandarin?”

“According to news articles and internet searches,” JARVIS began, “the Mandarin is a terrorist organization dealing in illegal weapons, specifically chemical and biological ones. They seem to be very secretive, as there is little information on them that I can find through surface searches.”
“Sure thing, thanks J. Hammer has… a lot of the same stuff, actually. Illegal weapons development, said weapons are a crime against weapons development as well. I could make stuff better than that stuck in a cave. Oh wait, I did. Anyway, they’ve also dealt with various other terrorist people, been doing stuff against the environment, generally breaking their government contract. Hey, look, there’s some child labour in here as well. Dickheads.”

“Ok, we have to get round there ASAP.” Steve said, scowling.

“Yeah. Well, if we plan for weapons caches, small shit in NYC, AIM and Hammer, that should keep us busy for a while. Sound like a plan?”

The rest of the group agreed.

“Sweet.” Tony said, grinning. "I might check on what Stark Industries has been doing, now that you've reminded me. I've been meaning to for a while."

He pulled his computer back towards him.

"So, lets see what Obadiah has been up to… Wow, we've been buying a lot of shell companies. Hmmmm. Wait a minute, is that a car wash that makes a surprisingly large amount of cash? It is! Oh Obie, you're in deep."

"What?" Bruce asked, confusion flitting onto his face.

"Money laundering," Natasha said, "One of the best ways to take up illegal money is to put it through a car wash, since it makes so much hard cash. As long as you have someone on the inside fudging the books, then you have a money laundering business."

They all stared as her.

"What? This is one of the things the Red Room taught me about. They had about three ways to money launder just within the ballet studio."

"Oh yeah? What were those?"

"Well, they'd ask for money for 'school trips' from parents, except all of us are orphans and our legal guardians are within the studio. So all the money given in was money we'd earned by killing people."

"Huh." They all looked taken aback. Most of the time they forgot that the Red Room was a ballet studio.

Tony was the first to shake himself out of it. "Well, Obie has so many different money laundering places, and d'you know why? He's been dealing weapons under the table. Bastard."

"Maybe we should take out some of those? If he's dealing them out of the US, I mean." Bruce suggested.

"Good plan," Tony shrugged, "but they're probably pretty well defended. Maybe after we've had some practise."

They all agreed, and quickly fell asleep.
"See that door, on the other side of the road?"

"Nope," Matt piped up, making them all groan.

"Well, that door leads to some abandoned subway tunnels. We could use them to get round the city without doing anything stupid. And it gets better, because I own that building, a garage by the way, so it won't even look suspicious."

"So, you're saying that I could have been defending Hells Kitchen the whole time I've been here?" Matt said.

Tony nodded, "Sorry. I probably should have told you sooner. Anyway, there's a passage over to there, so we can just go whenever we want. I've also got a few vans in the garage, just in case we need to pick people up the old fashioned way. I'm working on a pet project as well, which could be useful."

"Pet project?" Steve said, raising an eyebrow.

"Flying car."

"You're kidding!" Clint said, whipping round to face him. "You're building a flying car?!"

Tony grinned, "Why yes, yes I am. It'll be a while before it's finished, though. I spent a lot of the time I should've been working on it making the suits, so… maybe two weeks?"

"Tony," Clint said, slapping a hand to Tony's shoulder, "You are the best sometimes."

"Screw you. I'm the best all the time."

They jokingly argued as they walked down the hall, until Tony dragged them all down to his workshop to enthusiastically explain how the car was going to work.

Chapter End Notes

Ugh, exposition. I hate it. Anyway, a new chapter.

Again, because I will never stop singing her praises, Tony is the best beta ever. She has to put up with so much of my shit. Thank you so much, buddy.
As soon as the elevator doors opened, Tony sprinted down the corridor, heading for the training room. He had to find the others. He didn't care that he was quickly getting out of breath, the tightness in his lungs growing even as he stopped running and shouted for the teens.

"Guys, guys!" Tony yelled, bursting into the training room. "Our suits are finished!"

The teens whipped their heads round in unison, startled by Tony's sudden appearance.

"Finally!" Clint yelled, jumping off the obstacle course they had set up and running to Tony. "We've been waiting for ages."

"I don't have weapons yet," Tony said, "But I will by tomorrow, maybe the day after. Soon-ish."

A second later, DUM-E, U and BUTTERFINGERS rolled in, carrying a box between them that was filled with clothing. Bruce walked in after them, shaking his head and mumbling about running from elevators.

The teens each pulled out their suits, gasping in awe as they held them in their hands for the first time.

After their brief shock, they quickly found rooms to get changed in, and emerged a few minutes later dressed in their new attire. Natasha, Matt and Steve instantly started testing out moves in the suits, seeing how much movement they gave. Clint looked at Tony for a minute.

"Where's yours, Tony?"

"Down in the lab. I kinda want to try it out on the roof, a quick test flight, ya know? I'll wait t'il night-time though," He paused, "What time is it?"

"Just gone seven o' clock. I'd wait another few hours." Bruce piped up from where he had emerged from the changing room.

"A few HOURS? I can't wait that long. I've been working on that baby for months!"

The group quickly ignored Tony's complaining, and dragged him into training with them.

"You got this, Tony." Bruce said, helping to tighten the last screws on his suit.

Tony grinned behind his faceplate, "Hell yeah I do."

He activated the thrusters, and hovered for a moment, then flew up, away from the roof of the mansion, into the cold damp clouds.

He soared up into the sky, freeing himself of all of his problems. He was lucky that it was a cloudy
day, otherwise he definitely would have been seen. It was so different to when he had flown in Afghanistan, riding the adrenalin and the explosion behind him. It was serene this time, completely calming, floating through clouds in the slight breeze. The stars shone above, and as he broke gently through another layer of clouds he couldn't help but gasp.

"Woah," he muttered under his breath.

“What’s it like, Tony?” Bruce asked over the comms, and it took Tony a second to answer.

“It’s… It’s amazing. The stars are beautiful from up here.” He stared in awe at the twinkling stars surrounding him, so much clearer than in the light pollution of the city lights below.

He didn't know how long he stayed up there, spinning loops the loops, lying back and staring at the stars. After what seemed like an eternity, but also only a second, JARVIS told him that it would be wise to head back to the mansion. He landed lightly on the roof a few minutes later, a grin from ear to ear, looking happier than Bruce had ever seen him.

"Was it good?"

Tony stayed silent, but his grin said it all.

"You know we found that big-ass room full of weapons just after we moved in? Well, I've taken some of the weapons, modified some a bit, and made some by scratch."

"This cane, here, is actually a pair of billy clubs, just disguised a bit." He twisted at the halfway point, and the cane separated into two pieces, "Matt, they're for you, so you can use it as a cane as well, I guess. Oh! and at full length, it's kinda like a staff."

"Neat, thanks." Matt said, grabbing the staff and swinging it around a little.

"Natasha, here is a scary big amount of knives, guns and other weapons you said you liked the look of." He reached into the pile and pulled out a pair of gloves. "These are a little favourite invention of mine. It's all wired up to a static battery, just here, see, and basically when you punch people they get electrocuted as well."

Natasha grinned, and put on the gloves happily, and started strapping the various weapons to herself.

"I know you don't like weapons, Bruce, so I've got you a taser, and a gun with only stunning bullets in it. Also, I found this." He said procuring a small, rectangular device from the workbench. "It's a paralytic sound thing. I made it when I was about eleven in case I got kidnapped, but it never really took off. Shame, but now you get to use it. I modified the comms as well, so you'll be immune as long as you're wearing them.

"Steve… I don't have much for you, really. You've got your shield, and I don't think you'd need much else, but here are some knives, just in case."

Steve and Bruce picked up their weapons, testing them out slightly.

Tony grinned, rubbing his hands together. "Clint! Oh boy have I had fun with this. I've got two different bows to see which one you like best: a short bow and a longbow. They're both made of
carbon composite, so they're super strong and pretty light as well. For arrows, there are different heads. There's normal, armour piercing, explosive, boomerang, gas, electric, smaller explosive and pointy. The gloves of your suit have grips built in for different types of archery, which I thought you'd appreciate."

Clint looked at the bows in awe, picking them up and giving them a test pull. There arrows were neatly labelled, so he picked up the different types and tested the balance. "Thank you," he said reverantly.

They all spent the rest of the day in the training room, testing out their different weapons against each other.

"So this means no." Clint said, raising his first two fingers and then pinching them to his thumb.

Clint and Nat were trying to teach the others sign language, and were doing fairly well. They had taught them the alphabet, and were moving on to basic signs. To Clint's surprise, no-one was complaining, and even Tony was actually being attentive for once.

Matt was trying, but most of the time Natasha had to move his fingers to the right position. His 'sight' wasn't always accurate enough to interpret Clint's hand signals.

"For yes, you just make a fist and nod it up and down as if it were your head, like this." Clint explained, signing the motion, watching vigilantly as they repeated it back at him.

They all learnt quickly, but Clint decided to leave it there. He asked them to repeat back everything they had learnt, and then ordered some pizza from the place down the road. They deserved it.

"Any updates on our missing persons?" Nick Fury asked the agent at the door.

"No, sir, but we do have some updates on suspected illegal activity on several companies. I think we should ask for a warrant or send in a spy, to see what's going on."

Nick Fury nodded, "Well, give it here."

He opened the file, and two names instantly jumped out at him.

AIM INDUSTRIAL
HAMMERTECH

Chapter End Notes

So I hate filler. It sucks. I hate writing it. Actual plot will kick of real soon, though,
which is a plus.
ANYWAY.
What did you think?

(As always, Tony is my saviour.)
The "Small Stuff"

The Avengers sat in the den, among soft blankets and pillows, planning their first mission.

"Steve, since you're our master strategist or whatever, what's the plan?" Tony said, spreading out a map of the building over the blankets.

"It's simple, really. Nat, Matt, Me and Clint are going to go in first, through the entrance on the west side, just here, take out some guards and lackeys, then put charges in the drug supply, which according to Matt is in this room, and get out of there. Supply goes kaboom, and we get back here just in time for a midnight snack. Sound good?" Steve said, pointing out places on the map as he spoke.

"How will we get in?" Clint asked.

Tony and Bruce glanced at each other, and smiles lit up their faces. Bruce flicked through some files, and bought up a hologram of a small cylindrical device.

"I love these," Tony said, "It detonates a tiny explosion. So if you place it just above a lock on a door and stand back, boom, lock picked."

Clint nodded, "Nice."

"Any other questions?" Steve asked.

"Uh, yeah, what will Bruce and I be doing?"

"I was hoping that if we find and files or computers in the place, we could copy data from them and find more places to check out."

Tony and Bruce nodded simultaneously.

"Got it." Tony muttered.

"We'll also have access to the detonations, so we can set them off remotely," Bruce piped up, "Then you won't have to worry about blowing yourselves up."

The other teens nodded.

"We all good?" Tony said with a grin.

"We're good," came the resounding reply.

"Awesome," Tony muttered, flicking on the TV and grabbing a slice of pizza. "Almost time to get this show on the road."
The van was parked just across the street from the warehouse-like building, full of anxious teenagers.

"I still can't believe that we're actually doing this." Clint muttered from the back of the van, fiddling with the tip of an arrow.

"Neither." Tony said, tapping his hands on the steering wheel. Unfortunately, he was too noticeable to go on this mission, as was Bruce, so they were going to manage communications from the van. There were laptops and wires set up everywhere, nearly tripping up Clint on multiple occasions.

Steve turned from the front window, lowering the binoculars from his face. "Okay, the guards are all inside the building, and they shouldn't be doing another patrol for ten minutes. Now is the best time to move."

They all nodded, and put on their masks in unison.

There was a pause.

"I'm sorry but that was such a gangster moment." Clint said with glee, making the others groan.

Steve sighed, "Common, lets go," and slid open the van's door.

The four teens jumped out of the van, running quickly to the entrance of the building. Clint set the charge on the door, turning and taking a few steps. He braced as the small explosion cracked open the door, and they filed quickly inside.

They got to the storage room far quicker than they had anticipated. There were only about twenty people in the building, Matt had informed them, and fourteen were only meant to load and unload the cargo from ships, into storage, then out into vans. The other five were obviously guards, but they had been playing poker in a side-room when the Avengers had arrived, guns across the other side of the table.

The brawl had broken out quickly, and soon enough Steve was throwing punches left right and centre, Natasha was fighting two men at once and winning, Matt had taken out a man with a swift punch and Clint had managed to knock a guard unconscious by smashing a chair over his head.

It had taken less than a minute to knock the five guards out.

They collected the guns from the room, putting them in duffel bags, and moved on.

They snuck down the corridor, until Matt held up a hand to stop them.

"Four more in that room, three in the next corridor and seven in the cargo hold." He muttered, and the other three nodded.

They turned the corner into the corridor, Natasha and Matt quietly taking out the three people in the corridor. Steve and Clint sneaked ahead of them, into the next room, surprising the four lackeys in there. Clint quickly fired off five arrows, pinning two of the men to the wall, then walking over and knocking them out with a punch.

Steve dealt with the other two as Matt and Natasha joined them, and they moved into the storage room. It was a blur of fists after that, the four Avengers taking on seven untrained but strong lackeys, and the Avengers made quick work of the enemy's.
It took less than twenty minutes to knock out everyone in the building.

Matt and Clint pulled out some handcuffs, moving the unconscious men and women outside, cuffing them together and to the wall behind them.

Steve swiftly made his way to the storage room, setting charges as he went. He put one explosive on each crate, just to be safe, then ran to the exit.

"Charges are set, guys." He said over the comms, moving back through the corridors.

"One second," Natasha replied from another room, where she had found some computers and was hacking into them, "One more minute and I'll be done."

Steve nodded, "Better get out of there quick, Widow."

On his way out, he pulled a small bottle of spray paint out of his utility belt, and in neat block lettering wrote the name Avengers across one wall.

He left the building, joining Matt and Clint outside. They all ran to the van and leaped in, joined a second later by a victorious looking Natasha. She held up the flash drive in her hand, slamming the van door behind her. Tony hit the gas, and they sped off down the road.

"Okay, we all in? Good. And, detonating in three, two, one…" Bruce said, pressing the enter key.

An explosion blasted behind them, slightly shaking the ground underneath them. They listened as the noise subsided, the sudden silence filling them.

"Holy shit, we did it!" Clint yelled, grabbing the nearest person - an unamused Natasha - in a hug.

Steve smiled sadly, "We did it."

There was another silence, the only noise was Tony's drumming against the steering wheel and the hum of the engine.

Tony's drumming stopped for a second. "So, Steve, while I was stuck in here bored out of my mind, I was thinking: why didn't the Nazi's just shoot you in the legs? I mean, your shield is the size of a dinner plate and you are a bit of an idiot."

Steve face-palmed, "Why do I live with you people."

Clint piped up, "It is a good point though, how have they not taken down The Captain America already?"

Steve looked up at them, completely exasperated, "You think a few bullets to the legs are gonna stop me? Bullshit. I've been shot in the legs over forty times an' I'm still kickin'."

"Woah, okay, jeez. That escalated quickly," Tony said, adjusting his grip on the wheel. "Anyway, nearly home. How'd you guys feel about your first mission?"

Clint grinned, "It was awesome. We have to celebrate!"

Tony nodded, "Well, I ordered in some pizza, and I think Mr Patriotism over there made apple pie."

The others cheered slightly.

Half an hour later, after they had showered and changed into new clothes, they were all sitting...
around the dining table, raising their glasses.

"To us, and to future missions," Matt said as a toast. "And to those we are avenging."

Chapter End Notes

Vine references: 2. I'm on a roll. A bad and destructive roll. Tony needs to stop encouraging me, for the sanity of my readers. Anyway, what did you think of the chapter? Good, bad, a little short? (Who am I kidding this chapter was so short)
"Aren't you Level Seven? You're way over-qualified for this, Coulson."

The agent in question shrugged, "I pissed off Fury last month. He's been putting me on bad missions ever since. What's up with this case?"

"Last night at 2200 hours a group of masked vigilantes broke into this building, knocked everyone - five guards and fourteen workpeople - unconscious and blew up the rather large shipment of imported drugs that was being kept in storage. They handcuffed everyone outside, and 'tagged' the wall, with their name, apparently."

"What's the name?"

The agents walked through the door of the building, to find "Avengers" written in black, stark against the pale grey wall.

"The Avengers. Sounds pretty pretentious." The junior agent said.

Coulson chuckled, "It does, doesn't it. Are there any video feeds?"

"Yes. We've identified four individuals, plus at least one driver. A man in red, a man in blue, a man in purple and a woman in red and black."

"Any audio files?"

The agent nodded, "We're working on extracting them. The audio was pretty badly damaged in the explosion; there's a high chance that it will be unsalvageable."

Coulson hummed, then spoke again, "Any accounts from the workers?"

"Yes. They were very quick, taking the guards out first. The workpeople barely knew they were there until they attacked them. They didn't talk much, and they all wore masks. No way to identify them. They all attacked with fists only, except the man in purple. He used a bow and arrow."

"Did you just say a bow and arrow?"

"Yes sir." The agent replied.

"Huh. Maybe this isn't such a bad case after all."
The number of arms dealers and drug dealers in New York was astounding, Tony realized after their third mission taking out gangs. It seemed that every corner they turned they would find a new base to uncover, a new trafficking ring to expose. The city was riddled with underground crime.

That night - their fourth mission - was taking out an illegal arms dealer that was suspected to be in association with a few more major companies. Tony's job that day was to access the computers to check for possible connections.

"Happy Birthday to me…" Tony sung over the comms, blasting open a lock. "Happy Birthday to me…" He stepped into the massive room full of weapons, and started placing charges everywhere. "Happy Birthday dear Tony…" He left as soon as he could, heading to the room filled with computers. "Happy Birthday to me." He hacked the system within seconds, scoffing at the mediocre (at best) security system, and saved all the data to the flash drive in his hand. He ran out into the corridor, stepping carefully over the unconscious bodies lying in the hallway.

He turned left at the end of the corridor, nearly running straight into Matt.

"Were you just singing the Happy Birthday song? To yourself?"

"Well, it is just after midnight, so…" Tony muttered as they both started running up to the extraction point: AKA roof.

"Wait, did you not tell us about your birthday?" Matt huffed as they ran.

Tony didn't answer, but his silence was telling.

"I guess I didn't see that coming."

Tony groaned, "You're a little shit, Matt."

The ride home was quick, as always, and it wasn't long until all the teens were walking to the den in their pyjamas. Tony and Bruce decided to head to the lab, while the others went to the den.

"Guys," Matt said urgently as soon as they were alone, "It's Tony's birthday today."

"What? He didn't tell us!" Clint exclaimed, "I am offended. We need to plan an epic birthday right now."

The rest nodded in agreement.

"Steve, you go to the kitchen, see what food their is. We'll go to the ballroom and see if there's any bunting or something," Natasha said, and they all nodded and went their separate ways.

Steve arrived in the kitchen a few seconds later, and immediately began looking through the fridge and cupboards in an attempt to find ingredients, until there was a vibration in his pocket. It was a text from Natasha.

01:59 29.05.2010 Nat: Enough stuff to make a cake?

Steve had a quick look through another cupboard, and texted a quick affirmative reply.

02:02 29.05.2010 Nat: Cool. We're all in the party room setting stuff up.
02:02 29.05.2010 Nat: Bruce says Tony is in the workshop, so if you bake the cake now we can drag him to bed a bit later and then surprise him in the morning.

02:03 29.05.2010 Steve: What's my excuse for staying up so late? I felt like punching things?

02:04 29.05.2010 Nat: Sounds good

Meanwhile, in the lab, Tony was fiddling with one of his pet projects, the flying car, on a skateboard underneath the chassis, while Bruce was lounging around playing with holograms.

"Who're you textin'?" Tony asked Bruce, sliding out from underneath the engine.

Bruce looked up, "Oh, Natasha. She can't sleep so I suggested some chamomile tea that really helps me to calm dow-"

"Yeah, okay," Tony interrupted, "Sounds great. I'll be here for a while, so if you wanna go sleep that's cool."

Bruce waved it off, "It's fine. I'm not that tired anyway. We should head to bed soon though."

Tony slid back underneath the car, pulling a spanner with him. Bruce turned back to his phone, firing off a quick text.

02:11 29.05.2010 Bruce: Guys you have about an hour before Tony gets bored.

02:11 29.05.2010 Clint: We'll be finished in 40 mins anyway. Nat and Matt are just putting up some bunting. I'm doing balloons. Steve is on cake. How's Tony watching duty?

02:11 29.05.2010 Bruce: Ok. He's not talking much today.

02:13 29.05.2010 Nat: We'll tell you when to drag him to bed, ok?

02:13 29.05.2010 Bruce: Cool.

Bruce swivelled in his chair slightly, and went back to fiddling with holograms. He was nearly dozing off when a text came through.

02:47 29.05.2010 Nat: Yo, all done here. Get Tony to bed now. Big surprise later.

Bruce turned to Tony, and ignored the protests as he dragged the other teen to the den. The others were all lying in a pile, with Matt and Steve seemingly asleep while Natasha and Clint were reading Harry Potter fanfiction on Natasha's phone.

Soon, they were all fast asleep. Even Tony had nodded off into an unrestful slumber. He never slept well on his birthday.
"Dad, Dad!" Tony yelled as he burst into the meeting room, looking for his father.

"Not now, Anthony, I'm in a very important meeting." Howard dismissed, turning back to the board, and continued speaking as if the interruption had never happened.

Tony turned from the room, dejected, and trudged through the long corridors to his mother's room.

"Mama!"

She turned around from her piano, smiling at the small boy.

"What is it, my love?"

"It's my birthday!" he cried, running up to her and jumping into her waiting arms.

Maria Stark smiled at the small child, "So it is. Happy Birthday, mia stella."

She stood, and walked over to the dressing table at the side of the room, opening a drawer to collect the bundle tucked inside. She turned, and handed the delicately wrapped package into his small hands.

He carefully took off the bright red tissue paper, revealing "The Lord of the Rings" by J. R. R. Tolkien. He grinned, and hugged his mother with all his might, muttering his thanks. Maria smiled lovingly down at him, caressing his hair.

"Would you like me to play you a song?" Maria questioned, walking over to the grand piano.

Tony nodded enthusiastically, jumping up next to the woman on the piano stool.

"What would you like me to play?"

Tony paused for a moment, swinging his legs as he thought.

"Nurture," he said decisively, "by Satterthwaite."

Maria nodded, and her hands began to flow over the keys, creating the beautiful but heart-wrenching tune her son had requested.

At the end of the song, she turned to the small child.

"I'm sorry, my love, but I have to leave now. I must go to a gala this evening. I am sorry."

Tony's face fell, but he nodded sadly. He gave her one last hug, and stared dejectedly after her as she left the room. He looked down at his present, the beautifully illustrated cover staring back at him as he tried to stem the tears flowing down his cheeks.

He left the room, and trudged down the empty, barren, cold corridors. He went to his room, and flopped down upon the bed. He curled up in the centre of the mattress, his mother's gift lying on the bedside table.

He didn't know how long he lay there, crying, before Edwin Jarvis walked in.

"Ah, young sir. I've been looking all over for you--" the butler started, but cut himself off when he saw Tony's shaking shoulders. "What is it, young sir?"
“Da- Dad didn’t wanna s-s-speak t-to me, an’... an’ Mama had t-to l-l-leave.”

Jarvis sat on the edge of the bed, and wrapped the small boy in his arms. He muttered soothing words until Tony's tears subsided, and then cleaned the child’s face of snot and tears.

“Well, why don’t you come down to tea with me and Mrs Jarvis, how does that sound?”

Tony nodded with a small smiled, and took Jarvis's hand as they left the room. They arrived in the small corner of the house where the Jarvis family lived, and Tony perked up when he smelled baking.

Ana Jarvis was pottering around the kitchen, putting a large cake on the table. She looked up at them, smiling warmly, and said, "Hello, dears, and happy birthday Anthony! I've got a wonderful cake here."

Tony bounded up to the table and leaped into the waiting chair. "I noticed," he said, "Thank you very much."

"It's no problem dear," Ana said, setting out three plates on the table. "And how old are you now?"

"Six!" Tony beamed at her.

"Such a big boy," Ana said, cutting a piece out of the freshly baked cake.

"I hope some of that cake is for me," Jarvis said, walking back into the room - Tony hadn't even noted his absence - with a wrapped package in his arms.

From the size and shape, it was probably a book, or a collection thereof, or a box of some sort. Tony had always been good at guessing his birthday presents.

The two Jarvises sat around the table, on cutting and handing out cake and the other handing Tony his present.

"Happy Birthday, Anthony," they said, and Tony couldn't have been happier.

(After that, his birthdays only got worse.

His seventh birthday saw him at boarding school, where someone poured treacle all over him while he was sleeping.

His eighth, Howard screamed at him for hours on end.

His ninth, the Jarvises were ill, his mother was away at a gala, and he spent the entire time in his personal lab, trying not to cry.

By his eleventh birthday, he stopped caring whether Howard yelled or not.

On his fourteenth birthday, at MIT, no-one knew. He didn't tell anyone. He spent that day as he normally did, but no-one noticed his dejected sadness.

His seventeenth birthday was one he would rather forget. A cave in Afghanistan, a car battery tied to his chest and the fear of death hanging over him like a sword suspended by string was not a good way to spend a birthday. At least that year he had Yinsen, who played Backgammon with him in the darkness.)
Later that morning, they woke to Steve's alarm going off. Five teenagers grumbled and tried to roll back over underneath the soft pillows, but Steve had been in the army - in the Howling Commandos; they woke early and stayed up late, despite their own weariness, to kick HYDRA ass and end the war.

So Steve pulled them all out of bed, one by one, and dragged the gaggle of sleepy teenagers to the kitchen. He gave Clint and Tony, who were practically catatonic, a large mug of coffee each, and gave Bruce, Matt and Natasha some strong tea. He made a quick breakfast of bacon and eggs, and before long chatter had started up around the table. After they had finished breakfast and washed and dried and put everything away, the teens cajoled Tony into visiting the Ballroom.

"Come on, Tony, it'll be fun!"

"What's so fun about the ballroom anyway? It's dull as shit in there, guys."

They dragged him along anyway, covering his eyes just as they reached the doors.

"This is either a surprise or a human sacrifice, and I'm scared of both of those options," Tony said, shoulders tense.

They swung open the door, and uncovered Tony's eyes. The first thing he saw was the balloons, red and gold and strung around the room. The banners were red as well, with "Happy Birthday Tony" and "18th" written across them in gold lettering. In the middle of the room was a massive table, surrounded by six chairs, laden with colourfully wrapped presents. The table also had a cake sitting at its centre: covered with red icing with his name piped in delicate blue across the top.

His mother's grand piano sat in the corner of the room, untouched. The sight of it brought tears to his eyes as he turned to his friends.

"Guys," Tony said breathlessly, tears gathering in his misty eyes, "Thank you."

They all smiled, and before long they had sat around the table, handing Tony presents and chopping up cake.

It was the best birthday he'd had in years.

Except Jarvis wasn't there.

That night, curled up in blankets, surrounded by friends, all he could think about was Jarvis. Jarvis, who had always been there for him, patching up his wounds and supporting him in his endeavours.

Jarvis wasn't there anymore.

He cried, after everyone had fallen asleep. He cried like he hadn't since he was a young child, and when he finally drifted off into sleep all he could see was the all-encompassing darkness of the cave, and Yinsen covered in blood, and the deep-rooted pain in his chest only got worse. He couldn't tell if it was the arc reactor or the loss of his mentors.

Chapter End Notes
Detective Phil Coulson is a great Phil Coulson. Also I've been binge-watching Agents of SHIELD. Good show, actually. Very soul-destroying.

Tony is still the best beta ever. She has my eternal thanks.

Question: If you had to buy presents for the Avenger's birthdays, what would you pick and why?
"What if I pour coffee instead of milk into my cereal?" Clint asked, staring pensively into the coffee pot early that morning.

Natasha walked past and swiped the pot of coffee straight out of Clint's hands, "How about you don't."

"Aw, coffee, no." Clint said, trying to reach for the coffee pot and instead falling out of his seat, landing face first on the floor.

Matt ignored them, and asked, "So what's the plan?"

Steve and Tony shared a look, and Tony rolled out a map over his end of the table.

"So, there are ten floors, and there are more guards on the bottom few floors," Tony explained, "So we'll go through from the top. Then we'll get to these rooms: the data banks, and the vault. We've got no idea what's in the vault, so that will be a nice surprise."

"Once we've infiltrated the building, we'll fight our way down to the seventh floor," Steve took over, "That's were our target rooms are. Clint and Natasha, you have a special job. These idiots left a vent going straight past the vault room, so you two are going to crawl through the vents and cut a hole in the wall, then open it from the inside. That way we don't need to worry about codes or blasting through metal doors."

Clint and Natasha looked at each other, then nodded.

"Wait, the vault is on the seventh floor? Why not the basement?" Bruce pointed out.

"Uh…” Tony hesitated, trying to think up an answer, "Maybe they're just not stereotypical? Or they couldn't get planning permission for a basement? I dunno."

"How are we going to break into the vault?" Natasha asked.

Tony grinned and pulled a cigarette out of his pocket, handing it to Steve, who turned it over in his hands and grinned.

"How did you find this? We used these way back in the day, with the commandos."

"Seriously?" Clint said in awe, "That's so cool! But it's just a cigarette, isn't it?"

"No, it doesn't smell like a cigarette. No tobacco. It's metal instead. What's it do?" Matt answered.

Steve smiled faintly, "It's a laser. You can set stuff on fire with it from a hundred yards. We used 'em as a remote fuse for gunpowder, bombs and the like. Perfect for cutting through a wall."

"Cool!" Clint cried, leaning over the table, "Gimme!"

Steve held it away, frowning. "Hell no. These things are fuckin' terrifying, and not to be put in the hands of children."
Clint spluttered in protest as the others laughed.

"Anyway, the plan is simple. Get in, get out. We all know our jobs? Good." Steve said, beginning to tidy away their breakfast plates.

Tony stood, pouring himself a fourth cup of coffee. "Who wants to see the flying car?"

"You finished it?" Matt asked curiously.

Tony nodded, leading them all down to the garage. In the centre of the room was a large van, covered with a thick sheet to keep away dust and give extra dramatic effect. Tony pulled the tarp away with a flourish, revealing the shining van beneath.

"So this is your special car, huh?" Clint muttered in awe, walking around the automobile, trying to see it from every angle.

Tony nodded, "Yup. Based off of Gramps' old thing, Lola. He made it back in the war."

"Yeah, I went to the expo." Steve said, confused, "Wasn't Howard your dad?"

Tony shrugged, "Howard the second was. Howard the first was my Grandpa. He died when I was seven."

Steve awkwardly mumbled his condolences, but Tony waved them off, turning back to his creation. "Anyway," he exclaimed, "A flying van. Room for all of us, plus some, armoured sides, handles, cloaking devices, anti-radar, cup holders, flight, the works. If you can think of it, this baby probably has it."

Matt whistled in appreciation as Tony slid open the door to show them the interior. The first thing the teens noticed was the massive renovations. There was a large interactive screen built into the dashboard, presumably for JARVIS to operate through. The passenger seat had been taken out, replaced with storage space; a large first-aid kit; some computers; a cup holder. There were no other seats, just handles attached to the ceiling and padded rails on the walls. There was enough room for all of them to sit there with room to spare.

"Wow. This is… this is amazing. It flies as well?" Natasha asked.

Tony nodded, a pleased grin lighting up his face at the praise. "See the screen at the front? It's got its own AI. Not J, because I wouldn't want him remote: too much room for error. There's another AI instead. Say hi, ANA."

The screen lit up as Tony turned it on, and a soft, female, british voice spoke through hidden speakers.

"Hello, sir."

Tony smiled softly, and fondly patted the dash. "ANA is built in. She can take remote override of the van if needed. So… yeah. Wha’d’ya think?"

The teens grinned.

"It's amazing."
"Ready, everyone?" Bruce said as he strapped himself in and took the wheel, nervously tapping a rhythm.

A chorus of affirmatives filled his ears, stilling his fingers as he calmed slightly.

They settled nervously into the back of the car, anxious excitement buzzing in the air. This was their first big mission: everyone was nervous. Even Natasha, usually hidden and reserved, never showing more than an ounce of negativity, was tugging at a loose lock of hair.

They were too nervous to notice Bruce driving out of the garage.

They were too nervous to realise that they had taken off into the air.

It was an eternity before they arrived on the roof of AIM Industrial's main base of operations, landing softly on the flat office roof. Matt slid open the door, and they all quietly stepped onto the roof, running to their respective positions. Steve and Tony started setting up explosives above the elevator, with Matt, Natasha and Clint went to the grill in the roof. Matt started hooking up ropes and climbing harnesses, simultaneously listening for intruders. Clint and Natasha started to remove the grate covering the vent.

"Shit," Clint muttered under his breath, fingers fainting a very rude sign as he looked down the vent, hurriedly replaced the grill that had covered it.

"What is it?" Tony asked, looking over.

"Lasers. Also, the vents are too small," Natasha answered, "We'll have to go round the hard way."

Tony groaned, "Oh come on! I got you climbing harnesses and everything. I'm sorry guys, that's on me. I should've checked."

Natasha shook her head. "It's fine. We have plenty of explosives: more than enough to get the job done."

Clint jogged to the van, pulling a lump of C4 from a box and running back. "More than enough," he muttered.

"I guess it's go time, then." Steve said, flicking the switch he held in his hands, an explosion rocking through them a split-second later. Glass tinkled and crashed on the flood. That was the skylight gone, then. And the elevator.

They all leaped through the newly created hole, landing amongst shattered glass that crunched beneath their boots. The offices they crept through were empty, silent and dark. No-one was on the highest level at night-time, so no-one was there to watch the Avengers dismantle every security system, every camera, every bug on that floor. No-one was there to watch as Steve pulled out a can of spray paint and wrote "The Avengers" in bold letters across one wall.

It took them less than a minute, but by that point the building's security had felt the shudder as a hole blew in the roof. The elevator was out of action, so the Avengers had the two minutes and thirteen seconds it took for their enemies to run up the stairs to prepare themselves for the oncoming fight.

The oncoming fight was easy as pie.
The AIM lackeys were no match for the Avengers, bottlenecked as they were through a single door. After the eighth henchperson they slowed, people lower down the stairs realising their mistake and turning to run away.

Clint stepped forward. He fired a single arrow into the stairwell.

The concussive blast that blew from the arrow was enough to incapacitate half of the soldiers in the stairwell, and the other half was quickly defeated by the five teens rushing down the stairwell. Clint accidentally tripped on a few lackeys as he not-so-stealth-walked down the steps. As they came to the eighth floor, Clint looked up at Natasha. They paused before kicking open the door, rushing into the corridors.

“Black Widow, I think we should split up.”

“Why? What if you need me?”

“If I need you, I’ll give you a signal.” Clint huffed, turning round to knock out an approaching guard with the side of his bow.

“What signal?” Natasha said as she leapt at another lackey, knocking him over and knocking him out.

“I’ll imitate the scream of a terrified little girl.”

“Great,” Natasha smirked, “I’ll know just what to look out for.”

Clint didn't reply to her snarky comment, instead rolling his eyes, and they split ways to look for the vault. He crept down a corridor, stopping to peak around a corner. Eight sentinels were pacing in front of the vault room. Crap. Silently, he drew three arrows from his quiver.

He paused, an arrow knocked in his bow and ready to fire at the approaching henchperson, and stopped as a thought hit him.

“Wait, is this illegal?” Clint wondered aloud as he leaped from his cover, hitting a guard in the arm with an arrow, spinning round to hit another in the leg.

“Literally everything about this is illegal.” Matt said from a floor away, punching a guard in the face, “We could actually get arrested for this.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope.”

"I didn’t sign up for this.""}

“Well, actually, you did.” Tony said, firing at a repulser blast at a lock to get through into the next section of rooms.

“Why the hell did I decide to sign up for this?” Clint muttered. He shot a concussive arrow into the next corridor. The blast knocked out at least six guards, and he ran in, sweeping for more attackers, before moving to the vault door. “This is fucking crazy.”

"Agreed,” Bruce muttered from the van.

Clint pulled out a fake cigarette from his belt, testing it against the thick metal door, but the laser barely made a scratch in the steel. He cursed, and pulled out the C4, wiring it carefully to the door.
He dragged a few of the wardens away from the blast zone, then turned and walked three corridors away.

"Brace yourselves."

He hit the button, and a muffled "BOOM" shook through the building. He felt it more than he heard it, thundering through his chest. He waited for the rumblings to subside and for his limbs to stop shaking, then walked back to the vault door. The metal was bent and warped, blown out where the explosives had been set.

Clint carefully stepped over the rubble, into the vault.

"Huh."

Clint wasn't sure what he had been expecting, experiments or weapons or something, but this wasn't it.

"What is it, Hawkeye?" Asked Tony from a floor below as he fought his way to the data bank.

"It's… filing cabinets?"

"That is not what I was expecting." Tony said.

"Look through them," Natasha said from the doorway, "See what's inside."

So Clint and Natasha began rummaging through the filing cabinets, trying to find out what information was stored inside. The more files they looked through, the sourer their faces became.

"It's the illegal shit. All in one vault. It's not even encrypted. And where all the bases are. Fucking amateurs," Natasha spat, "We need to get these up to the van. Anyone who can help us haul them up?"

Steve signed himself up turning to last few guards streaming from the stairs. Steve's fist met an enemy's face, and his shield slammed into another two goons before returning to his hand. Tony's repulser blasts backed him up: strong enough to incapacitate, not kill. Steve nodded his thanks to Tony, then ran up the stairs to help the two teens upstairs.

Together, they managed to haul all eight large filing cabinets to the roof by the time Tony and Matt had recovered the electronic data. They all loaded them up into the van, deciding there was too little room for all of them. Steve drove off with Bruce, then came back twenty minutes later with an empty van to three extremely bored teenagers.

"Where's Tony?"

Natasha shrugged, "He got bored. He's off joyriding right now."

By the time they returned to the mansion it was well past midnight. They fell into bed, exhausted, and woke for lunch the next day with only mild complaining.

"To safety, to freedom," They toasted over their lunch, smiles of success on their faces.

Now all they had to do was figure out how the hell they were meant to get the files to the government.
"E-mail them to a government official?" Matt suggested, lying on his back and throwing a ball to himself.

"Too likely for nothing to happen," Steve shut down, "Paperwork is a bitch, takes a long-ass while and white-collars wouldn't like the extra."

"Agreed."

"E-mail them to more than one government official?" Bruce suggested tentatively.

"Same problem," Tony literally pointed out, waving his screwdriver at Bruce, then going back to fiddling with his gauntlet.

"What about blackmail?" Clint asked.

"No." Matt said, leaving no room for argument and ignoring Clint's subsequent grumbles.

"Spill it over the internet?" Natasha suggested after a pause for thought, "Then governments would have to deal with it to avoid bad press. They'd be forced to prosecute."

Tony put down his screwdriver and pulled a laptop towards him. "You've hit the jackpot, Nat. Lemme see what I can do. We've already scanned the documents, anyway. Shouldn't be too hard…"

AIM secrets spilled on net!

"Who spilled the AIM files? SHIELD is currently on the job, working to find out who did this and why."

SHIELD preliminary reports say that this attack was caused by a vigilante group known as the Avengers. Current members are unknown, but SHIELD has reported they will release aliases soon. No-one knows what the Avengers want, who they are, or why they are going after AIM Industrial.

(A leaked photo of Steve's spray-painted logo. It's "The Avengers" scrawled across a wall in dark spray paint, the wall slightly dented in a few places.)

"Earlier this evening, a vigilante group who call themselves "the Avengers" attacked a large research and development centre belonging to AIM Industrial, well known for its great inventions and contribution to science. However, the Avengers have revealed that AIM has a darker side. Government agencies are currently combing through data, and AIM has already been charged with eco-terrorism, illegal weapons development and human experimentation. The government is trying to reach out to those who have been affected by these issues, and will be reporting every 3 hours on their findings."

VIGILANTE JUSTICE: WORKING AGAINST THE LAW TO PROTECT THE LAW.
Avengers: Who do they Avenge?

Heroes or Criminals?

"The Avengers group has been in the news recently for taking down a small human trafficking ring based in Hell’s Kitchen, as well as destroying many caches of illegal weapons from varying companies all over the world. No-one has yet been able to reach out to the Avengers, but most hope that they will step forward to give further information."

New Vigilantes in town: for good or evil?

SHIELD has just released the suspected aliases of the Avengers, as heard from recordings from various listening devices at AIM Industrial Research and Development Centre.

Known members of the Avengers are Iron Man, who operates mechanical armor, Hawkeye, an archer, Black Widow, who’s skills are unknown but was shown to be very efficient in the field, Daredevil, who has recently been stopping trouble in Hell’s Kitchen, and finally a man who claims to be Captain America. Reasons for this are unknown, but some historians speculate that…

MK @ninetydegreeestosane
Have you guys seen the news? Who are #TheAvengers ? #WhoAreTheAvengers

Woytek @theBear
Heroes! #heroesORcriminals #heroes

Emile @jenesaispas
Wtf is going on?!?! #TheAvengers

George @totallynotgeorgewashington
#TheAvengers what is the world coming to

Mark @bullshit
The fuck is this #TheAvengers shit? I call cover-up.

Sarah Wayne @stacysmom
My daughter nearly got killed by AIM! #TheAvengers thank you for stopping others from getting hurt. #heroes

Theorists @conspiracytheorists101
Are #TheAvengers a government squad? A new secret superhuman program? Read more on our website. #WhoAreTheAvengers

WHO ARE THE AVENGERS?
“Um, sir?” The nervous junior agent said, knocking on the door to Nick Fury’s office.

“What?” Nick snapped, looking up from the massive pile of paperwork he was submitting.

A nervous pause. “You know how Steve Rogers... ran away, Sir?”

“You mean when we lost Captain Fucking America. How could I forget?” Fury snapped, making the junior agent cower.

“There’s been a development, sir.”

The SHIELD agent flipped over his tablet, showing Fury the news report.

He watched it through, twice, and then stood up. He looked the junior agent dead in the eye. “You have got to be fucking kidding me.”

Rhodes was just finishing his maths homework and starting on his physics when a knock at the door stopped him midway through an equation. He stood and opened the door, to see a solemn woman dressed in a deep navy blue suit holding out a letter to him. He opened the letter skeptically, glancing up at the woman with a raised eyebrow.

'Mr Rhodes, we regret to inform you that Sergeant David Rhodes and Lieutenant Mary Rhodes were Killed In Action on the 25th of June, 2010.' read the first sentence.

He stopped reading. His head snapped up to the woman.

"I know this is going to be a big shock for you..." she began, but he didn't listen.

Killed In Action.

The words smudged and blurred and bled together as his tears hit the page.

Fuck.

Chapter End Notes

Busy chapter, right? I loved writing this one: I was bored to tears with exposition. On the other hand, I can't write fight scenes for shit.
Rhodey's story is stepping up a notch. Also: SHIELD losing it's shit will never get old.
What did you guys think?

Special thanks, as always, to my beta Tony. This fic would be dead without her.

Comments and Kudos are always appreciated.
Tony sat at the table, surrounded by the rest of the teens. The only one not present was Steve, who had been sent out to get bubble tea.

"So, Steve's birthday is coming up. I want to do something nice for him, like we did with Matt and getting his dad's boxing gear," Tony addressed the group, "Any ideas?"

There were blank looks from around the table, until Natasha sighed. "Well, I don't know about you lot but I know exactly what I'm getting him," Natasha said.

Everyone turned to her with questioning looks until she answered. "A world war two veteran hat."

"Natasha, you're a fucking genius," Tony told her matter-of-factly.

“I know, but you can’t have it. Think of your own ideas.”

The teens slumped in their seats, thinking hard.

"We could get him some of his friends autobiographies?" Bruce suggested.

"That… could work. He might not like them, though. Too many memories. Putting it on the list anyway."

"A photo of Bucky? Or the other commandos?" Clint thought aloud, tapping his mug of coffee absentmindedly.

"Now that’s an idea." Tony muttered, noting it down.

"So, what's in the box?" Clint begged.

Tony had brought in the boxes half an hour previously, and had waited for the other teens to guess. So far, the guesses had been:

Guns, new armour, new weapons, Iron Man suits for all of them ("In your dreams Legolas!"), food, knives, the tardis, orcs, kittens, an unholy amount of gummy bears, guns, swords, a single baked bean, clothes, cookies, glitter pens, every Metallica album in vinyl, QR codes, bertie bots every flavour beans, Bob Dylan ("What- How even- NO"), a Phineas and Ferb box set, Orcs, all the alcohol, a severed head that talks about the French revolution, a sonic screwdriver, baked beans, a dodo, a first aid kit, guns, Clint's old circus buddy Wade, the Taj Mahal, freedom, a cuddly toy, and fourteen million six-hundred and five random nerdy references.

Tony finally opened up one of the boxes, giving up at their guessing. and pulled out a black gun with bright LED lights down the side. "Laser tag!" He yelled in excitement.
Everyone instantly crowded round, trying to get a look at the gear.

"No way," Clint said, darting forward, shifting through the boxes until he pulled out his vest. "This is gonna be awesome!"

Vests and guns were handed out quickly, all with different colours and designs of them.

Natasha's colour was crimson, the lights sprawling over the black vest like spider webs.

Tony had red and gold, lights matching where the plates of his armour would go. There was a soft blue glow from his chest anyway, because of the arc reactor, so he practically looked like a christmas tree.

Bruce had green lights that fell faintly into the shape of a fist.

Steve's were, obviously, red white and blue, even though he was rather unamused at the american flag that lit up across his back.

Clint's vest was purple, with a lilac arrow across the back. The lights on his gun were violet arrows pointing down the barrel.

Matt had red lights, although a lighter shade than Natasha's, in the shape of devil horns on his vest.

"What are the rules?" Matt asked, fingers running over the gun and the vest.

"Let's see: no bedrooms, bathrooms, the den or computer rooms. Kitchens and Labs are out of bounds. If you dare touch my lab I will personally make your life hell. I've closed off other parts of the mansion, so it's ground floor only. Also we don't want any explosions. No other weapons: laser guns only. No shields, no knives, no bows - looking at you Robin Hood. Please, no property damage.

"The vests work a bit weird, but basically there are two sections of it. This top bit here- instant kill. You're out. This lower part has a time delay, and the lights will turn off after a few minutes. If you get hit in the leg or the arm, it'll be anywhere between ten minutes and an hour, depending on how much you use that leg, alright? As soon as you're 'dead', your gun will be disabled. The guns also have a limit. You get twelve shots and then you have to reload at the entrance hall. There's a screen in there too, that shows who's alive, dead and wounded. Oh, yeah: everything makes "pew pew" noises as well. Anything else?"

"Every person for themselves for the first three quarters of an hour, at least. Ok?" Steve said, looking over his gun.

They all nodded seriously, picking up their weapons.

"Ok rules down. Nice. You have fifteen minutes to find a spot, and then JARV will start the game. Fifteen minutes starting… now."

They all scattered instantly, heading to different places throughout the mansion. Clint grinned as he ran through the corridors, finding an air vent and pulling away the grill. He slipped in and covered the entrance again, then crawled through the cramped vents for what seemed like an age. He knew the routes well, and eventually, he got to the vent that lead to the entrance hall.

A few minutes later, JARVIS announced that the game had begun, and Clint waited, silent.
Matt found an abandoned sitting room, crept inside and closed the door behind him, leaving an inch open. He had a massive advantage over the others; he could sense where all of them were. Clint was hiding in an air vent next to the entrance hall: a perfect stake-out position. Tony was creeping through hallways, looking for a spot. Natasha, Steve and Bruce were stalking the hallways on the other side of the floor.

Grinning, Matt looked vaguely in the direction of the nearest security camera.

"JARVIS?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Kill the lights, please."

The mansion plunged into darkness. Matt could faintly hear Tony scream from across the mansion as he tripped on something.

He was gonna ace this.

Matt slowed his breathing until it was silent and waited, stock still. It was three minutes before Tony rounded the corner, fumbling along the wall, and Matt aimed his gun slightly upward and fired four times. A small beeping siren sounded, and Tony stared down at his vest. His heart rate spiked, as did his breathing.

"Wha- What the fuck?"

Matt stepped out of the room, and waved at Tony, a cheeky grin on his face.

"You clever bastard. You know where everyone in this mansion is, don't you?"

"Yup."

Tony's heart began to slow, settling down to the soft 'Thump-thump creak thump-thump' that accompanied the arc reactor. He gave a deep, annoyed sigh. "This game is rigged."

Matt grinned again. "Yep."

"Well, I'm going to go to the computer room and watch the fun play out over the monitors. Peace out, polygraph." With that, he turned down the corridor and walked away, JARVIS guiding him to the computer room.
Matt took a deep breath, then slunk back to his hiding place. He waited in silence for five minutes, before realising that everyone was on the other side of the mansion. He waited another minute, trying to get comfortable, then stood, sneaking down the corridor almost silently. He was too bored to wait it out.

He snuck down a few corridors, listening carefully, keeping his steps as silent as he could. He turned, then stopped dead. Steve was one corridor along, hiding around a corner in wait of unsuspecting teenagers. Matt stepped cautiously, knowing the Steve could hear him. He turned the corner, instantly firing three shots at Steve. Steve fired off two quick shots, managing to nail Matt straight in the chest. The vest made a quiet but irritating beeping noise, indicating that Matt was “dead”.

“Good going there, Matt,” Steve said, clapping him on the shoulder, “You managed to get me in the leg. I’m fucked now.”

Matt laughed lightly, then handed Steve his gun with a shrug. “Might as well steal my ammo.”

“Good sport,” Steve said, checking the fake gun to see how much fake ammunition was left. There were still seven shots left, so he holstered the gun and kept his own in his grasp.
Steve crept down the corridors in silence. Even when he listened carefully, all he could hear was his own heartbeat thrumming in his veins and his own soft breathing. He turned a corner, sweeping for enemies, then continued down the hall. He checked that every door was closed before he went past, in case someone hid within. He was careful to keep as silent as possible, his footsteps light. He turned another corner, and instantly fired off three shots at Bruce before diving back behind the corner.

He heard Bruce fire off another shot, then ducked round the corner and fired off a few more. One of them hit its mark, and Bruce’s vest beeped its death.

Bruce laughed, thanked him for the good game, then wandered off to the computer room to help Tony.

Steve stared down at his leg. The lights were fading quickly, indicating the severity of the injury. At this rate, he reckoned he only had fifteen minutes left if he was lucky.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MATT. Status: Dead. Kills: 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NATASHA. Status: Alive. Kills: 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STEVE. Status: Injured. Kills: 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLINT. Status: Alive. Kills: 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TONY. Status: Dead. Kills: 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRUCE. Status: Dead. Kills: 0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Huh,” Tony muttered under his breath, staring at security cameras, “Where the fuck is Clint?”

Bruce leaned over his shoulder to stare at the security cameras, unable to find the teen in question. Matt sat up slightly in his chair.

“He’s in the air vents, just by the entrance hall. Good spot, actually,” Matt told them.

“That cheeky bastard,” Tony said, bringing up the security of the entrance hall. It seemed that where he was hiding was a security blind spot.

Natasha, who was hiding just outside the door, smirked in victory. She’d found Barton.

However, it was a bit of a predicament. She had to get Clint and eliminate him without him seeing her, even though he had chosen an excellent vantage point that oversaw the whole room. She took a moment to think, considered, then went for it.

Clint didn’t see Natasha sneaking silently along the wall. He was bored, and had pulled out his phone to read Harry Potter fanfiction. He glanced up every so often, but not often enough to see Natasha slink directly under his air vent. He caught a glimpse of movement out of the corner of his eye, and his phone clattered to the ground and the gun raised. But Natasha had already grabbed the grill of the vent and shot at him. His vest went black before he had time to pull the trigger.
He grinned, and silently thanked her for the game, then shuffle back down the vent to find the others.

---

MATT. Status: Dead. Kills: 1

NATASHA. Status: Alive. Kills: 1

STEVE. Status: Injured. Kills: 2

CLINT. Status: Dead. Kills: 0

TONY. Status: Dead. Kills: 0

BRUCE. Status: Dead. Kills: 0

---

Since she was in the entrance hall, she reloaded her gun and waited. She could tell from the scoreboard that it was only her and Steve left, and he was bound to come to the hall soon. He was injured as well. So, she leant against a wall and waited. There was a side-table about a meter away, for her to dive behind when Steve turned up.

She was waiting five minutes before Steve snuck round the corner, silent as a mouse. Natasha fired off three shots as she dove behind the table. Only one hit, and it nailed him right in the shoulder. He swore as he hid behind a corner, and there was a few seconds as he decided what to do. He dove from behind the corner, and fired as many shots as he could at her as he ran forward. Most were blocked by the table, but one managed to hit her in the leg. She ignored it, and ducked up from her cover to shot Steve straight in the head.

And that was the end of the game.

---

NATASHA WINS

---

They all flopped into the den, stripping off the laser tag gear and falling into the soft blankets and pillows. They spent a few minutes just lying there, before Matt sat up suddenly.

“Crap, we’re gonna have to take finals soon.”

Mass groaning erupted from everyone but Steve and Tony, who sat and looked smug. They put on some crappy TV, and stayed up until three in the morning before dropping off to sleep.

The next morning, they woke late, and Steve dragged them up to the kitchen so that he and Bruce (the only good cooks in the house) could make brunch. They plied Tony and Clint with coffee until they felt awake, and then all of them went back down to the den to plan their next heist.

Before they even started a phone began ringing, and Tony fumbled for his phone.
"Sorry guys, Rhodey's calling."

He wandered out of the room, answering the phone as he did so. He closed the door behind him, muffling the sounds of the avengers chatting in the other room.

"Hey, Platypus, what's up?"

"Tony, aw shit, I just- things have gone to hell, I need help." Rhodey stuttered over the phone, the shaking in his voice reminiscent of one who had screamed and cried for a long, long time.

Tony's face instantly shifted from an easy smile to worry. "You alright, Rhodey?" It was a stupid question, but he had to ask it anyway. He'd never heard Rhodey cry before. He didn't quite know what to say.

Rhodey paused before answering, faint sniffling noises reaching Tony's ears. "My parents, Tones - oh fucking hell. They were on tour, and they- they- shit. They got bombed straight outta the sky. Killed in action. I'm- fuck, Tony. What the fuck am I gonna do?"

"I'm sorry, Rhodey. You could always come stay with us? There's always room for you with the Avengers."

The sniffles on the other end of the line subsided slightly. "Thanks, Tones. I might take you up on that. They want to send me to stay with my aunt, the one who lives in New York."

Tony nodded, and leant against a wall. "We'll make it work, Rhodey. You want to become an Avenger? I'll make it happen."

Chapter End Notes

Did I just write nearly an entire chapter of Laser Tag? I did. FML.
Did I just subtly break the fourth wall while doing so? I did. Yay.

It's Chapter 12 and I am officially sick of the word AND. I need a Thesaurus right now.

Tony: I cannot express my thanks enough.

To everyone who comments, thank you so much! It really makes my day when someone likes my story enough to tell me about it.
Tony had spoken with Rhodey a few more times, making plans for his extraction. It was easier with Rhodey, because it was only getting one person instead of six. In the end, they decided that Rhodey should run away, and that one of the Avengers would meet him at a Starbucks nearby to lead him to Stark Mansion. Steve volunteered for the job, since he knew the area quite well and was the least conspicuous of the team. It helped that he wasn’t on any databases, since he had officially died in 1945.

So, on that early june morning, Steve dressed in a simple baseball cap and a shirt, with a backpack slung over his shoulder, prepared to go and collect Rhodey.

"I'm going out," The soldier called to the other teens, "If I don't come back, avenge my death."

A few laughs followed him out of the door, and it was only a short walk to the local Starbucks.

"James!" He said, walking up to Rhodey and giving him a quick hug. They walked out of the shop after getting their coffees, and strolled down the street at a leisurely pace. There was nothing more suspicious than running away, or looking anxious. So, they chatted amiably as they walked and drank their drinks, and got chatting about Tony (and embarrassing stories therein).

They arrived at the mansion with little trouble, and were greeted by a congregation of teenagers. Tony ran and tackle-hugged Rhodey, sending them both sprawling to the floor. The teens all laughed, helped Rhodey and Tony back to their feet then dragged him to the den.

It wasn’t long before they’d ordered pizza and settled down for an evening of crappy TV and banter.

The next morning, Steve woke the Avengers early for training. Clint stubbornly refused to wake up - given his magical ability to sleep like a log - so Steve left him and Rhodey alone. They stumbled into the kitchen nearly an hour after the others had gone upstairs, searching for coffee.

Clint quietly sipped his coffee, only half awake, listening to the distant sounds of pandemonium breaking loose from elsewhere in the mansion. Matt went racing past, swiftly followed by Tony, who was covered in bright orange glitter and a t-shirt that said "I heart Hammertech". Clint saw it too often and was too tired to be phased.

Next to him, Rhodey spluttered loudly, as if seeing something that had totally stunned him.

"Is something wrong, Rhodey?" Clint asked, instantly worried for the other Avengers.

Rhodey spluttered a bit more, then fell into a resigned sigh. “This is going to be my life from now on, isn’t it?” He complained.

“Well, you can always go out with Matt at night. That’s pretty fun,” Clint told him, “Lots of superheroeing and stuff.”
Rhodey nodded as Steve raced down the corridor, yelling after Matt and Tony.

Just another ordinary day at Stark Mansion.

Rhodey got used to the weirdness after a week or so.

"Oh, I love maths!" Clint signed, fingers sharp with sarcasm, a half-scowl settling on his face. They were learning everything they had missed at schools so that they could take finals, except that work sucked and they all wanted to go back to kicking ass and saving lives. Except Steve, Tony and Rhodey, who sort of sat in the background looking smug because they had either already taken the exams or didn’t have to take them. They did help teach every so often, but the rest of the time they were smug bastards.

"Me too," Natasha signed back, rolling her eyes and trying to stop the grin from forming on her face.

"What are you guys doing?" Rhodey asked.

"Cramming for finals. We need to take them to finish high-school, so… yay. Clint's doing maths right now, and Matt's doing history over in his room."

"His room?"

"Yeah. Sound-proof walls, incense candles, soft blankets. It helps him focus. We use when he has an overload day." Rhodey gave a puzzled look, so he continued. "The whole super-senses thing is hard on him. He has to filter out everything all the time. Some days he just… can't deal with it, so we put him in a sensory minimal room. It helps."

"Ugh, I'm bored," Rhodey groaned, lying across a table in Tony’s workshop in boredom.

"Go outside," Tony mumbled, still engrossed in his work.

"Can't. We'd get spotted and get arrested or sent back into the system."

Tony looked up instantly, a metaphorical light bulb turning on in his head, and grabbed a laptop from nearby. "I can do some stuff. Hack in, alter the case files t'il they say 'case closed', take down any notifications for facial recognition programs. We'll still have to be super careful, incognito to the max, but we could go out of we wore basic disguises like hats or something."

"Tony, you're a fucking life saver."

An hour later and all of them would be able to go outside without being spotted by facial recognition
programs. They would still have to be careful of manual searching, but for the most part they were safe. The first thing Steve and Rhody did with their newfound freedom was go to Starbucks and buy coffees for everyone. They deserved them for working so hard.

Except Tony. Tony wasn’t really doing much at that point.

“So, Rhodey-boy, we need to get you a superhero name!” Tony said as they lay in the den that evening after a hard day of learning and cramming for exams.

Rhodey looked up from his book. He paused for a moment, then shifted slightly before muttering something under his breath.

“What was that?”

Rhodey looked up and suddenly there was determination glinting in his eyes. “War Machine.”

Tony whistled. “Damn, that’s hardcore. Any particular reason why?”

“It’s… it’s the plane my parents went down in. It was called War Machine.”

Clint’s face softened with sympathy. “Oh, Rhodey, I’m sorry.”

He shrugged, but there was a half-heartedness about it that indicated how lost in grief he still was. “Don’t be,” he said, “S’not your fault.”

“What are we gonna do for weapons?” Natasha asked, from where she was organising her knife box.

“I have a spare suit lying around?” Tony offered. “You could use it temporarily.”

Rhodey’s face lit up.

“Temporarily.” Tony repeated, just to get the message across.

Shortly after Rhodey arrived, the exams started in earnest for four of the Avengers.

The four of them were miserable during the two weeks, cramming every bit of learning they could into their free time and living off coffee. For Clint, it wasn’t that hard, and Natasha somehow had an immunity to tiredness, but it was taking its toll on Matt and Bruce. Matt’s senses could barely keep up with the pressure, and Bruce was struggling with keeping calm.

They all did what they could to keep each other going for the length of the exams, and Steve made sure they relaxed after each test like the mother hen he secretly was.

When they all walked out of the last exam, right into the group hugs and high fives of Tony, Steve and Rhodey.
They went to get Bubble Tea to celebrate, and then went home and relaxed in the den.

As soon as they were settled, Tony pulled out his laptop.

He grinned. "Where to next?"

Chapter End Notes

So, yeah. How’d you like the chapter?
Thanks so much to everyone who has commented or left kudos: every single one makes my day and encourages me to write more. Special thanks to my beta, Tony, who is completely fed up of me sending chapters at her right now.
(Next chapter will be up on Saturday)
"What's this week's agenda?"

"Well, for Rhodey's inaugural mission, methinks we need to do something big but simple, yeah?" Tony explained, to the Avengers' agreement. "So: an AIM storage facility in New Jersey," Tony pulled up a holographic file. "It's been holding illegally made and potentially dangerous weapons. Natasha thinks it's where they store weapons before shipping them out to suppliers abroad. It's fairly close to a port and an airport, so a pretty decent spot."

Natasha sighed dramatically. "It's a shame we have to destroy it."

The other teens erupted into giggles, and they ironed out most of the details before turning on some crappy television to watch.

Tony got bored half an hour in, fingers twitching to make something, so he dragged Rhodey to his workshop to quickly fit Rhodey into his spare suit. It was gunmetal grey, with titanium and aluminium plates scattered in parts, but unlike Tony's suit the arc reactor was a deep, burning red, because Tony thought it would look cool with the other colours.

"Remember -" Tony tightened a screw in the leg plate "- this is only temporary, before we get you something better, okay?"

Rhodey nodded an affirmative, and before long had been kitted out in the suit. He stood in awe, gazing at the plates that shifted over his skin, and went for a test flight. He returned an hour later in a blissful state of wonder, and thanked Tony profusely before falling into the den, asleep before his head hit the pillows.

"Rhodey, if we get arrested, it's your fault."

The occupants of the van burst into laughter as they landed just outside the building, setting off about twenty security alarms that they didn't care about. Six security guards came rushing out of the building, and three went down with arrows in the knees before a second had passed. One went down with a shield to the chest, and the last two got Natasha's bullets to the shoulders. Matt sauntered over and punched them all unconscious, just to be sure, still chuckling about the joke.

The Avengers swept into the building, quickly taking out all the guards and knocking the other AIM lackeys unconscious. Natasha had just located the room containing the computer terminals and was hacking in when Matt's head shot up.

"Guys, I think I hear something outside." Matt muttered over the comms.

"Right," Tony acknowledged, "I'll do a quick perimeter check: make sure there are no reinforcements coming in."

He quickly located a window and flew out, flying around the perimeter of the building to search for more enemies. Instead, he found three black cars parked in a row. They had a logo on the side that
Tony didn't immediately recognise, even though it seemed familiar. It wasn't AIM's logo, so he landed in front of the vans, carefully holding up his blasters.

The doors of the cars opened in unison, identical men and women in black suits stepping out and walking forwards.

"Wait, who the fuck are you guys?" Tony said, blasters raised and ready to fire.

The man in the centre of the group spoke up, "I'm Agent Coulson from SHIELD. We'd like to form an alliance with you and the other Avengers."

Tony went silent. "Guys," he muttered over the comms, "You might wanna get out here. Real fast."

Within a minute, all the Avengers were standing outside the building, staring at the agents. When Steve came out, he froze for a split second before tensing slightly, shoulders coiled and the grip on his shield tight.

"Agent, tell these guys what you just told me."

"I'm from SHIELD. We'd like to form an alliance with the Avengers."

The group looked at each other, and through some minute shrugs and signing behind their backs, they all agreed that it was a good plan to go with what SHIELD was offering.

"We'd like to take you up on your offer," Steve announced, stepping forward, "But know that if you do anything shifty we'll bolt. Got it?"

"Loud and clear, Captain." Agent Coulson said. He stood still after that, unmoving.

"Uh, Agent Agent?" Tony said. "You wanted to do something? Take us anywhere?"

The hum of an engine joined the background noise, and a few seconds later a plane was landing right behind the parked cars. The wind from the landing ruffled Agent Coulson's suit, but he simply smiled slightly.

"This is our ride."

Tony stared in awe at the plane, instantly trying to improve the design. Steve looked at the other Avengers, signed "bomb" and ran off into the compound.

"If you'll give us a minute to set up our explosives," Natasha said politely, "Then we can leave and blow this place sky high."

They waited until Steve ran back out, then turned to the plane.

"The Quinjet."

He lead them over to the aircraft, and after a brief pause to let Bruce park the van they were flying over a remote field in New Jersey. Steve had clicked the detonator as they flew off, and the faint rumble of the explosion behind them meant another job well done. They settled down into the flight, chatting quietly amongst themselves.

"Where are we going?" Steve asked Coulson.

"A SHIELD facility near here. It's one of our main bases. We call it the Hub."
Steve nodded, and settled back into his seat. He pulled off his helmet and goggles, and muttered against the others protests that SHIELD already knew who he was. He rubbed his face, then settled in for the ride. There was going to be a stressful chat at the other end.

"Please, remove all of your weapons and place them in the trays provided."

The Avengers grumpily stepped up to the security gate, one by one, and removed the weapons they had on their persons. Tony got waived through, since he was wearing the armour and he didn't want to reveal his identity. Bruce gave in his stun watch, stun gun and other non-lethal weapons. Steve kept his shield, but pulled three knives from his boots and a whole range of other devices from holsters and his belt. Matt handed over his smoke bombs and billy clubs. Clint reluctantly handed over his bow and quiver, and then it was Natasha's turn.

She sighed grumpily, and began to pull off all the visible knives and guns on her person (a pretty large number to begin with) followed by the knives hidden in her boots, the long needle hidden in a special pocket on her leg, her stun-gloves, her stun-watch, the knives up her sleeves and the three daggers at the small of her back.

The SHIELD agents looked on in horror and awe at the steadily growing pile of weapons on the table.

Clint frowned suspiciously at her. "He said all of them, Nat."

She scowled at him, then began emptying her utility belt. There were five more knives, a swiss army knife, another multitool, a small biro pen and lots of explosives. She pulled the cigarette box from her utility pocket and placed it in the box too, much to the concerned looks of the SHIELD agents.

(Off the the side, Coulson leant towards Steve and asked, "Do I want to know?"

"No," Steve replied curtly.)

Clint gave Natasha a stern look, and she removed one last tiny pistol.

After Natasha had begrudgingly removed (almost) every weapon on her person, 53 in total, they moved on. They were given lanyards (or in Steve and Bruce's case, returned), and Coulson escorted them to a conference room. There was a large, elliptical table in the centre of the room, a screen at one end and no windows, only bright fluorescent lights overhead. In one corner sat a decorative but lonely plant pot, that had probably been put there by an optimistic agent who believed that it would liven up the dull grey room a little. It didn't. The plant had half-wilted from the sheer dullness of its surroundings.

The Avengers seated themselves around the table, had barely a minute to settle themselves before the door slid open and a very angry and angsty pirate walked in. He wore all black, had a scowl on his face that looked so ingrained as to be permanent, and wore a black eye patch over his left eye. He had really gone overboard on the black leather.

"Avengers," he announced, as if they didn't know who they were, "You have been causing me a fuck ton of trouble."
"And who are you?" Daredevil asked, polite given the circumstances.

The man's scowl got deeper. "I'm Nick Fury, Director of SHIELD. And I'm not very happy with you."

"No shit," Natasha snorted under her breath.

"What the hell are you idiots thinking? Rogers and Banner, I expected more of you, and the rest of you? What the fuck? What the actual fuck?"

"We just want to help people," Matt objected.

"By doing this? Vigilante justice has consequences, you dipshits."

"You think we didn't know that?" Natasha burst out, "The reason we're doing this is because the alternative was worse."

Fury raised a sceptical eyebrow. "How much worse?"

"Being forced to kill people. Being abused. Having attacks on your life, in Iron Man's case. Daredevil was already in the business. Cap has fucking PTSD, for pity's sake." Clint nearly stood in his anger. "You have no idea how bad it was for them."

Fury sighed as he dropped down into the nearest chair. "Well then, perhaps we can change topic to the reason why I asked you here: an alliance."

"What are the terms?"

"You'll work for SHIELD. Everything you do will be under SHIELD jurisdiction, and we'll share information. Every mission you go on will have a proper debrief and report, and everything will have to be cleared by me before you do it."

Steve leant forward. "If you want us to join you, we'll have some conditions."

After some hard negotiating, they came to an agreement. The Avengers would become part of SHIELD, having the equivalent of Level 8 clearance - but only within Avengers operations. They would have to call in operations within an hour of them happening, or before if possible. They weren't allowed to do anything stupid, which was fair, and they had to do proper reports of their missions. They also got to share information with SHIELD, which was a bonus.

They sorted out some paperwork, which sucked, then piled back into a Quinjet and headed for the field in which they had left their van. There was an awkward silence, none of them quite wanting to discuss what they had just signed up for, but as they walked back into the mansion Tony decided to break the ice.

"So, does getting found by SHIELD count as arrested? Because it’s totally Rhodey’s fault."

Their laughter followed them into the den, where they fell asleep in a pile of tangled, teenage limbs.

Chapter End Notes

So... SHIELD. What did you think?
Thank you all so much for your comments and kudos! It always makes my day when someone likes my fic.
"Again."

Clint scowled and turned back to his punching bag, firing off three quick jabs and an uppercut.

"No, no, stop. You're doing it wrong," Matt cringed, "I can hear your bones creaking with every punch."

"Oh fuck off. You don't have to rub it in." Clint joked.

Matt's lip quirked at the comment, but he returned to his instruction. "You need to straighten your hand up, so that it's in line with your wrist, like this -" Matt grabbed Clint's fist and moved it to the right spot " - Then you won't break your wrist when you punch someone in the face."

“Neat,” Clint muttered, turning back to the punching bag and firing off a few more jabs.

“Good,” Matt praised, walking across the room to let Clint continue to beat the crap out of the bag.

“Working for SHIELD sucks,” Clint groaned, leaning back in his chair to escape from the mount of paperwork in front of him.

“Ugh, relatable,” Matt grumbled from the corner of the room, from where he was dictating paperwork to JARVIS.

Clint stood with an exclamation of “Fuck it,” then looked at the mound of paper and sighed. “Can’t we just get JARVIS to do it?”

“Uh, no no no no. J will only do paperwork if he wants to do paperwork. He isn’t your personal slave.” Tony protested from the other side of the desk.

“I would be happy to assist you all with your paperwork, sir,” JARVIS said over the intercom.

“You sure, J? Wouldn’t want you to die of boredom or anything.”

Eventually, JARVIS convinced Tony that he could do paperwork for the Avengers, with the excuse that he’d not had much to do since he had moved into Stark Mansion beside hacking into various databases and monitoring internet activity. He’d been bored.

So that left the Avengers sitting in a room with nothing to do. Obviously, as teenagers are wont to, they quickly began complaining about SHIELD.

“So much paperwork,” Steve groaned, swiveling in his chair.

Natasha was carefully polishing a knife, but looked up to chip in, “And Fury is annoying as fuck.”

"He looks like a pirate, though!” Tony protested. “A really angsty, leather wearing pirate. He has the ship and the minions and the attitude and the eye patch already."

"Say that to his face and see what happens." Matt chuckled.
“Do I look suicidal?”

“Well, you don’t look anything…” Matt joked, leaning towards Tony with a shit-eating grin.

“Fuck. You.” Tony slammed his palm to his forehead, and promptly gave up.

In the next week, the Avengers (minus Steve) were busy plotting the Fourth of July celebrations. They organised Steve’s presents, and what they were going to do. Before long they were waking up to the awaited morning.

“Happy Birthday!” was what woke Steve, and before he knew it he was awake and laughing and shuffling all the Avengers upstairs for breakfast. Bruce insisted he make it, and Steve had a morning off for once. They all began handing over cards and joke presents, like Captain America figurines that looked nothing like him and tiny frisbees that Clint insisted were exactly the same as his shield.

Eventually, they moved to one of the lounges that they had set up with american flags and banners, and handed Steve his presents. Natasha had given him the promised World War Two Veteran hat, which made Steve laugh for five minutes straight and then firmly place the cap on his head for the remainder of the day. Clint had given him a StarkPod with music in every genre: things he’d missed while he was in the ice. Matt had given him three autobiographies: one of Peggy Carter, one of Jacques Dernier and another from Timothy Dougan. Bruce completed the set with the rest of the Howling Commandos, each with their independant biography followed by the one they had written together. His face had gone mysteriously blank at that, but he gave Matt and Bruce the largest hugs he could. Rhodey had got him blankets in red white and blue, as well as some crash course style history books for what he had missed. Last, but not least, Tony gave him his favourite present.

As he pulled off the star-spangled wrapping, he nearly gasped. It was like the air had been forced from his lungs. It was a framed photo of him and Bucky, taken way back in the war. Tony had managed to find the original picture - now rather time worn - and framed it for him. It was the tiniest of smiles on his lips, and crinkles at the corner of his eyes that told Tony he had done good.

They sat and talked and laughed until the evening, when they went out onto the roof and watched the fireworks light up the sky in bright reds, blues and whites. Matt couldn’t watch, but he felt the rumble of the explosions around him and the awe and laughter of his friends was more than enough to make up for his lack of sight.

They collapsed into bed that night, happy and exhausted.

Steve couldn’t sleep, though. He realised then that there where photos of him and Bucky scattered around the internet. It took him less than a minute to find a goddamned jackpot of photos and information.

He stared at his computer screen for hours, gazing at one photo.

It was a picture of him and Bucky, taken from a grainy black and white video at the Smithsonian. All Steve could do was stare at the photo, at the line of Bucky’s jaw, the way his lips curved up into a laugh. It was like he’d been hit in the chest with a sack of bricks, or the squeezing, gasping sensation of an asthma attack when he was a child.

He hadn't seen a photo of Bucky in months.

God, he missed him.

Tony snapped him out of his spiralling thoughts with a quick mumble about the screen’s light
keeping him up, so Steve quietly saved the photo to his computer and turned it off. He shifted into a more comfortable position, and tried to suppress the suffocating feeling of the blankets over him, and the sinking feeling of the mattress beneath him.

He lay there for hours, staring at the ceiling but not really seeing anything. Instead, memories came before his eyes. Every memory he held close: his mother stroking his hair gently, sunlight shining on Bucky's face, the Howling Commandos sitting round a campfire and laughing, him and Bucky lying next to each other in the swiftly fading light and talking about what they would do if there wasn't a war.

He stared until his throat hurt and his eyes stung with longing for the past. Crying silent tears, he fell into a restless sleep.

When he woke the next morning, his throat ached as if he'd been screaming since he'd gone into the ice, and his eyes were red and puffy.

None of the other teens commented, despite their concerned looks. They didn't need to.

Chapter End Notes

This has over 1000 views? Thank all of you so much for reading, and extra thanks to everyone who has taken time to leave comments and kudos! This all means so much to me.

On another note, updates are going to be sporadic for the next month or so. I'm very behind on my writing, and I'll have crappy Wi-Fi / Internet access for about a month. On the upside, I have chapter 21, 22 and 23 already written! Go prior planning!
“Quest complete!” Tony yelled as he threw himself into a pile of cushions. The other teens stared at him, confused.

“Seriously? That’s it for AIM?”

“Yeah, SHIELD sent in a few of their specialised units to take out a few of the straggling bases but now we’re finally done!”

“Good,” Matt grinned, “I was getting sick of the logos.”

Clint threw a pillow at Matt’s head, but Matt ducked out of the way just in time for the pillow to hit Natasha straight in the face. Clint paled, white as a sheet, as a flash of anger graced Natasha’s face, which settled into a deadly calm facade over her features.

The other teens stared in shock. Tony whispered “Oh snap,” but otherwise there was dead silence.

Clint turned tail and ran. He sprinted into the lounge, where Bruce was calmly sitting on a sofa with his laptop and a warm mug of tea.

“I’m not here,” Clint whispered as he dove behind the sofa, silently hiding within a second.

“So what did you do wrong?” Bruce asked nonchalantly, sipping his tea quietly.

“I hit Nat in the face with a pillow.”

Bruce paused and took another sip of his tea. “Do you have a death wish?”

“It was an accident!”

Natasha glided into the room, and smile on her face and a look in her eyes that wasn’t quite normal. “Hey, Bruce, have you seen Clint?”

“No, sorry.”

“Oh, okay. Then who were you talking to?” She had the kind of look on her face that said she knew she had him trapped, and that he would give away Clint’s location.

It was a good thing that Bruce was an excellent liar. “The Hulk,” he told her smoothly, “He makes the funniest comments sometimes. He likes your hair, by the way.”

Natasha kept smiling, but internally frowned. She turned back to Bruce with a “Thanks anyway,” then left the room to continue searching for Clint.

Said teen waited for three minutes before peeping his head over the side of the sofa. “Thanks, bro. You just saved my ass. I am forever in your debt.”
“So, who are we going after next?” Bruce asked, throwing a cricket ball into the air and then catching it.

Tony looked up from his laptop, a mug of coffee halfway to his face. “Well, SHIELD managed to get some more dirt on HammerTech, so… everyone okay with that?”

“Hell yeah!” Matt yelled, pumping his fist in the air.

In the corner of the room, Bruce grinned ruefully behind his book. It was payback time.

They had parked the van in the car park. It was a bold move, one that made the Avengers smirk, but none of them particularly cared about being seen: the cloaking on the van worked pretty well. Tony found it funny that they were right under HammerTech’s nose without them realising, which Natasha and Rhodey thought was “needlessly reckless, dammit Tony”.

For him, it was simple as hell to hack into the network and disable all the devices that were using the Wi-Fi or were hardwired in. The automated lights in the building, the security monitors, every device, the automatic doors, even the vending machine stopped working.

From the van, Matt could hear the cries of distress, alarm and outrage. He nearly died of laughter when he heard a man furiously swearing and kicking the vending machine because his skittles had gotten stuck.

With all communications down, the Avengers simply waltzed in, knocked out the security guards, and took all the information from the hard drive located on the third floor. Tony made sure to erase the data that had been left, which would leave HammerTech unable to continue as a company. Served them right.

Tony sighed as he and JARVIS began searching the files, marking dates and names and places. They found 5 additional facilities that hadn’t been on official record, as well as documents for their illegal doings. It turned out they had been buying StarkTech and making knock-offs for years, even before Howard Stark’s death. Even then, it looked like Obadiah Stane’s fault. Howard may have been a dick, but at least he had pride in his company.

The sucky thing about working for SHIELD was that they had to do reports after every mission. So, naturally, JARVIS did all the work while the Avengers sat around the den and played Super Smash Bros. Naturally, Natasha won. She always won. Tony was considering banning her.

They checked over the reports, then sent them off to SHIELD. Bruce then decided that everyone needed dinner, and dragged them all to the kitchen to cook some Thai noodles. The teens sat around the table, eating and chatting and laughing, and felt happy. They were a family now, and nothing could tear them apart.
So, um, yeah. Not too happy with this chapter. I might come back and re-write.
I have a question for you folks: if you got to prank Nick Fury, what would you prank him with and how would you do it?
Thanks to everyone who reads and comments! It really makes my day.
See you in the next chapter!
Hammer Time

Chapter Notes

No, I am not sorry for this title.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The atmosphere was grim in the van as they flew to their next target. SHIELD had been combing through HammerTech files to find out what this base would be like, and it wasn’t good news. This factory used children as labourers, and that didn’t sit right with any if the Avengers. This wasn’t a locate and destroy mission, like the others. It was a rescue.

Tony sat in the back of the van, wiring explosives, hands focused but mind racing a mile a minute. There were kids in there, and that was not fucking okay.

Before they knew it, they had landed just outside the complex. There were three buildings: two factories and a warehouse. Matt listened carefully, and confirmed that there were roughly thirty children and ten guards per factory. The warehouse had five guards, but they were all playing poker. They already knew from the schematics that the doors were industrially sealed, which was why Tony was wiring explosives in the back of the van.

They split up: Tony and Natasha working on the warehouse; Matt, Clint and Rhodey on one factory; Steve and Bruce on the other.

Bruce and Steve were the first to set off the explosives to blast open the industrial doors. Steve instantly leaped in, shield up and to the ready to stop bullets that came his way. He instantly ran up to the first guard he saw and knocked them out, then threw his shield at another four. They went down with practised ease.

Except there were still ten guards left, more than anticipated.

A child whimpered from where a huddle of small bodies were squished into one corner.

One of the guards, gun in hand, spun towards the sound of the child's voice, weapon cocked. No, Steve thought, absolutely not.
Steve launched himself towards the sentry, raising his shield. Four guns fired in his direction, but the moving target was hard to hit, and three out of four missed. The fourth scraped his shoulder, bouncing off his armoured gear. He threw his shield as hard as he could, and ducked as it bounced off three of the guards, punching the fourth in the face. He caught the shield as he stared at the bodies groaning on the floor, then turned to the small group of children hiding in the corner. He knelt down, slowly putting his shield on his back.

"Are you ok?"

One of the children closest to him nodded tentatively, a scared look marring his face. The look wasn’t directed at Steve, though, or the guards. It was at the hole that had suddenly been ripped through one wall, not by explosives, but by a massive green fist.

Bruce had peeped inside the factory quickly to see how Steve was getting on. He saw the guards across the room, aiming their guns at children, ready to fire. And all of a sudden there was a rushing in his ears and the thumping of his heart in his chest and everything hurt for a split second and then everything was…

Anger.

The Hulk burst into the warehouse, a roar tearing from his lips, and began smashing the slave-drivers into walls and floors so hard that their bones shattered. He sped through guards with ease while Steve took out the another four. The Captain stared up at the behemoth with a grin.

“Y’alright there, buddy?”

The Hulk gave a grin in reply.

“Good. We got some kids to get safe, ya hear?”

The Hulk, usually savage and angry, bent down to the tiny children and waved gently. He held out a hand, and one child eagerly leapt forward and stood on his palm. He looked down in shock, then gently lifted the child to one shoulder. Before long, fifteen children had piled themselves about his shoulders, head and neck, hanging on with childish glee. The other half had attached themselves to Steve, following him out to the entrance and the bright sunlight beyond.
Meanwhile, the other Avengers had finished their missions, having liberated another thirty children as well as some files from the warehouse, and were slightly worried.

“Where the hell are Bruce and Steve?”

They began looking around, but Rhodey quickly pointed at the factory with an “Uhh….”

It was easy to see why. There was a gaping hole in one wall, with a green giant lumbering out. It was the Hulk, but despite the bulging muscles he didn’t seem scary; probably because of the children clambering all over him. There were four children sitting on each shoulder, giggling, and two clinging to his hair with excited screams.

“Uhhhhhhhhhhhh…”

Steve came from the building behind him, a chuckle on his lips, and began helping the children from the Hulk’s massive shoulders.

So that was what SHIELD arrived to half an hour later: the Avengers entertaining sixty children by letting them climb up and down the Hulk and playing tag about his feet. The agent on duty nearly pissed himself when he realised that the Hulk was babysitting children, before he realised that the children were happy and laughing and enjoying themselves.

SHIELD didn’t have the transport to move them, but they had brought food and blankets with them while they waited for more Quinjets to arrive. The children, while happy to be rescued, were so tired and hungry and worn out from their long days of work that most of them barely had time to eat and grab a blanket before they fell asleep.

It was an hour before another Quinjet arrived, and in the meantime the SHIELD agents and Avengers were kept busy by handcuffing the unconscious guards that had been in the buildings. By the time the Quinjets arrived, they had only just finished. There were barely enough for the eighty or so people they had to transport.
The Avengers helped to rouse the children and load them to the Quinjets, then waved them off as they flew away to a SHIELD facility to be nursed to health and eventually to find their families.

Tony sent a stern message to Fury, telling him to keep the kids safe, warm, well-treated and well-fed. As the Avengers flew back to the mansion, Nick Fury leant back in his seat and listened to the recording.

“You keep ‘em safe, sunshine, or you’ll get what you’ve got coming.”

He gave a smirk. Maybe these Avengers weren’t so bad after all.

Chapter End Notes

Our first (proper) appearance of the Hulk! I know that I didn't go with stereotypically angry, but in the comics he's usually quite soft with animals and children. And there's plenty of time for him to smash things later. Thanks so much to everyone who comments or leaves kudos! You guys are amazing.
SHIELD reports *sucked*.

Fury had told them that they had to do reports on all of their previous exploits, individually as well as a mission log and a full team report. The Director was also pissed off because of all the property damage, so naturally they had to file that as well. The teens were nearly dying from all the paperwork.


“Welcome to the adult world,” Steve muttered under his breath, along with a rant about “military bullshit”, “lyin’ on five fuckin’ draft forms” and “tryin’ ta buy an apartment at twelve.”

Natasha and Matt snorted at his comments, the redheads having similar senses of humour: mostly consisting of bad puns, morbid jokes and laughing at other people’s misfortune.

It took the better part of two days before they finished the reports and other mounds of steadily growing paperwork. It was almost as if Fury was trying to drown them in the misery of administration so that they wouldn’t be able to do anything stupid.

By the end of the first day Natasha looked ready to commit murder, and by the end of the second so did everyone else, besides Bruce.

So, obviously, they decided some pranks were in order.

Even though they hadn't been told where the Hub was, Tony had kept his location on JARVIS's radar. He presented the map and satellite data with a grin, showing them how nothing was there.

"SHIELD's hidden it. This satellite data is from over 10 years ago!" Tony practically scoffed, but restrained himself.
"What's the plan?" Asked Clint, who stared intently at the map displayed on the small laptop screen.

"Who's up for some pranks?" Natasha asked in answer, a cold grin gracing her face and darkening her words to a far more morbid tone.

Matt's face lit up in a devilish smirk, as he too was absolutely done with the sheer amounts of paperwork the teens had been subjected to.

The Avengers quickly planned their wrath, grinning and giggling in gruesome glee. As a stealth mission, it was decided that Steve and Bruce would be sent in to plant the pranks. They decided on a few simple ones, old tricks that would keep Fury on his guard.

After a fun afternoon planning, they decided to get right down to it. Which was why the very next morning, at the crack of dawn, Steve and Bruce found themselves in the middle of the Hub, deeply disguised and awaiting instructions. Tony was muttering down their earpieces, giving them directions to Fury's office.

The old bucket over the door gag wouldn't work on the neat, sliding doors of the Hub, so Tony had devised a similar trick that would spray pink glitter over anyone who walked beneath it. He then went above and beyond that to make it remote activated so that they could cover Fury, as opposed to an unlucky agent.

Along with that trick, they were going to swap out all of his pens for lime green glitter pens, swap out all his eyepatches with bright orange ones with a skull an crossbones engraved into them, change his SHIELD file to read "Captain Blackbeard" and fill all of his drawers will Hello Kitty memorabilia. Tony had, along with all of this, managed to add it to Fury's financial history, with paperwork and an audio file to confirm the purchase.

With all of this in hand - well, backpack - Steve and Bruce disabled the security on Fury's office and planted every object as best they could, as well as some cameras and bugs to capture the look on Fury's face. They left as quickly as they could, almost running out of the Hub to get to the van to watch the fun.

The back of the van was full to the brim with screens, each of which was being carefully monitored by a teen. They flew home, diligently watching the fun as it unfolded.
Nick Fury prowled into his office that morning, thoroughly put out. He had been woken up early because of a supposed security break that had been confirmed as a fault two minutes after he stalked in. The coffee was just as crap as he remembered, and he wished he had remembered to grab some from his safe-house before he left.

He stalked into an empty elevator with a scowl, and absentmindedly said his name to the voice recognition system.

"Blackbeard, Captain," the speaker said, "Directors Office."

Fury’s eye flicked to the speaker and gave it a hard stare. "Motherfucker," he told it, and scowled harder.

By the time he got to his floor, his anger had begun brewing into a storm that would destroy anything that got in his path. His secretary said a jovial hello from behind their desk, and he scowled a little more. He stepped through the sliding door into his office, and there was a soft "poof" as he was surrounded by a cloud of glitter. He took a deep, steadying breath, then turned on his heel to face his secretary.


"I… I have no idea, sir." The secretary spluttered in shock.

"Was this you?"

"No, sir."

"Then who the fuck was it?!!" He yelled. "Call Hill, tell her that the security breach this morning had better be a false alarm." And with that he stalked back into his office with a grimace, trying to brush pink glitter off his coat but only managing to cover his hands with the stuff.

He took off his outer coat, the one mostly covered in glitter, and shoved it into a spare cupboard under his desk, where he pulled out his spare change of clothes. His eyepatch was covered in glitter as well, and his scowl (if it was even possible) got deeper.
He ripped off the eyepatch, revealing the scarred flesh beneath, and walked up to the secret cupboard that contained his spare eye-patches. He rifflked through them and swore violently. Every single one was a bright, jovial shade of orange, with the jolly roger imprinted on them. He slammed the drawer in a rage, a vein in his forehead straining in anger.

Luckily, he had a jacket-dusting brush, and in quick order he had removed all the pink glitter from his clothing and by doing so scattered it across the floor. He sat gratefully in his chair, thankfully sans glitter, and was surprised when a large farting sound echoed round his office. His eyebrow twitched.

"A fucking fart cushion?" He muttered under his breath. "Whoever did this is fucking dead meat."

After binning the offensive object, he returned to his chair and the steadily growing amounts of paperwork. He really needed to update to digital filing systems, he really did.

He read through the first document in the pile, a mission report from some Agents in Bahrain that was eerily supernatural. He sighed, muttered at the bullshit that was going on in the world. He reached for a pen to sign an agreement to redact the details, and was halfway through his signature before he realised that the writing was in a convivial neon green.

He restrained himself from murdering the nearest agent, and began rummaging around his desk drawers to find another, proper pen. He couldn't find one. Instead, he found a tonne of Hello Kitty memorabilia, as well as some My Little Pony figurines.

(Miles away, in the safety of Stark Mansion, Clint giggled with glee and explained to the Avengers about his "circus friend Wade" was obsessed with Hello Kitty, and how he had managed to prank every circus member with it at least once.)

Meanwhile, at SHIELD, Fury was plotting murder.

Hill had entered his office some time ago, with a report showing the lack of a break in of any kind, and a list of people who had entered Fury's office in the last 12 hours. The list was short, and Fury was aware of every single person. Which meant that someone had broken in. Which meant that someone had messed with the security cameras to remain unseen.

He seethed. He thought. He spent a fair amount of time plotting the painful demise of the criminal that had done this. He them, after getting the vengeance (mostly) out of his system, he began to think on who would have the balls and the IT power to hack SHIELD.
The CIA, FBI, MI5, MI6 and other official places were out. None of them would dare touch SHIELD with a ten foot pole. So that left either an unaffiliated organisation that he was unaware of (unlikely, given the simple prank) and...

"Where the fuck is Coulson?"

It turned out that Coulson was in his office, trying to figure out the various unknown identities of the Avengers. Unfortunately, the range of possible people was pretty freaking large. He leant back in his chair and flipped a page in the file he was reading. He took a sip of coffee, then glanced up nonchalantly as Fury stepped through his door: as if the director of SHIELD visited his office on a regular basis.

"Director! What's the reason for this kind visit?"

Fury scowled. "Those fucking Avengers, Coulson. We need to have a discussion." He put heavy emphasis on the last word in an attempt to curb his anger.

"Sir?"

"Get them on the fucking phone, Coulson."

Coulson raised an eyebrow, but dutifully picked up the phone and dialled the untraceable number assigned to the Avengers.

"Coulson!" Tony answered cheerfully on the other side, voice filtered to be the same as the Iron Man helmet. "My favourite SHIELD buddy. What's up?"

"Have any of you been to SHIELD headquarters or been in our systems lately?" Coulson asked in a jovial tone.

"Oooh," Clint whispered from across the room. "Busted."
Tony scowled at him, and replied smoothly to Coulson, "What makes you ask?"

"We suspect that someone broke into Fury's office and replaced a great deal of items with practical jokes."

"Well, I have no idea why those would be there. No idea at all."

"Make sure it doesn't happen again. If you could tell us how you hacked our system as well, that would be appreciated."

"Only if you stop the paperwork," Tony bargained, flicking a pencil at Clint's head as he snickered.

"Deal."

They hung up, and after a second Tony leapt from his chair.

"Yes!" He cried, "No more paperwork!"

The Avengers collectively celebrated, in various stages of loudness. Steve and Bruce, between them, managed to cook a large pot of Chilli Con Carne and appropriate with-its. The teens sat around the table, and celebrated their freedom from paperwork.

Chapter End Notes

Hi! Another week, another chapter. I'm super behind on writing at the moment, so next chapter may be late.

Thanks so much for all your comments and kudos! Every one is appreciated to no end.
They took down one HammerTech base, and another. Three more followed, and before they knew it July had faded into August. The New York air had turned from warm to stifling in a matter of days, the boiling streets now filled with bumbling tourists as well as New Yorkers. The roads were trapped in an endless gridlock, and the ever-present honking of car horns settled neatly into the bustling background noise.

It was also, of course, time for the Avengers to receive their exam results.

They all waited anxiously in the computer room. Bruce was pacing, five steps then a turn on the heel, and wringing his hands. Clint was biting his fingernails, a habit he had been trying to get out of since he had left his foster home. Rhody was trying to read a book as a distraction, yet his foot was tapping and he kept re-reading the same line over and over. Matt and Natasha were sprawled out over a sofa, both outwardly calm but roiling masses of nerves under the serene exteriors. Tony and Steve were kicking back in the den playing super smash brothers since they didn't have to wait for results.

JARVIS broke the tense silence. "Your test results have arrived. I have dispatched them to the appropriate email addresses."

If anything, the harsh agitation in the room only grew as the teens leapt towards their respective laptops. There was dead silence and anxious toe-tapping as they read through the files. Matt had put on headphones so that JARVIS could read him his results. Finally, after about five minutes, Bruce leant back in his chair with a sigh of relief.

“Did you pass?”

“I passed.”

All the teens that had taken tests had passed with flying colours. After the initial relief, they looked back over the results and had a wave of celebration. Because of the aforementioned passing with distinctions, Rhody, Matt and Bruce had managed to get into universities they wanted. All three were taking gap years: so that they could focus on their Avenger work.
Naturally, Steve had already baked a celebration meal: macaroni cheese followed by a hearty apple pie for dessert. Tony continued to make patriotism jokes as the pudding was served, and the Avengers sat happily round the table.

After each was fed and watered, stomachs full with Steve’s surprisingly good cooking, they all wandered down to the den. Despite trying to sleep of their heavy stomachs it was still only lunchtime, and even teenagers have a limit to how much they can sleep in a day. So, naturally, Clint challenged everyone to a full blown Mario Cart tournament.

Everyone knew the basics, so they bumbled up to the computer room and after fiddling with the settings so that even Matt could play they started off. The first few tracks were fairly easy, like the Dry Dry Ruins and the Moonview Highway, but then Bowsers Castle upped the difficulty, and the final track began with some cracking of knuckles and the readying of thumbs. The last track was the fabled Rainbow Road.

The race was heated, with a fair amount of swearing between Steve, Natasha, and Clint, all of whom were very competitive and knew lots of curse words. After the first lap, Steve was first, with Clint and Natasha battling for second.

Steve was so engrossed in his screen that he barely noticed the others falling off the road and into the starry abyss. Instead, all he saw was the the rainbow swerving last and the mystery boxes that appeared before him.

Clint, distracted for a second, threw a pillow at Steve’s head, snapping him out of his concentration so suddenly that his cart swerved on the screen, sliding off the Rainbow Road and into the dark abyss below. Just as Clint was about to smirk in jubilation, as he was now in first place, he glanced at Steve and stopped completely. Steve’s cart had just finished its spiralling fall, and had respawned at the start line. But Clint wasn’t paying attention to the game. His eyes were locked on Steve, who was holding onto his remote with such a death grip that the plastic was cracking beneath his fingers. His eyes were glassy and distant, and he was muttering under his breath in languages that Clint didn’t understand.

“Turn it off,” Clint said, swiftly going up to Steve and kneeling next to him. “Steve? Steve? You there, buddy?”

Steve was not, of course, there. He was high in the Swiss mountains, on a train hurtling across a cliff face. The snow was stinging his cheeks, burning with cold, or perhaps it was the tears that were burning. Bucky was falling away from him, with one last whisper.
“I said turn it off,” Clint snapped, and the screen blinked shut with a single line of code from JARVIS.

JARVIS reported Steve’s climbing vital signs, but had little experience in the panic attack department. Tony had had many, of course, but JARVIS knew to deal with those in Sir’s specific way: with soft blankets and hot coffee and soothing words of weather reports and science papers. JARVIS was sure this wouldn’t work for the Captain, as he didn’t like daily weather reports nor science. “Perhaps,” JARVIS recommended, “It would be good to move Captain Rogers to a more comforting environment.”

They nodded, and Bruce slung a blanket over Steve’s shoulders and moved in front of him. “Steve?”

Steve jerked, sky blue eyes snapping to Bruce, suddenly wide and alert. He looked like a startled deer caught in headlights. On second thoughts, he looked far more like a soldier with a gun turned on them.

Bruce was calmest in these situations, and reminded Steve of where he was and gently asked if he wanted to go the den. Steve nodded, and they managed to stumble down the corridor with Bruce supporting a heavily muscled super soldier.

After depositing Steve on a pile of blankets, Bruce continued the usual routine. Breath in, breath out. Breath in, and out. Steve calmed a little, but not enough for Bruce to consider him safe.

“How is it worse?”

“Do you want anyone else with you?” Bruce asked.

Steve gave a minute shake of his head.

“’M fine,” he muttered, “Don’t need no-one.”

Bruce frowned. “Steve, I’m going to be frank with you. There’s no way I’m leaving you alone.”

Steve took another shaking breath. “Sweet virgin Mary -” he muttered, but got cut off to take a few panting breaths, “It’s like havin’ a fuckin’ asthma attack, but worse.”

“How is it worse?”
“Buck,” he said, but didn’t say any more.

“What would he do when you had an asthma attack?” Bruce asked after a moment.

“He’d- He’d tell me ta breath, an’ pat my back, an’ carry me home -“ he paused for breath, wiping a cold sweat from his forehead with a shaky hand- “an’ dump me inta bed, then keep me there t’il ‘e was sure I’d recovered.”

He lay there, shaking, until the shakiness passed. Bruce pulled out the books Steve had received for his birthday, and Steve found the pictures in the centre of Peggy’s autobiography.

“That’s Pegs,” he said, pointing to the photo. She was sharply dressed, with a sensible heel and a sharp jacket. He’s seen the outfit often. “She was a firecracker. Best officer the SSR ever had.”

He pointed to another photo of the Howling Commandos, stood together in their full gear with weapons galore. “That’s Dum Dum, an’ Morita, an’ Falsworth, Dernier, Gabe Jones, and Buck an’ me -“ he pointed at the people as he spoke- “Dum Dum always wore his bloody hat. I swore that thing became legend in the ranks, if only it always stayed on his stubborn ass head.”

And so Steve began to explain the multitude pf stories surrounding Dum Dum’s hat. Bruce sat in awe, listening to tales so dramatic and otherworldly they could only have come from another time.

And so, after a while, Bruce’s eues began to droop, and he fell softly asleep where he lay amongst the blankets. Steve covered him with a comforter, then found a corner that he could squish himself into. He drifted off, thinking about the War, and the Commandos, and if any of them were still alive.

He vaguely noticed the hushed whispering as the other teens shuffled in, and the depressions in the mattresses underneath him. He didn’t bother to move or acknowledge them, just drifted off to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Hi again! A new chapter, as usual. I’m not as happy with this one, because a may have finished it five minutes ago. Anyway! What do you guys think? It’s always lovely when you comment, and it really makes my day.
In other news: it’s my birthday! *pulls out kazoos and weird party popper things* A present to you guys is a gift for me.

<3
In the countryside, nighttime was often characterised by soft sounds; wind faintly whistling through leaves, between cracks in hedgerows and tree boughs; the creaking of ancient branches; cicadas chirping in fields of wheat. A sky full of stars, a few clouds perhaps, but altogether quiet. It wasn’t like that in New York. In New York, the city never sleeps. Even in the dead of night, the air was full of car engines and smoke. Every so often, traffic lights would beep annoyingly at pedestrians and car horns would honk at someone parallel parking. Bells jingled tiredly as customers in search of coffee entered 24-hour service shops. Bars kicked drunkards out into the street as they became loud and disorderly.

Through this, the city lights shone bright, not that Matt could see them, but the streetlights hummed with the electricity that ran under the pavements and into every building, every crevice, until the whole city was buzzing with energy, like a beating heart, a body that never slept.

Matt was on the roof of the Stark Mansion, taking it all in. He'd taken a night off from his usual crime-fighting in Hell's Kitchen - nothing to do with the broken rib from the night before, according to him - and was having trouble sleeping. It was on nights like this, when the city air was hot and busy, that he couldn’t sleep. He was always reminded of his dad, boxing in the ring, hot and sticky in the summer heat. It was in summer that he had taught Matt to box.

“You’ve watched me do it a million times, Matty. It's simple: all ya gotta do is stay up an’ kickin’ longer than the other guy. Even your old man can do that.”

Matt turned his head away from the memories, and stalked downstairs to the training room. Hitting things repeatedly, until his arms hurt and his limbs were tired and heavy, always seemed to help with memories of his dad. Perhaps it was the boxing that made Matt feel close to him somehow. Matt didn’t know.

He bound his wrists and hands tightly, and took one last listen to the gentle silence of the mansion, before hitting the bag with a right hook that made a harsh ‘thwack’, satisfying and familiar to Matt’s ears.
From there, only the furious 'tap, tap, tap, tap, tap tap TAP!' of Matt's fists against the punching bag broke the heavy silence that had settled over the mansion.

'TAP tap, tap tap tap TAP THWAP!'

Steve looked over at him.

Matt was concentrating deeply in what he was doing, barely noticing Steve hovering in the doorway. He heard Steve shift behind him and stopped, breathing heavily, steadying the bag with one wrapped hand.

"I thought I was the only one who punched things at the dead of night." Steve said quietly, breaking the near-silence.

Matt gave a quirky smile. “I guess you aren’t so special then, Cap.”

Steve shrugged lightly, the corner of his lip jerking upwards at a long-gone memory. “I never was,” he said, “I was just a kid from Brooklyn who hates bullies and isn’t afraid to get in a fight.”

There was a moment of silence.

“Want a spar?” Matt asked.

“Please,” Steve said, as if to punch things was what he had secretly wanted all along.

The two, after boxing until they were tired and sweaty and their minds were settled, wandered to the kitchen to grab a bite to eat. Steve made a loaf of bread for the other teens’ breakfast, and scrambled some eggs for Matt and himself. Steve and Matt sat down to a midnight-snack-that-was-almost-breakfast of eggs on toast, and Steve was the first to break the steady silence.

“So what was keepin’ ya up?”

Matt finished his mouthful of toast while he considered the question. “My dad, I guess. He always…"
most of the time we spent together was in summer, when i was young, because of school and his job. And then after I lost my sight I was homeschooled. When the weather gets all hot and stuffy it reminds me of the gym he went to.”

Steve nodded in sympathy. “Well, from what I’ve heard, your pa was a good man. He woulda been proud of you.”

They fell back into silence as they continued their meal.

“What kept you up?” Asked Matt around another slice of toast.

Steve paused, going completely still. He paused, and stared into the distance over Matt’s left shoulder. He stayed like that for some minutes, and Matt eventually clicked his finger in front of Steve’s face a few times to see if Steve was still mentally present. Steve jerked back, rather startled, and took a deep breath.

“It was… it was Bucky.”

“Your boyfriend?”

“He wasn’t my-“ he began to say by reflex, but paused and sighed. “Yeah, close enough, I guess. We didn’t date, as such, not back then, you couldn’t, really. An’… I miss him. I miss ‘im so much. He’d’ve loved the future, loved this. Why did I have to live, dammit? Without him? He- Bucky deserves - deserved - this future far more than me. He should be here, happy. He’d have liked the future. I hate it. Fuck.”

"Survivors guilt," muttered Matt solemnly, after a second of staring in shock at the confession. "You and Tony have a real problem, Steve. Maybe you should talk it out with him."

Steve opened his mouth to reply, the other Avengers all stumbled into the kitchen looking for food. While Matt and Steve had sparred and eaten the hours had ticked onwards until it was a reasonable hour to be awake.

Tony stumbled to the coffee machine, put a large mug beneath the spout and stared at for a second before realising that he probably needed to hit some buttons before any of the precious liquid would be made. A scowled in an adorably tired sort of way, and hit some buttons until coffee fell into the
mug. He downed the entire thing in under a minute without spilling a drop, then put another mug to
be filled for Clint, who had stumbled in about a minute after Tony.

After the two had roused themselves into wakefulness, Tony finally clocked who was in the room.

“Matt! There you are! I have a burning question to ask you!”

“Fire away.”

Tony snapped his fingers, as if trying to remember what he was going to ask, then lit up as he
remembered. "So Matt, you have super senses, right?"

Matt nodded.

“What does Steve smell like?” He asked, completely deadpan.

Matt grinned, "Freedom!"

Steve face-palmed.

After Bruce had fried some more eggs for the group, despite Steve’s protests that he could cook,
Tony felt fed enough to go down to the workshop for many hours of working.

He had turned up the music (a Queen playlist), and was just reconfiguring the gauntlets on the Iron
Man suit for efficiency when JARVIS cut off Brighton Rock halfway through the third verse.

Tony’s head snapped up. “What the hell, Jarv?”

“Sir, I believe I may have found something of interest in the HammerTech files you uncovered last
week.”
“Is it urgent?” Tony asked, staring solemnly down into the bottom of his empty coffee mug.

“I don’t believe so, sir.”

“Cool. Flag ‘em for me, dear, and I’ll get back to it later. Got to get a refill first,” he said with a grin, raising his coffee mug to the nearest camera. Unfortunately, Bruce had confiscated the coffee machine from Tony’s workshop, so he had to shlep all the way to the kitchen for the beverage. Once there, he got distracted by Clint and ideas for a boomerang arrow, and soon enough his brief conversation with JARVIS was forgotten.

Nearly two hours, seven cups of coffee, two doughnuts and one notice from Steve that if they didn’t “get out of the kitchen right this instant i’ll haul your asses out myself”, Tony and Clint had designed a suitable arrow that would act like a boomerang.

“The balance is a little tricky,” Tony explained, “Because we want an arrow that can be fired, while also coming back at you. I think if we put the weight here -“ he gestured the rudimentary drawing on the back of the napkin - “at the tip of the arrow, then we can figure something out. I’ll have to do some prototypes. Why do you need this think anyway?”

Clint shrugged, “Could be useful.”

Tony mumbled “For what?” under his breath, but gave up on asking. He said bye to Clint, and wondered back to his lab to start fabrication on the new arrows.

12 hours later, and he had listened to all of his favourite albums by Queen, Iron Maiden, Megadeth, Metallica, Led Zeppelin and Guns ‘n’ Roses. He had also added so many modifications to his suit that he’d had to create an entirely new Mark. The edges were cleaner, as were the sliding plates and movement mechanisms. The gauntlets were more efficient, and the heads up display was fully optimised for- well, you get the picture. The point was that he had done lots of work and had just stumbled into the kitchen.

The Avengers were all sitting there, giving him various looks of disapproval.

“Evening, guys.”
Bruce gave a look as he took a sip of tea, the said, “Good morning, Tony,” in the most passive aggressive tone to ever be heard.

Tony looked at his watch for the first time in thirteen hours and summed it up in a single word: “Oh.”

Needless to say, Bruce managed to force him to go to the den and at least try to sleep. He grumbled, and did so, but ended up lying on a pile of blankets opposite from Clint, trying to come up with some more ideas for the suit. He got bored quickly, since he didn’t have any holograms to mess around with, and instead eyed up the nearest pillow with interest.

Tony managed to catch Clint’s attention, and signed “Think Fast” at him. Clint frowned at Tony’s hands, and raised his fingers in the sign for “Why?”, only to be hit in the face by a flying pillow.

As Clint fell into a pile of blankets, Tony fell over in laughter.

“How is it,” he wheezed, “that a top archer who can hit a fly from 100 meters away is so bloody bad at Think Fast?”

Clint frowned, unable to lipread through the laughter. He looked up to JARVIS, who had already converted the speech to text. He turned back to Tony with a scowl and gave him the one finger salute.

Which only made Tony fall over and laugh harder.

Chapter End Notes

Hi! I'm back! Sorry for missing last week's update: I was super busy. Apologies for that. Anyway: we're finally getting to the good part of the fic! Yay! Things are really going to start kicking off soon.
Thanks to everyone who comments! You always make my day. Thanks in particular to moonlight and karenvde for wishing me a happy birthday! You guys are awesome. I hope you enjoyed the chapter! Next one will be up on saturday, as usual.
Interlude: Thunder

Chapter Notes

Yes, I’m using they/them pronouns for Loki. Fight me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

APRIL 1st, 2010, ASGARD

The stars were always beautiful from the Bifrost bridge. It was by far the greatest view in the galaxy, with the stars glittering softly in the distance, with no sunlight to disturb them. There was a sun, of course, but the sheer amount of Seiðr - magic - on Asgard absorbed the light. The edges of galaxies could be seen as fuzzy streaks across the sky. Otherworldly suns spun gently, the light hitting Thor Odinson’s face in soft flickers, almost like a candle that lit up the tear tracks on his cheeks.

Thor sat at the end of the bridge, legs hanging over the shattered edge. His cape was fluttering about his shoulders, and his trusty Mjolnir was settled next to him. On his other side were two glasses of the finest Alfheim wine, one for himself and the other for the fallen.

It had been Loki’s favourite wine.

Another tear ran down Thor’s cheek at the thought, but he swiftly wiped it away. It had only been two years since his sibling had fallen from the Bifrost, but the pain was still there. Thor could still see Loki’s heart break, all too visible in their eyes, his Father’s voice stating a solid “no”. See Loki’s fingers loosen, their hand slipping down Gungnir and off into the abyss. Thor stared into the space his sibling had vanished into, and took another sip of wine. It was too dry for his tastes, and very bitter, but there was a lingering sweetness that balanced the wine perfectly. He understood why Loki had loved it, even if Thor didn’t share the sentiment.

Loki had loved the Bifrost too. Often, when they were younger, in happier times, Loki would wake up before dawn and go down to the Bifrost observatory. They would nod at Heimdall, then sit at the edge of the rainbow. Thor would often go searching and find Loki there, staring out into the distance, so deep in thought that they would not stir until Thor put a hand on their shoulder.

It was at these moments when Loki would have the patience to attempt to teach Thor seidr, how to control the invisible energy that Loki manipulated every day. Over the course of one thousand years, Loki had only succeeded in teach Thor three spells: one to create fire, one to heal small wounds, and how to better channel lightning without Mjolnir. The three of these were very difficult for Thor, the latter in particular, as he was not a natural Seiðhr, but the skills had stayed with him even over the thousand years he had been taught. He concentrated, and flicked open his palm. A small, sky blue flame flickered into existence, it’s warmth unneeded but it’s light helping to ground Thor and his thoughts.

If Thor had been on Midgard, the date would have been April 1st in the year 2010, but of course he was on Asgard so this date was completely arbitrary. However, in the reflected time of Asgard, it was the first day of Spring. This day was characterised by the flowers in the trees beginning to bud and flower, the sun becoming warmer and taking a beautiful golden colour. In previous years, it had also been made obvious by various pranks pulled by Loki - besides the decade where they had stopped, just to keep everyone on their toes. It was the kind of thing that you didn’t appreciate until it
were gone, even though it was a part of you: like your very bones.

Thor took another swig of wine, and sighed. Today was not a good day, despite the shining sun and amiable weather. The nostalgia was simply worsening Thor’s greif, adding insult to injury like salt to a wound.

“The King wishes to see you, Thor.” Heimdall was suddenly at Thor’s side, a comforting hand on his shoulder. Thor nodded his thanks and tipped Loki’s goblet into the void. He said a quick prayer for the fallen, even though his nation had scorned their lost heir and protested. He no longer cared what they thought of Loki, not after Odin’s speech to the kingdom on the matter.

“Former Prince, Loki of Asgard, is dead. He let the Jotunns into Asgard less than two days ago, banished Prince Thor and triggered my Odinsleep in a bid to become King. He then let Laufey, King of Jotunnheim, into Asgard in order to return the casket of Ancient Winters to the Jotunns and throw the Nine Realms into war.
“Before we could catch the traitor and execute him,” Odin had said, “He threw himself unto the Ginnungagap as a coward.”

Thor had scorned the lies then, and still did. Thor disdained Odin for the unforgivable words he had spoken, and had yet to hold a civil conversation in three years.

“Thor,” Heimdall prompted, so Thor finished his prayer and stood, dusting shards of crystal rainbow from his cloak. He gripped Mjolnir, and flew across the golden tops of Asgard to the balcony of his chambers. From there, he stalked through the palace halls to the War Room, which had been repurposed for simple strategising after peace had settled the Nine Realms.

“Thor!” Odin acknowledged as said prince entered the room. “Where have you been, my son?”

“The Bifrost,” Thor said icily, “Mourning the death of my sibling.”

A flicker of disapproval crossed Odin’s face, but he turned back the the councillors that had gathered round the grand gold-plated, oval table in the center of the room.

“Come, Thor, listen to these advisors and give your opinion on this matter.”

“What matter?” Thor began, and the councillors instantly began to explain.

“We detected a signature on Midgard,” explained one dressed in blue, a Seiðhr whom Thor recognised from earlier meetings. “It is that of the Tesseract, an item our King left on Midgard for its protection. This is not unusual, as there was a similar spike roughly 70 Midgardian years ago, except this was far larger, and coincided with portal energies coming from across the galaxy.”

The Seiðhr in blue paused, as if wondering how well the next words would be taken. “Outside the Nine Realms.”

Thor blinked in surprise, but motioned for the councillors to continue.

Another councillor, this time in red, picked up from where the other had left off. “We believe Midgard may be in danger.”

Thor stood. “Then I will take some warriors, go to Midgard and defend it.”

“But the Bifrost is destroyed!” cried a councillor in mauve. “We have no way to transport you there.”

Odin raised a hand. “I have been searching for a solution to this matter. In an emergency, a Seiðhr or
two from the academy have agreed to lend a hand in summoning the Bifrost. A difficult feat, but possible. And not without its risks.” He gave a pointed look to Thor. “Only enough dark energy may be gathered to transport one person. Just the one. Call the sorcerers! Tell them to prepare for the ritual.”

The king took Thor aside as the councillors began to discuss the topic at hand, and a messenger was sent to inform the sorcerers. Thor adjusted his grip on Mjolnir.

“I assume I am going to graciously volunteer to protect Midgard?”

“Of course!” Odin said cheerily, then more serious. “You must pull yourself from your grief, Thor. It does not befit a King.”

Thor nodded, and turned back to the councillors to inform them of this decision, when a servant rushed in and whispered to the Seiðhr in blue. A hush fell over the gathered nobility, and the servant quickly bowed and scuttled away from the room.

“It seems there has been a development,” The councillor in blue explained. “Our seers and scryers have discovered something more. The entity that created the portal to Midgard, using the Tesseract energy, that entity was Loki.”

And suddenly the breath had been knocked out of Thor’s lungs as surely as if he had been hit with in the gut with a planet.

Chapter End Notes

Hello again! A slightly different chapter from usual, but it's something that i’m quite proud of. Originally I was going to write the entire Thor film, but... no. Just no. It's Thor. We all know what happens. What's the point. So you get this instead! This chapter marks the beginning of my favourite half of the fic. From here we have some serious plot. Anyway, special thanks to everyone who comments and leaves kudos! You guys are awesome. See you next week!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The September morning dawned bright on Stark Mansion. Steve was first to wake, as usual, from the years of Sarah Rogers waking him and the Army service drilled into him. Bruce was second, always an early riser, followed by Matt and Natasha. Tony and Clint, as usual, were dragged out of bed with promises of coffee and sleep later.

After a full breakfast (courtesy of Matt), Tony disappeared down into his workshop while the others went to the training room or the library. He settled down into a morning of loud music and improvements to his latest Iron Man suit. Barely an hour passed before JARVIS paused his music.

"Aw, J, baby, why’dya do this to me?"

"There is a message from SHIELD, sir."

"Shit."

Tony was out of his seat like a rocket, grabbing his coffee cup on the way out. He stormed up to the training room, and burst in. There was the usual chaos: Rhodey and Matt parkouring expertly over some vaults, Bruce reading in the corner, and Clint, Steve and Natasha arguing in one corner.

"Clint, no." Steve said sternly, making the Captain America Disapproves Of Your Actions face™. Clint scowled, "But why? It’s only darts! What’s wrong with darts?"

“What’s wrong with darts is that the dartboard is six foot tall, spinning, and has Natasha attached to it."

“But I haven’t hit her yet! And I used to do this all the time at the circ-“

"Guys," Tony yelled over the comotion, "We have a message from SHIELD," Tony told them grimly.

Steve frowned at Tony's expression. "What's it say?"

"Avengers: Assemble."

There was a stagnant pause as they took that in.

"Well, fuck."

"Anything else?"

"Co-ordinates, a little outside the city. Somewhere large enough to land a plane. Let's go, people!"

They knew that something was very, very wrong before they even got into the Quinjet. Fury met them personally at the site, standing in front of the Quinjet and waiting for them. They pestered him with questions that he refused to answer and loaded them all onto the Quinjet as quickly as possible. The plane took off before the teens had even sat down. The flight was terse and silent, with no-one speaking except the pilot giving Fury updates on their position.
"We're about two minutes out from the ship, sir," The pilot informed Fury, flicking a few switches before radioing for permission to land.

"The Helicarrier." Fury announced, stepping away from the window to give the Avengers a better view.

A few minutes later, the Quinjet landed on the massive battleship, and the Avengers stared in awe. The teens and Fury quickly vacated the plane, walking down the Quinjet's ramp, eager to explore the Helicarrier. There was a hint of wariness suspended over them, as if SHIELD was going to betray them at any second, but that was always a concern for every Avenger.

An agent walked up to Fury, bearing a message. "They need you on the bridge, sir."

"Give us a second," the Director said, waving off the agent.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Fury continued to the Avengers, "You may want to step inside. It's gonna get a little hard to breath."

As he spoke, a shaking began to rock the deck, unsettling the Avengers.

"What? 'S this a submarine?" Steve asked, confused.

Bruce got concerned. "Really? They want me in a submerged and pressurised metal container?"

They all moved closer to the edge of the Helicarrier, peering over the edge. Four huge pieces of machinery raised up from the ocean, obviously mounted to the side of the ship, and drained of water to prepare themselves. As the water cleared, the fans became prominent and it dawned on the Avengers exactly what the craft was for. Flight.

Bruce shook his head with a grim smile, "Oh no. This is much worse."

The interior of the ship was a flurry of activity, with scores of agents sitting at computer screens and dozens walking between rooms. One agent was yelling instructions to others, standing in the centre of the control room, waiting for Fury to arrive.

"We're at lock, sir," the agent informed him, letting him step up to the control panels.

"Good," Fury muttered, "Let's vanish."

The Helicarrier rose high into the heavens. Suddenly, the entire ship was covered in reflecting mirrors, which then camouflaged the ship into the sky. The Avengers stood awkwardly at the edge of the room, unsure of what they were doing.

After a few minutes or directing, Fury turned to them.

"Come on," he said, "There's a briefing room all ready for you."

They were quickly sat around a table in another room, with Fury at the head with a holo-screen in front of him.

"Yesterday, at 22:30, a being by the name of Loki created a portal to one of SHIELD's secure sights and stole a power source we had been keeping there. Loki expressed a need for world domination, as well as spouting of some insane shit and brainwashed some of our best agents. We need you to stop them."
"Who's Loki?" Matt asked.

"Loki is… not from around here. Last year, we discovered that Asgard, and the Norse Pantheon, are real. Loki is, apparently, the God of Lies," came the answer, which made Matt scowl.

"What was this… power source?" Tony asked with interest.

"It was called the Tesseract. We fished it out of the sea a while back. Captain Rogers might be able to tell you a thing or two."

Steve gave Fury a half-glare. "You should have left it in the ocean."

"Which agents were brainwashed?" Bruce asked, worried for some of the agents that had looked after him during his time at SHIELD.

"Agent Coulson was compromised," Fury answered, "As well as our scientist Erik Selvig and an eight-man STRIKE team."

"Aw, crap," Tony muttered, "Not Agent Agent! He was my favourite!"

"We've been searching for them since their disappearing act yesterday." Fury informed them, "We're sweeping every wirelessly accessible camera on the planet. Cellphones, laptops. If it's connected to a satellite, it's eyes and ears for us."

"That's still not gonna find them in time." Tony muttered, swinging around in his chair.

"You have to narrow the field." Bruce told Fury, "How many spectrometers do you have access to?"

"How many are there?"

Bruce nodded, "Call every lab you know, tell them to put the spectrometers on the roof and calibrate them for the tesseract's gamma signature."

"I'll rough out a tracking algorithm based on cluster recognition. At least we could rule out a few places. Do you have somewhere for us to work?" Tony said.

Fury nodded to one of the agents standing by the door, "Agent Ward, would you show the Avengers to their laboratory, please."

Ward nodded and walked off, leading Bruce, Tony and Rhodey down the hall.

="We got a hit," Agent Sitwell called from his computer screen, “Sixty-seven percent match. Wait, crossmatch, seventy-nine percent.”

"Location?" Agent Hill asked, leaning over his shoulder.

"Stuttgart, Germany. 28, Konigstrasse. He's not exactly hiding."

Fury turned to Steve, “Captain, you're up.”

Steve nodded, and left for the Quinjet hangar, along with Natasha and a SHIELD pilot.

By the time Steve arrived in Germany, Loki was already knee deep in a speech about slavery and subjugation, ready to kill a man for defying their orders. The sceptre glowed with a blue light, eerily similar to the Tesseract and HYDRA weapons that it was pure instinct and years of honed
battle skills that made him leap in front of the old man, trying to protect him.

“You know, the last time I was in Germany and saw a man standing above everybody else,” Steve said, rising from behind his shield, “We ended up disagreeing.”

Loki stood from where they had fallen on their arse, and grinned creepily, “The soldier. A man out of time.”

“I'm not the one who's out of time,” The captain said, as the Quinjet swooped in from behind, pointing every gun it had at the deranged alien.

“Loki, drop the weapon and stand down.” A voice said over the speakers.

Loki paused, then aimed a blast of blue energy at the Quinjet. The pilot swerved out of the way just in time, but while Loki was distracted Steve had aimed his shield and threw it with all his might. They fought for what seemed like an eternity, but was probably less than a few seconds. Loki threw the captain to the ground, firing more blasts at him, until Steve stood and threw his shield. Loki simply swatted it away. Steve went in for a few punches, but was once again knocked down.

“Kneel,” Loki ordered.

“Not today!” Captain America grunted, flipping over and knocking Loki down with his leg. The battle was quick to ensue, Captain America against the God of Mischief. Suddenly, Black Sabbath’s “Iron Man” began to blast over the Quinjet’s speakers, causing the two fighting men to stop and look up.

“Hey, guys. Did’ya miss me?” Iron Man said, swooping in from between the buildings and blasting Loki to the ground. He touched down, and pulled out every piece of weaponry the suit had. “Make your move, Reindeer Games.”

Loki lifted their hands in surrender as their armour materialised away.

“Good move.” Tony said, as Natasha walked out from the Quinjet holding two pairs of handcuffs.

Natasha monitored the skies from the co-pilot seat, watching the SHIELD pilot battle through the weather. Thunder and lightning had appeared from nowhere, batting their ship like a tin can in a hurricane.

“Said anything?” Fury asked over her comm system.

“Not a word.” She answered, looking over her shoulder to where Loki was strapped into a seat.

“Just get him here,” Fury said, “We're low on time.”

Tony and Steve watched the insane god from the other side of the plane, whispering.

“I don’t wike it,” Steve muttered under his breath, glaring at Loki.

“What? Rock of Ages giving up so easily?” Tony said, giving Loki a pointed look.
“I don't remember it being ever that easy, back in the day. This seems fishy in comparison.”

Tony nodded thoughtfully, “Smells like a trap, doesn’t it.”

Steve agreed, and tightened his grip on his shield. Thunder and lightning flashed and boomed around the jet, shaking it violently.

“Be prepared for some turbulence, folks,” Tony muttered sarcastically.

Natasha frowned. “This wasn’t on the weather forecast.”

Thunder rumbled overhead, and Loki stared intently at the floor looking almost… afraid. What could be so terrifying as to scare Loki?

“What's the matter?” Steve asked, wondering about the possible trap. “Scared of a little lightning?”

“I'm not overly fond of what follows.”

Tony, Steve and Natasha all turned to look at each other, an expression of complete confusion covering their faces. Natasha signed “What the fuck?” at them, and Tony was just about to answer when a mighty crash hit the jet. The ramp opened all by itself, and a tall, buff, blond-haired man grabbed Loki by the throat and flew out of the jet.

“What the fuck?” Tony yelled succinctly, replacing his helmet.

“Another Asgardian?” Natasha considered.

“Think the guy's a friendly?”

“Doesn't matter.” Tony said, turning to the now open ramp of the Quinjet. “If he frees Loki or kills him, the Tesseract's lost.”

Steve grabbed Tony’s arm, stopping him. “Tony, we need a plan of attack!”

“I have a plan. Attack.”

Then he leaped out of the jet, chasing after the blond man. Cap grabbed a parachute to follow, swearing colourfully in six different languages about “that fucking dumbass”

“I'd sit this one out, Cap.” Natasha suggested.

“I don't see how I can. Tony's gonna get 'imself killed.”

“If he is Asgardian: they come from legends, they're basically gods.”

Steve turned to her as he walked towards the ramp. “There's only one God, Nat. And I'm pretty sure he doesn't dress like that.” And then he jumped out of the jet, the wind rushing around him as he fell.

Far below, Iron Man tackled the blond man mid-flight, straight off a mountain and into the deep forest. The man rolled himself to his feet, but Tony had managed to stay standing and kept his distance, wary of the stronger Asgardian. He opened up his helmet.

“Do not touch me again!” The man roared.

“Okay, okay, I won’t touch you again. But please don't take our prisoner, dipshit. We kinda need him so that our planet doesn’t get destroyed.”
“You have no idea what you're dealing with.”

“Uh, Shakespeare in the park? Doth mother know you weareth her drapes?” Tony joked, but then his face dropped into something far more serious. “Just kidding. I know that Loki wants to take over and planet and rule us. I don’t take lightly to that.”

“Loki will face Asgardian justice!” The man yelled like a stubborn mule.

“He gives up the Tesseract, he's all yours. Until then, we need him to give us answers.”

The man looked like he was about to yell, or throw himself at Tony, but then he paused. “We?”

Which Tony hadn’t been expecting. “Uh… yeah. Me, the Avengers, SHIELD, this entire planet.”

His expression settled into a smile, and he stepped towards Tony. “You work for SHIELD! How fortunate. You know the son of Coul?”

“Son of… Coulson? Yeah, a little, but he’s one of the ones Loki mind-controlled.”

Thor expression darkened. “Then I suppose that we must negotiate this matter further.”

Tony agreed, then paused, sticking out his hand for Thor to shake. “I’m Iron Man,” he introduced.

The other man looked at the offered hand warily, racking his brain to find the midgardian custom of shaking hands. “Thor.”

Captain America ran into the clearing, and his shoulders dropped with relief. “Thank fuck, I thought you were gonna be fighting like fuckin’ dogs or some shit.”

“Fuck you, Cap! I can do diplomacy!” Tony retorted

“Uh, right…”

“Shut up that was one time…”

Thor stood, watching the two bicker and getting increasingly more confused with each word said between them. Eventually, he cut in, “Man of Iron, who is this?”

Tony stopped suddenly, and turned to Thor. “Uh… this is Captain America. We’re friends. We watch each other’s backs. We fight assholes with a bunch of other friends - people like us, that is. We’re called the Avengers.”

“You are… shield brothers?”

“Uh, yeah, sure. If that’s how you want to put it.”

Thor, Captain America and Iron Man stood for a moment in awkwardness, until Thor flew himself up the mountainside to collect Loki.

When they returned to Natasha she smirked at them. “Took you long enough. I was starting to enjoy my time without you.”

After a short introduction to her, Thor settled into the ship, once again strapping Loki securely into his seat. The ride back on the Quinjet was awkward, to say the least. The thunder and lightning had abated at Thor's bidding, making the flight far smoother and easier than before. Thor sat opposite Loki, staring at him intently, but Loki's gaze stayed at the floor, unmoving. Tony, Steve and Natasha
watched the two vigilantly, making sure neither god pulled any stunts.

By the time they got to the Helicarrier, the silence had become unbearable.

Dozens of SHIELD agents escorted a handcuffed Loki to his cell. It had glass walls, for easy monitoring, and was suspended in midair.

Fury walked up the control panel of the cell, and a very dramatic and serious chat followed. The Avengers couldn't hear Fury's epic speech, however. They were stuck in the briefing room, watching the events through a small monitor.

Steve watched until the monitor went black. Thor, who didn't even look, just listened, stood there, torn apart.

"He really grows on you, doesn't he?" Clint frowned from the other side of the room.

"Who, Loki or Fury?" Tony asked.

"Both."

"Loki's gonna drag this out. So, Thor, what's his game?" Rhodey asked, spinning in his chair.

Thor roused himself from his thoughts. "He has an army called the Chitauri. They're not of Asgard or any world known. He means to lead them against your people. They will win him the earth. In return, I suspect, for the Tesseract."

"An army? From outer space? I'm not even surprised anymore." Steve muttered, rubbing his temples.

"So he's building another portal." Bruce theorised, pacing around the room, "That's what he needs Erik Selvig for."

"Selvig?" Thor said, looking up in interest at the name.

"He's an astrophysicist," Bruce explained.

"He's a friend. I met him in my journey to earth a short time ago." 

"Well, Loki has him under some kind of spell, along with some of SHIELD's agents," Clint said, "Which is just another reason for us to find the Tesseract."

"I wanna know why Loki let us take him. He's not leading an army from here," Steve muttered, "Seems like a trap."

Clint frowned. "I don't think we should be focusing on Loki. That guy's brain is a bag full of cats, you could smell crazy on him."

"Have care how you speak," Thor said, turning to Clint and explaining, "Loki is beyond reason, but he is of Asgard, and he's my brother."

"Loki killed eighty people in two days," Matt deadpanned.

Thor shifted slightly. "They're adopted."

"That isn't an excuse, Thor." Clint gave him a glare, not too pleased about the insult.
After a brief silence, Bruce began to tap his hand on the table, trying to think up a theory. “Iridium, what did they need the Iridium for?”

“It’s a stabilizing agent,” Tony broke in, “Means the portal won’t collapse on itself, like it did at SHIELD. Also, it means the portal can open as wide, and stay open as long, as Loki wants. Oh my god, that man is playing Galaga!”

The others turned to look at the man, who had sneakily switched to a different tab, and while they were distracted Tony snooped around the computers slightly, poking at the screens but not pressing any buttons. He sneakily placed a small device under Fury’s desk, without anyone noticing.

Tony continued, “The rest of the raw materials, Agent Coulson can get his hands on pretty easily. Only major component he still needs is a power source. A high energy density, something to kick start the cube.”

“When did you become an expert in thermonuclear astrophysics?” Agent Hill said with a raised eyebrow.

“Yesterday, on the Quinjet. The packet, Selvig’s notes, the Extraction Theory papers. Am I the only one who did the reading?”

Rhodey and Bruce muttered something about reading over Tony’s shoulder, and Tony shot them an encouraging smile.

“Does Loki need any particular kind of power source?” Matt asked.

Rhodey paused for a second, considering the matter, then answered “He’s got to heat the cube to a hundred and twenty million Kelvin just to break through the Coulomb barrier.”

“Unless Selvig has figured out how to stabilize the quantum tunneling effect.”

“Well, if he could do that he could achieve Heavy Ion Fusion at any reactor on the planet.” Bruce retorted.

“Finally, someone who speaks English!” Tony exclaimed.

“Is that what just happened?” Matt muttered to Steve, who snickered along with him.

Tony, Rhodey and Bruce fist-bumped.

“Let’s start with that stick of his,” Steve began seriously, leaning forward in his seat. “It may be magical, but it works an awful lot like a HYDRA weapon.”

Fury’s permanent scowl deepened. “I don’t know about that, but it is powered by the cube. And I’d like to know how Loki used it to turn some of the sharpest agents I know into their personal flying monkeys.”


“I do! I understood that reference.” Steve looked slightly proud of himself, while Tony rolled his eyes from across the room.

“Take me to your lab, Bruce,” Tony said, grabbing Bruce and Rhodey by the arms and dragging them down the corridor.

As Bruce, Tony and Rhodey walked out, the man who was playing Galaga turned slightly, looking
Bruce was scanning the scepter for gamma radiation, and Tony was shifting through complex programming and equations when Steve walked in.

“The gamma readings are definitely consistent with Selvig's reports on the Tesseract,” Bruce sighed, rubbing his forehead and looking to Tony, “But it's gonna take weeks to process.”

“If we bypass their mainframe and direct a reroute to the Homer cluster, we can clock this around six hundred teraflops.” Tony said, swiping away another hologram.

Steve stood in the doorway, trying to wrap his head around the techno-babble. “How're you guys doing?”

“We’re getting there. I’m just… something is bugging me. I mean - why did Fury call us and why now? Why not before? What isn't he telling us? I can't do the equation unless I have all the variables.”

“You think Fury's hidin’ somethin’?” Steve said, nodding in agreement.

“He's a spy. Captain, he's the spy. His secrets have secrets. It’s been bugging you two, I can tell.”

Bruce shuffled slightly, before pointing out, “I mean… 'A warm light for all mankind’, Loki's jab at Fury about the cube.”

Tony and Steve nodded.

“Well, I think that was meant for you. Stark Industries -the New York sector- just switched to an arc reactor technology, right?” Bruce continued, gesturing to Tony.

“That's just the prototype,” Tony muttered. “It would have been much better if I had done it, but no. It’ll only run itself for about a year, not a few decades like mine.”

“So, why didn't SHIELD bring Stark Industries in on the Tesseract project? I mean, what are they doing in the energy business in the first place?”

Steve nodded. It was suspicious. He’d always trusted the techs and engineers back during the war because they were smarter than he’d ever be, and he’d be damned if Banner and Stark didn’t make a whole lot of sense right now.

“I should probably look into that once my decryption programmer finishes breaking into all of SHIELD's secure files.”

“I'm sorry, did you say…?” Steve’s shocked expression morphed slowly into a grin.

“JARVIS has been running it since I hit the bridge. In a few hours we'll know every dirty secret SHIELD has ever tried to hide,” Tony confirmed, proud of himself, before stretching out a packet to Steve. “Blueberry?”

“Which begs the question: why didn’t they hire a consultant?” Steve muttered, grabbing a blueberry
from the offered bag.

“An intelligence organization that fears intelligence? Historically, not possible.”

Steve nodded, “Exactly. I think Loki's tryin’ a wind us up. This is a man who means ta start a war, and if we don't stay fuckin’ focused, he'll succeed. But first, we've gotta check out what the fuck SHIELD’s doin’. Keep an eye on my bag.”

Steve swiftly left the room, leaving Bruce and Tony behind to speculate where he had gone. With a heave, he pushed open the heavy steel door to to secure storage 10-C. Metal crates were stacked high, and STeve looked along the labels carefully. Not finding what he was looking for, he leaped up onto the catwalk railing and pulled himself up onto the next level.

Steve found the index he was looking for, and pulled out the crate. He scowled when he saw what was inside. HYDRA weapons. He thought he was done with those bastards.

_________________________________________________________

Jane Foster’s face stared at Thor from the computer screen, bringing back memories of his last time on Midgard.

“As soon as Loki took the doctor we moved Jane Foster.” Agent Hill explained, “We've got an excellent observatory in Traunsee. She was asked to consult there very suddenly yesterday. Handsome fee, private plane, very remote. She'll be safe.”

Thor nodded. “Thank you. It's no accident Loki taking Erik Selvig. I dread what he plans for him once he's done. Erik is a good man.”

“He talks about you a lot. You changed his life. You changed a lot around here.”

“They were better as they were. We pretend on Asgard that we're more advanced, but we...we come here battling like Bilgesnipe.”

“Like what?”

“Bilgesnipe? You know; huge, scaly, big antlers. You don't have those?” Thor but his hands next to his temples, fingers pointing up like antlers.

“Don't think so.”

“They are repulsive, and they trample everything in their path.” Thor walked to the window, staring into the clouds and wondering about events yet to come. “When I first came to earth, Loki's rage followed me here and your people paid the price. And now again. In my youth I courted war.”

“War hasn't started yet,” Fury quipped, “You think you can make Loki tell us what the Tesseract is?”

Thor thought for a moment before declaring. “I do not know. Loki's mind is far afield, it's not just power he craves, it's vengeance upon me. There's no pain that would prize his need from him.”

“A lot of guys think that, until the pain stops.”
“What are you asking me to do?” Thor asked, confused.

“I'm asking: what are you prepared to do?”

“Loki is a prisoner.”

“Then why do I feel like he's the only person on this boat that wants to be here?”

Thor didn't answer.

Loki was pacing back and forth in their glass cell, hands clasped tightly behind their back, shoulders tense. They reached one end of the cell, then spun around on their heel. Six paces, turn, six paces again. The monotony grounded them somewhat, helping their mind to think up some cunning plan. Six paces, turn, six paces again. Suddenly, they stopped, and spun to face the door.

“There's not many people that can sneak up on me,” Loki noted, looking at the red-haired figure standing at the wall of the cell.

“But you figured I'd come.”

“After whatever tortures Fury can concoct, you would appear as a friend, as a balm. And I would cooperate.”

Natasha nearly rolled her eyes at the obvious bullshit, but refrained. “I want to know what you've done to Agent Coulson.”

Loki hesitated for a second. “I'd say I've expanded his mind.”

“And once you've won: once you're king of the mountain. What happens to his mind?”

“A special interest in the man?” Loki asked, shifting the subject so obviously that Natasha nearly walked out of the interrogation then and there. Instead, she spoke.

“He's been kind to me and my friends. It’s rare.”

“Tell me.”

Natasha thought about refusing the command, but it was better to answer their question and let them think she was an idiot. “All of us had bad pasts. Between the six of us only one parent is alive and he’s not a nice man. Coulson showed us kindness. I’m thankful for that.”

“And what will you do if I vow to spare him”

Loki had fallen for her damsel-in-distress act hook line and sinker.

“Not let you out.”

“Ah, no.” Loki laughed, “But I like this. Your world in the balance, and you bargain for one man?

Natasha shrugged, “Regimes fall every day. I tend not to weep over that: I'm Russian. Or I was.”
“What is it you want?”

“It's really not that complicated. I've got red in my ledger, I'd like to wipe it out.”

“How can you? You’re trying wipe out that crimson ledger by breaking the laws of your realm - by endangering the lives of your own kind to ‘save it’. Your people view you as a terrorist, a traitor. You pretend to have morals, a code to live by, but in reality you are no better than the criminals you despise. Your ledger is bleeding red, and you think that saving a single man no more virtuous than yourself will change anything? Your attempt is pathetic.” Loki slammed into the glass, spitting out the words. Natasha feigned a flinch. “I won't touch Coulson. Not until I make him kill you, and your friends! Slowly. Intimately. In every way he knows you fear! And when he'll wake just long enough to see his good work, and when he screams, I'll split his skull! This is my bargain, you mewling quim!”

Natasha turned quickly, walking away with shaking shoulders, faking disgusted tears. “You're a monster.”

Loki laughed. “No, you brought the monster.”

Natasha turned back towards them, poised, suddenly dropping the act. “So, Banner... that's your play.”

“What?” Loki spat, staggered by her sudden change in demeanor.

Natasha turned to her comms. “Loki means to unleash the Hulk. Keep Banner in the lab, I'm on my way. Send Thor as well.” She turned back to Loki. “Thank you for your cooperation.”

Natasha quickly walked out, leaving Loki frozen in place.

Fury walked into the lab to find Bruce and Tony munching blueberries, not even remotely investigating the sceptre.

“What are you doing?”

“Uh… kind of been wondering the same thing about you,” Tony snarked back, throwing the empty packet of blueberries into the bin.

Fury set his jaw and tried not to hit something. “You're supposed to be locating the Tesseract,” he ground out.

“We are;” Bruce said, stepping between them. “The model's locked and we're sweeping for the signature now. When we get a hit, we'll have the location within half a mile.”

“And you'll get your cube back, no muss, no fuss.” Suddenly, his computer pinged behind him, and secret files began spilling over the screen. “Whoops. That means JARVIS got into the system okay. What is Phase 2?”

Fury didn’t answer, but Steve strode into the room, holding an ancient assault rifle. He dropped it onto the table, right in front of Fury, absolutely seething.

“Phase 2 is SHIELD usin’ the cube ta make weapons,” he ground out, fists clenched. “Sorry, the
computer was movin’ a little slow.”

The Director hurried to explain, “Rogers, we gathered everything related to the Tesseract. This does not mean that we're…”

“I'm sorry, Nick,” Tony said, spinning round a hologram to face Fury. it had weapon plans all over it. “What were you saying?”

Steve squared his shoulders. “I was wrong, Director. The world ain't changed a bit.”

At that moment, Thor, Matt, Rhodey, Clint and Natasha walked into the lab.

“I have information on Loki,” Natasha said to the assembly, “He wants you, Bruce.”

“He wants what?”

“He wants to unleash the Hulk and cause chaos, probably so that he can escape the ship.”

“Well… Shit.”

Clint had been glancing at the screens around them, skimming over the figures. The more he read, the further his frown deepened. “What’s going on here?” He asked, gesturing to the screens.

“SHIELD ain’t as smart as we thought,” Steve answered, “They’re makin’ bombs with the Tesseract. Like HYDRA.” He spat the final word as the insult it was meant as.

“We'd like to know why SHIELD is using the Tesseract to build weapons of mass destruction.” Bruce said, turning to Fury.

The Director pointed to Thor. “Because of him.”

Thor looked around briefly, slightly confused. “Me?”

“Last year earth had a visitor from another planet who had a grudge match that leveled a small town. We learned that not only are we not alone, but we are hopelessly, hilariously, outgunned.”

“My people want nothing but peace with your planet,” Thor was quick to affirm.

“But you're not the only people out there, are you? And, you're not the only threat. The world's filling up with people who can't be matched, they can't be controlled.”

“Like you controlled the cube?” Steve butted in.

“You r work with the Tesseract is what drew Loki to it, and his allies. It is the signal to all the realms that the earth is ready for a higher form of war.”

“A higher form?” Steve snorted in disbelief. He was ready to start a rant on how war was definitely NOT something that should have a higher form when Fury interrupted.

“You forced our hand. We had to come up with something.”

The Avengers all scoffed.
And then a blast rocked the Helicarrier

After the commotion had passed, the Avengers reconvened in the meeting room. Bruce was still calming down from his hulk-out, and the rest of the Avengers were either being incredibly salty at how Loki had escaped or celebrating the return of Coulson, who had been hit so hard in the head by falling debris that he had snapped out of the mind controlling spell.

They decided that Bruce would stay onboard the Helicarrier, and Thor volunteered to stay with him. The rest quickly formed the vague beginnings of a plan, then practically ran for the Quinjets. They knew where Loki was going now.

New York.

Captain America, Black Widow, Daredevil and Hawkeye walked towards the Quinjet, up an open ramp. A young pilot stepped in front of them.

“You are not authorized to be here… “ he trailed off, before realising that he was talking to the Avengers.

“Son… just don't.” Steve said, putting on the Captain America persona quick as a flash.

The team all loaded into the Quinjet, as Iron Man and War Machine raced past.

“Aren’t you, like, ten years younger than that guy?” Clint asked as they zoomed off towards Manhattan.

“Aw, shut it, will ya?” Cap retorted quickly, settling into his seat, his leg bouncing with nervousness. He clutched the dog tags that lay around his neck like a lifeline: the only thing tethering him to reality. The name punched into them wasn’t his own: it was Bucky’s. They rested over his chest, close to his heart, like Bucky had been.

The tags were the only thing Steve had left of him.

They raced towards Manhattan, and Captain America prepared for war.

Chapter End Notes

Finally! The Avengers movie! I've been waiting AGES for this, ok. This chapter was about 5,700 words, which is awesome! I don't think I've written that much since the first few chapters. And excitement, woah the excitement. Suspense for the next chapter. Yay. Anyway, what did you guys think? Feel free to comment (it really makes my day!)

(Sidenote: if any of you lovely commenters can think of a better title, I would give you so many hugs and hints. I'm crap at naming chapters, really.)

See you guys next week!
LAST TIME:

Captain America, Black Widow, Daredevil and Hawkeye walked towards the Quinjet, up an open ramp. A young pilot stepped in front of them.

“You are not authorized to be here…” he trailed off, before realising that he was talking to the Avengers

“Son… just don’t.” Steve said, putting on the Captain America persona quick as a flash.

The team all loaded into the Quinjet, as Iron Man and War Machine raced past.

“Aren’t you, like, ten years younger than that guy?” Clint asked as they zoomed off towards Manhattan.

“Aw, shut it, will ya?” Cap retorted quickly, settling into his seat, his leg bouncing with nervousness. He clutched the dog tags that lay around his neck like a lifeline: the only thing tethering him to reality. The name punched into them wasn’t his own: it was Bucky’s. They rested over his chest, close to his heart, like Bucky had been.

The tags were the only thing Steve had left of him.

They raced towards Manhattan, and Captain America prepared for war.

Iron Man aimed his blasters towards the device powering the portal and fired, the energy pushing Selvig backwards with a deafening crack. Down below, the citizens of New York stared up at the ugly Stark Industries building. A few ran for cover. Tony stared at the device in shock; it was completely unharmed.

“The barrier is pure energy,” JARVIS said helpfully, “It's unbreachable.”

Tony landed on the roof of the Stark Industries building with a huff, walking straight up to Loki.

“Please tell me you're going to appeal to my humanity,” Loki jeered, grinning savagely,

“Uh...actually, I'm planning to threaten you. Nice view from up here, don't you think?” He looked over the edge and considered throwing Loki over it.

“Stalling me won't change anything.” That layer of false charm was already beginning to grate on Tony’s nerves, and he tried not to do anything stupid.

“No, no, no! No threatening.”

“The Chitauri are coming, nothing will change that. What have I to fear?” He sneered in false bravado.
Tony gave a simple reply, “The Avengers.”

Loki looked at him, confused.

“It's what we call ourselves, sort of like a team. ‘Earth's mightiest heroes' type of thing.”

“Yes, I've met them.”

“Oh yeah? Let’s do another head count here. Your brother, the demi-God; a super soldier, a living legend who kind of lives up to the legend; a man with breathtaking anger management issues; a master assassin; a man who can never miss; a blind catholic with a chip on his shoulder; a man with actual morals; and you, big fella, you've managed to piss off every single one of them.”

“That was the plan.”

“Not a great plan. When they come, and they will, they'll come for you.”

“I have an army.”

“We have a Hulk.”

“I thought the beast was being kept in captivity.”

“You're missing the point,” Tony contended. “There's no throne, there is no version of this, where you come out on top. Maybe your army comes and maybe it's too much for us, but it's all on you. Because if we can't protect the Earth, you can be damned well sure we'll avenge it.”

Loki slowly walked up to him, raising the scepter. “How will your friends have time for me, when they're so busy fighting you?”

Loki tapped the suit on the chest with his sceptre, and it made a small “ping”. Nothing. Whatever magic was being used couldn’t breach the metal. Loki seemed confused for a second, then tried again. There was another “ping”, but still nothing.

“This normally works.”

“Well, performance issues. You know? One in five… “

“You will all fall before me.” In anger, Loki grabbed Tony by the throat and flung him over the edge of the building. Tony freefell down the side of the tower, before the suit’s repulsors kicked in. The suit flew up before he hit the ground, or the people gazing in awe from below. Loki looked up at him, angry.

“And there's one other person you pissed off! His name is Phil.”

Loki raised the scepter, but Tony fired before the god could let off a shot, sending him sprawling onto his ass. On the roof of a neighbouring building, Selvig looked up at the sky. Bright blue Tesseract energy beamed upwards, suddenly forming into a vortex. The vortex spluttered, then burst open into another portal. A vast expanse of space could be seen through the gap, as a if a hole had been ripped through reality. There was a second of silence, and then the Chitauri army spilled through the gaping abyss.

Aliens streamed from the portal by the hundred, spreading out into the city. Chitauri ships flew above the streets, shooting off bright blue beams of energy at the innocent people running for shelter below.

New Yorkers filled the streets as they ran for the cover of the subway. The Chitauri that were already streaming the streets unleashed blasts as it went, blowing up cars, setting storefronts aflame. An explosion ripped the windows off the top corner of a building, sending pieces of burning rubble - fire and stone - down to the street. That explosion started off a domino effect, and the sound of screams and explosions filled the air.

"Avengers, let's move." Steve said as the Quinjet approached the city.

Iron Man flew up to the portal, a miniature rocket launcher appearing from his armour. He fired a missile quickly, but it did nothing. He swore quickly, before Rhody, finally caught up to Tony, joined him.

“What’s the situation?” Rhody asked.

Tony paused for a second, considering the matter. “We’re fucked.”

“So helpful,” Rhodey muttered, voice dripping with sarcasm. “So reassuring.”

Loki moved over the roof as the sounds of destruction rang out. He gazed over his soon to be kingdom, admiring his own sick game. Thor landed on the roof, close to him, and strode over, making Loki turn to his enemy. Something changed in his eyes: something that Thor couldn’t quite place.

“Loki! Turn off the Tesseract or I'll destroy it!”

“You can't. There is no stopping it. There is only war!”

Thor set his jaw and adjusted his grip on Mjolnir. “So be it.”

Loki and Thor rushed at each other, their weapons colliding. Loki unleashed blast of pent-up rage and jealousy from his sceptre, leaving Thor no choice but to defend himself. It was a savage battle. Another blast sent Thor sliding across the floor, just in time for the Quinjet to zoom past, aiming its miniguns at Loki. Loki’s blast of blue energy hit the Quinjet, sending it spinning towards the streets, and then Thor tackled Loki from behind.

Thor held down Loki's face straight ahead, forcing him to watch the city falling to ash.

“Look at this! Look around you! You think this madness will end with your rule?”

Loki tried to look away, almost ashamed of what he had done. Something had changed. He sounded almost afraid of what he had done. “It's too late. It's too late to stop it.”

“No. We can. Together.”

Loki looked at his brother, showing a sign of hope. Then something hardened in Loki’s eyes and he stabbed Thor with a small knife, sending Thor keeling over.
“Sentiment,” Loki spat.

Thor got up swiftly, surprisingly quick after a stab wound. He was used to Loki stabbing him, after all, and Loki hadn’t even been aiming for a vital organ. He kicked Loki, then grabbed him and slammed him down hard into the floor. Loki, bleeding, rolled over the edge. Thor looked down over the ledge, shocked, to see Loki riding on a flying Chitauri chariot with dozens of Chitauri following his lead.

Soldiers, Policemen, Emergency Services and SWAT teams swarmed the streets, watching the sky. Iron Man was leading a trail of Chitauri up and away from the ground, trying to kill them off as he flew. The Quinjet boomed into the city.

“Tony, we're heading north east,” Natasha said over the comms.

“What, did you stop for a drive-thru?” He snarked as he blasted another enemy, “Swing up Park, I'm gonna lay 'em out for you.”

The red and gold armour banked around a skyscraper. Tony glanced around, seeing Thor and Loki still fighting on the roof. He swooped down a street, causing a Chitauri ship to crash into a building. Flying up, he turned, putting the Chitauri following him in view of the Quinjet. Black Widow turned the machine machine gun and fired at the Chitauri, killing them in one fell swoop.

“Sir, we have more incoming,” JARVIS informed him.

“Fine. Let's keep them occupied.”

Tony and Rhodey turned, back to the portal, to blast Chitauri ships out of the sky.

In the Quinjet, Hawkeye spotted Loki and Thor fighting on the roof and banked towards them. He fired at Loki, but got shot down by a blast from the sceptre. The Quinjet’s engine caught fire, sending it spiralling down to the street below. Daredevil made sure that everyone was okay, and then they unfastened their seatbelts and ran down the ramp into the chaos. They all pulled out their weapons.

Daredevil instantly ran off to help people out of collapsing buildings and into subway tunnels, leaving Hawkeye, Black Widow and Captain America defending the streets. They took down a few Chitauri, but before they could do much a ear-shattering roar of primal rage rumbled through them. A leviathan flew from the portal, carrying hundreds of Chitauri soldiers, passing over them in a shadow of fear. The city was silent for a second.

They stared at it, completely out of their comfort zone. Chitauri soldiers leaped from the behemoth and into buildings, smashing everything in their path. Blue blasts of energy slammed into people and buildings below. Terrified screams filled the air as the aliens entered buildings through the windows, blasting holes everywhere to cause chaos.

“Guys, you seein’ this shit?” Steve said in horrified shock, blue eyes fixed on the sky.

“Seeing, still working on believing. Where's Bruce? Has he shown up yet?”

“Bruce? I thought SHIELD was keepin’ ‘im.”
“Just keep me posted. JARVIS, find me a soft spot.”

As soon as Tony's voice ceased, aliens attacked the group on the ground.

Steve was quick to use his shield to block energy blasts, Natasha was instantly firing her firearms and dropping aliens left and right, and Clint was firing arrow after arrow into leaping aliens.

The suit quietly flew behind the leviathan, trying to find weak points in its shell. As Tony and Rhodey flew above the city, taking out aliens, Steve, Natasha and Matt stayed on the ground, picking off aliens of their own. The trio hid behind upturned cars for cover, firing arrows and bullets and shield frisbees at the aliens in an attempt to stop the incoming tide. Loki flew overhead, followed by an entourage of Chitauri that fired a chain of explosions all the way down the street. Terrified people ran from the destruction, looking over their shoulders in pure fear. Steve looked over the edge of the overpass.

"Those people need help down there.” He yelled over the chaos.

An energy blast shattered the glass near Steve's head, Natasha immediately leaping to her feet and firing off a few rounds. Hawkeye ran to a nearby overturned vehicle to get a better view of the incoming aliens that had spotted them, frowning when three more leaped down from a building to stare at their hiding spot.

"We got this," Black Widow yelled to Captain America. "Go."

"You think you can hold them off?" Captain America glanced between Natasha and Clint - who were grinning mischievously.

"Captain," Hawkeye said, prepping an arrow. "It'd be my genuine pleasure." He reached behind his back for an arrow, notching the arrow and letting it fly directly into an incoming alien's eye socket.

Energy blasts surrounded them, whizzing past their heads. Steve leaped off the overpass, and Natasha turned to shoot at the aliens advancing on them.

Hawkeye was the first to see the overturned bus of civilians. He nodded at Natasha to keep watch, and started to pull civilians through a window of the bus. He motioned them towards the nearest subway entrance, and kept an eye on them as the ran towards it, with Natasha using an alien weapon to kill the Chitauri.

The bus was soon empty, and Clint ran to help Natasha.

"Just like Budapest all over again," she yelled just as Clint loosed an arrow into the alien advancing towards him.

"You and I remember Budapest very differently."

"When the fuck did you two go to Budapest?" Tony commented, firing more blasts at aliens all around.

Natasha smirked, "Who knows? We'll tell you later."

Steve was helping a family stuck in a cab, when Natasha's voice over the comms made him pause. Steve gave a low chuckle at the voices in his ear, throwing his shield at an alien, watching as it bounced between three more, killing them instantly, before bouncing back towards him.

Cops were littering the roads, firing at the oncoming Chitauri. A young Constable ran over to his
senior. “We need to get out! They gotta bring the National Guard!”

“National Guard? Does the army know what's happening here?”

“Do we?”

As he spoke, Captain America fell from the sky and landed on a car in front of them. He groaned, then pulled himself up. The car was dented from the impact. He shook himself, then looked at the policemen.

“I need men in these buildings. There are folks inside that could run into the line of fire. You take ’em through the basement or the subway. You keep ’em off the streets. I need a perimeter as far back as 39th.” He wearily rattled off, his brooklyn accent slipping through the Captain America facade.

One of the police officers objected, until an explosion came up from behind Steve. An energy blast got blocked by his shield, and the two Chitauri that had thrown him into the car attacked. The cops watched in shock as he brought them down with practiced ease, shield bouncing between them like an excited frisbee. The Sergeant turned to his officer, rattling off the list of orders from Captain America.

Daredevil cocked his head, listening carefully to the sounds around him. Hawkeye perched on a roof, firing arrows at the flying aliens. Thor, surrounded by crackling lightning, the smell of ozone reaching him from a mile away. Iron Man and War Machine flying in tandem, firing their repulsors, and Matt could hear their armour creak as it dented. Black Widow and Captain America were on the ground, fighting off the monsters.

He was on the ground too, except he was doing a different job: keeping civilians safe. He couldn’t fight off aliens with his fists, after all. He heard the building next to him creak at its joints, ready to collapse, but there were ten or so people inside that would be killed.

He ran in, and coaxed them all out. Well, he screamed that the building was about to collapse, then hurried them all onto the street. There was a child, and he carried her to the subway tunnel at the end of the road, the stream of people running after him. They got down into the subway just as half of the building collapsed into a heap of debris.

He put the child on the ground next to her mother, making sure she was safe and on stable ground.

"Mr. Daredevil?" The child said innocently, head tilted towards him.

He gave a small smile, "Yeah?"

"Thank you."

He smiled slightly, nodded, and ran back up to the street. There were still more people to save.

A few blocks away, Iron Man and War Machine swerved around a building to face the Chitauri Leviathan. They pulled their miniature rocket launchers and fired. The Leviathan roared in annoyance, but didn’t have a dent on it. The Leviathan turns to them.

“We got his attention. What the hell is step two?!" Tony yells, half to JARVIS and half to Rhodey, speeding away from the behemoth as fast as he can go.

Suddenly, lightning struck down from the sky, channeling a massive blast of electricity that fired out
at all the Chitauri around them. The Avengers were blown back in the shockwave, but the enemies convulsed and dropped to the ground, dead. Thor landed in front of them, with Bruce clutched to his side.

“What's the story upstairs?” Steve asked.

“The powers surrounding the cube is impenetrable,” Thor said, putting Bruce gently to the floor and adjusting his grip on mjolnir.

“Thor is right. We gotta deal with these guys.” Rhodey muttered over the comms as he blasted a Chitauri out of the sky.

“How do we do this?”

“As a team,” Steve said, because he was always ready to be America’s poster boy.

“I have unfinished business with Loki.”

“Yeah, get in line,” Clint snorted.

“Save it,” Steve snapped, “Loki's gonna keep this fight focused on us an’ that's what we need. Without ‘im these things could run wild. We got Tony an’ Rhodey up top: they’re gonna need us.”

Bruce stood there awkwardly.

“Tony? We got your Science Buddy.”

“Brucie?” Tony yelled over the comms. “Aw hell yeah. Tell him to suit up. I’m bringing the party to you.”

Tony swung out from behind a building, followed by the Chitauri Leviathan,

The rest of the Avengers looked up, getting ready and standing still.

“I... I don't see how that's a party…” Natasha muttered.

“Bruce, now might be a really good time for you to get angry,” Steve muttered.

“That's my secret, Cap. I'm always angry.”

The Hulk roared from within him, and suddenly a green giant was there, punching the leviathan in the nose.

From the portal, thousands more of the chitauri soldiers and even more chitauri leviathans flew out.

“Guys,” Natasha muttered over the comms.

“Alright, listen up,” Cap called, “Until we can close that portal up there, we're gonna use containment. Hawkeye, I want you on that roof, eyes on everything. Call out patterns and strays. Iron Man and War Machine, you got the perimeter. Anything gets more than three blocks out, you turn it back or your turn it to ash.

Clint turned to Tony. “Wanna give me a lift?”
Tony nodded. “Right. Better clench up, Legolas.”

The two zoomed away, and Steve continued his speech.

“Thor, you’ve gotta try an’ bottleneck that portal. Slow ’em down. You’ve got the lightning. Light the bastards up.”

Thor flew off, and Steve turned to Natasha and Matt.

“We stay here on the ground, keep the fighting here. And Hulk: smash.”

The Hulk grinned in savage glee, then leapt away, jumping from building to building and smashing chitauri into the walls. He dove towards a building on the other side of the street, throwing dead chitauri soldiers at their comrades. Whenever Chitauri soldiers fired at him, he would wave them off with a backhand, then smash them into the ground. He was brutally effective.

Steve paused a moment to catch his breath, and whispered “Fuck my life,” before diving back into the fray.

Above the streets, Thor channeled lightning to the portal, blasting leviathans to pieces and lighting soldiers up left and right.

Iron Man and War Machine flew overhead, blasting at aliens and containing them: stopping them from leaving the area and spreading the havoc.

From his rooftop, Hawkeye fired arrows into the streaming flow of the chitauri riders, hitting his mark each time. He even aimed his bow behind him, hitting a chitauri soldier dead on without so much as a glance.

Down on the streets, Captain America and Black Widow were keeping up the banter as they beat up aliens. Daredevil helped civilians to safety, trying not to think too hard about the otherworldly creatures.

“Captain,” Natasha yelled over the commotion, “None of this is gonna mean a damn thing if we don’t close that portal.”

Steve looked at her, and took a deep breath. “How’re’ya gonna get up there?”

“I got a ride,” she shrugged, indicating the alien chariots that were zooming overhead. “I could use a lift though.”

She backed up to give herself a running start, then turned to Steve and ran at him. He boosted her with the shield and she grabbed onto a chariot, zooming away. She found a way to control the craft, and began flying towards the portal with a deadly gleam in her eye.

She jumped from the craft, rolling to a stop on the roof of the Stark Industries building. She turned instantly, looking carefully at the strange device powering the portal. Selvig was at its foot, slumped and weakened. He mumbled to her, telling her about the tesseract’s energy, and she was barely listening, trying to find a fault in the machinery.

Barely listening until she heard: “I built in a safety to cut the power source.”

It dawned on her. “Loki’s scepter.”
“It might be able to close the portal.”

Natasha grinned, and turned to the sceptre, where it was lying innocently on the floor.

Meanwhile, Tony was swearing up a storm inside his armour.

"A nuke? What the fuck!" Many other colourful swears passed his lips, some of which were creatively insulting the pilot’s mother. He paused, trying to calm himself, thinking, then spoke again. "We have to stop it from reaching the city."

"Sir, I don't think that would be a good idea-" JARVIS said, but Tony interrupted him.

"The portal is still open, right? We'll be able to get it through."

"Sir-"

"J, baby, please."

"Sir, while your plan is effective, it is also absolutely crazy, not to mention self-destructive, and I cannot allow you to do it."

"I dance the line between brilliance and insanity, J, you know that."

There was a silence from the comms that was the JARVIS equivalent of an exasperated sigh.

"Sir, you can't do this. You may not make it back through."

Tony set his jaw tightly, but didn't say another word.

"I can close it!" Natasha yelled over the comms.

"Don't," Tony answered, "We've got a nuke coming in, and I know just where to put it."

"Tony, you'll die!"

Again, he didn't answer, instead grabbing onto the nuke and speeding towards the city. It wasn't long before he was skimming up the side of the skyscraper.

He fell upwards, towards the portal, and at that moment he realised that there was nothing he could do. He was going to die there, in the vast reaches of space, without his friends or anyone to comfort him. Not even JARVIS. Oh god, JARVIS.

"J, I love you, buddy. You're the best. Be a good boy for me, will ya?" He choked out.

"No, sir!-" and then JARVIS cut out, leaving Tony alone as he passed through the portal into the darkness of space.

The bomb propelled itself forward as the suit's repulsors cut out, starved of oxygen. Tony was starved of oxygen, too. There was no air to breath, and he was choking suffocating drowning and he was back in Afghanistan with his head under the water and he couldn't breath and then the bomb exploded in front of him and he was back in Afghanistan oh god with that explosion of flames that he had caused and the last thing he saw was the beautiful colours of the explosion as his vision went dark: rich reds and golds that reflected of the suit and caught it on fire with its blazing light.
And then there was nothing.

Down below, every last Chitauri soldier, leviathan and craft keeled over. They lay on the ground, convulsing for a second, then stopped. The Avengers snapped their heads towards the portal entrance, praying that Tony would make it back through.

“Come on, Tony, come on…” Natasha whispered under her breath, shifting from foot to foot.

The explosion neared the portal entrance, and Cap closed his eyes in defeat before reaching for his comms.

“Close it.”

Without hesitating, Natasha pulled the scepter out of the tesseract, and instantly the beam of energy sustaining the portal vanished. The portal began to shrink. Just as it closed with a soft “whump”, a tiny figure fell, hurled towards the ground by the explosion.

“That son of a bitch!” Steve muttered, smiling.

But Tony kept falling. And falling. And falling.

“He's not slowing down,” Thor muttered. He began to swing Mjolnir, but just as he was about to fly up the Hulk came out of nowhere and caught him out of the air, crashing into a building and sliding down.

Hulk put Tony gently on the ground, and Thor ripped off his helmet.

Tony wasn’t breathing.

And apparently, that made the Hulk really mad.

Hulk yelled in fury, the noise startling Tony awake.

“Holy crap, am I dead?” He said, slightly breathless. He fell back to the ground. “O ye sweet solid land, I will never leave you again.”

“We won.” Cap said with a grin.

“Alright… Good job, guys. Let's just… not come in tomorrow. Let's just take a day. Have you ever tried shawarma? There's a shawarma joint about two blocks from here. I don't know what it is, but I wanna try it.”

Thor looked pensively to the tower. “We are not finished here yet.”

Tony nodded knowledgeably. “And then shawarma after.”

Chapter End Notes

Hi! I'm sorry this chapter took so long; real life has decided to be a bitch at the moment. At least it's posted, though.
If there are any errors with this chapter, please tell me! I didn't have time to proof-read it.

Special thanks to everyone who comments. You guys really make my day!

More thanks to my friend Tony. That bitch is amazing.

Until next chapter!
The Avengers stood awkwardly in the ruins of the Stark Industries building, unsure of what to do. SHIELD agents had arrived swiftly once the trouble had ended, and were quick to sweep Loki into a pair of handcuffs and whisk him to the strongest prison they had - all the while debating what to do with him.

The Avengers, amidst the chaos of SHIELD agents, where so in shock that Tony managed to convince them to go get Shawarma. No-one actually knew what it was, but it turned out to be a grease-filled meaty affair that they all happily accepted after their long day. By the time the food had been devoured, Clint and Natasha were nearly falling asleep on each other, Steve, Bruce and Thor were gnawing at the remains of the meal, Matt had crossed his arms on the table and rested his head on them, Rhodey was leaning back in his chair will a full stomach, and Tony was staring off into the distance. He snapped himself out of it all of a sudden, and turned to Thor.

"Hey, Thunder-guns, you got a place to stay tonight?"

Thor, after deciphering Tony’s words, shook his head. “Nay, friend, though I am sure SHIELD would be willing to provide a bed.”

"Nah, buddy. You can stay with us," Tony said, "I mean, we're team now or whatever. Also I'd like to pick your brains on Asgard, so… stay at our place?"

Natasha, who hadn’t been sleeping after all, poked Clint in the side to wake him up. He jerked awake and fell of his chair in a scramble of limbs, which everyone ignored except for Matt and Thor, both of whom had lifted their heads in worry.

Thor turned back to Tony and smiled at him, "You would invite me to your abode, Man of Iron? I accept your kind offer and appreciate your hospitality."

"Cool. We'll be heading off soon, so if you grab your things we can head there right now."
Thor picked up Mjolnir, and ten minutes later Rhodey had collected the Van and the Avengers were gathered around it.

Tony peeked skeptically at the inside of the van, and muttered "I don't think we have enough room for an extra god, so we'll have to fly there. Sound ok?" Tony said.

Thor nodded, tightening his grip on Mjolnir.

"Alright then, follow me." Tony shot up into the air, and Thor followed after one last nod at the team.

Tony swooped round in some looping circles over New York, then swooped low to land in an alley four bocks from the mansion. Thor landed softly behind him, looking around at the grungy alley in confusion.

“Man of Iron, I -“

Tony interrupted. “Listen up, Thunder-thighs, we need to know that we can trust you. Where we live - who we are - that information is not going anywhere. Not SHIELD, not the government, not the papers: nobody. If you dare, well, you can guess what’s going to happen. Capisce?“

Thor looked taken aback, and he adjusted his grip on Mjolnir. “Man of Iron, I would never break your trust in such a way. We are shield brothers! You need only ask and I will give you my word.”

“So… we’re cool?“

At Thor’s nod, Tony let out a deep breath. He grinned behind his helmet and flew back into the sky, arcing up and round, then skimming over the rooftops and coming to a sharp stop in front of Stark Mansion. Thor followed deftly, not commenting as they went into the underground workshop via the car entrance.

Tony took a deep breath, and walked through the rings of machinery that removed his armour. As he emerged the other side, he shot Thor a grin and a wave.
“Hi, I’m Tony. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“You are… younger than I expected.”

Tony shrugged. “Yeah, we all are.”

Thor took it in stride as they climbed into an elevator to the first floor.

“You must have gone through much hardship to become such fine warriors at a young age.”

Tony didn’t reply to that, as they walked through the corridors and arrived at the den.

The Avengers, all unmasked, were mucking around in the blankets. Clint and Matt were having a backflipping contest into the blankets of the drained pool, while Rhodey was chilling by the microwave making Quesadillas. Steve and Bruce were huddled in a blanket mass, debating what to make for celebratory dinner, while Natasha was throwing pillows at Clint as he did a backflip.

"This room, I like it," Thor said as he climbed down the ladder to the den, "It is soft, and… bouncy. Is this where you come for relaxation after a strenuous day?"

Clint nodded from where he lay sprawled amongst the blankets (a failed backflip). "Basically. We sleep here a lot as well. It's pretty sweet."

Thor grinned, then bounced lightly on the cushions. “Is this where I will rest as well?”

Steve looked up, gauged the rest of the team from their facial expressions, and answered. “Um… if ya want, I guess. We all ‘ave rooms, and we can get’ya one, but we never use ‘em, so… whatever you want.”

Thor’s grin brightened into a look that was not unlike a golden retriever that had been given a big treat and a pat on the head. “Thank you, dear friends! It is rare that I am allowed such freedom of choice.”
Steve, Captain America, Mr Freedom himself, looked up so sharply he got whiplash, and he fell over. There was a garbled “WHAT?!?” from amongst the blankets he had fallen into.

Thor frowned. “I am Prince of Asgard. Much is expected of me, and the Allfather… the Allfather is a strict man.”

“Well, buddy,” Steve said, standing and walking up to Thor, “Y’aint got nothin’ expected of ya here.”

They were almost the same height, Thor and Steve. Steve was just a few inches shorter, but as they stood opposite each other they seemed equal, in a way. A prince of asgard and a veteran of war.

“Welcome to the Avengers,” Steve said, and they shook hands as Thor gave his thanks.

After Thor had been given a room, he had disappeared to put away his armour. Without it, he seemed far less intimidating and more like a blond, soft-hearted bear.

Now that they had all removed their masks, Thor seemed to slot in surprisingly well. They laughed and joked, and talked.

“Wait, Thor hasn’t seen any Disney movies.”

So that was why the lot fell asleep, tucked under blankets, watching Lilo and Stitch. JARVIS turned it off automatically, once everyone had fallen asleep. He made sure to log average temperature and heart rate for Thor, an alien being with a different biology.

They awoke late the next morning, all groggy and achy from the fight the day before. Clint and Tony had to be dragged from their blankety beds with promises of painkillers and coffee, while everyone else was up and awake with only minor complaining. They moved to the kitchen, where Steve served enough breakfast to feed a battalion - all of which was gone within ten minutes.
After the second batch of coffee, Tony was awake enough to notice that Natasha had stolen half of his breakfast, and also to pull out his phone. He scrolled down news articles about the damage, marking the interesting ones for future reference, whilst generally ignoring the conversation about the table. He checked his notifications and tapped his mug on the table to silence everyone.

“Yo, guys, we got a message from SHIELD.”

“Oh yeah? What?”

“Basically, and I’m paraphrasing here: what the fuck have you done with Thor, can we have him back now and will you fucking clean up your mess, love Captain Sunshine and Eye-patches.”

Clint started giggling into his coffee, and Matt was hiding a smirk into his sandwich. They all unanimously agreed to help clean up New York, obviously, as it had been their previous plan.

It took them an hour to pull themselves into their armour, with lots of complaining from Tony and Clint.

(“My guys, I think my bruises have bruises.”)

“Oh, same, dude.”)

They shuffled into the van, all except for Rhodey and Thor, and flew to Manhattan. It was quick, taking minutes, but below them the scenery changed from city to ruins. They parked the van in a car park less than a block away, and wondered down the desolate roads.

The change from empty to full of people was sudden. There were support teams everywhere: clearing rubble, yelling orders, trying to comfort people who had lost loved ones or their homes. A silence fell as the Avengers approached, and Steve stepped forward.

“How can we help?”
Naturally, they were instantly put to work clearing rubble from the corpse of a building. Clint, only a few coffees down that day, mumbled about non-enhanced humans while shifting rubble, but got on with it.

It was hard work, shifting debris from inside to a truck outside and salvaging what items they could, but by lunchtime they had made a massive dent in the rubble of the building. They stepped out for a break, and found that the other volunteers had stopped work too for a communal lunch. The Avengers hadn’t brought anything, but there was some soup that one sturdy grandmother was willing to give to them.

As she handed over the bowls, she shook each of their hands and whispered “Thank you.” They didn’t know that Daredevil had saved her and her grandchildren from certain death. They didn’t know that Iron Man had saved her son who had been in one of the high-rise office buildings during the attack.

They talked with the other volunteers over lunch. As was natural, it evolved into Steve and Thor swapping battle stories while everyone else listened in.

“- and then this big-ass German tank - biggest I’d ever seen, lemme tell ya - started rammin’ over Germans and shootin’ holes in’a ground. An’ then Dernier falls out the hatch at th’top an’ yells « Bonjour! J’ai encore sauvé tes derrières!» then faceplants in the mud.”

“What happened next?” An interested woman leaned forward, followed by the rest of the group.

“Well, we took th’tank back with us. The look on Peg’s face when we rode up t’camp in a tank: priceless. We ended up writing ‘GET FUCKED NAZIS’ along one side. We kept the tank ‘til the end o’the war. No idea where it is now, ‘course.”

“It’s in the Smithsonian,” a worker piped up from the crowd. “They washed off the writing, and made the story more sensible, but it’s there.”

Steve gave a fond smile, shaking his head fondly.

Another person filled the silence. “So you are him? The real Captain America?”
“People have been speculating, you know. Saying that you’re a fake.”

Steve’s happy demeanour slipped away as he stared down at his empty bowl. “Yeah. I guess that’s… that’s fair. Even I thought I was dead, ya know? I don’t think I’d believe it either.”

The conversation tapered off after that, and soon enough the Avengers were whisked back into the building to help clean up. Not ten minutes after they started up again, a SHIELD agent arrived and escorted Thor to a car. He promised to be back soon, before their evening meal at least, then vanished. Without Thor, the weight of shifting brick and concrete was slightly heavier, but they made up for it in jokes and laughter.

"What's going on with your accent, cap?" Rhodey asked inquisitively. "It's been bugging me for months. It flicks between Proper American Hero and Backstreet Brooklyn. You drop so many letters: you're like a rogue postman."

"Fellas," Steve replied with a Brooklyn accent so thick and natural they could barely understand, "Y’can take the man outta Brooklyn but y’can't take the Brooklyn outta th’man, a'right?"

There were chuckles all round, and then it was back to hard, backbreaking work.

True to his word, Thor arrived back at their headquarters only half an hour after the Avengers themselves. They all showered, washing away the dirt and grime of the day, then assembled in the kitchen while Steve and Bruce cooked their celebratory meal.

Thor, while chopping apples, explained his afternoon. “I spent much time in meetings, of the diplomatic sort. We were discussing what to do with Loki.”

“Well?”

“Some want him to be tried on Earth for his crimes; others wish to load the responsibility unto Asgard.” Thor looked back to his apples and continued to peel. “I have a vast dislike for diplomatic
meetings.”

Tony raised a glass. “Cheers to that.”

They kept chatting until dinner was out of the oven and they all had drinks in their hands. (Somehow, Tony had managed to procure some alcohol for Thor. No-one wanted to be the one to ask where he had got it from.)

With the dinner ready, they moved from their perches around to kitchen to the dining table at the other end of the room.

"What is this for?" Thor asked, slightly confused.

"It's kind of a tradition," Natasha answered, "After every mission we have a proper meal in here, and we toast to something."

Thor nodded in understanding, and sat in the space they had made for him at the end of the table. Steve stood, and raised his glass, the others raising their glasses as well.

"To heroes," Steve said in a toast, "Heroes like Phil Coulson - to the hope he gets well soon. To those we avenge."

"To heroes." The avengers echoed solemnly.

Chapter End Notes

So, uh, yeah. It’s been a while. Sorry! I’ve been super busy recently, but I’ve just found a little more time to write. A little. This chapter hasn’t been proofread either, so yeah. On the upside: the next chapter is already started! Yay!
Special thanks to my friends Tony and Isabelle, for putting up with my shit, and to the wonderful wonderful people who comment. See ya next chapter!
The next day saw Thor beckoned back to SHIELD, and the Avengers went out to help with the clearing up. Steve told more war stories, Tony kept telling bad jokes, and before they knew it it was once again dinner time at the Avengers HQ.

Steve couldn’t be bothered to cook, so they got take-out pizza instead.

As they sat in the Den, munching their pizza slices, they got comfortable and put on some background TV for atmosphere. Instead of watching, they began to talk.

“So, Thor, did you come to a decision with the whole Loki business.”

Thor nodded, and swallowed a bite of Hawaiian before answering. “Yes. He is to be tried on Asgard. We are trying to arrange a way to take myself, Loki and the Tesseract to Asgard, given that the Bifrost is destroyed.”

“The Bifrost?” Matt asked, and at least three people jumped in and simultaneously tried to explain Norse mythology.

Thor shook his head and chuckled. “Silly Midgardians and their stories. It doesn’t work quite the way any of you described.” He turned to Matt. “It is not merely a rainbow bridge, it is a mode of transport between realms. It is more akin to a portal than a bridge. It was destroyed in my last battle with Loki, and repairs are slow due to its mystical nature.”

They all nodded, and Tony had the Look in his eyes that meant he was itching to ask how it worked.

Thor continued. “It is decided we will probably use the Tesseract as transport. We will have to wait for a container for the Tesseract to be made, but the fine persons at SHIELD believe this will be done within the week.”

Which made sense.

Rhodey was the one to point out the elephant in the room. “Will you be coming back? After you go to Asgard and try Loki, I mean.”

Thor thought for a moment. “I would like to, once the Bifrost is repaired. I find your company enjoyable, and Midgard is a beautiful realm. I must find time to visit my dear friends Lady Jane and Darcey, and Dr Selvig. They are good friends.”

The other Avengers nodded, and not two hours later they were all nodding off to Disney’s Tangled.
The following three days passed quickly, similar to the first two. They would wake up, eat breakfast, get into their gear and then fly over New York, looking for where their help was needed.

As the days passed, the Avengers learned more about Thor, and he learned more about them. They learned about Thor’s time as the prince of Asgard, and of his epic journeys and battles. He had a thousand years worth of stories, after all.

Every night after they came home, Tony would spend hours scrolling through news feeds. The coverage of the Avengers was immense, with articles on almost everything about them. Who were the Avengers? Where did they come from? What were their real identities? Were they heroes, or misguided vigilantes? Was Thor actually a god? Was Captain America the real deal?

The more he read, the more he became worried, yet at the same time more reassured. None of the guesses to their identities were even close - most of them being adults who had gone missing years before - but the amount of bad coverage was horrifically large. It seemed many people thought they were misguided, wrong in what they were doing.

Tony couldn’t decide whether he agreed.

“Hey, JARV?” He whispered.

The light in the corner blinked in response.

“Could you start analysing the data we got from HammerTech? It’s about time we got round to it.”

“Of course, sir,” came the whispered reply. “Sleep well.”

Tony smiled and rolled over. He punched his pillow a bit, then began to drift off. It would all be alright.

The next day was Friday, and SHIELD practically begged them to stay at their secret hideout, if only so that they didn’t have to deal with the press releases. They lay lounging in the Den after they got the order, considering.

“So what do we do?”

They paused.

“Pillow fight?”

“Epic mario kart battled to the death?”

“Food?”

Tony grinned. “Excellent. Which first?”

“Food,” came the unanimous reply.
Steve whipped up some bacon and eggs for them, and shortly after they had returned to the Den to plan.

“Mario kart?”

In the end, Tony, Steve and Natasha were neck and neck for first place on Rainbow Road - the winner would win the entire cup.

“Asshole! Tony yelled at Steve, dropping his remote to punch Steve in the shoulder.

“Don’t abuse the elderly!” Matt exclaimed through a mouthful of crisps, which made Thor clutch his chest and bellow with laughter.

Steve simply smirked as he approached the finish line, end in sight, and he lined himself up for the final metre -

When a blue shell hit him from behind and Natasha sped past, face alight with malice. Steve spluttered, then grabbed the nearest pillow and hit Natasha in the face. He went in for another, but Natasha blocked his hit with her own cushion and sent Steve’s weapon straight at Matt. Within seconds, everyone had grabbed a pillow to join in the fight. Even Thor, who had no idea what was going on but loved the fun along the way.

As with all pillow fights, there was no winner. They all just collapsed into the pile that had been their weapons not two minutes before, giggling with joy.

They fell asleep like that, and the next morning SHIELD called to inform them that Thor would be heading home.

“Well, my friends, it seems this is goodbye for now,” Thor said solemnly.

Assembled in central park in full armour, the Avengers were acting as Loki and Thor’s security detail before their trip to Asgard.

“I promise I will return when the Bifrost is repaired. I would love to see my dear Lady Jane.” Thor turned to Fury. “It has been a pleasure visiting your planet. I thank you for your hospitality. It has been most welcome.

“We’ll miss you, Thor,” Steve said.

With a last clap to Steve’s shoulder, Thor turned back to Loki and the Tesseract - locked up in its cage for transportation - and moved them until they were a few metres from the Avengers. With a twist of the handle they were whisked away in a swirl of electric, mesmerising, powerful light.

The Avengers thanked Fury and headed back to the van. They had work to do, after all.

It was another week before they had finished clearing up the rubble of New York. None of them had any expertise in building, so they settled for handing out warm blankets and food to those who had
lost their homes in the battle. With Thor gone, it felt like there was a hole in the group that had never been there before. They all missed him, even if they had only spent a short time together.

"The floor is lava!" Tony yelled, sitting cross-legged on his slowly spinning office chair and grinning at the ensuing chaos.

Instantly, Natasha leaped onto the table, knocking off the book she had been reading a moment earlier. Clint and Matt fell off their chairs at the sudden shout. Clint just lay face-down on the floor, mumbling something that sounded suspiciously like “take me”, but Matt caught himself just in time, pulling himself up onto the sofa. Bruce sat calmly, cross-legged on the arm of the sofa, sipping green tea. Rhodey swiftly lifted his feet from the ground and curled up on the sofa, then went back to reading his book.

Steve stood in shock at the centre of the chaos, a cup of coffee halfway to his lips.

"Oh my god,” Tony lamented. “Guys. Steve doesn't know what 'the floor is lava' is. We have lost our leader and our archer. We're doomed!"

Steve gave everyone a thoroughly confused look that sent Natasha and Tony to their deaths on the floor, trying not to weep with laughter. Clint was giggling too, but also cheering because now they had a whole gang of dead Avengers, and “suck it, Tony”.

Somehow, Rhodey, Bruce and Matt managed to get to the kitchen for dinner without touching the floor. Rhodey had found his War Machine boots and had flown there - cheating, according to Clint - and only ‘died’ when Natasha kicked his chair over while he wasn’t looking. Bruce managed to crawl through some ceiling vents to get there, and Matt used some freaky witchcraft-spider-parkour to get there without falling.

By bed-time, they had all decided to restart the game the next day. Steve still had little idea how it worked, but as soon as he got the hang of it he decided he would be the “only sane person on this goddamned planet and stay on the fuckin’ floor.”

Naturally, it was then that Tony piped up with his craving for bubble tea. None of them had indulged in the drink for months, not since they had become the Avengers. Steve, being the only person standing on the floor, offered to go and get them.

“- one peach jasmine with blueberry and one tropical with kiwi and pineapple. Did I miss anything?”

“Cookies,” Clint chipped in.

“Right. Cookies.” Steve added to the list in his neat handwriting. “If I’m not back in, I dunno, an hour, send out a search party or somethin’. Be back soon!”

Left the room, grabbing keys and his phone as he left. He pulled on a jacket and a cap, shoved some cash into his pockets and strolled to the nearest subway station. Looking at the train times, it wouldn’t take long to get to the bubble tea place and back.

They might have passed a pleasant evening, had shit not gotten real.
Hi! I’m back! Again. I hope you guys liked the chapter, and please drop a comment if you can. Next chapter will definitely be posted next week, since I wrote it, you know, six months ago.

Special thanks to my friends Isabelle and Tony for proofreading!

Til next chapter!
They might have passed a pleasant evening, had shit not gotten real.

The group asked Steve to go to Emmy's Bubble Tea, so he shrugged, took everyone's orders, and took the subway to the small shop.

The bell tinkled as he walked in, making the woman at the counter look up from her book.

"Hey, it's you! You haven't been here in ages. How're your friends?"

Steve looked up at the woman. She was usually there after school when they were, way back before they became vigilantes and saved the world.

"Uh, we're good. We got distracted by revising for finals, so... Yeah. Sorry." The lie rolled easily off his tongue. They always had.

"Nah, it's chill. At least you're back, right?" She said with a smile.

Steve nodded.

"So, what's your order?"

He reeled off the list of items the other Avengers had ordered, then sat and waited for them all to be done.

The woman smiled as she handed over the drinks, and he gave a small smile back at her. He payed and left the shop, and had just closed the door behind him and ducked to text the others when a bullet whipped past his face, and a gunshot echoed in his ears. He shoved the drinks back into the shop, meeting the woman's eyes. She ran back to hide behind the counter as Steve turned to face his attacker.
The assassin had obviously given up on stealth, and was striding across the street towards him. His metal arm glinted in the light, while his black combat gear made him fade into the shadows of the pavement. His greasy hair fell into his eyes, but a mask covered the lower half of his face. He had weapons strapped to every inch of his body.

The assassin pulled out a gun, and fired fifteen shots that whizzed past Steve’s ear as he dove behind a car. One bullet shattered the window behind him. Another clipped his ear, leaving behind a trail of blood and a burning, stinging sensation that Steve ignored. He was more preoccupied with the fact that he was being attacked and he didn’t have his shield.

His brain fired off solutions quickly as the assassin approached. Six steps. He couldn’t use his shield. His new fighting skills would be useless unless he managed to disarm his attacker. Five steps. A kid raised in Brooklyn after the great depression always kept a knife on them, just in case. He pulled the blade out of his boot. Four steps. His eyes flickered to some movement in the shop beside him, and it was the woman who had made his drinks. She was peeking around the counter, a circular metal drinks tray in her hands. Three steps. She threw it like a frisbee through the shattered window, and he caught it expertly. Two steps. He flipped the knife in his hand, and gripped onto the drinks tray. There was no strap on the back, like with his shield. He held it by an edge, and tensed. One step. He leaped.

The small blade slid off the assassin’s metal arm, useless, but Steve managed to jab it back round and into the side of the combat gear. It barely penetrated. At the same time, he slammed the tray in his other hand straight into the side of the attacker’s head.

The assassin reeled for a second, but quickly gathered himself. Steve barely had enough time to adjust his grip on the tray. As the assassin lunged forward. Steve managed to bring up his arms just in time to block the punch, dropping the knife as he did so, holding the tray with both hands. The metal arm ripped through the metal, and Steve flinched back, defence now destroyed. If he hadn’t moved, the metal fist would have had enough force to shatter his bones and smash his skull.

The assassin rained a few more relentless blows, that Steve successfully blocked or dodged, but didn’t manage to hit Steve. The attacker stepped back and pulled out a knife of his own, spinning it deftly round his fingers. Steve internally swore, and ducked at the first stab of the blade, sidestepping the second. The third was aimed straight for his stomach, and he pulled back, the tip of the knife tearing his clothing and leaving behind a stinging scratch.

The assassin punched with one hand, flipping the blade to the other and lashing out with another stab. It was a bombardment of fists and knives, and it was all Steve could do to dodge and throw a few punches of his own.
It was all a blur to him.

Avoid, punch, dodge, kick to the shin, defend, pull back, punch, duck, scratch face, block a punch, 
drop, up again, punch, evade, strike, block, deflect the knife, jab, uppercut, avoid blade, deflect, 
disarm, and then suddenly he didn't have to worry about the knife.

Uppercut, jab, punch, deflect the metal fist, block, roundhouse kick, duck, up again, a punch that hit 
the assassin in the face, knocking him off balance, but not for long, and then it was back to punch, 
pull back, duck, kick to the knee, elbow, dodge, strike to the shoulder, deflect, uppercut, punch, 
roundhouse kick, duck, punch, dodge, repeat, fight, punch, kick, dodge -

And then, suddenly, the assassin pulled back as if yanked by a leash. He stayed, staring at Steve for a 
 single, lingering second, and then in the blink of an eye was gone.

Steve was left alone in the suddenly empty, silent and destroyed street. His heart hammered in his 
ears, his breathing ragged, but that was the only noise. He shifted, unsure of what to do, fists 
clenched, until a movement from the corner of his eye spun him round, and he was met with the 
 woman from the bubble tea shop staring at him.

"What's your name?" He said politely, but distractedly, hands twitching from the adrenalin rush.

The woman was surprisingly unfazed by the chaos he had caused. Her hand barely shook as she 
handed him the drinks.

"Antoinette. You're Captain America."

"Yes, yes I am. Thanks for the help. And the drinks."

He gave her a small smile, just as the SHIELD vans pulled up to the scene.

He sighed, "Here comes the inquisition. This'll be fun."

Antoinette smiled at him. "It'll be okay, right? Just make sure your friends get those drinks, 'kay. And 
make sure you come back."
"Will do, ma'am."

With that, a SHIELD agent came over, and escorted him to a van.

It was like a whirlwind of people around him. An hour and a half later, Steve had been near interrogated by SHIELD, signed a crap ton of paperwork, been stitched up, and then been shoved out of the door by the agents on duty. Apparently they weren't too happy with him by that point. He arrived back at the mansion two hours later than intended, and the other avengers were swarmed him instantly. Tony and Matt were halfway into their suits, about to go and look for him.

"Where were you?" "What happened?" "Are you okay?" "You look pretty banged up, spangles." and "Where's my goddamned coffee?" were the stream of questions from Bruce, Natasha, Matt, Tony and Clint respectively.

Steve sighed, and handed them their drinks. "Check the news, it's probably on there by now."

They crowded around Tony's computer, but he quickly set up the news feed on the projector.

They watched in shock as a shaky video showed Steve fighting with the masked assassin. They kept glancing at the various cuts and bruises covering Steve's form. They didn't see the slight twitch in his hand, or the tap of his foot on the ground, or the slightly distant look in his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

*Dramatic music*
Sorry this is late! I only just got my computer back up and running, so yeah. I'm going to do formatting later.
Thanks to everyone who comments! You're all awesome.
More thanks to my friend Tony, for being awesome. She proofread this ages ago, and it wouldn't be the same without her.
This chapter was actually the second chapter I finished, I think. So yeah. I've been planning this a while.
“Why would someone want to kill Steve?”

As soon as Matt said it, everyone agreed it was the question they needed the answer to.

Tony nodded thoughtfully and sipped his coffee. “Well there’s why. We don’t know. How? Fairly obvious. Scary assassin dude. Who? Don’t know that either, besides said assassin dude What? Like, what do they want to accomplish? Umm… lets not think about that.”

They all nodded along, faces grave as the conversation went on.

Rhodey picked up where Tony’s trail of thought had been going. “So, basically, we need to know who this guy is and why he wanted to kill Steve.”

Steve nodded. He would really like to get those questions answered: preferably quite quickly, before it happened again.

“And if he was working for anyone,” Natasha added. “There are loads of rogue organisations out there. None that I can think of with assassins that well trained.”

“I can search the files from AIM and HammerTech,” Tony contributed. He took a sip of coffee and pulled his fluffy blanket closer about his shoulders. “I’ve been putting it off for ages. Might as well.”

They all nodded.

“I’ll help,” Rhodey added. “There must be a tonne to get through, right?”

“Cool. Everyone else, um, Steve hasn’t seen the disney Atlantis movie yet. He’s missing out.” Tony stood, gripping his coffee cup in one hand and his blanket with the other. He shuffled out of the Den and to the computer room, Rhodey not far behind.
Steve didn’t really register much from the conversation. His brain kept flickering over the fight, trying to figure out what was so hauntingly familiar. Perhaps it was trying to save his skin without the Captain America get-up. Yeah, that must be it. He tried to convince himself that it was the adrenaline, and pushed away any other possibility.

He pulled a blanket over his shoulders, clutched his coffee mug to his chest. On the wall, the opening credits for the movie appeared, and he tried to pay attention to the film. His mind quickly zoned back on the fight, trying to figure it all out. It had been a blur.

By the time he came back to himself, his coffee had gone cold. He stood for a refill, and was by the coffee machine when Rhodey dipped his head in to yell.

"Does anyone know who HYDRA is? They keep cropping up."

Steve's blood ran cold. His fingers went numb. His breathing picked up. He dropped the mug he was holding. He didn’t notice it slip from his fingers, smashing to shards on the floor. He didn’t notice the concerned looks of his friends. He didn’t notice how Natasha had tensed beside him, swearing under her breath in Russian.

All he noticed was that he had failed. They were still there. They were still there. They hadn't been defeated. All of that work, five years of war, two and a half years of his own life given to battle, all for nothing. If HYDRA were still alive, the bastards, he’d given his life - Bucky had given his life - for nothing. He'd failed.

"Steve? Steve? Are you okay? Can you hear me?"

Bruce was sitting in front of him. He didn't know when that had happened. He hadn't noticed when he’d fallen to his knees, or when the shards of porcelain had cut into his skin.

"Dammit," he whispered, "Dammit."

"What, Steve?" Bruce said, putting a comforting hand on Steve's shoulder.

"The Nazis we fought, in the war. They were HYDRA. I thought they were gone. But they're not,
they’re fuckin’ not. Everythin’ we did back then, was all for fuckin’ nothin’—he broke into tears, wracking sobs shuddering through his shoulders.

Rhodey knelt down beside him, and wrapped his arms around Steve’s shoulders. It was only then he realised he’s fallen to his knees and the shards of porcelain were digging into his bones. Even that pain couldn’t compare to the pain of a cause he had given his life to being shattered.

He took a deep, shuddering breath between sobs. Through the tears and the pain, he could see Natasha kneeling in front of him. She looked him dead in the eyes.

“Do you speak German?” She asked, in said language.

Steve hiccuped before replying. “Ja.”

“Then I will tell you. The people who made me an assassin: the Red Room. They muttered of HYDRA, when they thought we could not hear. I know the name only through terrified whispers. You understand? They have been trying to rebuild since you died - or didn’t die, you understand my meaning.”

Steve nodded, and leant further against Rhodey’s shoulder. Natasha placed a hand on his arm - a great comfort, coming from Natasha - then she stood, and left the room to give her information to Tony.

Steve was left on the floor, surrounded by friends, but so alone inside. None of them quite understood - or could ever understand - the pain he was going through. He curled up further into himself as the tears fell.

As he lay there, pitifully exposed, he thought carefully. Mostly it was swearing creatively in a combination of seven languages, but other than that it was a gritty determination. He cried until he couldn’t cry anymore, wiped his eyes, and set his shoulders. He looked up, and there was determination hard in his eyes.

"I'm not going to stop until all of HYDRA is dead or captured."

"I thought you didn't kill people," Tony pressed tentatively. Steve hadn’t realised he had entered the room.
“What, you learn that from a history book? Killed plenty’a people: it was a fuckin’ world war, what’d ya expect?”

The avengers paused awkwardly. They tried to be no-kill on their missions, and had succeeded besides the Battle of New York. It had only just occurred to some of them that not everyone had a clean record.

Steve spent hours trying to explain to them. He began with Azzanno, not that he wanted to mention Bucky too much. It still hurt like a punch to the gut, even after more than a year. He skirted around Bucky for the rest of the talk to try and avoid the pain. He explained HYDRA, the experiments they carried out, Johann Schmitt and his red skull, Erskine, the whole shebang. He explained their bases, their tactics, how the Howling Commandos had torn their way through Europe to take down the main HYDRA bases and any other bastards they found along the way. He spoke of the injuries, the lives the other’s had given up, how soldiers had families back home, how men lost everything because of HYDRA. He described in excruciating detail how HYDRA would send their soldiers to random towns in Europe, how they would line a whole village up in a line and take the strongest for experiments. He choked on how they murdered any and all who retaliated, then left their families to deal with their broken lives.

When he was done, his voice was raw and his eyes were red and his limbs were filled with a heaviness than only came with grief. He rubbed at one eye stubbornly.

Matt’s jaw had set, body tense as Steve’s tale went on. He sat there with clenched fists, and with a look in his eye that promised pain he put his hand on Steve’s shoulder. “We gotta stop ’em.”

Tony rolled over, shuffling forward to pull up the holographic blueprints of the building, handing the paper copy to Matt. Bruce reached forward and flicked the pale blue hologram, watching the it spin around.

"So this is the place. It's definitely HYDRA: JARVIS and I used the AIM files to trace back the owners of the building to one Felix Jameson, who supposedly died last year in a car accident, but was seen last week in the background of a Facebook photo. I found him in some of AIM's files: he's the liaison between HYDRA and other organisations of ill repute."
"The building is pretty heavily guarded, given the computer ports here, here and here, and the big-ass safe that we need to get rid of. Nat, do you wanna explain the rest of the plan?"

Natasha nodded, and poked at the hologram for a moment. "The plan is to land the van on the roof: Bruce, you're our driver, as per usual. Clint and I will sneak through the air vents, through the roof entrance, to get inside the vault without alerting the guards. Tony, Rhodes, Matt and Steve will fight their way down, blowing up as much shit as possible. Most of the defence is in the lower floors, 'cause that's where they expect shit to go down. Tony and Rhodes will stop to access computers and steal their information."

Rhodey nodded, "If you find any paper files, give 'em to me, and I'll fly them upstairs to Bruce. Could be useful."

They all agreed.

"We need to be quick with this," Steve said sternly, determination hard in his eyes. "Hit hard, in and out, as much damage as we can do without leaving evidence."

"Seriously? That's gonna screw 'em up real hard." Clint muttered in awe.

Steve nodded, "Back in the war we'd call this a 'fuck you' strategy. Worked pretty well most of the time."

“Cool,” Clint muttered. “Let’s do it.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, another chapter. This one hasn’t been proofread. If you find a mistake just comment where it is and I’ll find it. So things are starting to get interesting, right? Yeah. I’m genuinely excited for the next few chapters. I haven’t written them yet, but I have a basis for what’s going to happen and I can’t wait. This fic wouldn’t be the same without Tony and Isabelle, who keep giving me ideas when I’m stuck, and everyone who comments. You guys keep this fic going. Thank you. Until next week (hopefully)!
Bruce climbed forward as everybody yanked open the doors and slid out, already forming into groups as they stormed the entrance. They all knew the plan.

It took less than ten seconds to disable all of the front door's security and put JARVIS into the system. They entered, running down the first corridor.

“Split!” Steve snapped, and the group followed his orders and went down one of the two corridors. Steve, Clint and Rhodey went one way, with Tony, Matt and Natasha going the other. Each team beat down the guards they found with ease.

“Computer terminal is on the next floor up,” Tony said as he ran along the corridor. “Stairs just ahead.”

He blasted a door that JARVIS couldn't open and flew in. Matt followed with Natasha hot on his heels, using each other as springboards to take down a pair of guards. Matt drop-punched one in the face, while Natasha downed the other with a flying kick to the jaw.

Floors below, Steve threw his shield, the metal edge smacking the first guard in the shoulder, the angle and momentum causing it to connect with a second guard. Before the third guard could even pull his gun out of its holster Steve had punched him in the face.

Steve spun round and punched another HYDRA guard in the sternum. The bone cracked beneath his fist and the lackey gasped, clutching his chest as he collapsed to the ground. Steve was barely out of breath. These guys were too easy.

They always had been. Back in the day the Howling Commandos could take down every other HYDRA outpost with nothing but a well-aimed sniper, a good punch or two and a bomb. The other bases were slightly better defended but still incompetent.

He continued to fight his way through the guards, but they were dispatched all too quickly. Before long he was standing amongst a pile of unconscious bodies. He put a hand to his ear as he started to rifle through the office cabinets.
“Anything?”

“We got the data,” Tony replied. “From the system. JARVIS is gonna help with it later.”

Steve pulled away from the filing cabinet. Nothing. “Anything else?”

“Not that we can see.”

“Dammit.”

They took all the files anyway. There were so many that they dedicated two massive rooms in the mansion to store them, and any they might get in the future. Bruce had to ferry each box, folder and cabinet from the base to the mansion, then get back in time to pick up the others.

The work paid off though. They saw how HYDRA had been funded through embezzlement and fraud, how they split money between departments that the Avengers hadn’t known existed. Even better, locations were detailed often in the papers. With cross-referencing, they knew what it was.

They found another base.

“We’re leaving.” Steve said, turning around. They’d found nothing. Nothing. Nothing that could show why HYDRA wanted him - wanted them - dead, besides the obvious historical hatred. Nothing of how they had materialised an assassin from thin air.

“But they have a lobster tank in their basement!” Clint exclaimed, snapping Steve from his thoughts.

“Wait, they have a what?”
“It’s a kind of tank, I think. Except kinda crossed with a freezer, you know? Seems real cold.”

Steve spun on his heel and ran to the stairwell. “Keep goin’.”

“Um… it’s kinda knocked over? I dunno why. There’re a whole bunch of wires - no idea what’s there either. But there’s a lot of ice and oh god those aren’t lobsters or rubber bands.”

“What are they?”

Below, in the basement, Clint swallowed. “Restraints.”

Chapter End Notes

Hello again! Sorry for the delay. Life’s been really busy for me recently. But yeah, new chapter. Next one should be up soon.
I’d love to hear your comments for this fic! Whenever I get one it makes my day.
Special thanks to Tony and Isabelle, as always.
I hope you enjoyed this chapter!
They uncovered one base, then another, and another, until eight bases had been ransacked in as many days. With each day that passed, with each base they gutted, Steve became more and more frustrated. Every base revealed new information, useful in its own right, but nothing that was remotely useful in discovering who had tried to kill Steve, how they had managed to find him, why there were icy chambers and hulk-proof restraints in the damp basements of HYDRA facilities.

Of the eight HYDRA bases, no others had had the strange contraption that had been hidden in the depths of the third.

Steve rolled over, mulling over the thoughts that fired around his head. The minutes ticked by as he tried to piece together the puzzle, a puzzle where they only had a handful of the pieces. It was no use. He sat up, and started looking at the best way to infiltrate the next base. It had been a long week, but they still had work to do.

He lay there until seven in the morning, then got up and started to make breakfast. The Avengers would need it. They had another base to break into.

“Role call!” Tony yelled from beside the van. The sound echoed through the basement, making the other Avengers turn towards him. “Clint? Got your ears on?”

The archer didn’t respond, and kept fiddling with his arrows.

“I guess that answers that question.” Natasha hit Clint over the head and handed him his hearing aides.

“Got your arrows, Clint?” Tony asked.

“Yep, yep,” he replied, and went back to loading the arrows into his quivers.
“Rhodey-boy -“

“- don’t call me that -“

“ - have you got your gadgets. I’d be sad if you didn’t; you know what I’m like when I’m sad, sweetie. Steve?”

He was loading bombs and gadgets into his utility belt, but he looked up and gave a “I’m ‘ere, ya asshole.”

“Nat?”

Natasha gave a friendly glare in response, and Tony mentally marked her as present.

“Brucie? Or resident ray of sunshine?”

Bruce had his elbows resting on the steering wheel, reading a book on quantum physics. “That’s not sunshine,” he snarked without looking up from the book, “It’s gamma radiation.”

Tony snickered, the composed himself. “Matt?”

Matt yelled “Yup!”, then pulled open the back door to the van. Everyone piled into the back, with Tony hopping into shotgun.

“You ready, guys?” Steve called.

A chorus of “AYE AYE, CAPTAIN!” met his ears.

“I hate you guys. Let’s get this show on the road already.”
"Cap, I’ve found a door. Locked." Natasha started poking around in her belt for the bombs. The initial infiltration of the base was easy as pie, and now they were raiding the place for information. “I'm cracking in right now.” She pulled out one of the charges from her belt and set it to the door, flicking a switch as she did so. A high pitched beeping filled the air. She dove round the corner and covered her ears as the explosion went off, then peeked round the corner to assess the damage.

"What's inside?" Steve asked over the comms.

"The bomb didn't break anything obvious, which is good. Seems to be… filing cabinets? Quite a lot of them. I'm betting this is from before HYDRA went digital. Ancient stuff. We should probably keep all this."

"Would there be enough room to fit them in the van?"

"I think - only if none of us were inside. Yeah, that could work."

Tony and Rhodey helpfully took the files up to the roof, where they helped Bruce load them into the van. After he'd dropped them off at Tony's mansion, he swung back to the HYDRA base. They'd finished up by then, so they celebrated on their way home, got themselves cleaned up and into warmer clothes, and then sat and ate pizza while watching crappy movies.

It wasn't until the next morning, when they were eating breakfast, that Natasha remembered the filing cabinets. There were four in total, and all of them full of papers and memos and reports. As the teens raised from the table to go to their own business, she went to the room dedicated to filing cabinets. She opened the first cabinet, curious, and peeked inside. The papers were arranged chronologically, so she navigated herself to the beginning, and began to read.

Chapter End Notes

Hello again! A short chapter this week, but i’ll make up for it next week. Special thanks, as always, to Tony, Isabelle, and anyone who comments! You guys are awesome. I’m not going to be putting a note on the next chapter; I think it would ruin the vibe and i’m a dramatic bitch. On that note: the next chapter is possibly my favourite of the lot. It was the third chapter I completed of this fic! I’m really proud of it. I hope you enjoy it.
OPERATION: WINTER SOLDIER

DATE: 22/03/1945

TestSubject_355 (see: base_616_tests) recovered. Left arm missing, but otherwise alive. No frostbite. Survival most likely caused by Serum_V.3.57. Serum_V.3.57 deemed successful.

DATE: 02/04/1945

TestSubject_355 had head dumped repeatedly with/in water while interrogated for SSR secrets. None disclosed.

DATE: 04/04/1945

TestSubject_355 put in isolation cell. Will be permanent residence from now on. Isolation may contribute to re-programming techniques.

DATE: 23/04/1945

TestSubject_355 kept in isolation for 19 days. Removed after extreme hallucinations, self-harm and psychosis. Recommended for short periods of time only. Useful for disorientation and reprogramming techniques.

DATE: 05/05/1945

TestSubject_355 subjected to sleep deprivation for 48.25 hours. Subject began to hallucinate and speak to self after 22.5 hours.

Note: associations with Steve Rogers / Captain America. Future exploitation?

Effective way to disorient subject. Will repeat for reprogramming.

DATE: 09/05/1945

TestSubject_355 shackled to cold floor with lowered ambient temperature for 16 hours. Removed when subject began to show signs of hypothermia.

DATE: 31/05/1945
Further testing of Serum_V.3.64 on TestSubject_355.

DATE: 03/06/1945

DATE: 04/06/1945
3 hours of constant verbal abuse at TestSubject_355. Effectively disorients. Good for reprogramming.

DATE: 19/06/1945
TestSubject_355 subjected to sleep deprivation for 49.33 hours. Subject began to hallucinate and speak to self after 25 hours.

DATE: 21/06/1945
TestSubject_355 shown a tape of hypnotic images for 10 hours, given a 5 hour break then shown another 16 hours. Eyes forced open constantly for full effect.

DATE: 22/06/1945
TestSubject_355 subjected to sleep deprivation for 27 hours.
TestSubject_355 put back into isolation.

DATE: 27/06/1945
TestSubject_355 removed from isolation after 5 days 11 hours.

DATE: 04/07/1945
Attempted hypnotizing techniques to start reprogramming process. TestSubject_355 had little reaction, but could be more useful over time. More techniques recommended.

DATE: 06/07/1945
TestSubject_355 was subjected to sleep deprivation for 37.5 hours. Effective way to disorient subject. Will repeat for reprogramming.
DATE: 11/08/1945

Told TestSubject_355 that previous connections (see: Capt. America) are now dead as part of reprogramming technique. Was given newspaper article on the death of Capt. Rogers. TestSubject_355 became violent, then unresponsive.

DATE: 13/08/1945

TestSubject_355 still unresponsive. Could be sign of successful reprogramming.

DATE: 14/08/1945

TestSubject_355 exposed to electroshock therapy. Could be useful for future reprogramming. Technology is limited. Pause before commencing reprogramming recommended.

DATE: 15/08/1945

Using TestSubject_355 to test cryostasis technology. Data indicating a working prototype.

DATE: 12/02/1947

TestSubject_355 removed from cryostasis.

DATE: 02/05/1947

TestSubject_355 exposed to electroshock therapy. Good response. Tests show extreme memory loss: excellent for re-programming.

DATE: 04/05/1947

Extensive testing on TestSubject_355. Was responsive to treatment. Good sign for later testing and use.

DATE: 22/05/1947

Torture techniques used on TestSubject_355. Created shallow cuts on arms, filled with acid. Healed quickly, but extremely painful. Serum_V.4.5.27 has high probability of success.

DATE: 24/05/1947
0838: TestSubject_355 exposed to electroshock therapy.

0851: TestSubject_355 had a series of triggering words repeated to him. Will continue between testing.

0959: TestSubject_355 exposed to electroshock therapy.

1334: TestSubject_355 exposed to electroshock therapy.

2029: TestSubject_355 exposed to electroshock therapy.

DATE: 25/05/1947

0247: TestSubject_355 exposed to electroshock therapy.

0532: TestSubject_355 submitted to Water Torture for 2.5 hours.

0825: TestSubject_355 exposed to electroshock therapy.

0918: TestSubject_355 submitted to Water Torture for 12 hours.

2207: TestSubject_355 exposed to electroshock therapy.

DATE: 26/05/1947

TestSubject_355 submitted to Room_39 for experimental ‘Chinese Water Torture’. Effective way of disorienting the subject and causing distress. May be useful for future re-programming techniques.

DATE: 27/05/1947

TestSubject_355 prevented from sleeping. Buckets of ice-cold water poured over the head regularly for 24 hours.

DATE: 28/05/1947

0023: TestSubject_355 exposed to electroshock therapy. Sleep deprivation technique continued.

0608: TestSubject_355 exposed to electroshock therapy.

0733: TestSubject_355 exposed to electroshock therapy.

1608: TestSubject_355 submitted to Water Torture for 1.5 hours.

1800: TestSubject_355 exposed to electroshock therapy.

DATE: 29/05/1947
Consultant_34 recommends creation and use of a prosthetic arm to maximize functionality and use of Asset. Prototype designs held in next document.

(Attached: Schematics for a prosthetic arm on blueprint paper.)

DATE: 30/06/1947
Operations on TestSubject_355 finally complete. Prototype prosthetic arm fitted. Further tests to complete, but full range of function to be expected.

DATE: 01/07/1947
TestSubject_355 put into cryostasis while not being tested. Recommended removal date: 01/11/1949

DATE: 14/11/1949
TestSubject_355 removed from cryostasis.

DATE: 25/11/1949
Trigger words successfully implanted. Training initiated.

DATE: 14/05/1950
Asset ready for deployment and use. Currently stored in cryostasis.

DESIGNATION: WINTER SOLDIER

MISSION REPORT: 22/11/1963
Asset deployed in Dallas, Texas to take down Target: Eagle. The Asset fired two bullets, taking out Target: Eagle. Asset returned to rendezvous and given standard post-mission procedure (electroshock), returned to cryostasis. A suitable candidate was framed and killed before prosecution. All loose ends tied up.

TARGET ELIMINATED
MISSION REPORT: 04/04/1968

Asset sent to Targets hotel for reconnaissance. Target's room identified. Asset positioned on adjacent rooftop. Waited 0.25 hours. Target moved to balcony, Asset fired one bullet. Arrived at rendezvous, given standard post-mission procedure and returned to cryostasis.

TARGET ELIMINATED

NOTE:

Do not deploy the weapon on July the Fourth unless above Level 9 importance. Do not let the asset see calendars on or around this date. Such actions induce protocol-breaking behaviour.

MISSION REPORT: 16/11/2010

Asset deployed 3 miles from target's expected path. Stationed on off-road for 3.5 hours. (Note: no signs of hypothermia. unexpected aspect of serum v.11.3). Target passed, Asset pursued vehicle. Vehicle crashed. Target was eliminated. Asset destroyed all security cameras on site and retrieved tape recording. All other copies successfully removed. Asset met at rendezvous 0.8 hours later, standard post-mission procedure and returned to cryostasis.

TARGET ELIMINATED

Natasha got to the end of that file, shaking. She put it down on the floor, on top of the 5 other files she had gone through. There was only one left. She picked it up, and opened it. This file was different from the others. It wasn’t reports; it was pictures.

DATE: 01/04/1945

(A photo of a man on a stretcher. He has brown hair and pale skin, slightly blue tinged from the cold. His thick blue coat is covered in blood, and it's easy to see why. His left arm is mangled and bloody, a bone sticking out of the skin. It's ripped a hole clean through the coat. A shame. The coat must have been so warm before then.)

DATE: 01/07/1945

(A photo of the man again, curled up in the corner of a room. There is little to see of his face, but his eyes look tired and scared, and he is dirty and unshaven. He must have been there for some time. One of his arms is missing. He is wearing the remnants of a uniform. A blue jacket, with standard US military army trousers and boots.)
DATE: 18/08/1945

(An image of the Winter Soldier in cryostasis.) TestSubject_355 in cryostasis testing. Vital signs show that subject is still alive.

DATE: 04/04/1968

(The man strapped to a chair, with his arms strapped to his sides with heavy restraints. One arm is metal. Odd machines surround him, monitoring vital signs. An oddly shaped helmet is pushed over his head. A mouth guard shoved between his teeth. His face is contorted in pain. He looks like he’s trying not to scream. Or perhaps he is screaming, but the photo didn’t capture the sound.)

Natasha almost put down the file, ready to throw up from what she had just read, just seen, but she turned one last page and found…

(A photo of James Buchanan Barnes, in military uniform, looking well-fed, young and strong. It must have been taken before the war started.)

NAME: James Buchanan Barnes

DOB: 10/03/1929

DESIGNATION: TestSubject_355, Asset.

OPERATION: WINTER SOLDIER
The avengers looked up as Natasha entered the room, folders clutched in one hand, pale faced and shaking.

“Guys, there’s something you’ve got to see.”

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!