Summary

*Long Term Hiatus* When Clint and Natasha come across a hurt teenage boy they have no idea just what the Avengers are in for.

Notes

Series updated every Sunday.
Chapter One

Clint slouched deeper into Natasha's side and purposefully ignored the flakes of blood collecting between his fingers and at the creases of his elbows. The large set of bruises developing along his right side flashed hot as he recrossed his arms and the artificial light made his tired eyes ache.

Natasha shifted next to him on the narrow subway seat and adjusted the arm she'd casually thrown over his shoulder. The cut high on her cheek had finally scabbed over and her uniform was dirtier than his.

'Soon.' She signed halfheartedly, head tilted back and eyes closed.

He made a noise of affirmation, something between a sigh and a grunt, and closed his own eyes. After the day they'd had, Clint was certain he deserved at least twenty four hours of uninterrupted sleep. They all did.

Natasha carded her hand lazily through his hair.

"What is in your hair?" Her rough voice reflected the hours she'd spent stuck downwind of the huge fire. She sounded as if she'd been smoking two packs a day since turning twelve.

He adjusted one hearing aid; sound coming from the left seemed far away and muffled. Natasha seemed to be calling to him from the end of a steel tunnel.


She cracked open an eye and hesitantly leaned forward with a hiss. Her ribs were equally tender and her hair had long since fallen from its ponytail. Strands hung around her face like a bedraggled curtain. She was going to need conditioner, a fine toothed comb, and a lot of time.

Or, knowing Clint's luck, he was going to be spending a few hours hunched over Natasha, picking at tangles while she watched something mindless on television.

"It looks like you need a shower." She answered.

Clint chuckled and rubbed a filthy hand over his equally covered face. There was a pounding behind his right eye, a splitting headache just waiting to develop into a migraine.

"You and me both." The subway car stopped, doors automatically opening for an empty platform. "Did you tell Steve we're on our way?"

She nodded and shut her eyes again.

He flexed his toes and grimaced. Both of his boots had been damaged today, the soles chewed up and riddled with holes. His damp socks stuck to the bottom of his feet. Sewer water. Clint was going to have to soak his feet in bleach and burn the shoes. He had gone nose blind hours ago, and for that he felt lucky.

A high school kid entered the otherwise empty car just before the doors closed, his face turned down as he moved towards the nearest seat. Clint ignored him and turned his attention back to Natasha. Her dark lashes stood out in sharp relief against her skin as her breathing evened out. Asleep.
Clint was glad one of them could at least enjoy a few minutes of rest. Debriefing would take hours, never mind the fact checking, note comparing, and organizing of schedules for the next few days. He'd already been in the middle of a 36 hour day before the call came in. He was running on less than fumes.

'What's he doing here?' Natasha nudged at him and signed, eyes open and staring at the only other occupant of the car.

Clint blinked and found his molasses slow thoughts catching up. How long had he been blankly staring at the wall?

'Aren't you sleeping?' He automatically responded; his fingers felt like alien appendages.

Her mouth turned down slightly and Clint's shoulders automatically hunched.

'No.' The 'obviously' was more than implied.

Her gaze pierced him again. The lingering look stopped on his forehead and paused on his side. He could practically hear her thoughts.

"I'm not hiding injuries." Clint said in response to her unasked question. "Steve nearly had my head last time."

"We'll talk about this later." Natasha's pivoted her attention back to the high schooler and Clint relaxed as her eyes moved away from him.

The teen sat adjacent to them, oversized hoodie pulled up and arms loosely crossed. His head hung to the side, eyes closed and mouth slack on a pale face. Napping. There was red pen on the cuff of his hoodie and his jeans had massive holes in the knees.

"Maybe he was caught at a friends house during the-" Clint made a motion to encompass the entire shit-storm the last twelve hours had been.

She made a noise that might have been agreement or dismissal. Clint rubbed again at his forehead.

"How many people have you seen in the last hour? What about the hour before that? Or the six before that?"

None. It was early morning, large portions of New York had lost power, and a city wide emergency had been declared. The streets were a ghost town. Jarvis had overridden the entire subway system to get Clint and Natasha home.

"Hey, kid." He raised his voice slightly. The boy didn't stir. "Hey."

Clint spoke loud enough to break the quiet atmosphere. The teenager remained still and the subway car passed through a tunnel. Long shadows flickered across empty seats.

He shared a look with Natasha and she stood with a hiss.

"Hey, there." Her voice was even as she approached the teen. Clint could hear the hidden words behind her casual tone. Identify yourself. "Excuse me?"

Clint's mouth settled into a hard line at the teen's lack of reaction. He pushed himself to his feet and remained just behind Natasha and out of the teen's range. Clint reached for his bow, then changed directions and moved towards a large knife he carried. The small space would make maneuvering a
She reached out to gently shake a shoulder and the boy's arm slide down onto the seat next to him. The entire section previously hidden by his arm was wet and red.

"Fuck." Clint stepped forward, wiping his grimy hands against his ruined pants as Natasha rotated the kid flat onto his back. The kid didn't respond. "What the actual fuck."

He leaned in close, waited to feel an exhale from the teen's mouth, and tucked two fingers under the chin for a pulse. Natasha pulled at the bottom of the hoodie.

"He's breathing." The kid's pulse jumped and stuttered at break neck pace under his skin.

"Shrapnel." Natasha spoke with a grimace. "I think." She pulled her hand away and it looked as if she'd just come from finger painting. "Massive trauma."

Clint stared down at his ragged shirt before shrugging it off and tearing what was left into wide strips. Neither of them had anything remotely clean. Natasha took each as quickly as he made them, hands firm as she wrapped the messy torso.

He handed her the last one and moved his attention to the unnaturally pale hand hanging off the seat.

"I'm going to call Tony, see if he can meet us for an airlift." Natasha flicked the earpiece she still wore back on.

"I thought he was grounded." She raised an eyebrow at his words and he shrugged at the motion. Clint supposed she was right. There wasn't much of anything that could keep Tony 'grounded'.

He was used to this, working with Natasha was easier than getting to and from the grocery store. Clint hunched forward enough to pick up the teen as they came to another stop. His head swam and he shook it like a wet dog. "C'mon kid. Let's get you out of here."

Clint hefted the surprisingly light weight through the empty station. Next to him, Natasha spoke in clipped tones. He let her commanding voice wash over him and kept moving. Just had to keep the kid safe. Just had to take one more step.

"You're going to be fine." Clint murmured more to himself than to the unconscious bundle he carried. His bones felt fragile in Clint's grip, as if Clint's large clumsy hands were wrapped around a small bird.

"Tony is on his way." Natasha took the lead as they walked up and out onto unfamiliar streets.
This is officially set six months or so after CA:TWS. It diverges from the MCU at that point.

Natasha paused in the hall. Through the open doorway, Clint rested face first and barefoot on a sleek looking white couch. Tony would have to replace it, she could already see the smears of blood and dirt against the bright white.

Her partner hadn't even tried to make it upstairs and to his rooms. He'd found the nearest flat surface, once debriefed and cleared by medical, and proceeded to pass out. A half eaten take out box of sesame chicken balanced precariously on the arm of the couch.

He smelled so bad she wasn't sure Tony could banish it without gutting the entire room.

"Is he alright?" Steve's asked quietly.

Even with the serum, he looked as if he needed sleep as much as the rest of them. Dark shadows lined his eyes and his skin appeared paper thin and bloodless.

"He just needs twelve hours of uninterrupted rest."

Steve frowned. "But-"

Natasha waved her hand in dismissal. "He needs twelve but he'll feel much better with two. I'll wake him soon and wrangle him upstairs."

Steve nodded and rubbed at one of his shoulders. He'd changed into a loose pair of sweats and the deep bruises on his arms had already turned a sickly yellow. He hadn't been hurt during the attack, but all of them would be taking it easy for a few days.

"I can help move him now if it would be easier?" He asked. She watched him absently sway like a man who'd been up all night drinking.

Natasha smiled and shook her head. As strong as she was, Natasha knew she couldn't support both of them if Steve inevitably collapsed. "Leave him. He'll be fine."

Steve nodded and slouched against the wall behind him. He blinked slowly. "You headed to bed?

Several junior staff members cleaned up the otherwise eerily quiet floor. Chinese take out containers and bottles of water littered every available surface not filled with paperwork. The harsh light of day streamed through the windows.

"Soon. Just going to grab some tea." It would be a miracle if she had any sort of voice the next seventy two hours.

Tony and Bruce had already crashed, somewhere between fatigued and delirious. The scientists had started to toss theories back and forth on the strange accelerant used, running on ideas alone as their
bodies wilted like plants left too long in the sun.

It had been strangely fascinating to watch their composed high energy conversation debilitate into nonsensical words and strange hand gestures. She'd recorded several videos to share during the next movie night.

Pepper had escorted Tony to his room by the ear before coming back and doing the same to Bruce.

"Tea sounds good." Steve nodded and trailed behind her.

She filled the kettle with water, grabbed the honey, and pulled out two mugs. "Any reason you're still awake?"

He shrugged and slid onto one of the breakfast stools. He rested his forearms against the counter and leaned forward. When she moved closer he buried his head in her shoulder. His hair looked like straw and his breath was warm against her arm.

"Steve?"

"I'm just," he paused as if gathering his thoughts, "...there was just... It was a lot of fire." He finished lamely in a flat voice.

"Yes, it was." She thought back to the files on Steve she'd memorized before meeting him. Thought about the shitstorm they'd survived six months ago.

His eyes focused on the counter and he laughed self depreciatingly. "I guess it just brought up some... I just wish-"

Steve's words halted midstream. He took a deep breath and stared blankly at the wall, mind miles away.

Natasha knew all about bad memories. She wrapped her arm around his shoulders and covered his eyes with her fingers and palm. He sighed.

"You need rest." Now was not the time to remind Steve that James would reappear when he was ready.

"Yeah." Steve mumbled back. His eyelashes were damp against her fingers.

Natasha eyed the heavy slope of his shoulders and realized she'd be tucking in more than one super hero.

"Come on." She turned the burner off, poked at his cheek with her free hand, and pushed him up and off his seat. "Let's get you to bed."

Natasha grasped him by the arm and he followed.

"Bed? Nat, I'm fine."

"Yes." They passed by the room Clint collapsed in and the sound of his snore cut through the quiet. "You remember bed, right?"

"Bed?" Steve intoned again like a broken record. "I was going to help clean up."

She ignored him.
"Jarvis?" They entered the elevator. "Steve's floor please."

"Yes, Miss Romanov." Jarvis intoned. Steve rubbed at his eyes.

"Clint mentioned you guys found a teen?" He started as Natasha led him across his kitchen floor.

Jarvis pulled the shades on the windows; the blissfully dark room welcomed them with open arms. She didn't bother with the lights and her eyes quickly adjusted.

"We did." She responded.

Steve didn't pull back the comforter before he collapsed against it. He snuggled against a pillow and groaned. The bed creaked at the sudden weight, but didn't break.

"Is he going to be okay?"

"I think so." She sat on the edge of his bed and started unlacing his shoes. "Dropped him off in medical. He got out of surgery a half hour ago."

Natasha had a string of texts from the lead surgeon and had already read through the initial notes and assessments.

Steve made a noise of concern and rolled off his stomach. "What was he doing out there?"

"I don't know." And it bothered her like a pair of heels a half size too small.

"Clint seemed worried."

Natasha thought of the kid's tattered clothing, pale skin, and bloody torso. Streets nearby had been destroyed, buildings charred black and trees turned to ash.

She'd spotted Clint darting to medical during breaks. For all the limited interaction he had with children, Clint was surprisingly good at it.

Natasha met Steve's gaze in the nearly black room. In the poor light his eyes were dark pools. "It wasn't any place for a kid."

"Yeah." Steve reached forward and squeezed her shoulder. "I'm glad you guys were there."

She nodded tightly. "Me too."
"Where is Tim?" Cass's voice cut through Dick's earpiece with the subtlety of a freight train.

He flinched mid air and tucked into a roll.

The hard steel of the roof bit uncomfortably into his thigh as he shifted weight and came out of the somersault. The space between United Bank and Gotham Financial was small enough he didn't bother with a grappling gun.

"Jesus!" Dick exclaimed. "You surprised me."

"Lie." The sound of traffic echoed behind her and Dick would bet money she'd perched on a high skyscraper with both legs kicked out over the edge.

He laughed and the early morning wind carried the sound away. "Still, warn a guy. And no street names, Black Bat."

"Tim."

An eye twitched and his hand clenched tighter at the wall he scaled. Dick opened his mouth for a retort, thought better of it, and changed tactics.

"I could have been in the middle of something."

He hadn't been. The last month had been slower than hell; he itched for a bit of excitement. A drug bust. A kidnapping ring. Anything.

"Where is he?" Cass spoke again as he landed gracefully and threw himself into a quick back hand spring.

It had been months since she'd contacted him and her no nonsense tone tinged with restrained affection made him strangely giddy.

"You should come for Thanksgiving. Are you coming for Thanksgiving?"

Dick climbed down a half rotten fire escape and traveled through a pedestrian tunnel known for muggings. It would take some finagling, but he would get the entire family into a room for one holiday this year. Even Jason.


"I am not letting you off the hook for this fall." He sighed at her one track mind and slowed to watch an employee open and enter a shop unscathed. Crouched low to the roof, he rested his forearms on bent legs and breathed in the taste of smog and garbage. "He's on the beach, getting stupidly
freckled, hit on by models, and harassed by reporters."

Dick would want to be there too, except his brother was terrible at relaxing.

He frowned, glanced at the predawn light just starting to trickle across the tall buildings, and redirected his route to a nearby safe house. He had to be at the precinct bright and early and getting all the way back to his own bed would cut into prime sleep time.

Cass paused on the other end. "No, he's not."

Dick frowned, mind skittering away from the thought of sleep. "Yes, he is. Batman's orders." He thought of the embarrassing article he'd clipped out of Weekly Gotham News about Tim hooking up with a Kardashian clone while on vacation. He'd taped it up on the fridge at the manor. "Threatened to throw me off a bridge if I didn't rescue him."

He knew the exact time and day Tim arrived back in Gotham. Red Robin could hold a grudge.

"Tim said he would call on the fifth. He did not call. He did not email. He did not text. He. Is. Missing." She reiterated. "Twenty four hours. You will tell me where he is or I will be there. I am patching in Oracle."

"Whoa, what-"

"Hello?" Barbara voice sounded tired and lacked its usual distortion. Dick hung his head and slunk between two buildings for privacy. "Black Bat?"

"Sorry," Dick started, "she called you."

He resisted the urge to bang his head on the nearest brick wall. Trying to control Cass was like trying to herd cats.

"I gathered." Barbara answered dryly. Dick knew she would be just coming off a late night herself and once again cursed his family. "Did she hang up?"

"Er.... Yes?" He dumbly answered. "Black Bat?"

Silence.

Barbara snorted on the other end.

"Any particular reason she's contacting me from Hong Kong?"

"Well, she's.... can you maybe just get a read out on where Red Robin is?" He finished lamely.

"Hm?"

Her focus slid away from him and towards one the computers closest to her. He couldn't hear typing, but knew her fingers flew across the keyboard at an alarming rate. Dick leaned against the damp brick behind him and scratched absently at his nose. Maybe he could head to Barbara's place instead and have coffee with her before throwing on his uniform.

Dick waited a few moments, more than enough time for her to track down everything from Tim's most recent phone calls to what he'd eaten for breakfast. The line remained suspiciously silent.

"Hey," A feeling of dread washed over him, "he's good, right? Black Bat is just being paranoid? He's holed up watching The Lord of the Rings trilogy? Yeah?"
"You should swing by." The hair on the back of his neck stood on end and his stomach flipped. "I need to check a few more things."

He swallowed and changed directions.
Chapter 4

Tim knew immediately he'd been given the good drugs. His mind floated, unfocused and slow, and his limbs followed suit. They hung from his torso like bags of sand, weightless and disconnected.

He cocked his head to the side, more asleep than awake, and listened. A secondhand moved loudly across the face of a clock and beyond it the hum of machines created soft white noise.

Hospital?

He swallowed back the taste of morning breath and medicine, his dry throat swollen and sore, and tried to focus. He'd told Bruce more than once he didn't like heavy narcotics. Better to be sharp and in pain than slow and numb.

"Bru...?" The name came out unrecognizably slurred. Tim's throat tickled uncomfortably.

He shifted his weight and darkness spun behind closed lids. Tim clenched his muscles and hissed out through a locked jaw as he waited for the vertigo to pass. His stomach somersaulted.

"Whoa whoa whoa, take it easy there." A male voice interjected from Tim's right side. "You shouldn't be moving."

Strong hands pushed carefully at Tim's shoulders and he instinctively fought against the unfamiliar voice.

"I thought you said he'd be out for hours?" The man spoke again. Tim wriggled his body like an eel and struggled to control his legs.

"He should be!" A second voice answered.

The hands on his shoulders tightened and Tim kicked out with a leg. The man grunted and his grip turned almost painful in its strength.

"Jesus, kid! I'm a good guy!"

Tim kicked out again, momentarily thankful the drugs numbed out the worst of the pain. His captor walked the line between holding him tightly and hurting him, and Tim used the indecision to push for an advantage.

"Let me get the doctor."

"You think?" The man sarcastically intoned.

Tim opened his eyes in time to see the door close with a bang. The sound hurt his ears and he hissed. All of a sudden he couldn't care less about getting away.

"Vom-" He stuttered. Tim's stomach twisted in knots and sweat broke out along his brow.

The man immediately switched gears and rolled Tim to his side. His abdominal wall roared in unexpected pain as stitches pulled and injured muscles strained. Tim tasted old blood and bile as his body shivered, trembled, and vomited over the side of the bed and onto the floor.

The hand not supporting his head squeezed at his shoulder. Tim felt callouses through the thin hospital pajamas he wore.
"Better?"

Tim nodded and his head pounded. Clearly, escape wasn’t a viable option.

He moved Tim back and stepped away cautiously, as if waiting for Tim to strike out again. When Tim did nothing but watch, he grabbed at one of the blankets on the bottom of the bed and used it to wipe at Tim’s mouth and part of the bed he had dirtied. Even with the truckload of narcotics numbing his body, Tim blushed.

"Good, good." He spoke the words more to himself than to Tim. "Let’s get you some water. I can’t imagine that tasted good."

He grabbed a glass off the sink.

Tim reached with a weak hand for the offered cup. His eyes darted over the room and took in the state of the art equipment surrounding him. The smell in the air reminded him of the high end cleaners Bruce used in the cave.

Everything screamed expensive except the man he’d just met.

His clothing looked as if it needed to be burned; it hung threadbare and faded off his frame. Laugh lines framed his mouth and the beginnings of crow’s feet lingered around his eyes. His short cropped hair matched his fit body and he watched Tim like Dick did after a particularly grueling case.

Where was he and how the hell had he gotten here?

Tim’s mind rewound over what he could remember. Fire and smoke so thick he could taste the hot ash. The floor beneath him literally giving away with a sick lurch.

And-

Tim dismissed his thoughts as a woman in a lab coat walked in and the nurse followed. Her heels clicked on the floor and she eyed Tim like a specimen in a lab. He’d seen that focus a thousand times. Doctor.

Behind them, a woman with red hair, jeans, and a dark sweater entered. She had the gait of a dancer and took in the room with a flat all encompassing glance.

The doctor crossed the room brusquely, attention flicking across the scene before she frowned at Tim. She pulled out a StarkPad and his bed slowly raised into a reclining position.

He sipped at his lukewarm water.

"Clint?" The redhead spoke in an unaccented voice. "When did he wake? I told you to call me."

"Just now." The man responded in a weak voice. "I was about to. There was puking."

She pursed her lips as if to respond.

"Yeah, yeah." Clint answered an unasked question. "I know."

The doctor shone a light in Tim’s eyes and he responded automatically to questions.

"Do you know where you are?"

"Hospital?" Tim’s voice ached from disuse.
"What's the last thing you remember?"

Tim thought back to grabbing clothes out of one of Jason's stashes and ditching his suit. He remembered pressing an arm to his stomach and calculating how far he could go in his condition. Clearly, he had miscalculated. "Uh, getting a drink on my way back to my hotel?"

The doctor noted something before turning her sharp gaze back on him. "On a scale of one to ten, how is your pain?"

"Um." He tried to think of how much pain a normal person would be in after such a serious accident. Tim had no idea. His midsection felt as if someone had taken a cheese grater to it. He hazarded a guess and hoped she wouldn't try to up his pain meds. "Four?"

Her lips turned downwards and she made another note. Behind her, the man and woman continued speaking as they were in their own world.

"Tony decided he'd take the time to order food since you didn't show." She crossed her arms. "He's planning a contest. They're arguing about pizza toppings. There are charts."

Clint winced. "Natasha-"

She silenced him with a look. "Charts, Clint."

The man sighed and rubbed reflexively at his forehead. There were bandages on his fingers and he moved as if his ribs hurt.

Tim froze momentarily, things sliding quickly into place as he restudied them.

No. His luck couldn't be that terrible.

"Young man?" The doctor asked.

"Yes?" He answered faintly.

"You've been seriously hurt, I'm afraid you'll be in Stark Tower for quite awhile." His stomach dropped and he resisted the urge to hang his head in his hands. He had the worst luck. "We did see in one of our initial scans that your spleen has been removed. Are there any other injuries, conditions, or allergies we need to know to treat you effectively?"

He held back laughter and thought of the dictionary sized file of medical information on him stored at the cave. Tim had glanced over the pages and pages on past injuries with morbid curiosity on more than one occasion.

He shook his head.

"Do you have a parent we can call?"

Behind the doctor, Natasha and Clint continued to banter but their focus shifted. They listened with practiced ease.

"Um." His still drug addled mind tripped over itself as he weighed his options. Bruce Wayne's adopted son injured and hurt in New York? Bruce Wayne's adopted son with a laundry list of undocumented scars and injuries? At the current home of the Avengers? Rescued by the Avengers? The media would have a field day.
"Um..."
Hey guys! Due to some real life things taking up more time than previously thought- updates will be every two weeks for awhile- hopefully still happening on Sundays (crosses fingers but no promises). Thanks!

Jason's lungs itched for a smoke. The air smelled like chemical fire and everyone walked with forced nonchalance. Ash lined the streets and particles lazily drifted through the air. Several people passed by in medical masks.

Down the street, two fire trucks and several dump trucks worked to break down collapsed buildings and piles of charred garbage.

It reminded him of Gotham after a three day weekend. He expected to see people picking over the wreckage for anything worth selling. This was New York though, and early morning commuters moved as if too important to be bothered.

"Fucking New York." The riffraff here wouldn't stand a chance against even the most pathetic thugs from his home city.

He lit a cigarette, took a long drag, and picked his way across what had been low income housing. Heat still rose from the scorched foundation of the recently burned down building.

Jason pushed at melted sheetrock and stepped over what had been a crossbeam.

He lost himself in the meticulous search. Broken glass, clothing, kitchen utensils, and pieces of furniture covered the ground in a thick blanket. He reached for another cigarette and sighed at the empty box.

It crunched in his fist and he tipped his head back with frustration. His cigarette stash kept going missing and replacing them was expensive. The sun sat high in the sky and sweat gathered at the small of his back and the collar of his shirt.

"Fucking sun," he grumbled and threw on a pair of sunglasses. Jason could count on one hand the number of times he'd worn them for shade.

A rusted bed frame stood out among the rubble. He cocked his head and tugged the screeching metal to one side.

Music blared suddenly and Jason jumped. He scrambled for his jacket pocket and answered his phone after glancing at the name.

"Did you change my ringtone again?" Jason glanced around to see if anyone had heard the embarrassing tune.

"What?" Dick asked.

His voice reeked of insincerity and distraction.
"I sure as hell didn't set my ring tone to 'I Knew You Were Trouble'. You trying to say something?"

"You know Taylor Swift?" His older brother sounded delighted.

"Dick." Jason tilted his head back in exasperation. He wanted a cold beer and the filthy sharp air of Gotham in his lungs. "Did you need something? Or were you just calling to discuss a top twenty artist and the voice of a new generation?"

"Well..." Dick's voice lost its playful edge, "where are you?"

Jason looked around the wreckage of what had been a city block. "New York."

"New York?"

"You know, the city that doesn't sleep? Home of Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty? Little Orphan Annie's playground?" Frustration crept into his voice; speaking to his brother made him crave more than just a beer.

"Why are you there?"

"I'll be back tonight. Just finishing up a few things."

He hadn't been to the safe house in years, but no way could the cops come across the small cache of weapons he'd left.

"Important things?" Dick asked. Jason heard the unasked 'do you need help?'.

"It's fine, Dick."

"Good," he audibly swallowed, "Hey, you haven't heard from Tim, have you?"

"Replacement?" Jason's eyes caught on something. There. He tipped the hidden black safe beneath the bed frame upright and brushed at the thick layer of ash on it. "I thought he was vacationing?"

"He's off the grid. Babs can't find any recent record of him."

"How recent?"

"Five days this morning."

Jason fiddled with the lock and his hands went from bone dry to cold and clammy.

"Five days?" Barbara could find anyone. Barbara was better at technology than Bruce and Tim. Combined. His stomach knotted in worry. A lot could happen in a few hours, never mind a work week. "And you checked with Kon? And Steph?"

"So, you haven't heard from him?" Dick inquired again.

"No." The word tasted sour. He inwardly calculated how long it would take to get back to Gotham. "Where was he last?"

"Cape Cod. Grabbed dinner and took a cab back to his hotel."

"Everyone else is safe?"

"Yes," Dick spoke as if saying the words hurt, "and Gotham's underbelly is accounted for."
The vice around Jason's heart released a fraction at the unspoken reference. "What does Bruce think?"

"He's working on a lead."

Jason choked back a laugh; the ever elusive and mysterious detective.

The safe clicked with a soft snick and fabric spilled out. He stopped at the torn red and black. His thoughts jumbled and tripped before screeching to a halt.

"New York." Jason pulled the clothing out enough to see the ruined midsection stiff with dried blood. He glanced around, somehow expecting Tim to be slouched against a nearby building on his phone.

"New York?" Dick echoed in confusion, "You already said that."

Jason tilted the box forward and pulled out Tim's bandoliers. One was half melted.

"Fuck fuck fuck fuck." He quickly sorted through them. Tim's ruined earpiece fell out.

"Jason?"

"He's here. New York." Jason shut his eyes and clenched the earpiece until it cut painfully into his palm.
Chapter 6

Clint shifted and fiddled with the bandages on his fingers. Outside the large windows, the sun cast long shadows between tall skyscrapers. The smell of fresh vomit burned the inside of his nose.

Lines of pain around the teen's mouth deepened the longer Clint watched. The kid quietly reported his pain level and Clint's eyebrows raised at the bald faced lie. His blue eyes held the glassy sheen of someone in desperate need of stronger meds.

He should be barely coherent with the cocktail of drugs pumping through his system.

Instead, the patient clung to his glass of water like a lifeline, newly hollowed cheeks pale and limbs purposefully still. Above scratchy hospital pajamas his collarbone stood out in sharp relief.

The posture screamed 'don't look at me'.

Clint had been looking though. Over the past few days he'd somehow managed to burn the image of the bedridden teen into his memory.

'Bruce' the kid had mumbled in his sleep, more than once late at night. Clint could hear the name, even now, quiet, scratchy, and desperate. No 'Bruce' had filed a missing person report in the last two weeks. Jarvis had verified.

Whoever this 'Bruce' was, he either didn't know or didn't care about the missing teen.

Good. Clint had read the kid's file.

Natasha tilted her head to the side. "I also had to listen to Tony's ninja theory again. Magical ninjas with flame throwers."

He grimaced and pushed the dark thoughts out of his mind. "Sorry. I'll make it up yo you."

"Charts and flame throwers." Her flat words carried unspoken recrimination. Her gaze stayed firmly away from the kid.

"What do you want, Nat?" Clint would do a lot to stay on the former assassin's good side. He picked again at the dirty bandages and eyed her still frame. "What's going to put a smile on that face?"

An unhappy Natasha made for a miserable Clint. Her frown deepened. "I think you know what would make me happy."

Yeah, Clint didn't have to ask. They were two sides of the same coin. She'd dropped by more than once during his visits and pulled up a chair. Natasha wanted, just like him, a few uninterrupted minutes in a dark alley with 'Bruce'.

'One step at a time,' he signed with a knowing glance towards the teen, 'We don't even have the kid's name yet.'

'Obviously,' she signed back, 'but I want first dibs.'

'Naturally,' he agreed. Anything he wanted to do to 'Bruce', Natasha could do twice as hard without breaking a sweat.

She grinned at him with a mouthful of teeth and a glimmer of something dark and dangerous. He
grinned back.

"We did see in one of our initial scans that your spleen has been removed. Are there any other injuries, conditions, or allergies we need to know to treat you effectively?" Dr. Andrés' voice continued in an even pace and Clint refocused his attention.

The patient hesitated before shaking his head 'no'.

Liar. Liar, liar, pants on fire.

Natasha's mouth tightened as if she'd sucked on a lemon.

"Do you have a parent we can call?"

The kid froze like a deer in headlights.

From the corner of his eye something outside the window caught the sun. It flashed again, metallic and momentarily blinding, and his muscles coiled at the sight. Clint darted across the room before his mind caught up with his body's actions.

He reached across the width of the bed and cushioned the teen with his other arm as he tipped the frame onto its side with a loud clang. Glass shattered as bullets broke the windows and struck the metal frame. Clint pulled the teen in tight and shielded the smaller body with his own.

Clint closed his eyes, held his breath, and waited to see if his luck would hold out. An alarm sounded and moments later the room grew dark and quiet.

He counted to ten, cracked a lid, and did a quick check to make sure all his limbs remained intact.

The kid in his arms groaned and clenched at Clint's shirt like a lifeline. Any color left in his face retreated and his chalky gray skin appeared lifeless.

"Deep breaths, kid," Clint intoned. He slowed his own breathing and the teen matched it, wheezing and groaning as if he'd run a marathon.

Near them, Dr. Andrés body sprawled out on the tile. She'd been shot in the head and at least twice in the torso.

"Natasha?"

"Here." Emergency lights came on. She stood just beyond the doorway with the unharmed nurse tucked behind her and a gun in her hand.

Glass littered the floor and metal shutters blocked out the sun.

"Jarvis?" Natasha asked. She stepped back into the room and examined the damage with a critical eye.

"Mr. Stark and Mr. Rogers are on their way. All windows and exits have been closed. No other injuries reported thus far."

"What the actual fuck." Clint moved to stand, he'd managed to slam his knee and it ached against the cool tile. The grip on his shirt tightened. He halted and waited for the teen to regain his composure.

"Across the street?" Natasha questioned. She pulled out her phone and took a few pictures.
Clint thought of the flash he'd seen and nodded. "Yeah. Northwest, rooftop, no more than a mile. One shooter." He eyed the glass and the bullet hole ridden far wall. "But, definitely more than one type of gun."

The teen's face tilted forward and down until Clint could only see the dark hair on the top of his head. His body shook and he spoke between clenched teeth.

"I think I'm going to be sick again."

He threw up all over the front of Clint's shirt.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

I just want to thank everyone for all the feedback! I never expected so much and it means a lot to me! Thank you all!

"Where is he?" Steve asked from his position at the far end of the table. Blood and adrenaline pumped loudly in his ears. Near him, his shield sat propped up against the couch.

"Asleep." Clint perched on the kitchen island countertop and pulled at his shirt.

"What is that smell?" Steve couldn't help but ask. It burned his nose and made his eyes water. He eyed Clint's stained garment and breathed purposefully through his mouth.

The archer pursed his lips and pulled the offending garment up and over his head with a grimace. He threw it into the sink and turned the water on.

"It's nothing." Clint crossed his arms and looked away.

"He's nearby. The kid's been moved and sedated," Natasha added. She leaned over Clint to shut the water off and eyed the sink bowl with a curled lip. "You are not going to leave that there."

She met Clint's eyes and sipped at a large cup of tea. He signed something and Natasha raised an eyebrow.

"Sedated?" Bruce inquired from the other side of the table. His own cup of tea sat untouched in front of him. The circles under his eyes were dark and his hair looked mussed and unwashed. Steve hadn't seen him outside the lab in days.

"Pulled stitches," Clint spoke plainly. He rubbed offhandedly at a knee and ducked to whisper something in Natasha's ear. She cuffed him behind the head.

"But he's going to be okay?" Steve followed up. The kid's room had been demolished.

Natasha nodded with a forced nonchalance Steve could see right through. "Doctor Smint says he needs uninterrupted rest and zero stress."

"The Tower isn't exactly the safest place for either of those things." Bruce leaned back and gestured toward himself before motioning to the rest of them. "The events of an hour ago should make that clear. A lot of people want us dead."

Natasha moved closer and rested a hip against the table. The bits of glass still stuck in her hair glinted strangely under the bright light. "I don't think this was about us."

"This wasn't an attack on the Avengers," Steve agreed with her assessment; he'd walked through the destroyed room and one thing had been clear. "This was about murdering a kid barely old enough to drive while he was under the protection of some of the most powerful individuals in the world."

"That seems illogical." Bruce grasped his cup of tea and blew across the top. Natasha sat down next
"More like straight up suicidal." Clint leaned back onto his elbows with a wince and reached for a bag of chips.

Steve looked over his ragtag team; with Thor off-world, they were still short one. "Where's Tony? He should be here for this."

Clint scratched his nose and Natasha shrugged.

"Lab?" Bruce pushed his glasses up.

Steve sighed and stood. How Tony had been able to slip away silently when he couldn't even think quietly was a complete mystery. "I'll be right back."

In the hall, Pepper walked past in a sharp suit with a covered tray. He smelled soup.

"Miss Potts." Steve inclined his head and moved to allow her more space. His shoulders and large frame filled even the widest of hallways.

"Steve," she grinned and it reminded him strangely of Peggy, "if you're looking for Tony, he's in Lab Two."

"Thank you, Miss Potts."

"Pepper, Steve, please call me Pepper." She frowned and Steve fought a blush. "I know I've asked before."

"Yes, Pepper." The name sounded strangely personal coming from his mouth.

"We'll work on it." She passed by him with a soft laugh. "I have to go before this gets cold. Good luck with Tony."

"Thanks." Steve swallowed back the odd pressure in his throat. He could count on his fingers the number of people he felt comfortable addressing by their first names in this era.

Inside the large lab, a dark head of hair bobbed to loud abrasive music. Above, security feeds looped and played as Tony manipulated them.

"Tony?" The music ate Steve's voice. "Tony?"

The billionaire leaned back until his chair rested on two legs and started a drum solo on his knees. Steve waved a hand.

The security feed on the left looped again and Clint darted across the hospital room moments before the windows shattered. It had been a close call. To the right, Tony and Bruce's conversation stopped abruptly in Lab Four as steel shutters sank down and blocked all natural light.

On the bottom in a small screen, Steve watched himself race up the emergency stairs.

"Tony?"

The man made a flicking motion with his hands and the views switched to outside. Steve moved closer, gaze glued on the blurry image of a man clad in black as he quickly assembled a sniper rifle.

"Professional," he murmured to himself as the assassin switched weapons quickly and efficiently.
"Jesus!" Tony jumped and his chair abruptly landed back on four feet. "Warn a guy next time. Didn't even realize guys as huge as you could be sneaky."

Steve crossed his arms. "The meeting?"

"Meeting?" Tony turned back to the screens and blew up the video of the unknown man on the edge of the roof.

"To discuss the gunman?"

"Right..." Tony tilted his head. "Jarvis?" The music turned off.

"What building is this?" Steve's words echoed in the suddenly quiet space.

"Top floor? Banking and investing." He popped the 'b' loudly and brought up another video. "And the gunman just took a nose dive off the side."

Sure enough, the man didn't pause before doing several flips and jumping off the far end.

The video replayed. "Did the police recover a body?"

"Nope." He paused it. "Jarvis? Can we sharpen this?"

The still frame grew less blurry. The man wore form fitting black and a mask covered the lower half of his face. Tony stood and rubbed his hands together. "Natasha owes me a drink."

"What?" Steve asked in confusion.

"You know what this guy is?" Tony smiled. He looked like he needed uninterrupted sleep and something to eat other than the half cup of coffee on the desk. "He is a fucking ninja."

"A ninja?" Steve tilted his head.

Tony switched the feed. Burning buildings filled the screen and the view from inside Iron Man's helmet tumbled and jerked as Tony flew.

"There." Tony paused the video as a dark shape moved in the far corner. It remained blurred and indiscernible. "I saw a ninja when we were fighting that fire. A ninja with a flamethrower backpack."

Steve rested against the desk's edge. "Why would a ninja burn down blocks of New York City and then try to assassinate a teen?"

The billionaire looked over at the question. "Well-"

"Sir." Jarvis' voice cut in and a new screen opened.

A security feed showed a dark office transformed into a makeshift hospital room. Pepper stood near the door, arms raised and the tray of soup spilled across the floor.

A man with a gun, leather jacket, and a mask talked to Pepper. With his free arm he supported the injured teen against his side like a toddler.

"Is this live?" Steve asked, horrified.

Tony didn't answer. He tripped over his feet and rushed across the room and out the door. The Iron
Man gauntlets passed Steve in a blur.
Chapter 8

Tim stared at the ceiling above and counted down from twenty. They'd upped his meds and the room tilted and shifted like a ship at sea.

Down the hall, in a geek fantasy gone wrong, the Avengers discussed him like a puzzle piece or lost puppy.

Tim watched the ragtag team form with fascination from his dark city during the crisis in New York. They'd gone from disorganized and sloppy to a well oiled machine. And now the Avenger's laser focus rested on him. The entire situation made him lightheaded. He pushed himself weakly onto his elbows and strained his ears.

Tim heard muffled sounds through the wall, their voices already familiar, as they spoke in low tones.

Earlier, Clint Barton carried him out of the bullet riddled room while Natasha Romanov barked out orders to get another set up for him in the heart of the tower. Captain America, blue eyed and smelling like freedom and justice, had asked him how he was feeling.

Tim had actually thrown up ON Hawkeye. His stomach churned at the memory. If anyone in his family ever found out he'd never live it down.

"Yo." Jason's heavily shadowed frame leaned against the shut door.

"Ja-" Tim blinked heavy eyelids and fought to keep his heart steady.

"Hey," the older vigilante cut him off with a quiet hiss and gestured to his black domino and outfit, "none of that."

Right. No names when someone wore a mask. He knew that. Tim nodded and closed his eyes.

"Replacement." Jason moved closer in the several seconds Tim wasn't watching. He gestured toward the IV. "What are they pumping you full of?"

He nodded again.

"Not an answer," Jason grumbled under his breath. "Where is your file? Do you have a file?"

He eyed the makeshift room with disdain before seemingly dismissing a search.

"You smell like puke," he added off handedly while checking Tim's pulse. He pulled out a small flashlight and shined it in Tim's eyes.

Tim lets his arms sag. He tried to roll over.

"Nope." Jason held him still and checked the bandages on his stomach. He peeled up one of the edges. "Awesome. Lots of stitches."

Tim shrugged and the room spun. So many stitches. Tim felt like a doll whose stuffing had all come out.

"Lose any other organs? Anything the big man needs to knock you up the side of the head for?" He expertly removed the IV and glanced back at the closed door.
"Ha ha," Tim croaked. He didn't want to think about Bruce's reaction. He could live a perfectly ordinary life without his spleen.

"We gotta be quick." Jason leaned down as if to scoop him up and everything came to a crashing halt in Tim's mind.

"How?" Tim started, body tense as he pushed at Jason's chest until he could look him in the eye. His bed rested within the impenetrable walls of the Avenger's tower, the lion's den of New York City.

"How are you here?"

Jason groaned and ran a hand through his hair. The white streak flopped in his eyes and he pushed it back absently. "Not the question to be asking while we're still here, yeah?"

"Do you even know where you are?" Tim whispered urgently; his fingers gripped the front of Jason's shirt and twisted. "Do you even understand how bad of a decision this is? I know you are the king of shitty decisions, but this is a seriously bad idea."

The older man stilled and his mouth tightened in a firm line. "You're the fucking idiot. Do you understand what you've done? Do you?"

"I'm fine," he insisted stubbornly. Tim would have figured it out. He'd gotten out of worse with less.

"Fine?" Jason gave a mocking laugh. He gave Tim a little shake and the younger man's irritation ballooned. He didn't need a lecture. "Never mind your family as long as you're 'fine'."

Tim's fingers weakened and the shirt slipped through his fingers.

"Family? I'm an emancipated adult," he weakly argued.

Jason paused and curled his lip in disgust. "Really? You want to play that game?"

"No one could find you, Tim. No one."

Hot shame rolled down Tim's back and settled uncomfortably in his bones. His skin felt uncomfortably tight.

"I didn't mean-"

"You never do," Jason interrupted. "It doesn't matter. We need to get out of here."

Despite his gruff tone, Jason's movements were careful as he reached for Tim.

"I wouldn't do that."

A woman stood in the dark outline of the door, her hair a beacon in the otherwise shadowed space. Just an hour earlier she had offered Tim a packet of crackers with a sympathetic smile. He smelled soup.

Jason's fingers on Tim's arm tightened.

"Don't," Tim asked Jason, voice quiet. Despite her bravery, Miss Potts wasn't a super hero.

Jason relaxed and rolled his shoulders back. His face stretched into its signature 'fuck you' grin. The tension in the room grew impossibly thick.
"Hey gorgeous," his voice teased, "how about we have the kiddo sit this one out and we'll play cops and robbers?"

"Step away from him," she said with no trace of fear.

Jason cocked his hip and shook his head. "Naw, I don't think so."

She dropped the tray with a clang and made a move back toward the door behind her.

"Jarvis!" She yelled.

Jason stepped forward and caught her arm. She dug her heel into his instep and he made a noise and drew his gun.

"Ah, ah, ah," he chastised between clenched teeth. "Sorry, but there is no one listening right now. I wanted to make sure this remained a private conversation."

She put her hands up and he gestured her back near the open doorway. A piece of hair hung in her eyes and her perfectly pressed suit had a tear in the right shoulder. "Close it."

Miss Potts eyed Tim and shut the door. "Are you okay?"

Tim opened his mouth and forced himself into a sitting position. Everything from the neck down screamed in pain.

"Don't talk to him," Jason growled. Tim looked on as the situation spun out of control.

"Ja-"

"Replacement," Jason grit out, "shut up. And lay the fuck down."

Tim's jaw closed with a click and he locked his muscles in frustration. His vision grayed out momentarily.

"You aren't going to be able to escape with him," Miss Potts said calmly. Her eyes flicked back and forth between the two men.

Jason huffed out a weak laugh. "Yeah, no, nice try, Ginger Rogers, but we're not hanging out to meet your friends. I've heard they're assholes."

Awesome. Tim supposed Jason had heard Bruce complain about 'that showboat Tony Stark'.

The vigilante reached down with one arm, pushed the blanket off, and lifted Tim like a toddler. The teen clung to Jason's leather jacket and couldn't help but groan at the sudden wave of vertigo. His side burned at the movement and he leaned against the man's shoulder like a wet noodle.

"You with me?" Jason asked after adjusting his weight.

Tim breathed in the scent of gun oil and leather; his legs dangled. He felt too awful to be embarrassed. "Yeah."

"Okay." Jason's attention shifted back to Miss Potts. "Move to the other side of the room. Put your hands behind your back."

"He needs supervised medical attention," she argued. "If you try to escape with him he'll be re-injured."
Tim watched her from beneath heavy lids. Under his hand, Jason's chest rose and fell with a heavy sigh.


She took a step and the door behind her buckled. Tony Stark entered with half of the Iron Man armor on. The palm of his hand glowed red even as shin guards attached themselves to his legs. Beyond him, Tim caught sight of Steve Rogers.

Jason shifted Tim until he blocked most of the older man's torso. The muzzle of Jason's gun pressed cool against his temple.

"Woah," Stark pulled his hand up, "you really want to go the hostage route? In my tower? Surrounded by the Avengers? After threatening my Pepper?"

Jason sneered and the grip on Tim's hip grew painful. "Yeah, I think I do."

Tim shut his eyes and cursed.
Chapter 9

Jason wanted to shake the injured teen in his arms. How Tim consistently managed to get himself involved in the craziest bullshit, Jason would never know. The entire vigilante population of Gotham knew Batman's stance on the New York team of crime fighters.

Do not engage; do not expose yourself; do not put yourself on their radar. Do not, under any circumstance, give them any reason to investigate.

Tim had somehow managed to break every one of the old man's rules. Stupid fucking Tim.

Across the room, hard eyes searched for weak spots. Jason breathed evenly and kept his heart beat slow and steady. Adrenaline coated the back of his throat.

It never ceased to amaze him how fast his plans went from solid to total shitstorm.

Against his shoulder, Tim barely kept his head level. Trouble making ass.

"Out," Jason said in a no nonsense tone; his arm ached from the teen's weight.

"How about you let the kid go?" A blond man wearing a shirt two sizes too small stood just behind Stark. His hard but somehow still earnest expression made Jason's blood boil.

Jason laughed and dug the muzzle of the gun into Tim's head. The teen groaned, flexed his fingers, but didn't fight.

"Terrible idea," Tim barely breathed out, "such a terrible idea."

Jason ignored him. "How about you three step back or I paint the wall red?"

"Just terrible," Tim muttered again. A strong shiver accompanied his voice. Jason eyed the blanket on the bed.

Everyone shuffled back and Ken doll's jaw clenched. Without looking, the blond reached out, grasped Ginger Rogers' elbow, and tucked her out of sight as if Jason were a rabid dog.

"Don't worry sweetheart," Jason called after her, "you're thinking of the wrong guy. Red heads aren't really my type."

Tim huffed a quiet laugh against his shoulder and said something unintelligible against Jason's neck.

"Don't talk to her." Tony Stark's voice lost its teasing edge.

Wonderful. Jason didn't have time for macho bullshit posturing. These asshats couldn't comprehend the mess coming their way if Jason didn't check in with Batman's missing bird accounted for.

He eyed the doorway and wished for an antacid.

"Gladly, high maintenance isn't my type either." He glanced at the glowing circle visible beneath the billionaire's t-shirt. "Though, I have a feeling she's the one dealing with a high maintenance partner."

Iron Man's eyebrow twitched and Tim tugged hard enough on Jason's coat it momentarily cut off air.

"What are your demands?" The blond asked.
"What are you implying?" Tony Stark followed up, his tone once more strangely conversational. The Ken doll gave the billionaire a look Jason easily deciphered. Good to know he wasn't the only one dealing with idiots. Tony Stark ignored it. "Are you trying to insult me? Obviously, I'm a fabulous catch. You'd have to be dead to miss that fact."

Jason tasted the teetering edge of sanity. He bared his teeth in a growl. "How's this? Move the fuck back or I will make sure a bonding moment in your relationship will be watching a kid get murdered."

"Woah," Tony Stark snarked back, "and I'm high maintenance?"

"Tony," the other man chided.

"Yeah, Tony," Jason mocked, "listen to the action figure behind you and take a few fucking steps back."

The blonde's gaze grew hard and Jason hated his own loud mouth. If Dick were here he'd have the entire Avengers team eating out of his hand. Too bad for everyone, the waste of space 'son' was closest.

Both men stepped into the hall and Tim sagged against his shoulder like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

"Think this through," the injured teen pleaded. He breathed messily through his mouth and his glassy eyes tracked movements around him slowly.

"Just like you did?"

Tim shivered again and said nothing.

"To the right," he called out. The men shifted until the door and immediate hall opened.

Jason followed them, gun steady as he kept tabs on their body language. The blond's hands made two solid fists. Tony Stark officially wore enough metal suit to be considered more super hero than rich asshole.

He moved in the opposite direction down the cleared hall and they kept pace with him.

"There is no place to go," the blond spoke plainly, his gaze fixed on Tim before it shifted and hardened. "So, let him go."

Jason didn't bother to respond.

"Replacement." He jostled the younger man as he neared the elevator. "Down."

Tim sighed and reached one of his hands toward the closed elevator door buttons. He suddenly stiffened and a rush of air passed as the teen reached up before groaning loudly and collapsing back against him.

Jason glanced down the adjacent hall where an archer stood with a drawn bow and a shocked look on his face.

His stomach sunk and he shook Tim until the teen pulled his arm in and Jason could see the damage.

"Did you seriously catch an arrow with the palm of your hand?"
Like a gag gift gone wrong, the arrow disappeared neatly into the center of Tim's palm before reappearing out the back of his hand. Blood welled up and dripped messily.

Tim hissed and held it up as if equally surprised. "It would have hit you. I'm not quick enough right now to catch it."

"Mother fucker!" Jason exclaimed and behind him the doors opened with a soft sound. He stepped through them and pointed the gun out. A woman came up behind the archer and reached across her body for the gun undoubtedly tucked in her coat.

The elevator doors thankfully closed. The numbers descended slowly and Tim hesitantly reached for the arrow.

"Ugh," Jason eyed the wound, "don't touch it."

He tucked the gun into his shoulder holster and leaned down. Tim swayed and his bare toes curled up against the floor. Once both his hands were free, Jason reached forward and snapped the front and back of the arrow off before Tim could work himself up.

"Shhhiiiiittttt." The injured teen blinked wet eyes before leaning forward and dry heaving. Jason caught Tim beneath his arm pits and tuned out the noise. He could feel a sympathy knot in his own throat.

"C'mon," Jason ripped off a piece of Tim's shirt to wrap around the injury, then pulled his coat off and slung it over narrow shoulders. No time to recheck the abdomen. He hefted the teen back up, retrieved his gun, and ignored protesting back muscles. "We're almost there."

The doors opened to a surprisingly deserted lobby. Outside the tall glass windows, the usually busy New York street was empty.

"Gun." Tim motioned with his uninjured hand. "Give me one."

Jason pressed the muzzle of his own weapon to Tim's head again. "Yeah, let's not make this more confusing for those dumb fucks. You, hostage, in shock. Me, asshole renegade gunman."

Tim made a disgruntled noise.

An arrow shot past and buried itself in the ground next to him.

"You sure are fast," he quipped at the archer wedged high between the ceiling and exposed metal beams. The man notched another arrow and aimed. "Oh, so do you give a shit about hitting the hostage or not? Cause, past experience tells me you're no Robin Hood."

The archer didn't respond but the next shot landed inches from Jason's right foot. At the far end of the atrium the redhead he'd caught a glimpse of held a gun and the blond carried an iconic shield.

Jason's stomach twisted. Tim seriously made the worst decisions.
Hey everyone! I'm sorry about the extended absence. Things in RL have finally slowed down and I will be back to posting a chapter every other week. Thank you to everyone who has reviewed, encouraged, or lurked. A few of you reviewers are what got me back on the wagon and I am forever grateful. :)

The huge glass window splintered, shattered, and fell. Sharp shards rained down in a shower and Dick rolled to avoid the worst of it.

He darted around a stop sign and did a back spring onto a nearby parked car. Two assassins waited on the other side of the vehicle, and he cracked the head of the closest one against the door.

Beyond the newly destroyed glass window, Jason supported Tim against his shoulder, assessed the situation, and fired his gun into the blanket of new opponents.

"You are so fucking late," Jason yelled, voice prissy.

Avengers stood in the atrium with drawn weapons and exchanged confused glances. At least two of them had weapons actively trained on Red Hood. Dick wouldn't pretend the view surprised him.

Jason had that affect on most people. He could be pricklier than a cactus and twice as dramatic as a Real Housewife.

Dick resisted the urge to wave and instead slid under a poorly placed punch.

"I know!" He roundhouse kicked the other assassin and used an Eskrima stick to disable a third. Dick slipped and skidded through the unexpected battlefield. "I thought you were going to be stealthy? How is every Avenger here and pissed at you?"

"This is not my fault!" Jason reloaded his gun one handed and made a disgusted noise. "And what the fuck? Did you call the entire League of Assassins on your flight here?"

"Hey!" Nightwing ignored the recrimination and called out past Jason. Captain America's head swiveled in all its golden glory and Dick could swear he heard a very quiet bugle start the national anthem. "I read you didn't learn to drive until you were over seas fighting the war. Is that true?

The Avenger opened his mouth to respond. His all American features drew together in confusion. "Wha- look out!"

Dick ducked under a newly toppled light pole and twisted his shoulders to throw a batarang. The opponent behind him crumpled.

"Thanks!" He saluted the national treasure, giddy with glee. Bruce's rule about the Avengers was downright cruel.

Captain America tilted his head and threw his shield into the wall of darkly clad opponents.
"Steve-" a woman he recognized from photos started, her own gun drawn.

"One threat at a time, Nat." He bent legs the size of tree trunks and kicked a nearby assassin clear across the room. "Just make sure they don't leave."

Her mouth tightened and she nodded briskly before saying something into an earpiece.

Dick moved closer to Jason and Tim.

"How is he?" The teen looked a mess and cradled a tightly wrapped hand.

"Initial reports pulled by Oracle were not entirely accurate." Jason's voice huffed out. He shifted the teen's weight and Tim watched them both with unfocused eyes. "He was on the wrong floor. His injuries worse. Initial exit pathways closed down. My earpiece stopped working almost immediately. You were at least fifteen minutes late. Fuck you all; how do you think it went?!"

Dick winced. "Oracle, did you catch that?"

"Yes," she answered dryly, "the schematics I found must not have been accurate. Let me see what I can do about communication."

Nightwing paused to dispatch a League member with a well placed throat jab. On the other side of the now ruined atrium, Black Widow moved lightening fast. Above her, Hawkeye picked off enemies with ease.

The entire situation made Dick's head spin and hands sweat. He was fighting with the Avengers. New York's finest. Batman was probably having kittens in the cave.

"And where the fuck did the League come from?" Jason growled.

"They were at my first checkpoint." Dick grimaced and tried not to think about how wrong things could have gone. He darted a hand out to catch an assassin in the jaw before she could move into Hawkeye's blind spot. "I didn't exactly have time to ask."

"So you brought them with? Like a fucking field trip?"

Dick huffed out a laugh and paused to watch Steve Rogers punch two guys in the face with one fist. The tight shirt he wore strained and for a moment Dick thought it might split right up the back. Unbelievable.

"Hey!" Red Hood hissed out. "Pay the fuck attention. What are you, seven?"

The oldest Robin tugged his eyes away from the surreal sight. "This is so cool."

"Nightwing!"

"I thought I could shake 'em, alright? And I didn't want to leave you without back up."

"Well-"

Black Widow waded between them and shot at an assassin hanging on one of the upper beams.

"What. Is. This." Her smoky voice cut between them easily and her no nonsense authority conjured up images of Barbara and Kori in Dick's head. She smelled like gun oil and smoke and her red hair glimmered beneath the lights.
"Uhhhhhhhh..." Dick was in love.

Jason frowned. "We don't have time for this."

Outside on the street, Dick heard what had to be Iron Man. Classic music blared. A car caught fire and from where he stood Dick felt the heat.

"Found them," Tim mumbled from Jason's shoulder, "or they found me. It's here and I couldn't just..."

Jason leaned down and listened as Tim spoke too quietly for Dick to hear. Their heads made a sea of dark hair and if he didn't know better, Dick would have sworn they were blood related.

Red Hood raised his eyes after several moments and met Nightwing's questioning face. His grim gaze made Dick's stomach roll. Now what?

Black Widow watched the exchange with lowered brows.

"We need to talk," she interrupted and drew both men's attention. Dick had stumbled into the Twilight Zone.

Jason huffed in irritation and gestured to Tim. "He can't be here."

Tim looked like he had slid all the way from injured and coherent to barely there shock. His eyes skipped between them but otherwise held little comprehension. The young vigilante would and could fight if prompted until he literally collapsed, Dick had seen it.

Now was not the time for it.

"I didn't bring him here." Her sarcastic tone dripped with disapproval. "Nor did I bring this army of..." She seemed to struggle for a word, "ninjas."

"Assassins, actually." Dick rubbed at the back of his head.

"Assassins?" She repeated, disbelieving.

Red Hood scowled and the arm supporting Red Robin tightened. Dick looked down briefly in embarrassment. The League could be shifty when it wanted and he hadn't been nearly prepared enough.

Jason glanced behind them and his look turned sour. He leaned in close to Black Widow and Dick got ready to intervene if one of them made an aggressive move.

"Take him." Jason handed Red Robin over to the Avenger as if the teen were a sack of flour. Black Widow shifted Tim but easily held his weight even with a smaller frame. She eyed Red Hood as if he had two heads. "I need both hands and he weighs a fuck ton."

She said nothing but her eyebrows rose in astonishment.

Nightwing interjected. "Perhaps everyone was a bit too... hasty? Can we call a temporary truce until the... er... ninja assassin situation has been taken care of?"

Jason rolled his shoulder and took out another gun. Without looking back, he waded into the fray. The assassin closest to him got a well placed kick to the knee cap and a point blank shot to the shoulder. Dick winced.
"Let's do this, Nightwing. Stop staring at her tits and get a move on. I want Replacement out of here," Jason called back.

He met Black Widow's gaze and blushed. "Errrrr.... Do you have a place we could-"

"Today," Red Hood interrupted. He stepped behind two men firing on Captain America and put the nearest one into the ground with a fist to the head.

She watched him from beneath the fall of heavy dark lashes. "Your brother sure has a mouth on him."

"Ugh, I know, " he responded automatically.

Black Widow chuckled and Dick opened and shut his mouth like a fish.

"Ignore that," he squeaked out.

"Did you just.....?" Oracle's computerized voice asked in horror.

If Bruce wasn't having kittens before, he certainly was now.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Thanks everyone for the warm words! It's so good to be back!

Natasha smoothed her hair into a ponytail and watched Dr. Smint reinsert the teen’s IV. The room looked nearly identical to the first makeshift one. Tony’s people had somehow transformed a spare office into a state of the art hospital in minutes.

"How are his stitches?" Bruce entered the newly minted hospital room and glanced over the prone teen with a critical eye and frown. The deep lines of pain around the kid’s mouth slowly smoothed out with the reintroduction of painkillers.

She remembered the kid clinging to his kidnapper like a koala, unconsciously clutching at the man even in the middle of a battle. It spoke of a familiarity she knew well. Even when Natasha couldn't think straight she knew who she could rely on to stay safe.

And he trusted those two men with his life.

Nightwing leaned against the far wall with relaxed muscles and a friendly look on his face; the total antithesis of the man in the leather jacket. The blue splash of color on his chest stood out starkly against an ocean of black.

Bruce’s gaze caught and stumbled over the intruding figure and he froze before glancing at Natasha. She raised her eyebrows and gave a tight smile. "Oh."

"His stitches are fine," she said shortly as the doctor carefully un-wrapped neatly tied bandages. Natasha’s fingers dug painfully into her arms at the sight of the bleeding wound in the center of his palm.

The doctor winced and Bruce blanched at the sight.

"What-"

She cut her friend off with a look and studied the fourth person in the room. He watched them all with unabashed curiosity and held the teen's medical chart. He'd flipped through it twice since they'd arrived.

Nightwing looked like he could be a frat boy dressing up for Halloween, but she knew better.

He paused, cocked his head, and grunted as if listening to someone. From where she stood, Natasha couldn't see the earpiece he wore. He made another noise, something between assent and confusion, before shaking his head and studying the chart once more.

Her fist flexed and she itched to punch someone, anyone.

"Hey," Bruce interrupted quietly. He moved close enough for her to see the wrinkles in his shirt and the beginning of stubble on his chin. Natasha split her attention between the Avenger and Nightwing. "This is good. Right? He’s going to be fine. It's good."
The former assassin glanced over the prone teen and swallowed. Trust Bruce to find the silver lining. She purposefully uncurled her fingers.

The masked man meandered closer to the bed and she vaguely wondered how he managed to slip into such a form fitting suit. It appeared tighter than even her own.

"Jesus, kid." Nightwing dumped the clipboard on a chair and sat down on the edge of the bed. Besides dark hair and pale skin, all three of their guests bore the same strangely flat accent.

He reached out and brushed a strand of hair off the kid’s face; his other hand discreetly took the teen’s pulse. The man’s back bowed and he squeezed the patient’s wrist. Whether the comfort was for him or the unconscious teen, she was unsure.

"Family?" Bruce asked with a clear voice. He moved close to the bed and stuck his hands into his rumpled jean pockets. Of course he picked up on it immediately; Bruce understood people.

"It's better if I say nothing." The man chuckled self depreciatingly. "I'm already going to be in enough trouble as it is."

Bruce scratched at his chin and picked up the recently discarded chart; he glanced at it before observing the stranger with knowing eyes. "And why is that?"

Nightwing smiled painfully. "Oh, you know, the usual."

The usual? She grinned disarmingly back at him. “Don’t worry about it. I have that effect on a lot of people. We don’t have to tell Bruce.”

She stepped closer.

"Tell me what?" Bruce inquired.

"No, not you.” Natasha cocked a hip. "I'm talking about a different Bruce, I'm sure you must know him?"

"Er..." Nightwing’s body language remained suspiciously relaxed and he shook his head with a smile. She would bet her life his eyes widened comically behind his mask. "Nope, no Bruces. I do know a couple of Brendas? And a Bert? Does that help?"

Liar.

"Right," Natasha responded dryly.

"Excuse me," Doctor Smint interrupted from the corner. He frowned at them disapprovingly. "I'm going to need some space to work on his hand."

“Of course,” Bruce readily agreed. “I’ll send in the nurse.”

“Right,” Nightwing added with a sigh. “Can I stay?”

Over her dead body. She would rather do Clint’s laundry for a year then let him stay with the teen unsupervised.

“How about we go grab a quick coffee,” Bruce interjected carefully. “This room is going to be cramped with nurses and equipment. I’m going to guess you did a fair bit of traveling and worrying in the last twenty four hours?”
“You could say that.” He leaned in, tucked the blanket more firmly around the kid, and clicked on the bedside light. “I won’t be far, Red. You just concentrate on feeling better.”


“C’mon Nat,” Bruce cajoled when she made no move to follow them out. “Smint needs space and we should check in with Tony to see what’s happening outside.”

Dr. Smint huffed in annoyance at their slow departure.

No part of her wanted to leave the teen alone; not with two unknowns in the building and a mess outside. She pulled out her phone and texted Tony for additional security.

“Sounds like the assassins have withdrawn for now.” Nightwing stated as the door shut behind them. He eyed the solid wood with a frown. “Captain America is keeping Red Hood company, which I’m sorry if he says something awkward? He can be ...” He didn’t finish the sentence. “And your crew...” He made a hand motion, “I guess they’re doing whatever it is they do.”

“Thanks,” Bruce responded before the words sunk in. “Assassins?”

“But coffee sounds great.” He reached up to clap Bruce on the shoulder and ignored the question. “We won’t be too far?”

“Er...” Bruce stumbled at the wheedling tone. “Nat?”

“Take him for coffee on floor five.” No way could he meander around the Avengers’ main level. Let him lounge in the building’s cafeteria for an hour while her team reassembled. “Then the two of you can come back up and wait in Maxine’s office for Smint to finish. I'll let him know. We'll have Steve bring your friend up.”

“Awesome.” Nightwing raised his hand to give her a high five. She stepped back and he changed it to a thumb’s up instead.

“I’ve got to check on a few things.” She needed to touch base with everyone. In the last hour everything had changed, again.

“Alright.” Bruce nodded his head at the ‘hand off’. Natasha trusted him to keep an eye on their friendly guest. Nightwing bounced next to him after giving the shut door one more look.

“You’re Hulk, right?” She heard him ask as they walked away. “How exactly do you keep your pants on after you’ve transformed?”

Right. Not her problem.

She pulled out her phone.

“Yo.” Clint answered in a clipped tone.

“Meet me upstairs?”

“Righto.”
Chapter 12

Clint sagged in an open doorway, bow tucked out of sight, and waited for Natasha. He stretched out a leg and grimaced at the tightness. His body couldn't go from zero to sixty easily anymore and swinging through the rafters without stretching first had been a poor decision.

Natasha emerged from an adjacent hall and he let the light pressure of her hand guide him back through the open doorway. The door shut behind them with a soft click.

Clint slouched against the wall.

“What’s going on?” He asked when she said nothing. A sliver of light shone in from the hall and his eyes adjusted quickly to the dark meeting room. She watched him unblinkingly and the lines around her mouth tightened.

Natasha waited. The hair on the back of his neck rose and he abruptly hated how well she knew him.

‘I’m fine,’ he signed. ‘It’s fine. Now isn’t really the time.’

Natasha tilted her head.

‘Fine,’ Clint added after a moment in frustration, his shadowed fingers almost indistinguishable in the dark. ‘I didn’t mean –’ He stopped. ‘I could have –’ He froze again. ‘I should have been more careful.’

‘The doctor is seeing him now.’ The former assassin responded to his rambling calmly. Her moving hands created long shadows on the wall. ‘It doesn’t sound like any permanent damage was done.’

Clint swallowed and pulled at the hair on his head. What a massive fuck up. “I was just…”

“I know.” Natasha stepped into his space and tugged Hawkeye’s hand away. She hauled his head down until he could breathe in the scent of her shampoo. Her fingers gripped the back of his neck tightly and his muscles relaxed. He wrapped his arms around her in a loose hug.

“It isn’t your fault.” She shook him briefly and spoke vehemently. He nodded but said nothing. “It is not your fault,” Natasha reiterated fiercely, as if she could make him believe.

“I got it the first time.” His skin seemed abruptly too small. Clint stepped back and couldn’t meet her eyes.

“He’s not helpless,” Natasha added. “No way would a normal teen even attempt something so foolish.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” He crossed his arms briefly before letting them hang at his sides. His entire body seemed suddenly awkward and out of place.

“Alright, case closed.” She didn’t bother to lie convincingly.

Natasha regularly bent world leaders to her will. He knew she wouldn’t hesitate to use every dirty underhanded tactic she knew to get what she wanted. Wonderful.

“Nat –”

“No,” she steamrolled over him, “you’re right. We have other pressing things to discuss.”
She turned on her heel and walked back into the hall. The red head took a hard right and Clint trailed behind her.

“Nat -”

“Everything about this is all wrong,” Natasha stated. Her ponytail bounced as she took the stairs two at a time.

“I mean it, Nat.” He cajoled, heart abruptly in his throat. She stopped in the stairwell and he grimaced. “Nat – ”

“It’s okay Clint.” She kept her hand on the railing and her attention focused forward. “I won’t ambush you, I promise. We can talk about it when you’re ready.”

Natasha stood two steps above him. The line of her back stood strong and straight beneath the fluorescent lights.

“Really?” Clint asked in disbelief. Natasha hated being told to wait.

“Nope,” she answered and exited the stairwell. Clint trailed after her, feeling both fond and nauseous.

Lab equipment, machinery, test tubes, long tables, and papers filled the immense space. On the nearest table, a half assembled Iron Man shoulder piece rested next to a cup of coffee. At least a dozen more cups littered the space.

“Tony?” Natasha called.

The billionaire’s head poked out from under a table. He held a handful of wires in one hand and coffee in the other. “Natasha! Clint! Did you see the ninjas???”

“How could you miss them?” Clint responded. A guandao still sat wedged behind the receptionist's desk.

“Well,” Tony lounged in a nearby chair and waved the wires he held as he spoke, “I said that the first time and Natasha –”

“Tony.” She raised her eyebrows.

He looked chagrined momentarily before taking a long swallow of coffee and continuing. “I know right? Ninjas! Just so you’re aware, I prefer single-malt scotch.”

Clint looked between the two of them in confusion. “What?”

“I know you’re Russian and you’ve got all that going on… but I’m going to trust you won’t buy me some garbage and feign ignorance.” He gestured with his coffee cup. “Only the good stuff.”

“Fine,” she conceded dryly. Clint knew without a doubt she’d find a way around his request. “Though, technically, they’re assassins.”

“I know a ninja when I see one.” He narrowed his eyes in suspicion. “They had masks. I saw at least five katanas and a dozen other ninja-like weapons. Scotch.”

“Jarvis?” Natasha ignored the words.

Clint walked over to a nearby couch covered in papers and collapsed. The reports crunched under
him and he shifted his weight enough to slide most of them onto the floor.

“Yes, Miss Romanoff?”

“Can you search the SHIELD files for ‘Nightwing’? Cross reference with any pockets of unusually high vigilante or mercenary activities. Focus on the United States, please.”

“One moment.”

“Nightwing?” Clint asked, curiosity piqued. He opened one eye.

“Our man in blue,” she replied with a grin. He smiled faintly back.

Tony rolled his chair back. “You know, Jarvis and I were working before you two got here.”

“Anything useful?” Clint asked. He grabbed at a nearby mug balanced on the arm of the couch. It was half full of coffee.

Grimacing, he looked around for a coffee pot. When none appeared, the archer braced himself and took a sip, desperate for the caffeine hit. Ice cold. He grimaced and finished the cup.

“Wellllllll…” The billionaire swiveled and opened a large screen. Lines of undecipherable code filled it. “These guys got a techie who knows what they’re doing; they managed to get around security multiple times. Jarvis keeps shutting them out, but they keep making new backdoors to slip through.”

“What are they searching for?” Natasha asked. She waded up a piece of paper and threw it at Clint. It bounced off his nose and he made a noise of irritation before pushing up and walking over in stocking feet.

“Patient info. Floor schematics. Piggybacking off our towers for communication.” Tony shrugged. “Ninety percent of it isn’t enough to trip any of our usual warning sensors. If we hadn’t been looking, it may have gone unnoticed indefinitely.”

“They wanted just enough info to get in, get what they wanted, and get out.” Clint muttered to himself.

“Yeah?” Tony probed. His eyes flicked between the two of them. “But what exactly are they sneaking around for?”

Clint tilted his head. “Pull up the security video from the hospital room.”

Iron Man’s fingers flew across the screen and a grainy black and white video popped open.

Clint leaned forward. “Can you make it bigger?” Tony enlarged and sharpened it. Next, he pulled up security feed from inside the elevator. The archer studied the two figures silently interact. “Audio?”

“No, disabled.”

“Nightwing and this guy,” Natasha motioned to the kidnapper, “are brothers. I know that much. In fact, I would bet they’re all related. Nightwing all but confirmed it.”

“Hmmm.” He studied the hospital room. “Can we play it from the beginning again?” Clint switched his hearing aids off and propped his hands on the table.

In the quiet, the video played two more times and Clint watched their mouths with focus. When he’d
gotten all he could, he studied the other video. He flipped the volume back on.

“Nat’s right.” Clint gestured to the teen. He re-watched the adult scold the kid for disappearing. The teen’s stubborn jaw trembled in embarrassment and shame. “I think our patient got in over his head and these two are the cleanup crew. Sounds like the kid’s been missing and everyone’s been scrambling.”

He could practically hear Natasha’s mind slotting pieces together. On the far video, the masked man held the kid while he puked. Without the kidnapper’s harsh grating voice or bravado it seemed obvious.

The man wanted to protect, not harm.

“Brothers?” Tony asked. He scratched his goatee and pulled a coffee pot out of a drawer. Huh. “So, like, they’re in the ‘family’ business?” He made air quotes, gestured to the teenager with the pot, and refilled his cup. Without waiting, he poured another and handed it to Clint. Thank god. “All of them? This one isn’t even old enough to vote.”

“He asked for a gun.” Clint cringed at the thought of having to fight a child. “And he’s emancipated. At least, he said he was.”

“Miss Romanoff?” Jarvis’ voice broke in. Dozens of new windows opened and Clint surveyed the wall of information. A file with SHIELD letterhead and mostly blacked out text caught his eye first.

He reached out, scrolled, and read a few indecipherable words about a clash in Hong Kong between SHIELD and another organized unknown group.

“Gotham?” Tony cut in after a few minutes. Clint studied a blurry image of a figure jumping between roofs, then examined several more unfocused photos. “That cesspool?”

Iron Man double tapped the screen and his article tripled in size.

‘Batman Claims Another Victim: Who is to blame for the widespread violence?’ Another indistinct image of a night sky and a dark shape accompanied the article.

“Gotham,” Natasha echoed with comprehension.

“What’s a Batman?” Clint asked out loud.

"Fucking, Gotham." Tony bent his head enough to knock it against the edge of his desk.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

I can't believe this story has hit 1000 kudos! It's a dream come true! Thank you all so much!

Steve rotated his shoulder and let his fingers find the well-worn grooves of his shield’s straps. The comforting weight pulled at his arm and his legs automatically adjusted for the uneven burden.

After everything, the piece of metal was one of the few things left unchanged. It even smelled the same. If he closed his eyes, he could almost imagine being shoulder to shoulder in a trench with Dum Dum or playing poker at camp with Jones.

Under his feet, glass pieces crunched as he shifted. Stray leaves blew in from the new hole in the wall and in the vicinity a car alarm sounded. Tony had contacted the authorities, but there would need to be a road closure until the mess could be cleared. Too much debris. From where he stood, Steve could see superficial damage to the street and nearby buildings.

Where the front desk once sat, the trespasser smoked a cigarette. In his other hand he fiddled with a cellphone and shook his head at whatever he saw. Concrete dust clung to his dark pants and a bruise bloomed high across his cheek. Human?

Steve faced all sorts of adversaries as Captain America. Aliens, Nazis, and everything in between. But a league of assassins? He would have to add it to the list. Bucky would have found…. would find… it fascinating.

The guy’s attention flickered to him before he turned back to his phone with a huff somewhere between disbelief and frustration. He took a long drag and held it in for several heartbeats.

“What?” Steve asked, unable to help himself.

“Nothing.” He smiled tightly and eyed Steve with a distinct look of apathy.

The Avenger pursed his lips and ignored Steve. He didn’t have to explain himself to this guy. People like the intruder were all violence and swagger; Steve had met dozens of individuals like him over the years.

The man kicked at a piece of steel and it skidded across the floor with a screech. Steve’s grip on his shield tightened.

“Cool it.” He didn’t bother to look at Steve. “I’m not interested in fighting the embodiment of American pride.”

“You seemed pretty interested two hours ago.” His jaw flexed. What a bully.

“Ha,” the would be kidnapper responded flatly. “I didn’t realize you were so fucking sassy. Would have been a good fact for my seventh grade report.” The dark haired man scratched a scab on his hand. “Things change.”
As if Steve needed the reminder. He moved his shield to his back and leaned against one of the untouched support pillars.

The stranger fiddled with his earpiece and flicked the butt of his cigarette. It landed in one of the few unharmed large potted plants.

“Got somewhere better to be?” Steve couldn’t help but ask. Let him try to run.

“Sorry, Sunshine,” the guest answered with a mean grin. “You’re stuck with me.”

Goody.

"How long you been awake?" The man asked abruptly. He stared out into the street and lit another cigarette. The familiar smell reminded Steve of the market on Saturdays and packed dance halls.

"Long enough." He responded shortly.

"Must be weird. All your friends with one foot in the grave or long dead. Fashion. Politics. Food. War. Everything’s different."

Steve glanced down at his steel toed boots before looking at the sleek futuristic room they stood in. Even trashed, it looked like something out of a sci-fi movie.

"And you, of course." The man continued with a knowing look. "No way you could come through something so jacked up unscathed."

Captain America thought of his nearly empty apartment in the tower and the meticulously detailed book of lists he carried everywhere. He crossed his arms and said nothing.

"I can’t imagine decades just gone." The stranger gave a rueful laugh. "And I thought I was fucked."

Steve opened his mouth to respond, not sure just what would come out, when a pop song blared. He jumped at the upbeat notes and cheerful female voice. Natasha and Sam kept introducing him to all sorts of music, but the melody was unfamiliar. The guy growled something obscene under his breath and pulled his phone to his ear.

Huh.

“What?” He hissed into the speaker and froze. His face tensed and went from cocky and irritated to cold. “Why are you calling me?”

The man listened for only a moment before hanging up. The phone rang again. He sent it voicemail. It rang again.

“Don’t call me. Call Nightwing.” The growled out words were dangerously quiet and Steve felt his breath slow and attention focus. His fingers itched with the urge to arm himself. “I’m not dealing with your bullshit.”

The person on the other end said something and the masked man listened with barely restrained emotion. Steve eavesdropped with fascination. He could audibly hear the man’s teeth grind as he clenched his jaw.

“I’m not – ” He stopped. Took a deep breath. “You can’t –”

He kicked at another piece of rubbish and watched it hit the far wall with a resounding thump.
“Would you just listen? I already know that, Red Robin told me! If you had been on top of your shit this wouldn’t even be a thing. And how you even let him –”

Steve noted the new name and the sudden protective edge to his voice.

“Hey,” Tony’s voice sounded in his ear.

“Yeah?” He responded quietly without taking his eyes off their guest. The man made a rude hand gesture as if the person he spoke with stood in front of him.

“How we doing down there?” Tony asked. He popped a piece of gum.

“Fine?”

“Fine? That’s all? What about the Mad Max style villain we’ve got? He’s more emotionally stunted than you. Think he has any weird piercings? I swear, Natasha is going to –”

“He’s on the phone.”

Tony made a humming noise and the connection went quiet for a moment.

“Jarvis!”

Steve winced at the sudden shout.

“Looking into it, sir.” Jarvis’ steady modulated words answered.

“I got another name to add to the list,” Steve added. “Red Robin. Jarvis?”

“Of course, Captain Rogers.”

“Thank you, Jarvis.”

“We were able to find some info you’ll want to see,” Tony continued. “Bruce is babysitting Nightwing and the kid is getting his hand looked at. Jarvis found all sorts of good stuff.”

The sound of glass clinking came through the phone.

“Are you drinking?”

“Just some Irish coffee. Minus the coffee. Started a bit early; I deserved it. Awful shit. Clint’s having one too.”

“And chewing gum?” The idea horrified Steve.

“Yeah? I mean, I’m good at multitasking.” Tony popped his gum again and Captain America winced.

“Tony, do you –”

“Don’t you dare,” the man hissed into his phone. “Unless you want to fuck everything up even more. Fuck you and fuck this mess.” He dropped his phone and crushed it under his heel. A moment later his cigarette joined it.

Steve froze, mouth half open and thoughts abruptly halted.

Their guest smiled down at the destroyed object before meeting Steve's eyes. “What?”
“Uh –”

“It’s Red Hood.” He introduced himself without prompting and tucked his hands into his pockets. “And I’m over this. My earpiece is offline again and my phone is shockingly, not working. I need to speak to Nightwing. Can you escort me or whatever?”

“Uh.”

“Cross my heart I won’t murder anyone.” Red Hood glanced over the damage. “Really, this has nothing to do with you or your friends. Just fuck off and leave it alone. We have work to do.”

“Nothing to do with us?” The ruined room around them said differently.

“Nope.” He moved forward at a leisurely pace and Steve eyed the coiled muscles and forced nonchalance. “Really, just shitty luck on Red Robin's part. And New York’s.”

“Cap?” Tony’s voice questioned. Steve ignored it momentarily.

“Red Robin?”

The man’s smile slipped and he looked unexpectedly much older. His words came out cold. “You know, the teenage soldier you seem hell bent on treating like an invalid? He’s been taking down baddies since before your little club was even an idea.”

“Soldier?” Steve repeated, dumbly.

“Wait, what?” Tony asked. “What is he saying?”

Red Hood cracked his neck. “So, you gonna let me chitchat with my friends? I'm outta cigarettes and we really should get this figured out before anyone else decides to show up.”
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

This chapter for some reason was the source of much frustration. Sorry for the wait! Thank you all for the continued support!

Bruce shot out of the parking lot and loosened his tie. Lightning struck in the distance and the migraine behind his eyes threatened to grow. Rain pelted his windshield; he punched the wipers on.

“Call Alfred.”

While the phone rang, Bruce shrugged out of his suit coat, tossed it haphazardly into the back, and shut off the radio. Cars filled the streets and pedestrians waited under tightly clutched newspapers and rooftop eaves. He took two exits and made his way across the city as quickly as possible.

“Sir?” Alfred’s calm voice did little relax him.

“That meeting was completely unnecessary,” Bruce complained with a clenched jaw. “There was no reason why I needed to be there.”

“Sir – ”

“And why hasn’t Jason called back?” Bruce hissed. “I’ve called him four times. Did you hear him? He nearly compromised - ”

“Sir – ”

“They should have been out of there hours ago. What is Dick doing? I need to be there.”

“Sir,” Alfred spoke in a firm voice reminiscent of Bruce’s childhood, “Dick and Jason have worked independently for years. As has Tim. This is a delicate situation.”

Trees blurred outside the windows and Bruce glanced again at his dashboard. He imagined the older man’s patient yet exasperated face. “If this is a delicate situation then we shouldn’t have allowed Jason to participate at all.”

“Allowed?” Alfred repeated, as if the word were foreign.

“And has Barbara contacted us with anything new?” Bruce took a hard left turn down a winding hidden driveway. Signs marking the land as ‘private’ dotted the road. “What is she doing?”

Alfred sighed. “She has her hands full.”

Bruce knew that. Oracle had stopped accepting his calls hours ago. “I know she’s busy.”

“Do you, sir?”

He pulled into the garage and forcefully shut his car off. Bruce took a deep breath, closed his eyes and slammed his hands once on the steering will.
Inside, the house stretched out around the millionaire, empty and quiet. He navigated the long halls without thinking.

Alfred waited in the cave, hunched over a report and rubbing at his eyes in exhaustion. His suit remained perfectly pressed.

“As I was saying,” Alfred continued without looking up, “Barbara is keeping our communication systems up, providing back up to Nightwing and Red Hood, and scrubbing Tim’s face from all facial recognition programs. Stark has run Tim’s face through seventeen in the last two days.”

“I thought it was ten?”

His friend pulled out a file and handed it to Bruce without shifting his gaze from the paper in front of him.

Bruce flipped open the file and clenched his jaw. “Stark shouldn’t even have access to these last three databases.”

“Keep that in mind the next time you call up Miss Gordon for an update.”

“I know that.” Bruce replied evenly. Barbara could keep Tim’s identity safe. There was no one he trusted more to go up against Stark’s tech and connections. He just wished he could make her answer her phone.

“Good, sir.” The butler flipped a page and Bruce rolled up the sleeves of his shirt. “Now, you need to put more faith in the men and women you train.”

“Stark is a menace,” the Gotham socialite responded hotly. “Who knows what the pompous asshole will try to pull. He’s a train wreck. I don’t know how S.H.I.E.L.D. worked with him at all -”

“Sir –”

“Father?” Damian emerged from the far end of the room in Robin’s reinforced suit, removed his gauntlets, and stretched his neck to the side. A fine sheen of sweat covered his forehead and he drank heavily from a water bottle. “We're going?”

The young teen looked hungry at the prospect.

“We are not going,” Bruce started, “but I –”

“No,” Alfred interrupted. “Sorry, Master Damian, but neither of you will be taking a trip to New York.”

“But –”

“But –”

Damian and Bruce started at the same time.

“No.” He reiterated, finally looking up. Dark circles lined his eyes. “Going would be a foolish decision.”

“This isn’t a game,” Bruce pointed out. “What will we do if the Avengers decide to detain Dick, Jason, and Tim indefinitely? What if they somehow stumble onto their identities? What if they arrest them?”
“And what good would it be in any of those situations to have you there?” His longtime friend countered. “How could ‘Batman’ help at all?”

Bruce paused, mind spinning. He crossed his arms.

Alfred stood and patted Bruce’s arm as he passed. “Have confidence in your former charges.”

Damian pulled off his belt and perched on a nearby chair. His mouth turned down in a pout Bruce recognized from photos of himself as a child. “They get to have all the fun.” He mumbled and grabbed the solvent to remove his mask.

Alfred’s eyebrows rose and he sighed. “I don’t believe they are having much fun at all, Master Damian.”

Bruce walked over to the nearest print out of Stark’s garish tower and eyed the blueprints for the millionth time. He peeked under them and flipped through the personal files of employees they’d been able to get their hands on.

“Were you able to find out anything about this?” Bruce gestured to the last name on the list of medical staff. Unlike the others, no picture accompanied it.

Damian plucked the file out of Bruce’s hand and glanced at it. The skin around his eyes looked red and irritated from the mask and his blue eyes stood out starkly. “Nurse Ripley? What a terrible hack job. If Alfred hasn’t looked at this, I could.”

“Thank you, Master Damian.” Alfred smiled.

The teen nodded and kicked his feet out. His limbs looked long and gangly; he’d needed a new suit for a second time in the last six months. He disconnected his cape and let it fall unceremoniously over the back of the chair.

“Really though, what Dick and Jason need is some Avenger’s nemesis to show up.” Damian stated. He leaned forward enough to rest his elbows on his knees and finished his water bottle.

“Nemesis?” Bruce asked.

“Yeah.” Damian shrugged and bit at his thumbnail. “It would make it easier for Dick and Jason to slip away with the invalid if there was some nut-job threatening to blow up New York.”

Bruce frowned, ignored the jab, and flipped pages. Nemesis? He tapped his fingers on his thigh before pulling out his phone and scrolling through his contacts. There.

“I think you’re right, Alfred.” Bruce grinned and looked up. “Batman won’t be able to do much.”

The older man eyed him warily. “Sir?”

“I don’t think I can scrounge up an adversary for the Avengers, but I know I can find one for Tony Stark.”

“Father?” Damian asked.

“I think maybe Bruce Wayne needs to take a trip to New York.”
Hey everyone!

I have had a lot of really awesome people leaving comments and inquiries for this fic.

Thank you all so much for your continued support. It means so much to me that people are still interested in something I sort of started on a whim.

I wish I could say that there was some terrible thing keeping me from posting- but really I've just had a terrible run of writers' block and life.

However, I've started writing again (two chapters done!) and am feeling a lot more optimistic.

What does this mean for you guys and the fic?

Well, I don't want to post again in random spurts- that seems very unfair to everyone- so, the goal is to finish the fic and then post weekly as I edit.

I'd like the writing portion to be completed by the end of December. I would say sooner.... but I just don't know what the next few months will bring and I'd like to keep this goal reachable.

If all goes as planned- you can expect updates starting late December. If I'm struck by the inspiration gods- there is always a chance I'll post sooner- but the end of December is my goal.

Thank you all again so much for your support. I do not know what I'd do without you.

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Some good news, some bad news. The bad news is I managed to break my laptop and let’s just say I lost some work and have been writing on my phone. So, things are a bit more slow going than anticipated. The good news? Still writing, still planning on doing updates and finishing.

Jason kept his posture relaxed as he followed Captain America, a fucking icon of American strength and integrity, down the hallway and towards presumably Dick. From his viewpoint, the man’s blond hair looked ash beneath the bad lighting and his broad shoulders took up nearly the entire width of the hallway.

The image: red, white, and blue, burned into the back of Jason’s eyes. Even now, when the guy wore dirty jeans and a worn t-shirt, Jason could see the vivid colors.

It hurt to look at the man, somehow clearly still so good, even after everything.

But the colors. Jesus. Hadn’t someone told him that he straight up looked like a fucking piñata? This wasn’t World War II anymore. No need to draw enemy fire.

Even Red Hood’s helmet seemed like too much occasionally. A flamboyant statement he regretted after a couple beers and a few broken bones.

“I like the navy.”

He’d seen a few pictures after they’d pulled Steve Rogers out of the Potomac. The uniform upgrade made a world of difference.

“Excuse me?”

“Never mind.” Like the guy gave two shits what Jason thought of his updated uniform.

Nothing beat head to toe black. You couldn’t catch a dirtbag pimp or child molester dressed like a clown.

Whatever.

Jason glanced around the floor, watching as regular office workers fought to get a glimpse of the action as they were herded towards the elevators by security, and felt as if he were moving through a thick fog.

The press of normal people was crushing. A woman in the far aisle carried a bagged lunch and paused to grab a Coke from the vending machine on her way out. A Coke.

Not even three hours ago a league of assassins had attacked.

“How the fuck do you guys get anything done with all these sheep?” His skin literally crawled under their curious stares.
Captain America stopped and Jason nearly tripped over his own feet to avoid smacking into the man. “They are not sheep, are we clear?” His voice got low and firm. “Don’t even look at them.”

Right. Jason raised his arms in mock surrender.

“Fine, got it… no looking… you guys love surrounding yourselves with weak bags of flesh. Got it.”

“This way.” Captain America eyed him with a frown before turning away abruptly.

Jason cocked his shoulder, the scrape on his jaw burned and the skin beneath his mask itched fiercely. He wanted to wash the stench of sweat and blood from his skin.

He should have known from the beginning there was no way this was going to be easy. Not with Tim involved and especially not with Dick involved.

Lesson learned.

They passed a nondescript meeting room, door firmly shut and blinds drawn, and every hair on the back of Jason's neck stood at attention. No one was stationed outside, but there might as well have been a neon sign.

Tim. Jason was sure of it.

Fucking Tim.

He refocused on the man leading the way. Even Captain America’s haircut looked uptight. The latest biography Jason had paged through had said emphatically that Steve Rogers was adjusting well to the future.

What a crock of shit. No one ‘adjusted well’ to dying.

He followed the icon down another hall and memorized the layout as they moved. For an ‘office building’, he counted an extraordinary amount of exits, choke points, and disguised panic rooms.

Captain America halted in front of an open conference room, swiveling to face Jason with a look that reminded him of a disapproving teacher.

He opened his mouth before closing it again with an audible snap.

Jason raised an eyebrow beneath his mask.

“Got something to tell me, Ken? A secret you wanna share? Are you just amazed people no longer have to shit in buckets? Sad that it costs more than a nickel to go to the movies?”

“Ignore him!” Dick’s voice drifted out of the open doorway and into the hall. “Please.”

The blond gestured for Jason to move. He swaggered and watched Rogers’ shoulders rise in irritation.

“Can you try to be less irritating?” Dick asked as soon as Jason entered. The slope of his shoulders looked tired and a cup of coffee rested in front of him. The light color and sweet smell had Jason’s stomach rolling. “You’re ruining my chance for an autograph.”

“Fuck off,” he responded.
The room he’d been herded into was small, with dark wood, soundproof walls, and state of the art equipment. At the large table, Dick sat next to an exhausted guy wearing glasses.

Nightwing smiled widely and instinctively Jason reached for a cigarette. Thank god he’d found a few stuffed into the bottom of his jacket pocket.

“This is where the Avengers hang out? Gotta say, I’m disappointed.” He pulled out his lighter.

At least Bruce had the decency to fill his hundreds of conference rooms with comfortable seats. This chair was somehow simultaneously digging into his spine and left shoulder.

“Uh...,” the guy next to Dick adjusted his button up and scratched his nose. He glanced between the two vigilantes. “Are you smoking in here?”

“Yep.” He slouched into the chair and took a long drag. It tasted fantastic.

“This is the Hulk.” Nightwing gestured to the man next to him. “Isn’t he cool?”

“Call me Bruce, please.” The man who transformed into the Hulk said in a soft voice. His shirt needed a good ironing and his glasses had visible fingerprints on them.

What were the Avengers thinking? The Hulk was a liability and had no business pretending to be a ‘superhero’.

Jason tapped his cigarette on the edge of the desk, letting the ash fall on the carpet. What a fucking shitshow.

Bruce coughed.

“Dude, put it out.” Dick chastised as if Jason were a kid.

He shrugged. “I’ll be done in a minute.”

“We’re guests.”

“Fine.” Maybe the next time a Robin went missing he wouldn’t lend a hand. Maybe he’d let all their calls go to voicemail. Let them chase their own tails.

He stubbed it out on the mahogany table in front of him, taking visceral pleasure in the smell of wood and varnish burning.

“We’ve got stuff to do,” he groused.

They didn’t have time for this. Not with the League in town and Tim injured.

Nightwing rolled his head back and made a frustrated noise. “C’mon.”

“What?” He kept his voice deceptively lighthearted. “You disagree? Wanna have a slumber party and make flower crowns?”

Before Dick could try and shame him, or worse, agree to the idea, the red headed bombshell from earlier walked in. The gun on her hip flashed under the florescent lights and he counted at least three visible knives.

Behind her, Tony Stark talked loudly into his phone. Jason felt his lip curl.
“I don’t have time right now,” the man groused, “I told you, only emergencies-”

He halted outside the door and waved a hand in frustration. His voice rose as if he were trying to talk to someone at the other end of a tunnel. “I know, but there is no way. He is the single most pig headed -”

“Tony?” She interrupted.

He put a hand over the receiver. “I’m sorry, I gotta take this. I’ll be quick. Go ahead and start.”

The multi millionaire put the phone back to his ear. She shut the door and pulled out a chair while Captain America perched himself, arms crossed, against the far wall.

She eyed the two of them, gaze taking in their faces and forms before her already flat eyes grew hard. He’d recognize that look anywhere. This day just kept getting better and better.

“Gotham,” she growled the word like it was an insult.

Next to him, Dick’s smile froze before it reformed quickly. He opened his mouth to undoubtedly lie.

“Well,” Jason cut him off, “I am aware of our city of origin. Are you looking for travel tips?”

He crossed his own arms and leaned back until the chair creaked in warning. She blinked.

“Surprised I admit it so easily?” He laughed and didn’t try to keep it from being ugly. “I don’t give a fuck if you know who I am. Oh, and Valerie’s on 8th Street has the best pie in the city.”

“Red Hood, nice to meet you.” He kicked his feet up onto the table. Soot still clung to the bottoms of his boots from the destroyed building he’d waded through.

Nightwing moved his head into his hands.

“Oh,” Bruce answered, “Well, I don’t think I’ve heard of you.”

Jason laughed again, this time genuinely. He’d put a lot of bullets in a lot of heads to keep his name quiet outside of Gotham.

“You seemed to care a lot before. About remaining unknown.” The bombshell adjusted her ponytail and leaned an elbow against the table. “Even if it meant hurting the person you were trying to retrieve.”

The front two legs of Jason’s chair thumped back against the floor.

“Angry that things didn’t go your way?” She continued with zero inflection.

“Not 100% pleased, if we’re being honest.” He carefully intoned back.

“Red Hood, I am always honest.”

Right. Jason would believe her as soon as Batman stopped dressing kids up in capes and throwing them onto the street.

He glanced over at Nightwing and waited to see if he’d jump in with his good cop routine. Dick gave him a look but didn’t try to intrude. Good. Jason was on a roll.
“Black Widow, right?”

“Yes.”

“With the long legs and the good hair I was thinking either Thor or Widow.”

“What gave it away?”

“No hammer.”

Bruce chuckled as if the noise were punched out of him. Nightwing made a sound of emotional distress.

“I don’t give a shit about what you know anymore because my priorities have changed.” Jason continued in a tired voice. He didn’t have time to play nice with these goodie two shoes.

“Priorities?” Captain America asked. “What priorities?”

And wasn’t that the million dollar question.

“I still wanna know how a teenager is recruited to fight crime in one of America’s most dangerous cities.” Widow said in a no nonsense tone. “I don’t really care about your priorities.”

Dick frowned at the implication.

“You’re going to care a lot more. Especially when your city continues to fucking burn.” Jason thought of Tim’s words, rushed and slurred against his ear.

There was no time to waste playing super hero friends.

“What?” Widow asked.

“We’ll take care of it,” Dick placated, giving Red Hood an easily interpreted look. Shut. Up. “We understand this threat and can have it resolved quickly. We’ll be out of the city in just a couple days, problem resolved.”

“You can’t just say that and expect us to agree.” Bruce cleaned his glasses.

Against the wall, Rogers nodded his head in agreement.

Jason sighed and shared a look with Dick.

Works inspired by this one: Hissing Fauna by BearHatter

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