Young Avengers Assemble
by G_N_Story

Summary

In the year 2033, the Avengers have been branded terrorists, and any meta-human is on a watchlist. There are no more heroes. A group of young people hide their powers, in fear of being arrested and disappeared. But when a mysterious young woman from the secluded and mythical Island-state of Arcadia brings them together to fight against a fascist President and his Hard Line Policies, Steve Rogers will be forced out of retirement. Can Steve talk some sense into them before it's too late? Or will they be the ones to bring him to his senses? It's time for the Young Avengers to Assemble.

OR

Basically my take on fitting the Young Avengers into the MCU.

Notes

Been wanting to write a Young Avengers in the MCU fic for a while now. Blending the comics and the cinematic universe. Let me know what you guys think. If you like it, I'll keep writing. Hope you guys enjoy.

CW for Chapter One: homophobia, both internal and external
Chapter One

It’s a desolate looking kind of day in late summer. With only a week left in October, the heat still hasn’t broken, and it probably won’t break until mid-November. With each passing year, the summer starts earlier and sits heavy around the city for longer. Scientist will bemoan it, politicians will deny it, everyone else will ignore it and keep on living. It’s simply something that Billy has gotten used to as he’s grown up. Each year that passes feels like a year closer to Armageddon, that’s simply something that Billy and the rest have come to accept. Coastlines disappear, birds and insects go extinct, but the world keeps turning; trying to throw humanity off of its back like an angry old bull.

Today, the smoggy storm clouds cluster in swirling columns in the sky, threatening the kind of rain that falls thick and warm. Smoggy storm clouds of self-doubt swirl in Billy’s chest as well, so it’s a fitting atmosphere, he thinks bitterly. Billy’s private school uniform fits a little too large, obviously hand-me-down, and currently dirty and torn from the bullies who caught up with him in the alleyway after school. The clouds overhead swell; the change in the atmosphere becoming palpable at this point. Billy doesn’t care about getting caught in the rain, he doesn’t care about much at the moment. Instead, he walks with his head hung low and his backpack thrown over one shoulder. He catches a glimpse of his reflection in a nearby storefront window. He looks pretty worse for wear—a black eye and bruises blossoming over his cheekbones, hair disheveled, collar torn.

Back at home, Billy knows his parents are expecting him, but that’s not the direction that he’s walking today. Instead, he’s found himself on the edge of town, where the city blocks grow grittier in a place long ago forgotten. It’s technically a monument, a memorial, but nobody ever comes here anymore, not in nearly ten years. Maybe that’s why Billy likes it. It’s lonely and it’s forsaken, just like him.

Of course, the high gates that surround the remains of the Avengers Manor are padlocked and Billy knows that the protections go far beyond what meets the eye. So Billy just comes to a stop and peers through the rusted bars at the half crumbling manor within. It was never repaired after the incident, standing as a physical representation of the public’s view of vigilantes—damaged and long forgotten. Billy sighs and tears his eyes away. As a kid, Billy loved the Avengers, idolized them. He had their action figures, he devoured the videos of their heroism, he stayed up late at night with his parents to catch a glimpse of them on the news, he carried a Captain America lunch box to school. But now, that lunch box is faded, filled with equally faded clippings and pictures, tucked under Billy’s bed. He hasn’t opened that box in years. The clouds finally break and the rain begins to fall as Billy makes his way over to a dilapidated bus stop.

Billy isn’t sure how long he sits there as the rain continues to fall, steadily growing heavier. He quickly becomes drenched, fat drops rolling down his back and arms, soaking into his socks. But he’s pulled from his thoughts when a woman in a red hoodie pulled tight around her face sits down next to him.

“How are you?” she says softly. Billy doesn’t look over at her, he keeps his eyes on his tennis shoes. “Are you alright?”

“I’ll be fine, thanks,” Billy says tersely, hugging his backpack to him tighter and keeping his gaze on the ground.

“You’re bleeding,” the woman points out.

Billy swipes his sleeves across his face, the dried, brown stain there now joined by fresh red blood.
mixed with the warm rain.

“Sorry,” he grumbles. “Thought it stopped.”

“What happened?”

Billy sighs heavily. He really isn’t in the mood for this conversation with a stranger. He finally glances over at her. Most of her face is hidden by a heavy hood and a non-seasonal scarf. There’s an accent in her voice that Billy can’t place and her green eyes are narrowed, studying him with an almost expectant look. Billy shifts uncomfortably, trying to get as far away from her as he can on the small bench.

“I got punched in the face repeatedly,” Billy replies, voice flat as he brings his gaze back to his sneakers.

“Why?” the woman presses.

Billy furrows his brow and shoots her a look, but she just watches him with wide eyes, as if he was telling some sort of compelling story and not just a teenager complaining about bullies.

“Because I’m different,” Billy spits, crossing his arms tight across his chest.

“Different is just another word for extraordinary,” the woman says.

“You sound like my mother,” Billy scoffs, turning to look down the street for the bus that he knows is going to be late.

“Billy, listen to me,” the woman insists, a sudden desperation in her voice.

Billy whips his head around to peer at the woman suspiciously. “How do you know my name?” he asks slowly, back stiffening.

She just stares at him in silence, her green eyes watching him like she plans to memorize his face. Billy wants to get up and run, this woman is giving him the creeps, but something is keeping him in his seat.

“You’re stronger than you know,” the woman says earnestly.

“Who are you?” Billy asks, furrowing his brow. There’s something eerily familiar about those green eyes.

The woman reaches out and catches Billy’s hand in her own. Billy nearly tears it away, but as soon as her fingers touch his, he’s filled with an emotion that he can’t name. It’s both soothing and emboldening. A warmth starts at his fingertips and moves up his arm and across his body. Suddenly, his bullies don’t matter, his trivial teenage problems don’t matter, his grades don’t matter. He can conquer them all, he can face any obstacle.

“You’re stronger than you know,” the woman repeats. “Stand your ground, show them that you aren’t afraid.”

Billy nods slowly because, yes, he can stand his ground, he can show Kessler that he isn’t fucking afraid of him anymore. Everything is so crystal clear.

“Stand your ground,” the woman says again, squeezing Billy’s hand tight. “Visualize what you want, and it will happen.”
Billy nods slowly as his eyes slide closed. He can visualize it, it’s perfectly clear in his mind. Kessler on his knees, whimpering as all the outcasts and misfits cheer Billy’s name. He’s a rock star, he’s idolized, he’s a hero. Billy smiles dopily at his juvenile fantasy, the kind of thing he dreamed of as a kid, before the world beat him down the way it beat everyone down.

“When she comes for you, say yes,” the woman whispers.

Billy furrows his brow. The hand around his disappears and when he opens his eyes again, the woman is gone. Billy looks around as the warm, centered feeling that had been spreading through his core dissipates, replaced by the humid, wet rain drops rolling down his skin. There’s no sign of the woman anywhere, no evidence that she had ever been there at all. Not even a dry spot on the bench next to Billy.

“Great,” Billy grumbles to himself, “now I’m losing my damn mind.”

By the next morning, Billy has all but forgotten about the strange woman in red. At breakfast, his mother frets over his black eye, which is now bright purple and swollen, threatening to call the school and make a fuss.

“Ma, come on, don’t do that, you’ll only make it worse,” Billy grumbles as she presses the bag of frozen peas to his face.

“Just give me a name, William. Tell me who did this to my baby. I’ll see them expelled, believe you me!”

“Then some other guy will just take his place,” Billy says, mostly to himself.

Unfortunately, his mother hears that, and she grabs the nearest chair, pulling it close and sitting down in front of Billy. Billy rolls his eyes, wincing at the pain it causes as his mother gingerly grabs his chin and makes him look at her.

“Why are they doing this, baby?” she says sadly, running a gentle finger along his swollen cheek.

Billy just huffs, trying to look anywhere but at his mother’s wide, worried eyes.

“Because I’m…different, Ma,” he answers quietly.

“Why doesn’t anybody stop this? Why don’t the teachers stop this?”

Billy pulls his face free from his mother’s lose grip.

“I’m just…gonna avoid him from now on, alright?” Billy replies, staring hard at the kitchen wall. “I gotta get to school, Ma. I’m gonna be late.”

His mother sighs a watery sigh before getting to her feet. She kisses Billy’s forehead gently and brushes his hair behind his ear with her fingers. Billy chews on his lip for a moment before getting to his feet. He scoops up his backpack from where it’s slumped in the corner and grabs a few pieces of toast from the table.

Avoiding Mikey Kessler works for most of the day, of course until fifth period. Ms. Langer calls on Billy to present his history project almost as soon as the bell rings. Nervously, Billy walks to the front of the class, keeping his eyes low as he gets onto his tablet and pulls up his project. In the back corner of the class, Kessler lounges in his plastic chair like a Mafia Don, his letterman jacket somehow both ironic and iconic. He’s chatting loudly with Lewis Greene. Billy tries hard not to feel the heat of their glares on him. His embarrassment and shame from the day before making him
feel uncomfortably warm as he clears his throat and tries to get the attention of a bored, disinterested class.

For the most part, Billy mumbles through his presentation on vigilantism at the beginning of the century. Deep down, he’s pretty proud of his presentation. He had been doing research for nearly a month on it, far more effort than anyone else in the class had put into the assignment. He mostly talks at his teacher, moving through the presentation slides without the need for notes. He knows the whole story by heart.

In 2008, Tony Stark came out as Iron Man and became the first vigilante hero. Three years later, Steve Rogers was discovered in suspended animation in the Arctic. Everyone knows the story, Billy doesn’t spend too long on the early years. The Battle of New York, Washington DC, Sokovia, the Great Invasion of 2018. Back when Super Heroes were heroes, not fugitives. Most of his report centers on the Sokovia Accords, the stepping stone to the 2020 Registration Act. President North introduced registration in the first 100 days of his presidency, the first of his Hard Line Policies. He demanded extradition of James Barnes from Wakanda to answer for his crimes, and the Avengers refused, making them all fugitives overnight. Pretty soon, a list was compiled from the Hydra algorithm. Anyone who showed signs of “significant threat” to the Hard Line Policies were forced to register as well. US troops were sent into Wakanda to arrest the Avengers and war broke out when King T’Challa refused to hand them over. The Avengers were branded terrorists, the Wakandans religious extremists. The Scarlet Witch was taken into custody on June 4th, 2024. Two days later, there was an explosion at the Avengers Manor in New York and 2% of the world’s population, 136,000,000 people died abruptly all around the globe. It was attributed to Wanda Maximoff. The meta-human threat was suddenly real. Every country contributed forces and resources to bringing meta-humans to heel. Half the Avengers were killed, more were imprisoned. Everyone on the Hard Line Registration list was rounded up and sent to camps in order to “evaluate their threat.” Most of them never returned. Americans looked the other way because North told them that it was to protect their safety, and he was elected for a third term.

“You sound like an apologist!” Kessler shouts from his corner.

Billy snaps his head up, he hadn’t thought anyone was paying attention to anything that he was saying.

“It’s just the facts,” Billy defends quietly.

“No, the fact is that President North is protecting us from further alien invasions and meta-human threats. You some kind of Socialist along with being a queer, Kaplan?”

Billy’s face grows hot, with both embarrassment and indignation.

“By taking away the rights of American citizens?” Billy almost shouts. “By forcing through legislation that directly contradicts the Constitution?”

“The only ones against Hard Line Policies are faggots and terrorists,” Kessler sneers. “Which one are you?”

“Mr. Kessler, that’s enough,” Ms. Langer finally interjects.

“By exercising the rights given to me by the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which is the topic of my report, if you’d like me to go next,” Kessler retorts. “It’s against my religion to sit here and have this faggot lecture me on socialists and terrorists.”

The rest of the class is paying attention now. Some of them are laughing, others are just glaring at
Billy. Billy balks, he almost goes back to his seat. But suddenly he remembers the woman in red.

“There is no empirical evidence that the Hard Line Policies have had any effect on the safety of Americans,” Billy almost shouts.

“The Americans for Freedom Census Center—” Kessler begins.

“Is biased at best,” Billy interrupts. “Flat out liars at worst.”

“Everyone knows you have a hard on for Steve Rogers, Kaplan. Another faggot who breaks the law to protect his Communist boyfriend, who’s been in hiding for the last ten years like a fucking coward.”

“That’s enough!” Ms. Langer shouts, getting to her feet. “Both of you, to the principal’s office, now!”

Billy breathes hard through his nostrils, biting his tongue as he grabs his tablet and turns to storm out of the classroom. There’s laughter and whispered conversation from his classmates as he shoves the door open. He hears Ms. Langer shout something at Kessler, but Billy just puts his head down and hurries away from the classroom with his tablet held tight against his chest. He’s halfway down the hall when he hears Kessler shout after him. Billy almost breaks into a run. He knows that Kessler is about to try to give him another black eye. But once again, the woman in red’s voice echoes in his head.

You’re stronger than you know. Stand your ground, show them that you aren’t afraid.

Billy turns on his heel to face Kessler, who is barreling down the hall towards him. Kessler stops short when he sees Billy’s face, an unreadable expression flitting across his features. It looks almost like doubt. Billy doesn’t budge, he just glares at Kessler.

“You wanna go another round, Kaplan?” Kessler sneers, his usual demeanor of bored self-confidence returning.

“Is this your way of asking me out, Kessler, because you’re really not my type,” Billy spits. “Get the fuck away from me.”

“What did you say to me?!”

“I said, get away!”

Kessler lunges, fist raised. Billy hears his tablet clatter to the ground as he throws his arms up to protect his face. He closes his eyes, bracing for the impact of Kessler’s fist. But it doesn’t come. Instead, there is a blinding light. Billy feels something white hot in his chest, wound around his heart and bursting forward. There’s a crash and when Billy dares to open his eyes, Kessler is sprawled on the ground, slumped against the lockers, wide, terrified eyes looking up at Billy.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?!” Kessler practically sobs. “What the fuck is wrong with your eyes! You’re-you’re-you’re one of them!”

Billy looks down at his hands. Silver streaks of electrical energy dart between his fingers. He’s panting, his heart rate spiking as his gaze moves down to his feet. They aren’t touching the ground. Billy swallows hard and takes a step forward, his sneakers never touching the linoleum, more bolts of energy shooting out from Billy’s feet, casting an eerie silver glow on everything around him.

“Getthefuckawayfromme,” Billy growls.
All at once, Kessler is on his feet. Something invisible grabs him around the middle and begins to
drag him down the hall. Kessler is screaming and thrashing, trying to get away from whatever has
hold of him. As he disappears around the corner, he begins to sob and scream for help.

Billy shudders as he falls to the ground on his hands and knees. He’s panting, frantic, staring down
at his hands as the silver energy surrounding his body fades, sucking back into him, coiling around
his heart once again. He glances around nervously, there is nobody else in the hall, but classroom
doors are flinging open and heads are starting to peer out. Terrified, Billy gets to his feet unsteadily
and begins to run in the other direction. He doesn’t know where he’s going, he’s just running. He
can’t be seen, nobody can know, he’d be arrested and sent to the Cube in an instant. So he runs until
he finds a door.

The door locks magnetically until the bell rings at the end of the day. Billy tries throwing it open
even though he knows he can’t. He stares at the handle.

“Open,” he demands.

The door flies off of its hinges and flips over itself out into the parking lot. Billy watches it, mouth
agape, as it collides with the flag pole and crashes noisily onto the pavement. He darts nervously
through the agape doorway, an alarm going off behind him. There are cameras everywhere, and
now there is video proof of Billy doing whatever the hell that it is that he’s doing. Barely able to
breathe, Billy moves between cars at a dead sprint until he’s in the woodline behind the school.

“Pretty sweet moves,” someone says to his left.

Billy turns wildly, trying to see who has spoken. There’s a girl about his age leaned against a tree.
She has a wild mess of tight black curls on her head and dark skin. She stares down at her
fingernails with mild interest, wearing a pair of dark shorts, a plain white tank top and a bright blue,
Captain America jacket. Billy furrows his brow.

“Who the hell are you?” Billy demands breathlessly.

“My name’s America,” she says, looking up at him with dark, mischievous eyes. “And I’ve been
looking for you, Billy Kaplan.”

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“Christmas has come early!” Greg announces in a sing-song voice, dropping his tablet on the table in
front of Teddy.

Teddy looks up at Greg’s giddy grin for a long moment before pulling the tablet towards him. It’s an
old article, nearly fifteen years. Teddy furrows his brow and glances up at Greg, confused.

“Just read it,” Greg presses.

Teddy looks back down at the tablet. AVENGERS DISASSEMBLED. It’s an article about the old
Avengers Manor being made a public landmark after the Avengers were forced to officially disband.

“This is old,” Teddy says as he reads the short article. “There’s nothing left in that place worth
while. Just a bunch of old statues and crap.”
“I did the research,” Greg replies. “The security on those old statues and crap is top of the line. I know lots of people who have tried to get in. But it requires biometric approval.” Greg snatches the tablet up again, tapping through to another page and turning it to show Teddy a picture of Steve Rogers.

“That place has belonged to the government for a decade. They’re about to tear it down, man. There’s no way the security system still in place would allow an actual Avenger in there,” Teddy replies.

“So we try fucking President North for all I care,” Greg snaps, patience running thin.

Teddy grinds his teeth for a moment, his stomach twisting uncomfortably. Three months he’s been doing this. Three months he’s been following Greg Norris like a lost puppy, hoping that any day now will be the day, the day when his faith and his persistence will be vindicated. Three months he’s been robbing banks and museums, turning everything over to Greg. It’s dangerous. Any day now he could get the impression wrong and be caught, made to disappear. And, worst of all, Teddy has the growing suspicion that any day now, Greg himself will turn Teddy over. The pain of that reality is almost unbearable.

“I don’t know, man. I don’t think we should do another one,” Teddy says carefully. “We could get caught. It’s government property.”

Immediately, Greg’s playful demeanor changes.

“You mean you could get caught,” Greg warns, voice suddenly venomous.

Teddy balks.

“Fine,” he says quietly.

Greg’s dangerous mood disappears just as suddenly as it had appeared, and a grin splits his face. Teddy cherishes it, stares openly and tries not to look doe-eyed.

“There’s my man,” Greg praises, rounding the table so he can throw an arm around Teddy. Teddy swallows hard at the contact, trying to remain perfectly still as Greg drops the tablet in front of him and begins to chatter about the Manor.

Teddy knows he’s being used. But that doesn’t change the way he feels. He nods pleasantly along, wishing that Greg would do more than just throw an arm around him.

The weather has turned suddenly this year, from sweltering hot to blistering cold in the span of a week. They bundle against the frigid wind and head towards the edge of the city in Greg’s sports car. Curfew for minors is strictly enforced in the city, so to get through the checkpoints, Teddy shifts to make himself look older. He tells the cops that he’s Greg’s uncle and that they’re heading out of the city for the holiday break. They make it to the Manor just past midnight.

The Manor is in total darkness, rising out inky black of the night, not even a star or a streetlight to illuminate it. Crumbled remains looking like a tombstone that Teddy feels some obligation to mourn over. Greg shines his flashlight at the rusted gate as Teddy quietly tries to imagine what it must have been like back then. A life without fear, a life where he could be a hero instead of a fugitive.

Just as Teddy had guessed, Steve Rogers doesn’t work. Teddy tries to get Greg to turn back, certainly they’ve tripped some sort of alarm. Steve Rogers is a wanted felon after all. Certainly any indication that he is back in the country will be met with force. But Greg persists and Teddy has no choice but to play along.
President North does work, and they squeeze through the gate and dart across the overgrown yard. Teddy tries to imagine this place in its former glory, a monument to heroes before they were branded terrorists. Before the Scarlet Witch killed 136 million people. A statue of the original Avengers sits in the middle of the weeds, half crumbling like the house behind it. Teddy stares up into the rain stained faces of Steve Rogers and Tony Stark for a long moment before Greg calls to him from the edge of the mansion.

“How the hell are we supposed to get in?” Greg hisses.

Massive marble columns lay across the entrance, a mountain of rubble on top of them, long settled. Teddy bends at the knees and gets his hands under one of the columns and lifts.

“You’ve got super strength?!?” Greg gasps as the debris shifts and falls away, creating a small opening.

“I told you that,” Teddy replies, holding the massive weight easily against his chest.

“No you didn’t!” Greg snaps. “What else haven’t you told me?!”

“What are you talking about?” Teddy defends nervously.

“Forget it,” Greg hisses. “Let’s do this before the cops show up.”

Greg darts inside, leaving Teddy to chew President North’s lip nervously. He slips inside after Greg, ears piqued for the sound of the police. Once the column settles back against the ground, and they are bathed in darkness, Teddy shifts out of his disguise. Something about wearing the President’s skin makes him feel dirty.

Greg is already deep inside the manor, the weak beam from his flashlight sweeping around the darkened rooms. Teddy walks through the crumbling house slowly, shifting his eyes to that of a feline so that he can make out more than shapes in the dark, trying to reconstruct the once regal mansion in his head. As the Avengers grew in size, when more and more meta-humans, aliens and vigilantes were signing up to fight, the manor had been built as a sort of home for the team. The Tower was their headquarters, the Compound was their training area, but the Manor was their home. Here, they housed not only themselves, but their family and their friends, protected by top of the line security systems and a constant guard of the greatest heroes on Earth. This is the place that they felt at home, where they could take of their masks and not just be gladiators and champions, but actual people. They could be a friend, a mother, a father, a husband, a wife. They could be themselves, away from the prying eyes of the public and the gnashing teeth of their enemies.

“Wow,” Teddy breaths when he catches glimpse of a portrait on the wall. It’s one of a row, but many of the portraits are missing. “Captain Marvel.”

The portrait is as big as he is. Captain Marvel is dressed in her uniform, grinning knowingly down at the viewer.

“What’s that?” Greg calls, as his flashlight suddenly illuminates the portrait, forcing Teddy to close his eyes against the sudden light.

“It’s Captain Marvel,” Teddy repeats a little louder.

“Who?” Greg replies, coming closer.

“Captain Marvel. She was an Air Force pilot and a SHIELD Agent who merged with the Marvel Force and became protector of the universe. You know, back when Earth had extra-terrestrial
diplomacy.”

“Neat,” Greg says in a bored voice. “How much do you think we can get for these?”

Teddy turns around to find Greg with an armful of small blue boxes. He holds an open one out to Teddy. Inside is a gold coin, with the Avengers A on the front.

“Oh my God,” Teddy breaths. “Those are Avengers coins. Every new member got one of those.”

“Sweet, so they’re worth something. I figure at least smelted down,” Greg says casually, snapping the box shut.

“They’re not just gold, they’re computer chips that granted members access to Avengers Tower, the Manor and the Compound. You can’t take those.”

Greg just scoffs.

“Oh come on, Altman. You already steal people’s faces. Imagine what we could get into with these puppies.”

“It’s not the same thing,” Teddy snaps, reaching for the cases. Greg dances out of his grip, settling him with a furious look. “Put that stuff down,” Teddy demands.


“I’m not Skrull,” Teddy retorts immediately.

“Yeah, sure. Don’t tell me, you can tell the cops all about your shape shifting and super strength. What do you think they’ll do with you then, huh? Let you come back to high school and keeping playing basketball. Don’t forget, Altman, you owe everything to me.”

“Put that stuff down,” Teddy repeats, stance shifting into something more threatening as his hand begins to grow, morphing into a massive and clawed paw. “Put it down and I’ll let you leave.”

There are sirens in the distance. Greg’s face still wears a smug look, even as he eyes Teddy’s hand nervously.

“Whatever you say, freak,” Greg smirks, dropping the cases in his arms. They clatter to the ground. “Let’s see what the police say when I tell them you kidnapped me.”

Teddy’s hand shrinks back to its normal size. Greg is right. Teddy is a freak. And he’s spent his whole life trying to hide it, to blend in, to seem normal. Greg was the first person to know what Teddy was capable of, besides his mother. And Teddy had thought that that had meant something. But it hadn’t, and it didn’t. Greg was ready to see Teddy sent to the Cube for the rest of his life, he had never given a damn about Teddy.

“Good luck getting out of here without me,” Teddy says softly.

“What?” is all Greg can get out before the wings spring forth from Teddy’s back and propel him upward.

He leaves Greg behind, staring dumbstruck up at Teddy, shouting obscenities. Teddy shimmies through the hole in the ceiling and up into the frigid night sky. He doesn’t stop until he reaches the clouds. It’s been so long since he’s taken to the sky, so many years he’s spent afraid of being found.
He had forgotten how literally getting above it all can really clear his head. All of his problems are left down below on the miserable crust. The thin air up here is bitter with ozone, but Teddy can shift his lungs, can change every organ in his body, turning into something barely human as he streamlines himself and soars through the clouds. He flies, dodging airplanes and flocks of geese until he feels empty enough inside to come back down to Earth, landing quietly on top of the skyscraper.

Except, he’s not alone. There’s a bright blinding light and suddenly Teddy has an audience for his twisted form. Terrified, Teddy shifts back into his normal skin, darting quickly behind something, afraid that he’s been caught. Greg must have told the police, they must be after him.

“You don’t have to be afraid,” someone calls out to him.

Teddy dares a glance around the air conditioning unit he is ducked behind.

“Shows what you know,” Teddy shouts. “I always have to be afraid.”

A girl with a dark mass of curly hair stands on the roof in the freezing air, dressed in nothing but a pair of shorts and a light jacket. Teddy furrows his brow.

“Who are you?” Teddy calls nervously.

“We’re here to help you,” the girl says, putting up both of her hands.

Teddy leans out further and catches glimpse of the second person. It’s a boy, more properly dressed for the weather in blue jeans and a winter coat. He stands silently behind the girl, watching Teddy with knowing eyes. And Teddy can’t help but stare. His dark hair is short and messy, wind whipped at odd angles. His jawline is sharp and his features are slightly cat-like—narrow eyes, high cheekbones, thin lips. His dark eyes are full of something Teddy can’t comprehend and there’s a faint, silver glow coming from the tips of his fingers. Slowly, Teddy steps out from behind the air conditioner.

“My name is America,” the girl says, putting her hands on her hips. “This is my friend Billy. We’ve been watching you.”


The boy named Billy smiles to himself, a crooked, pleasant smile that makes Teddy feel warm inside.

“You wanna use your powers for something other than stealing for the benefit of assholes?” Billy asks.

“Like what?” Teddy asks, shoving his hands into his pockets.

“Like helping people,” America says. “Like being a hero.”
Chapter Two

Chapter Summary

Comment if you like it and I'll keep writing!

Next chapter we get some Stucky action, yay!

Teddy has never teleported anywhere before, and he can’t say that he likes the feeling. The sensation is akin to being turned inside out several times. When his feet finally touch the ground again, he immediately doubles over and begins to vomit. As he gasps for air, a hand falls on his upper back and begins to rub soothing circles into his tensed shoulder blades.

“You gonna be alright?” Billy asks.

Teddy gasps for air and gives Billy a weak thumbs up.

“Takes some getting used to,” Billy says, patting Teddy on the back.

When Teddy finally straightens up, he is met with the sight of an ancient behemoth of a structure, carved out of the side of a mountain, that can only be described as a castle. It’s absolutely massive, even with half of it missing, no doubt crumbled into the crashing waves that Teddy can hear below. But the rest of it is made out of primeval bedrock, a long forgotten skeleton made of the mountain itself, grown through with vegetation and eroded by the constant stream of groundwater which seems to tumble from every opening. For a long moment, Teddy can only stare awestruck.

“Where the hell are we?” Teddy asks.

America has already bound ahead of them, and is crossing a dangerously perilous looking rope bridge that connects the rocky slope that they stand on now to the cave-like entrance of the castle.

“Scandinavia,” Billy replies brightly.

“You live here?”

“Sorta,” Billy shrugs. “Now I do.”

With that, Billy pats Teddy on the arm and moves past him to follow America across the abysmal gap. Teddy watches as Billy’s converse slowly leave the earth, and he walks on nothing but air across the bridge. Following his lead, Teddy sprouts wings and tries not to stare down into the dizzying depths below as he crosses to the other side.

The inside of the castle is exactly as one would imagine it to be, all ancient limestone, narrow passages, and expansive courtyards. Teddy follows Billy, who holds an orb of blue light in his hand, through the maze of spiral staircases and damp halls. When they finally reach the cold belly of the castle, the halls are lit by burning torches set against the walls until they come out into a large room. On one side in a yawning, primordial fireplace and scattered around are assorted floor lamps, lit up even though they are plugged into nothing. The rest of the castle has a cold, tomb-like feel to it, but this room is almost homely. It’s decorated with modern amenities, including a small kitchen area, a few worn sofa chairs, bookshelves, a television, rugs, and, along one wall, several mismatched beds.
In front of the fireplace is two well-worn leather chairs, and when Teddy steps into the room, he hears an excited squeal from behind one.

A tiny, blonde girl sticks her head out from behind the arm of the chair and squeals again when she sees Teddy. She hoists herself out of the chair and comes bounding towards him like an excited puppy. Up close, she is even smaller, barely five feet tall, her blonde hair in two braids on either side of her head, and dressed in bright colors that stand in stark contrast to the grey stone all around them.

“You found him!” she cries excitedly, bouncing on her toes. She sticks out her hand with a wide, dopey smile. “I’m Stature.” Teddy tries not to laugh at the irony of the name as he shakes her hand. “But you can call me Cassie. Stature is my codename.”

“Teddy,” Teddy replies tersely, looking around the room. America is standing behind what looks to be a wood carving bench that’s being used as a kitchen counter, her weight on the palms of her hands as she watches Teddy with narrowed eyes. “What exactly is going on here?”

“How do you feel about President North?” America asks him, her voice low and commanding. She exudes the kind of confidence that Teddy had always been jealous of in Greg, though America doesn’t seem to lord it over other people the way he did, not yet at least.

“He’s a fascist dick,” Teddy replies immediately. “Why?”


“Uhm,” Teddy mumbles, stuffing his hands into his pockets. He realizes suddenly that this could all be an elaborate trap. “Not a big fan. Why?”

“You a fan of the Avengers?” America asks immediately.

“What is this about?” Teddy demands. “Who are you people?”

In response, Cassie practically skips away, going to a rickety bookshelf and grabbing up an armful of books before depositing them in front of America. She motions for Teddy to come closer. Teddy glances over at Billy, who is watching him with an amicable smile. Slowly, Teddy approaches the table. Cassie has thrown open the book to a picture of the Avengers, and she’s pointing at a man with a dopey smile who Teddy knows to be Ant-Man.

“That’s my dad!” Cassie announces, barely able to contain her excitement.

“Wait? Scott Lang is your dad? The Ant-Man is your dad?” Teddy cries in disbelief.

Cassie nods like a bobble head.

“I got his powers!” she declares.

“You have the Ant-Man suit?” Teddy asks.

“Don’t need it.”

As a demonstration, Teddy watches as Cassie begins to shrink even smaller, disappearing until she is no more than two inches high, waving at him from the table top. A moment later, and she’s grown back into her normal size, a slightly manic smile on her face.

“It works the other way too,” she confirms with a nod as if Teddy had asked.

“You can get bigger?” Teddy clarifies.
“Don’t!” both America and Billy cry at the same time.

“We’ve had some…accidents,” Cassie explains with a sheepish shrug.

“Okay…” Teddy says slowly, still not understanding. “So what are you, Asgardian?” Teddy laughs looking over at Billy.

“Wiccan!” Cassie cries as if that explains it.

“Not actually a wiccan,” Billy corrects. “That’s just the codename Cassie gave me. I can cast spells. Still not entirely sure how it works.”

Teddy can’t help but laugh.

“Okay, alright, sure. So if she’s Ant-Man and he’s Thor, who are you, Captain America?” Teddy scoffs looking over at America.

“We’re not trying to recreate the original Avengers,” America says slowly.

“America is her real name,” Cassie interjects. “She’s from Arcadia.”

“No you’re not,” Teddy says immediately. He’s heard of Arcadia in school. A little known Island-state that had existed under the radar of most of the world’s population until just a few years ago. After President North had unsuccessfully invaded Wakanda, he turned his sights on Arcadia. Magical and mythical, it was an island inhabited solely by warrior women, the origins of the Amazon myth, all of whom were as strong as ten men and as a fierce as forty. Their strongest warriors made up the Alpha Force, who defended the island to their deaths. Last Teddy had heard, most of the inhabitants were dead, and the rest were interred indefinitely in the Cube.

But to prove her statement true, America bends at the waist and lifts the table above her head with one hand. Cassie jumps up and down, clapping like she’s excited by the display.

“Isn’t she awesome?” Cassie cries once the table is back on the ground.

“But last I heard—“ Teddy begins.

“We’re not all dead,” America states with an air of finality that tells Teddy that that’s all he’s going to get from her right now.

“Yeah, okay, cool parlor tricks,” Teddy says, crossing his arms over his chest. “But what exactly am I doing here?”

“What can you do?” Cassie asks excitedly, grabbing Teddy’s arm.

“I-I can…shape shift,” he explains sheepishly.

“Into anything?” Cassie presses.

“Uhm…into anyone,” Teddy corrects. “Or anything person-like. But I don’t think that I could, like, turn into a chair.”

“Show me!” Cassie insists.

Teddy studies Cassie for a moment before shifting into a mirror of her. She jumps up and down, excited, looking around at Billy and America as if she can’t believe her eyes.
“That’s so cool!” she exclaims.

“He can also grow wings,” Billy adds. Teddy turns to see Billy looking him up and down. He blushes and turns away, shifting back into himself.

“So you’re Skrull?” Cassie deduces.

“No,” Teddy snaps immediately. “No, I’m just a weird…human.”

“Let me see!” Cassie insists, not at all put off by Teddy’s tone.

He sighs, finding it hard to resist her innocent insistence. He shifts into something massive and green, being careful not to rip his clothes, with thick skin and bat-like wings.

“He can be our Hulk!” Cassie says happily.

Teddy furrows his brow and shifts back into his normal skin.

“Are you gonna tell me what this is all about now?” Teddy presses, settling America with a serious look.

“We’re going to stand up to President North,” America says plainly, as if it’s that easy. “We’re going to show him and the rest of the world that we won’t go gently into that good night.”

Teddy laughs, because that’s just plain ridiculous. But nobody else laughs with him.

“Seriously?” he cries. “Four teenagers are going to stand up to President North and, what, convince him to step down?”

“Technically, America isn’t a teenager,” Cassie points out as if that matters. “She’s like two hundred years old.”

“Two hundred and thirty four,” America corrects. “But yes, we’re going to stand up to President North and convince him to step down.”

“You’re insane,” Teddy states, crossing his arms hard against his chest. “You think that four of us are gonna be the New Avengers, the Young Avengers?”

“Oh! That’s a great name!” Cassie interjects. “The Young Avengers!”

Teddy throws his hand up.

“She has a list,” Cassie says, pointing at America. “A list of kids like us!”

“You mean a list like the Registration list?” Teddy scoffs.

“Sort of,” America says with a shrug. “But we’re not alone. There are others like us out there. Others who want to stand up, others who won’t accept being sent to the Cube and becoming a lab experiment. We’re going to find them.”

“And then what? Run around performing heroic deeds until President North is just like okay, yeah, meta-humans aren’t all bad?” Teddy cries. “Right.”

“Exactly,” America says plainly, never even blinking.

Teddy can’t help but throw up his hands once again and laugh. Because it’s ludicrous, and it sounds
like a one way ticket to a private room in the Cube.

"President North has the whole country—the whole world convinced that he's keeping them safe by taking away rights and locking innocent people up," Billy interjects, rounding on Teddy with a deadly serious look on his perfect features. "But he's not. People aren't safe. People are being hunted down, killed in the streets, beaten to death, or worse, all because they toed one of North's Hard Lines."

Teddy sputters but suddenly can't think of anything to say with Billy's dark eyes upon him.

"It's true," America says calmly. "Government backed supremacy gangs hunt people down based on zero evidence and kill them in the streets, leave their bodies for their families to find, or drop them off at the Cube. And everybody turns a blind eye to it."

Teddy balks. He knows that it's true, good lord, does he know that it's true. He bites his lip and tries hard to resist the sudden urge to cry. He tries not to imagine Jacob's body, mangled to the point that he was barely recognizable, dropped on his parent's doorstep. The police didn't care, no report was ever filed, because to them, no crime was committed. One less homo in the world, they said.

Ever since that day, Teddy has lived in constant debilitating fear.

"We can take you home if you want," America says. Teddy looks up at her, swallowing the lump in his throat. "But how much longer do you think you can hide?"

Teddy shudders.

"Even if the police don't believe Greg Norris, you know there is someone out there who will," Billy says gently, taking a small step closer to Teddy. "You're strong, you might be able to fight them off but…" Billy waits until Teddy finally looks up into his eyes. "Wouldn't you rather fight them off together?"

"I-I," Teddy stutters, hands flailing uselessly. "I need some air…and-and a minute."

"Take all the time you need," America says. "If you don't want to stay, we'll take you wherever you need to go."

Teddy swallows hard and turns. He storms out of the room, even though he has no idea where he's going. He pounds up stairs and through corridors until he finally comes out into a dark courtyard. Throwing himself against a wall, he slides down and pulls his knees up to his chest.

He has no idea how long he stays like that. His mind flits aimlessly through thoughts and memories, never settling on one thing for very long. He thinks about Jacob, about Greg, about the fear that he's lived in for so long, about the fear his mother has had for him, about his entire lonely life, moving from town to town, always on the run from an unknowable and unbeatable enemy. The Hard Lines are so hard to avoid, the red tape is everywhere you turn. No drugs, no premarital sex, no homosexuality, no dating outside your race, no political dissent, no religion except the Church of America, and absolutely no super powers. Anything that makes you different, anything that sets you apart, even if it doesn't cross a Hard Line, just being a misfit or an outcast means constantly looking over your shoulder for the Supremacy gangs. All it takes is a rumor and you're as good as dead. It's not the country that Teddy remembers from his youth, and it's definitely not the country it claims to be. And everyone looks the other way.

The sun is beginning to rise when a bright light draws Teddy's attention to Billy's arrival. Billy doesn't say anything, just slides down the wall and sits in silence next to Teddy until Teddy finally
“I was in high school in Chelsea,” Billy begins softly, looking up at the sky streaked with bright pinks and oranges. “There was a boy there that I liked. I never told him, obviously, but he found out and him and his friend beat me senseless in an alleyway. The next day is the first time I used my powers.” Billy pauses. “I was scared. I didn’t have a choice.” He sighs heavily. Teddy finally sits to look at Billy better—his face tilted up towards the sky, the rising sun making his skin look like marble. “I didn’t even get to say goodbye to my parents.”

Billy suddenly looks like he might cry and that’s when Teddy realizes that there’s tears streaming down his own face. He wipes at them quickly when he thinks Billy isn’t looking. Billy turns to look at him, his dark eyes deep pools of some unknowable emotion. Teddy is usually good at reading people, but Billy seems to be a mystery.

“It’s not right,” Billy says solemnly.

“It’s not,” Teddy agrees, voice barely a whisper.

Billy holds out his hand. Teddy studies it for a long moment before taking it.

“We’ll fight it together,” Billy says with a nod. And it’s a promise. One that fills Teddy with a warm feeling. He nods, looking Billy in the eye. That makes Billy grin his lopsided grin, the one imperfection on his flawless face. It’s enduring, and Teddy wants to trust him. He so desperately wants to trust him. “I’m scared too,” Billy admits.

“Okay,” Teddy whispers. “We’ll fight it together.”

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“Theodore, what do you mean?” Teddy’s mother cries desperately over the phone. “Where are you?”


“Come home. Come home and we can figure this out together.”

His mother sounds like she’s crying, Teddy is afraid he’s about to start again too. He turns away from where Billy is leaned against the wall, making a show of not eavesdropping.

“I can’t, Mom,” Teddy says, desperation pitching his voice. “It wouldn’t be safe for either of us. Greg Norris knows.”

“How does he know?”

Teddy swallows hard.

“He…found out at school and he…made me do stuff,” Teddy admits unsteadily. “Made me pretend to be people to steal things. I’m sorry, Mom. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.”

His mother is definitely crying now. Teddy wipes the tears from his eyes.

“Theodore,” she sobs.
“He told the police, I had to leave. But I’m safe now, I promise.”

“Where are you?” she asks again.

“I can’t tell you, but I’ll come home as soon as I’m able,” Teddy promises earnestly.

“Can I come there?” she begs.

“Maybe,” Teddy says after a pause. “But not yet.”

America appears in one of the arched entry ways, waving at Teddy and Billy to get their attention, an air of urgency about her.

“Mom, I have to go,” Teddy says apologetically. “I love you.”

“Teddy, wait. Please just wait,” his mother cries. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

“I promise I’ll call as soon as I can. But I have to go.” Teddy swallows hard, trying to ignore the desperate pleas of his mother. “I love you,” he repeats and hangs up before he loses his nerve.

America has jogged over to them now. Billy comes up even with Teddy.

“So,” America says, looking Teddy up and down, “are you in?”

Teddy glances over at Billy who gives him a reassuring grin.

“Yeah, I’m in,” Teddy says with a nod.

“Good. And are you ready to fight?”


“No time like the present,” America states before turning and walking back towards the castle. Teddy gives Billy a sidelong look, but Billy is already following after her. They follow her inside and down a long hall, coming out in a room that is half crumbled into the ocean and overgrown with trees and moss. Cassie stands uncharacteristically solemn in the middle of the room, eyes on her tablet. When she spots America, she holds it out to her.

“We follow a lot of the Resist chatrooms,” America says in a hard voice as she grabs the tablet and turns to address the group. “We’re really glad you’re on board, Teddy, because there’s been chatter for a few days now about a Supremacy gang in New York planning what they call a Rodeo.”

“That sounds…dark,” Billy comments, brow stitching in worry.

“It is,” Cassie says with a nod.

“What is it?” Teddy asks.

America looks around at them, almost nervously.

“Let’s just say they’re going to…round up what they call ‘un-American scum’ and…have a sport at it,” America explains with a strained voice.

“Shit,” Billy whispers.

“But we’re not gonna let that happen,” America almost shouts, fists curling. “Not on our fucking
Their small group cast glances around, jittering with nerves, with fear, with excitement. Teddy catches Billy’s eye and they maintain eye contact for what seems like forever.

“Let’s do this fucking thing,” Teddy growls, barely noticing himself begin to grow.

“That’s what I’m talking about,” America says, a sudden twinkle in her eye. She moves across the room, hauling a box out of a dark corner. She throws it down in the middle of them. “I had to guess the sizes, but I say it’s time to suit up.”

Alyssa is halfway through her vows when it happens. At first, the commotion is a welcome distraction to Kate. She can’t stand this sappy crap, and her sister had been sobbing so hard she was barely coherent. The doors of the church fly open with a loud bang, and everyone turns in their seats to see who is making all that noise. Kate’s confused at first. The men come prowling in, all of them dressed in red, most of them wearing masks. Her first thought is that it’s a robbery, 98% of the people in here are loaded. Of course, the chief of police is in attendance, so it’d be a fucking stupid robbery, but that’s what it seems like at first. The man leading the gang isn’t wearing a mask. He strolls down the aisle like he’s the bride to be, a spring in his step and a stupid grin on his face.

In the front row, Kate’s father gets to his feet indignantly. But before he can open his mouth to say a single word, the leader of the pack is throwing open his arms and speaking in a loud voice.

“I hate to break up this beautiful ceremony,” the man shouts. Everyone in the church is glaring at him. Alyssa has dropped her tearful bride act and is bunching up her dress, getting ready to march towards the man. “But I’m afraid that this union cannot be recognized by God or by the state.”

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?!” Kate’s father snaps, red faced and furious, storming towards the man.

The man doesn’t even pause, he just puts a hand on Kate’s father’s chest and shoves him to the ground.

“Daddy!” Alyssa cries, now rushing down the steps. Great, now she’s getting in the guy’s face. But before she can get close, the man pulls a gun from his waist and brandishes it, causing Alyssa to stop short.

“Just doing the Lord’s work here,” the man announces, stupid grin still plastered to his face. “Let me do my job and we’ll be out of your hair.”

“What do you want?” Alyssa demands, helping their father to his feet.

“Well, you see, Missy, your good husband-to-be up there ain’t exactly who he says he is.”

Kate turns to look at Marcus. The groom has suddenly gone deathly pale and rigid. The man with the gun bounds up the steps of the altar.

“Ain’t that right, pretty boy?” he asks, putting his face dangerously close to Marcus’s.
Marcus doesn’t move, he just looks as if he is about to faint. The man turns and walks back down the stairs, opening his arms again to address the audience. Alyssa runs back up the steps, grabbing Marcus’s hand and hissing something into his ear.

“You see, Marcus here has had several homo-sex-tual relationships!” the man announces in a loud voice. There’s whispers in the crowd while the man’s cronies begin to boo and hiss. Kate steps closer to her sister, grabbing for her hand. “And I know all you good, God-fearing citizens wouldn’t want such a pretty young Belle spoiled by the sins of this disgusting man.”

The man with the gun turns and spits. His cronies all follow suit.

“Alyssa,” Kate whispers, tugging her sister towards her. “We can take them, there’s only ten of them, there’s two hundred of us.”

“Shut up, Kate,” Alyssa whines, trying to shake Marcus, whose face has entirely glazed over.

“So, we’ll just be performing our duty,” the man turns, cocking his gun and pointing it right at Marcus. “And then we’ll be on our way.”

The crowd of masked men suddenly swarm around the man with the gun, rushing towards the altar. Kate puts herself between the group and her sister.

“I’d like to see you try,” she growls at the first masked man who makes it to her. She punches him hard in the throat, grabbing his arm and wrenching it behind him until it pops. More men rush her, but Kate stands her ground. She seems to be the only one because there’s too many, and nobody else is moving. Some of them get ahold of Marcus and are dragging him down the steps. Alyssa has begun screaming, people in the audience are shouting or sobbing or gasping, but nobody is doing anything to stop them.

Kate breaks the nose of the man closest to her, brings her heel down onto the instep of the next guy and chases after the group who are whopping and cheering as they drag a silent and terrified Marcus down the aisle. The man with the gun isn’t looking at her, he’s grinning like a fool and shouting self-indulgent things about God and country. He’s almost too easy to disarm. But just as Kate aims the pistol at the guy who has Marcus in a headlock, her father tackles her to the floor.

“Just let him go, Katie,” her father pleads, pressing his weight against her.

“Daddy, no!” she shouts, trying to kick him off without hurting him.

Nobody is doing anything. The crowd just sits in stunned silence as Marcus is dragged away. But Kate isn’t letting all of them leave this fucking church alive.

At that moment, the rose window up above shatters, raining down colored glass on everyone below. Kate isn’t exactly sure what she’s seeing, but it definitely has wings. The mass tumbles to the ground, adding to the melee and confusion. A body goes flying into the organ, another skitters across the floor ungracefully. Four…people dressed in ill-fitting flight suits detangle themselves. Well, three people and one giant, green monster with bat wings. Kate watches as the first one to their feet, a girl with a mess of wild black hair, runs down the aisle and body slams the guy in charge.

“Wiccan!” the girl shouts over her shoulder. “Get that guy out of here.”

Kate can’t believe her eyes. One of these new masked individuals lifts up into the air, hovering as electric energy crackles around him, looking every bit like the long exiled god of thunder. His eyes glow bright silver and he begins to mutter to himself. Kate cranes, shoving her father off of her finally so she can turn and watch as Marcus is lifted into the air as well. A few of the thugs hang
onto him, only to be zapped by the electricity in the air. As soon as Marcus is free, he disappears before everyone’s eyes.

Kate gets to her feet. The thugs in red are shouting furiously, brandishing weapons at their new enemy. Kate kicks the one closest to her in the back of the knee and hits him hard in the head with the butt of the pistol. She takes aim at another one, only to have the gun kicked out of her hand by the girl with the wild black hair.

“No guns, no killing,” the girl says before turning and punching the guy closest to her multiple times in the face.

“Oh so you’re not okay with killing, but traumatic brain injuries are cool,” Kate shouts, but the girl doesn’t hear her. “Your rules not mine!”

The massive green monster has recovered from where he crashed into the organ and is now looming over Kate. Kate jumps, unsure if he’s a threat or not, shocked when he gives her a pleasant smile.

“Get everyone out of here,” he says in a way that sounds more like a friendly request than an order.

Kate grumbles to herself before noticing a guy with a tire iron rushing at her. She hits him hard in the gut, spinning around him to bash his head into a pew before grabbing the iron from his hands.

“Come on, everyone, this way, out the back,” Kate starts shouting over the din, trying to get the attention of her friends and relatives. Nobody pays any attention to her.

Alyssa has come flying down the aisle and barrels right into Kate.

“They took Marcus!” she screams in Kate’s face.

“Oh, now you’re worried about him?” Kate asks. “Come on, we need to get everyone out of here.”

There’s a crack of lightning and the boy with the glowing eyes is back. One by one, the guys in red are lifted into the air and disappear. Finally, the people in the crowd are starting to move, and Kate feels a bit like a shepherd, trying to redirect them out the back, away from danger. Alyssa finally gets with the program, shouting in her shrill voice for everyone to leave. One guy in red charges at Alyssa, and Kate enjoys the sound of his skull cracking against her newly adopted tire iron.

A short girl with pigtails sticking awkwardly out from under her mask darts past Kate. Kate turns and watches in disbelief as the tiny thing jumps onto one of the guys back, hitting him with her elbow ineffectively. The guy turns and throws the girl to the ground. Kate moves towards the man, brandishing her iron when suddenly, the tiny girl isn’t so tiny anymore. She grows and doesn’t stop until her head hits the broken glass ceiling of the church, reaching down and picking guys up, looking more like a child playing with dolls than a person fighting with gangsters. Kate runs out in front of her, waving her arms.

“Hey!” Kate shouts. “Giant girl! Get these people out of here!”

The enormous blonde looks at Kate before nodding happily and saying, “okay!” in an incredibly loud voice.

Probably not one of Kate’s best plans, because a moment later, the giantess kicks the side out of the church and begins using a massive hand to scoop people towards her newly created exit. Just as she reaches or Kate’s elderly grandmother, Kate steps in front of the hand the size of a dinner table.

“That’s okay, I’ve got her,” Kate calls.
The blonde nods pleasantly and turns to start sweeping more people outside. Kate helps her grandmother to her feet.

“It’s the Avengers,” her grandmother muses in a stunned voice. “The Avengers are here!”

Kate is about to correct her grandmother when she pauses.

“Yeah, grandma, I guess you’re right,” she scoffs, finally getting the old woman to her feet.

There are police sirens outside. The men in red who weren’t made to disappear by Lightning Guy are either beaten down or have taken off. The church is empty now, except for the wounded and the masked wonders, stumbling over each other. Kate deposits her grandmother with Alyssa and runs back inside.

The giant blonde has shrunk back to a seemingly normal size, and the small group of flight academy rejects are regrouping. Most of them are laughing, relief painted on their faces, but the girl with the wild black hair looks deadly serious as she tries to corral the group together.

“Hey!” Kate shouts. “Who the hell are you guys?!”

They all turn to look at Kate with wide, surprised eyes.

“Wiccan,” black hair snaps, “get us out of here.”

Lightning Guy’s eyes light up again and Kate has an inkling of what he’s about to do. She runs forward as fast as she can as he begins to mutter under his breath. A blue orb emerges from the kid’s chest and grows to engulf the small group. Kate gets her hand on the kid’s shoulder just in time. Teleportation is not fun.

At least she’s not the only one with weak knees. One moment she’s in the crumbling remains of the church, and the next she’s in a desolate looking park, falling onto the damp grass along with blond pigtails and big green.

“Hey!” crazy black hair snaps when she notices Kate.

Kate recovers quick enough to dodge the girl’s arm that tries to get her around the middle.

“What the fuck was that back there?!” Kate demands.

The other three stare at her with owlish looks.

“Who the hell are you?!” Kate demands. “What is this, Avengers’ Farm League?”

“We’re the Young Avengers!” blondie corrects brightly even though she still looks a little green.

Kate laughs, but apparently that isn’t a joke.

“You have to be kidding,” Kate scoffs.

“What we are is leaving,” wild black hair retorts.

“I want in!” Kate cries.

“What?” Fearless Leader barks.
“I wanna join your club. I wanna be on your team,” Kate says quickly. “Beating up Supremacy guys? That’s a drum I could march to.”

“No,” the girl says with finality.

“Why not? You think you super powered weirdos are the only ones with a chip on your shoulders about the Hard Lines?” Kate demands before glancing up the strong silent type green dude. “No offense.”

“You’re Kate Bishop,” the Thor wanna-be suddenly says. “I know you!”

Kate looks over at him.

“Am I supposed to know you?” she asks him. “Thor’s…distant cousin or something?”

“No we go to the same school,” the kid replies brightly. “Chelsea!”

“Wiccan,” crazy black hair hisses.

“Oh my God, Billy Kaplan! Yeah I know you!” Kate cries. “You’re the kid who used your freaky magic powers on Kessler a few months back. The cops are still looking for you!”

Kaplan balks, going suddenly pale as he shrinks back on himself. He’s realizing his error, obviously. Not that Kate would ever report someone for a Hard Line break.

“Fuck!” Fearless Leader shouts. There’s sirens in the distance. Kate smirks and crosses her arms across her chest.

“Guess I’m coming with you now, huh?” she says, arching an eyebrow.

“Fuck, fine. Wiccan, take us home.”

Another moment later, and the blue light engulfs them all. Kate’s stomach flips again as they’re sent hurtling through space towards another unknown destination.
Chapter Three

Billy seems to be the only one comfortable in America’s stolen flight suits. Of course, his seems to be the only one that fits right. After growing and shrinking back down, Cassie is practically drowning in hers, holding it in bunches in her hands so that she can walk; it stretched well to fit her as she grew, but it definitely didn’t spring back to its original size. Teddy’s, on the other hand, is far too tight, even once he’s returned to his human form; he tugs at the edges, an annoyed look on his face that makes Billy smile to himself. America’s seems to fit just fine, but Billy suspects that she dislikes tight clothing, and she already has it unzipped and tied around her waist.

They all seem to hate the masks though, as those are the first things to come off, despite America’s original protest.

“We have a civilian with us,” she had hissed, glaring sidelong at Kate.

Billy had known who Kate Bishop was for as long as he could remember. Her father was some titan of industry turned politician, and their family was richer than God. Kate had always been the most popular girl in class, but Billy had never been cool enough to have any real interactions with her. Everybody always said that she was “nice,” but Billy had no idea if that was true. What does seem to be true is that Kate can kick some serious ass. From within the fray, Kate had been holding her own whenever Billy had caught a glimpse of her from above. That’s probably not something the kids back at school knew.

As soon as they had landed back at what Billy’s come to call Minas Tirith in his head, Kate had demanded to know where Billy had taken Marcus, the groom.

“Uhm, a hospital,” Billy had answered nervously.

Apparently that wasn’t the right answer.

“Are you fucking crazy, Kaplan?!” Kate cried. “He needs to be out of the city!”

She hadn’t waited for a reply, simply pulled out her phone and started making calls. With Kate distracted, America calls a team meeting.

“I don’t trust her,” America says immediately.

“Why not?” Cassie asks, whispering for no reason.

“Who is she, Billy?” America presses.

“Kate? She’s…a popular girl at my school—at the school I used to go to…” Billy answers vaguely.

“And?!”

“I wasn’t friends with her!” Billy defends, feeling a lot like America is blaming this whole thing on him. Maybe it is his fault, he did reveal his identity to Kate without a second thought. But it’s not his fault he isn’t used to being a masked vigilante with a secret identity. “Her family is really rich. Her dad is a Senator or something now.”

“A fucking Senator?!” America cries. “That’s it, Billy, you’re wiping her memory and getting rid of her.”
“I can’t wipe people’s memories!” Billy gasps. Every eye turns to him and he shrugs defensively. “At least, I don’t think I can…But I think we should give Kate a chance.”

“Rich white girl with a politician for a Daddy?” America laughs. “No.”

“You’re not getting rid of me,” Kate calls suddenly from where she’s still on the phone.

“Let’s put it to a vote!” Cassie suggests excitedly.

“Well you know I’m a no and Billy is a yes,” America says, exasperated. “What do you think, Teddy?”

Teddy looks up sheepishly from where he’s been standing quietly.

“Oh, uhm…” he swallows. “I think we should at least talk to her. I mean, we need as many people as we can get, right? That’s what you said earlier.”

“Plus, she was kicking those supremacy dick’s asses before we even showed up,” Billy points out.

“That doesn’t mean anything,” America retorts. But every eye is on her now, and she knows that she’s outnumbered. “Fine,” she growls, crossing her arms. “We’ll talk to her.”

As if on que, Kate comes strutting over to them, still in her strappy heels and bridesmaid dress.

“Reason I’d be an asset to the team,” Kate begins without prompting, shouldering her way into the small circle. “One, I’m rich as hell.”

“You mean your Daddy is rich as hell,” America corrects vehemently.

“No, I mean that I’m rich as hell. When I turned fifteen, I was able to have my entire trust fund transferred to my name early. I’ve been building my stock portfolio ever since. I made a few key investments, and I’ve seen my money grow tenfold in the last three years. And I turned eighteen last month, so that money is officially mine.”

America opens her mouth to reply, but comes up short. Kate smirks and holds up another finger.

“Two, I can teach you all to fight,” Kate says.

“We know how to fight,” America interrupts again. Kate rolls her eyes.

“Right. Having super powers and knowing how to fight are two entirely different things,” Kate points out. “Kaplan, do you know how to fight?”

Billy feels himself blush.

“Not exactly,” he says slowly.

“What about you, Hulk…ling?” Kate asks, turning her eyes on Teddy.

“That’s not my name,” Teddy retorts.

“I like it!” Cassie chimes in.

“Why do you get to decide all the codenames?” Teddy demands.

“Topic at hand,” Kate snaps. “Do you know how to fight?”
“I wrestled in junior high,” Teddy replies with a shrug.

“Right, okay. How about you, Pigtails?”

“Not really, no,” Cassie replies brightly. “But I’d love to learn. Do you know Kung Fu?”

“I know everything,” Kate says easily.

“Doubt it,” America grumbles. Kate narrows her eyes. “We’re supposed to believe that you’re an expert trader with tons of money and practiced in hand to hand combat?”

“Do you have any idea how many extracurriculars you need to get into a good college these days?” Kate retorts.

“No, I don’t,” America answers deadpan.

“She’s from Arcadia,” Cassie explains.

“Sure you are,” Kate laughs, rolling her eyes.

“You don’t fucking believe me?” America snaps, shoulders growing ever tenser.

Kate throws up her hands.

“Fine, you’re from Arcadia,” Kate concedes with a raised eyebrow. “You learn how to fight in Arcadia?”

“I was trained in combat from the time I was three years old,” America growls.

“Okay, fine. That makes one of you who can fight,” Kate says, brushing past America’s frustration. “If you think being superheroes is all fighting half-drunk, poorly armed supremacy guys, you might as well turn yourself over at the Cube right now.”

Kate waits for a reply, but nobody has anything to say, not even America.

“Okay,” Kate says brightly, putting up another finger. “Number three, I’ve got the ins.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” America snaps.

“It means, as you so astutely pointed out, that my father is a Senator. A Senator that has a top secret security clearance and that I have access to my father’s systems,” Kate says dramatically.

“So you’re a hacker too?” America scoffs.

“Like I said, Arcadia, extracurriculars,” Kate declares. “Plus, you don’t need to be a hacker to be a Daddy’s Girl and, like, baseline observant.”

“Fine, you want us to trust you, then enlighten us on one of these ‘ins,’” America demands.

“Alright, how attached are you guys to these…ill-fitting…scuba suit things,” Kate asks, looking Billy up and down.

“I like it,” Billy replies immediately.

“What about you, Pigtails, you into that costume, or would you like something that can grow and shrink with you?” Kate asks Cassie.
“There’s no such thing,” America replies for Cassie.

“Of course there is, what do you think Ant-Man wore?”

“That’s—“ Cassie begins excitedly before she’s cut off by America.

“—not available at your local Macey’s,” America finishes before Cassie can give herself away.

“Exactly,” Kate nods. “So, Avengers Tower, the Avengers Compound, and Avengers Manor. All owned by the government now, why haven’t they been demolished? Why would President North allow them to stay standing when he is so against meta-humans and vigilantes?”

“I heard that they’re about to tear the Manor down,” Teddy points out.

“They’ve been saying that for years,” Kate replies. “Why haven’t they just taken a wrecking ball to it?”

“Because…there’s something inside that they want?” Billy guesses.

“Bingo,” Kate exclaims with a slightly manic smile. “And would you like to know what exactly is inside those places?”

“Would you stop it with the suspense and just tell us?” America groans, annoyed.

“You’re Cassie Lang, right?” Kate asks, looking over at Cassie.

“How did you know that?” Cassie asks with a small frown.

“Because you look like Cassie Lang,” Kate replies as if that was obvious. “And I mean, changing your size…not that much of a leap.”

“Oh, well, yeah,” Cassie laughs nervously. “That’s me.”

“I told you we shouldn’t have taken our masks off,” America grumbles.

“Okay, so at all three of the Avengers properties, there are subterranean rooms which hold the entire armory of Avengers gear, sitting there, untouched and just waiting for the right people to come along and claim it,” Kate reveals with a dramatic sweep of her arms.

“And why hasn’t the government seized it yet?” America demands.

“Because they can’t,” Kate says. “The rooms are impenetrable, with security protocols programmed by Tony Stark himself.”

“So what makes you think we could get in there?” Billy asks.

“Because we have Cassie,” Kate answers with a casual shrug. “The Manor, the Compound and the Tower haven’t been torn down because President North has been trying to get into those rooms for almost ten years now, but can’t. The only people who can get in are Avengers. Once the Avengers were disbanded, the rooms locked down. There’s an eight point security check, to include biometric, voice, DNA, and identifying questions.” America opens her mouth to say something, but Kate continues. “After an Avenger dies, the armory can be accessed by their next of kin. And that is Miss Lang, over here.”

Cassie is audibly gasping, mouth falling open before she begins to bounce up and down like an excited Labrador.
“We could get my dad’s gear!” Cassie squeals, clapping her hands together. “We could get my dad’s gear! We could get all of the gear! Oh my God, we could get it all!”

“Isn’t that sort of like stealing?” Teddy asks.

“They’re not using it,” Kate points out. “I think the Avengers would want us to have it.” Kate turns to look at America. “How’s that for an in?”

America’s arms are crossed tight across her chest. Her eyes dart around the group a few times before settling on Kate, looking her slowly up and down.

“Fine,” America finally grunts. “She can stay.”

“Don’t worry, Arcadia,” Kate says with a smirk. “I’ll grow on you.”

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Steve’s back hits the wall hard, knocking the breath out of him. He throws his arms up against the oncoming attack. Bucky throws a haymaker with his metal arm, which Steve deflects. But Steve isn’t ready for the gut punch, and he doubles over, grasping desperately for the back of Bucky’s neck. He pulls hard, trying to connect his knee, but Bucky is able to twist out of Steve’s grip. At least the momentum gets Steve away from the wall. He deflects two more punches, maneuvering himself into the right angle to throw a roundhouse. That knock Bucky away from him, and Steve takes two quick steps backwards to gain some distance.

“Stop taking it easy on me,” Steve pants.

Bucky grins at him, raising his fists.

“Who says I’m taking it easy?”

Bucky makes his point by rushing him, getting his weight around Steve’s middle and throwing him to the ground. But Bucky isn’t quick enough, and Steve gets him into his lower hold, using the strength in his legs to hold Bucky off of him until he can throw him to the side and put himself on top of Bucky’s chest.

“Well,” Steve says, “you’re not hitting me with your left arm.”

Bucky shoots his left arm up in demonstration, getting it around Steve’s neck and throwing hard to flip them back over. But it doesn’t get Bucky out of Steve’s lower hold and Steve grabs him with his arms, gripping hard in a reverse headlock.

“That wasn’t a punch,” Steve points out as Bucky tries to throw him off.

Bucky shifts his hips in the opposite direction, turning hard to throw Steve against the ground. It breaks Steve’s upper hold and Bucky presses his advantage to get Steve into an arm lock. He twists so that Steve’s own hips are apply backwards pressure on his shoulder, throwing his other arm back against Steve’s throat.
“Alright,” Steve gasps, as he taps the mat. “Point proven.”

Bucky releases him immediately and Steve slumps against the mat. Grinning down at him, Bucky gets to his feet, holding out a hand to Steve. Rolling his eyes, Steve takes Bucky hand and springs to his feet, his knees protesting with loud pops. His body isn’t as young as it used to be.

Bucky is still grinning like a fool, walking in a slow circle around Steve. Steve can tell that he wants to go another round. Despite his body’s objections, Steve drops back into a defensive stance. Bucky bobs, but instead of actually rushing Steve, he reaches out and gets his fingers into Steve’s waistband. Steve goes lax and lets himself be pulled towards Bucky. Bucky lifts his hands so he can run his fingers through Steve’s hair, pulling him in closer as he grins, eyes on Steve’s lips.

“Am I still being easy on you?” Bucky asks, voice pitching low in a way that makes Steve shiver.

“No,” Steve replies breathlessly, his hand running down Bucky’s front until he gets his fingers on the arches of his hip bones. “I think you’re getting awfully hard.”

Bucky chuckles and leans in, catching Steve’s lips with his own, hand threading in Steve’s hair and gripping hard. Steve presses himself closer to Bucky, returning the kiss, hand snaking around Bucky’s back to pull him in even tighter.

“As much as I’m enjoying this scene,” someone calls from across the room, “I really think you’re gonna want to see this, Major.”

Steve reluctantly pulls away from Bucky, peering around his head to find Hope, a tablet in her hand and a serious look on her face. Steve sighs, separating himself from Bucky’s grasp. Bucky makes a protesting noise in the back of his throat, dropping his head and his hands before he walks quickly towards his gym bag, avoiding turning to face Hope.

“What is it, Hope?” Steve grumbles, walking across the mat on his bare feet as Hope bounds down the steps.

Hope holds up a tablet, dropping it again too quickly for Steve to get a proper look.

“You’re gonna wanna see this, Major,” Hope says hurriedly.

Steve sighs again, holding up an arm to invite Hope further into the room. Hope bustles past him.

“What the fuck is it?” Bucky asks, turning around to finally face Hope, a towel in his hand drying his sweat damp locks.

Hope barely pays him a second glance, rounding around the television against the wall. With a few swipes, she throws whatever is on her tablet onto the television screen.

“AVENGERS RETURNED?” the banner reads.

“Where’s the volume?” Hope cries, looking around wildly. Steve moves back through the room, scooping up his phone and turning the volume up.

“...terrorist attack on New York City’s Cathedral of America tonight,” the blonde reporter is saying. “The identities of these vigilantes are not yet known, though they showed obvious signs of meta-human abilities. Still no word from President North on this latest terror attack, though sources in the White House say that this may have something to do with Steve Rogers.”

“What?!” Bucky demands.
“Yeah, Steve, apparently you were New York City a few days ago,” Hope replies quickly. She taps her tablet a few more times, this time pulling up a hacked police report. There’s fish-eyed, close up picture of Steve attached to the report.

Except it isn’t Steve. He may not age, but the years certainly haven’t been kind to him. The security camera picture is of Steve circa 2015, blonde hair perfectly parted, still fresh faced and bright eyed. No, Steve today looks nothing like that. Now, his hair is long, his beard is grown in, both dyed dark brown. A thick, fibrous scar runs from the right corner of his forehead, across his right eye, ending on his left cheek. His eyes have long grown dark and weary.

“That can’t be right,” Steve mutters mostly to himself.

“An automated security system at Avengers Manor sent that snapshot to NYPD yesterday around midnight,” Hope explains, scrolling through the report.

“Avengers Manor?” Bucky asks, brow furrowed.

“That’s what the report says,” Hope nods. “The cops got there a few minutes later. All they found was some kid who broke in, claiming that an alien abducted him and that he didn’t remember how he got there.”

“Was the kid…” Steve trails off.

“No, no meta-human traits detected. Father is the DA. They released the kid a few hours later.”

“A Skrull?” Bucky suggests, looking over at Steve.

“Show me the news report again,” Steve asks, nodding at the television.

Hope pulls up the report once more.

“…once again, breaking news, a terrorist attack carried out by four meta-humans tonight in New York City. Nine people taken to the hospital, one person reported missing, we’re still unsure about a lot of the details. And-oh! This just in, we now have acquired some footage taken at the scene.”

The view switches over to a shaky cell phone video. At first, there’s not much that can be made out. The video is wobbly and the audio is only some heavy breathing and the videographer whispering “Holy shit, holy shit” over the muffled din of shouts and grunts. Steve catches glimpse of swinging blonde pigtails being throw to the ground by a man in red. Suddenly, the entire frame is taken up by a girl in a mask, growing and growing in size until she takes up the entire space of the cathedral.


“No,” Steve breathes. “Can’t be. She’s not even eighteen yet.”


The girl in the video reaches out of frame, giving someone a happy thumbs up before kicking a hole in the side of the church. The person taking the video drops their phone, and when they pick it back up, there’s a pair of feet floating across the top of the frame, never touching anything. The video swivels and now focuses on a teenage girl in a bridesmaid dress, trying to scream over the commotion, waving a tire iron before the phone goes tumbling to the ground again and cuts off.

“Again,” the reporter starts back in, “we also have unconfirmed reports that Steve Rogers was in New York City as early as last night. Okay, we are now going live to a statement from New York
City Mayor, Kevin Tilo.”

“Turn it off,” Bucky demands bitterly. Hope presses pause.

“Steve, that was definitely Cassie Lang,” Hope says seriously.

Steve dry washes his face.

“Well,” he says wearily. “Just, let me have a minute to think about this. We’ll be down in a little bit. Just give me some time to think.”

“Whatever you say, Steve,” Hope says. Before she leaves, she hands the tablet to Steve.

Once the door is closed behind Hope, Steve throws the tablet into his gym bag, running his hand through his sweat-drenched hair and glancing up at Bucky. He doesn’t know what to think at the moment, because this could be any of number of things. There was absolutely zero intelligence about a meta-human group operating in New York City, nobody has a death wish that acute. Ever since Steve and T’Challa started the Rebels without Flags, they’ve kept a close eye on any reports of meta-humans, aliens, or anyone causing a commotion across the globe. There had been some security footage caught of a kid clearly using sorcery at a school a few months back. The kid had gone missing almost immediately after the video was taken. Steve had assumed he’d been arrested and disappeared to the Cube.

So this could be a trap, North’s way of trying to draw Steve back onto US soil. But what if it isn’t? What if that really is Cassie Lang? And if that is really Cassie Lang, then her comrades are most likely other teenager, other young meta-humans, playing at heroism with no idea of the consequences. If that’s the case, then Steve needs to get them out of the country as soon as fucking possible. Because there is no way that he could stomach the idea of a bunch of starry-eyed kids dying while trying to follow in his foolish footsteps.

Bucky nudges Steve.

“What are you thinking about?” Bucky asks gently.

Steve sighs and runs his hands through his hair again.

“I don’t know, Buck,” Steve says. “It could be a trap. Or it could really be a bunch of dumb kids trying to be the new Avengers.” Steve looks up at Bucky, not bothering to hide the desperation in his eyes. “What do you think we should do?”

“What do I think we should do?” Bucky repeats. His eyes slide down to his gym bag as he thinks, biting his lip in the way the Steve loves. “I think you should call Jones. She’s got boots on the ground in NYC.”

“Jessica Jones?” Steve clarifies incredulously. “There’s no way she would do that for us. She just had a baby.”

“Well,” Bucky sighs, saddling Steve with a long look. “You can either calls Jones or you can fucking go there yourself and try to find these kids.”

Steve picks up the tablet again, taping play on the shaky cell phone footage again. He stares at the video as Bucky watches over his shoulder. Steve doesn’t really have any other choice. There are no more contacts in New York, barely any in the US at all. Those who weren’t killed or captured by now had fled for Wakanda. Jones, on the other hand, was a force of nature.
“You think after how hard I’ve fought for this fucking city that I’m gonna just run away?” Jones had scoffed when Steve had invited her and Cage to the Rebels Camp. “No fucking way.”

Instead, they had taken on new identities, something that wasn’t unfamiliar to either of them. They’ve been working behind the scenes for years now, Steve knows it even though neither of them will admit it. They’re adults, though, Steve can’t make them go anywhere. And maybe they’re braver than he is. Steve had stopped wearing the American flag decades ago, turned his back on the country who had created him. But it’s too early in the morning to go down that rabbit hole. The fact remains that if the girl in the video is Cassie Lang, then Steve has an obligation to Scott’s memory to keep her safe. Scott had always been the first one to follow Steve into battle, no questions asked, just the same cocky self-confidence that he had become known for.

Cassie is a minor and the only thing left of Scott Lang. Steve had met her once. She had been seven years old, a bubbling, bouncing source of constant energy, a super nova of positivity that had been the guiding light in Scott’s life from the time she had been born. There was no way in hell that Steve would sit idly by and let her be sent to the Cube.

Because, otherwise, what in the hell has Steve been fighting for?
Chapter Four

Kate finds her family at the police station. She can’t have been gone for more than two hours, but her father is in the middle of the precinct, shouting at the commissioner when Kate walks in.

“Katie!” her father shouts when he finally sees her.

It’s rare that her father hugs her, he’s the type of man who prefers a brisk handshake, but he throws his arms around her and begins muttering against her shoulder.

“I thought those freaks had taken you,” he sobs weakly.

“I’m fine, Daddy,” Kate mutters, hugging him back awkwardly. “Is everyone else alright?”

“Those-” her father stutters as he pulls away but keeps a hard grip on her shoulders, looking her up and down. “Those fucking metas!”

“The metas?!” Kate cries, brow furrow as she tries to pull away from her father. “What about the Supremacy gang?”

Her father glances around the police station quickly.

“Darling, those men were trying to protect us against the meta-human terrorists,” he says in a low voice, eyes wide.

Kate pulls herself away, fury rising in her chest.

“What?!” she demands. “The Supremacy gang came in there trying to kill Marcus!”

“Katie, you’re shouting,” her father warns, voice low. “Let’s go outside.”

He tries to grab her arm, but Kate shrugs him off.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

People are starting to look at them funny, including the commissioner. Kate’s father grabs her arm hard and steers her towards the door. Once they’re outside, he doesn’t release her.

“The meta-humans saved us from the Supremacy gang,” Kate snarls, tearing herself out of her father’s grip. “Not the other way around. Are you blind?”

“Katie, please be quiet,” her father insists seriously. “The official report is that the terrorists came to the church trying to take hostages. The bystanders outside saw what was happening and came to help.”

Kate is dumbstruck, unable to believe what she’s hearing.

“Those bystanders were there first,” Kate growls. “They tried to kill Marcus. They were ready to kill anybody who got in their way.”

“Those men were fulfilling their duty to their country,” her father hisses, face growing angry as he tries to grab Kate again.

“I can’t believe you,” Kate cries. “I really cannot fucking believe you.”
Kate doesn’t wait for her father to respond. She turns and storms down the street, her father calling after her. But she doesn’t turn back around. She waits until she gets around the corner before hailing a cab. Once she’s in the back, she struggles to keep herself together. On the consul in front of her, she scrolls through a list of hotels, blinking back tears until she finds one near the edge of the city with a vacancy. The driver-less cab pulls away from the curb and once it’s swerving through traffic, Kate breaks down into tears.

Her father-her entire fucking family had lied to the police so that the incident would fit into a Hard Line narrative. Kate slumps miserably against the worn seats. She sobs and struggles against the tight silk dress that she’s still wearing. The thin material rips at her hip. Kate groans, frustrated as she tries to sit up so that she can see the damage. The tear only gets bigger. With a frustrated growl, she grabs the ripped material in both hands and tears until the gap runs the length of her leg.

Suddenly, everything feels far too familiar, and it makes Kate feel like she’s suffocating. Sitting in the back of a dirty cab in ripped clothing, sobbing and desperate, knowing that she can’t possibly go home right now. Kate can feel the tendrils of a panic attack start to curl around her heart, her pulse quickening.

It’s always the same story, day after day. Nothing ever gets better, nothing ever changes. Only people like her father can survive this life: privileged, rich, and willing to look the other way. That’s why her mother had left him. Kate can still remember her father’s last words to her mother, even though she couldn’t have been older than six when he said them.

“If you do this, you’ll end up dead.”

And he had been right. Her mother had fought, she had resisted, and she had taught Kate to do the same. Living in tiny apartments and dirty motel rooms, smuggling people out of the country, using every last penny she had and every single dollar that she earned. She had saved people’s lives. Kate knew this, even though her father had lied, told the world that her mother was an addict because the truth that she was resisting was far more terrible for her father’s image. Her mother had given everything, including her life.

But things were still the same. Terrible things still happen, and nobody is safe.

Kate sits up straight in the back of the cab. She’s grown complacent, she’s allowed herself to be swept up in her father’s fantasy for far too long. She’s played his game, she’s forgotten about everything that her mother had taught her. For the last five years, she’s taken her father’s limo to her private school, she’s had body guards escort her to fucking fencing and sailing and young UN. She’s closed her eyes to the reality around her. Here it was staring her in the face once again, and she’s about to run away from it.

Kate’s fist slams down against the consul. The cab veers to the right, stopping beside the curb as Kate inputs another location. One of her father’s warehouses is only a few miles away. Kate has his security pass saved in her phone. The cab starts back up and makes a u-turn. It only takes a few minutes to get to the warehouse.

Her strappy heels are left in the back of the cab. Kate dodges the security guard and gets through the gate without issue. Sealed wooden boxes sit in high rows for as far as the eye can see. Kate walks along the tight aisle, reading the sides of the boxes until she finds what she’s looking for. A crowbar lays across the top of a box nearby. She grabs it, climbing on top of the stacked boxes and working one on top open. She grabs what she needs and continues down the line.

Thirty minutes later, Kate knows she must look ridiculous, but she doesn’t fucking care. Still in her torn purple dress, she catches a glimpse of her reflection in some glass. For some reason, she thinks
about what Alyssa would think about Kate’s new accessories clashing with the expensive dress she had picked out. Kate smirks at herself, grabbing her hair and pulling it up into a ponytail before she yanks the goggles down onto her face.

Kate’s mother had taught her that in this world, there are only two options: complacency or resistance.

It’s about damn time that Kate starts to resist.

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The adrenaline rush of the mission is quickly wearing off, and everyone is starting to look exhausted. Teddy really wants a shower. He glances down at the dried blood on his knuckles, rubbing the flakes off absentmindedly. But he doubts there’s a functioning shower in this place. The rest of the team are spread across the room, changing out of their flight suits. Billy is in the kitchen, drinking out of a gallon of milk. Teddy moves towards him.

“So I’m guessing there’s not a shower anywhere around,” Teddy says.

Billy looks over at him, still drinking, and shrugs.

“Not a shower exactly,” Billy replies once he’s put the jug down. “Follow me.”

Billy leads Teddy through one of the many narrow passageways. They make a sharp left turn and come out into a small room. It’s plain and it’s empty, but on the far wall, water falls constantly through an eroded hole in the ceiling. Billy holds out his arms in presentation.

“Be careful, it’s pretty cold,” Billy explains with a smirk.

Teddy smiles gratefully. Billy turns to leave, and Teddy nearly says something to stop him. But he bites his tongue. He listens to the echo of Billy’s footsteps disappearing down the hall, unzipping his flight suit slowly.

Billy was right, the water is frigid. But once Teddy has gotten used to it, it’s actually pretty refreshing. Teddy leans against the wall behind him and lets the frigid water run down his body. Exhaustion is quickly settling into his bones. He realizes that it’s been a while since he last slept, the night before his excursion with Greg. That thought makes Teddy think about Kate Bishop’s proposal.

It suddenly hits Teddy that this is actually happening. He’s really doing this. The events of the past day and a half feel almost like a dream, like a story told to him about somebody else. It doesn’t feel like something that happened to him. But here he is, standing in an ancient castle, showering blood off of himself with spring water. A handful of hours ago, he had taken on a Supremacy gang. He had stopped them from killing someone, he had stopped them before they could take to the street and kill a handful of others. He was a superhero now.

That thought should terrify him. He should be worried about getting caught, about being sent to the Cube or being killed. But instead, it just makes him feel warm inside. He’s almost comforted by the idea. The feeling is overwhelming. He thinks about America, Cassie, and Billy. He’s only just met them, but he realizes that they’re now inseparable. They’ve gone into battle together. From here on out, they’re going to need to trust each other, rely on each other, work together. And Teddy has never had that kind of relationship with anybody but his mother. It’s always been too risky.
Teddy realizes that he’s smiling to himself.

“Hey, Teddy,” Billy calls from around the corner.

Teddy has no idea how long he’s been standing under the water, but his toes have started to go numb. He shifts suddenly, trying to cover himself.

“Yeah?” he asks uncertainly.

“I’ve got a towel and some clothes for you,” Billy answers. “I’m gonna leave them here, okay?”

“Yeah, thanks,” Teddy replies, still smiling to himself like a fool. He crosses the room quickly, sticking his head around the corner. But Billy is already walking away. Teddy once again almost calls out to him, but instead just watches as he disappears around the corner. Teddy picks up the offering left: a towel and a pair of sleep pants. He dries himself off and slips into the cotton pants, gathering his dirty clothes in his arms.

Once he’s back in the main room, all of the lights have been turned off. America and Cassie are already fast asleep in their beds. Billy, however, is sitting cross-legged on his mattress. He smiles a friendly smile when he sees Teddy.

“Do they fit alright?” Billy asks, nodding to the pants Teddy is wearing.

Teddy smiles back.

“Eh, if they didn’t, I could always grow or shrink to make them,” Teddy replies with a shrug.

Billy looks down at his hands quickly.

“Right,” Billy mutters.

Teddy stands awkwardly near the refrigerator, realizing suddenly that he doesn’t have a bed. He begins eying the many chairs around the room.

“You can sleep here,” Billy says suddenly. “You know, if you want,” he adds quietly. “It’s a-…a big bed.”

It’s true. Billy’s mattress has no bedframe, set on the floor, but it appears to be a king. Teddy walks slowly towards the bed, hugging his dirty clothes to him awkwardly.

“Are you sure?” Teddy asks. “I don’t want to impose or anything.”

Billy shrugs. “It’s a big bed,” he repeats, eyes going back to his hands.

“Alright,” Teddy says.

That earns him a brilliant smile. And Teddy suddenly feels like he would do anything he can in order to see that smile again. He’s disappointed when Billy becomes self-conscious and drops his gaze again. Without looking up at Teddy, Billy maneuvers himself under the sheets, as close to the left edge as he can manage. Teddy watches hard, dropping his clothes in a pile at the foot of the bed before sitting on the edge uneasily.

Teddy can feel Billy’s eyes on his back. He swallows hard again before swinging his legs into the bed and laying back against the pillows. He makes sure to stay above the sheets, grabbing for a blanket near the edge of the bed. He pulls it up to his chin before he turns to look over at Billy. Billy is staring at him from under dark lashes. They just look at each other for a long moment.
“You were awesome today,” Billy says quietly.

Teddy smiles.

“Me? I’m not the sorcerer,” Teddy replies.

“Okay,” Billy says with an awkward shrug. “We were both awesome.”

“Yeah,” Teddy mumbles, not wanting to look away from Billy’s dark brown eyes. “We were.”

Billy sighs and smiles his crooked, enduring smile.

“Well, goodnight,” Billy whispers.

Teddy nods and tries not to feel sad when Billy turns in the bed and puts his back to him. It doesn’t take long for Billy to fall asleep. Teddy stares up at the low ceiling of the room, listening to Billy’s slow breathing. Carefully, he turns onto his side so he can watch Billy’s body slowly rise and fall.

There’s still a fire crackling in the hearth, and somewhere, there’s water dripping slowly onto the stone floor. Along with the sounds of his teammates’ steady breathing, it creates something like a lullaby. And moments later, the exhaustion settles into Teddy’s bones and he follows them into sleep.

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Kate’s mind is somewhere else entirely. She isn’t tired, though she should be after her sleepless night. She isn’t in pain either, despite her broken rib. But she is distracted. She’s been phoning it in all day. Not that anybody has noticed. High school is easy—it’s always been too easy for Kate. She floated through the school day the same way she floats through every day. But something about today felt extra pointless.

True to what her father had said the night before, the news had called the Young Avengers terrorists. The manhunt for them is being led by her father. Kate had caught his press conference at noon and it had almost made her sick. The night before, Kate had arranged to have Marcus moved out of the city. She didn’t really know the guy, he had always seemed like a pushover to her, but her sister had been insanely in love with him. And Kate wasn’t about to let him be killed. But, of course, her father can spin any story. She had watched him with a churning stomach as he claimed that his son in law had been kidnapped by the “terrorists.” Kate had very nearly smashed her phone.

Her father hadn’t said a word to her that morning. She had snuck into her bedroom just before sunrise and stashed her stolen goods in her closet, showered, and made it downstairs just in time for breakfast. Her father had glanced at her as she had passed his office, but had continued on with his phone call.

The limo had taken Kate to school. She ignored her friends when they had swarmed around her. They weren’t really her friends. Secretly, she hated almost all of them. They were fake and they were bigoted and they were only friends with her because her father was rich. She had ignored her teachers, turning in her homework and zoning out during lectures. The limo was waiting, like it was every day, to take her to fencing. One of her father’s required after school activities. He had never cared what she did after fencing, or riding lessons, or debate team, or any of the other activities he had insisted on over the years. Once they were over, she was able to go wherever she pleased, but
god forbid her father find out she missed one of his stupid sponsored activities.

“Why do you always put me with the girl?” Lawrence complains loudly, pulling Kate out of her faraway thoughts. “I want a real challenge!”

“Oh, you want a real challenge?” Kate dares, mood darkening even further.

She lunges, catching Lawrence off guard. He parries clumsily, but Kate presses. She kicks him hard in the chest and he stumbles to the ground. The coach is shouting at Kate about the rules, but Kate doesn’t care, she throws herself down on top of Lawrence, tossing her edgeless weapon to the side and pulling back a fist. With her other hand, she tears her helmet off before grabbing Lawrence hard by the front of his uniform.

“How is this for a fucking challenge?!” she snarls.

“Bishop!” her coach shouts, rushing towards her.

Before her coach can get there, she gets to her feet, scooping up her helmet as she goes. She shoves the helmet into her coach’s arms.

“I’m done with this bullshit sport,” she spits.

Kate walks out and doesn’t look back. She has work to do. She bounds down the stairs and heads out the back door in order to slip her bodyguard, tearing off her uniform as she goes, discarding it in the stairwell. Her thoughts are a formless storm as she walks through the crowded streets with her head down. At some point, she yanks her phone out of her pocket.

“Kate?” America answers in a gruff voice.

“Hey, I’ve got some information,” Kate says quickly.

“What do you mean?” America replies uncertainly.

“I mean I got some information last night. Not safe to talk about it on the phone. We should meet. Have Billy come pick me up.”

Kate hangs up the phone without waiting for a reply.

When she gets to the dojo, it’s empty. The battered wing chun sits near the window, and Kate doesn’t wait. She needs to take out some frustration. Kicking her shoes off, she attacks it as if it has personally offended her.

“Kate?”

Kate throws a glance over her shoulder and sees Colleen. She pauses, turning quickly and bowing at the waist.

“Sensei,” Kate greets quickly.

Colleen returns the address, a concerned look on her face.

“What are you doing here, Kate?”

Kate turns back to the dummy, throwing a kick at it and following with two quick punches.

“I need more training,” Kate pants.
“What do you mean?” Colleen asks.

“I mean I’m done with the little kid stuff. I’m eighteen now.”

“I know,” Colleen replies softly. “And you’re already one of the best students that I’ve had.”

Kate doesn’t reply, just continues her exercises, barely pausing for a breath.

“Kate,” Colleen says, putting an arm on her shoulder.

Kate very nearly throws Colleen off. Instead, she turns to glare at Colleen.

“What’s the matter?” Colleen insists.

Kate huffs, pulling away and walking in a tight, anxious circle. She feels like she is about to explode. She tries to steady her breathing, taking slow breaths through her nose. But it’s not helping. Kate feels on edge, dangerous.

“Is this about…” Colleen begins, her eyes serious.

“No, not that,” Kate huffs. Colleen tilts her head in confusion. “Not exactly,” Kate admits. “But maybe it is. Maybe what happened to me is just a small part of something bigger. And the more I look, the bigger it gets!”

“I saw the news this morning,” Colleen says softly. “Your sister’s wedding.”

“No, you saw my father’s version of the news,” Kate spits. “And that’s another small part of-of-of this monster, of these terrible things that happen.” Kate pauses, looking over at Colleen. “If you could do something about it, if you could do something to stop it all, would you?”

Colleen gives Kate a long, serious look. Her eyes hide something that Kate can’t comprehend.

“We all have an obligation to do whatever we can,” Colleen replies, voice low and severe. Her tone makes Kate pause.

Neither of them say anything for a long moment. Kate swallows hard.

“I can do something,” Kate admits, voice almost a whisper.

“What is this about?” Colleen asks, taking a weary step closer towards Kate, treating her almost like a wild animal.

“I’ve become part of something bigger, Sensei,” Kate admits, eyes dropping. “And I’m starting to think that everything relies on what I decide to do next.”

Colleen has gotten close enough to catch Kate’s hand in her own. Kate goes lax and lets Colleen examine her knuckles. They’re cut and bruised, swollen from the night before. She waits for Colleen to say something, but she doesn’t, she just drops Kate’s hand and looks at her hard.

“You’re awfully young for the weight of the world to be on your shoulders, Kate,” Colleen says softly. She lifts a hand and tucks a hair behind Kate’s ear.

“I don’t think that the world cares how old I am,” Kate mutters bitterly. “It never has before.”

Another long silence falls between them.
“You might not believe me,” Colleen begins carefully, “but I understand how that feels.”

Kate looks up at her, feeling suddenly very vulnerable.

“Will you tell me what’s going on?” Colleen insists.

Kate licks her lips, eyes dropping to the worn wooden planks of the floor.

“I…. I did something…last night,” Kate admits miserably. She doesn’t wait for Colleen to reply before continuing. “I know I’m naïve. I know I’m young. But last night… I met some…people who want to make a real difference. And I don’t think that they understand what that actually means. What it entails. I said I would help them.”

Kate glances up at Colleen, waiting for her to discourage her, tell her that she should keep her head down. But she doesn’t, she just nods carefully, watching Kate with wide eyes.

“I went to the Red District last night,” Kate confesses. Colleen’s eyes widen, but she still doesn’t say anything. “I’ve never been there before. I had heard stories. And I know that nobody tries to stop them, I know that the police turn a blind eye to it. But I had no idea how bad it really is.” Kate swallows the lump in her throat. She isn’t going to cry. Not in front of her Sensei. “It’s festering wound, a cancer. And it needs to be surgically removed.” Kate knows that her eyes are shining when she glances up at Colleen. “Why doesn’t anybody remove it?”

“Kate,” Colleen says softly. But Kate just shakes her head vehemently.

“If nobody will stop it, then I have to,” Kate declares, eyes setting resolutely. She grits her teeth and stares hard at the wall. “I need you to train me so that I can train them. So that we can stop it. I need you to.”

Kate waits. She waits for Colleen to say no, waits for her to discourage her, to tell her that it’s not her job, that she’s too young, that it’s too dangerous. Kate steels herself for it. But Colleen is just silent for a long moment.


Kate feels something unnamable swell inside of her. She glances over at Colleen in disbelief. Colleen stares at her, face resolute.

“Really?” Kate asks unsteadily.

Colleen puts a hand on Kate’s shoulder and squeezes.

“Kate, you’re young and you have a fire in you that many lost a long time ago,” Colleen says earnestly. “I’m not going to dissuade from this path. I won’t tell you that this will be easy. But I will tell you what I have learned in my life. In all of my years, the opportunity to do something real, something worthwhile, something that will make a difference, has only presented itself two or three times. I was young once, and the first time life gave me the chance, I passed it by. The second time, I met it with doubt. And of the few things I regret in my life, not stepping up immediately both of those times rank at the top.” Colleen nods solemnly. “And now, life presents me with that opportunity again. The only answer that I have is the answer that has been on my lips for nearly twenty years, waiting for this very moment.” Kate takes a sharp breath. Colleen nods, moving in even closer.

“Yes. The only answer that I have is yes. It will always be yes.”
Chapter Five

Chapter Summary

Phew, took me a while to finish this chapter, but I think I’m happy with it. Thanks for the positive comments! You guys motivate me to keep writing! Hope you enjoy.

“All right,” America says, crossing her arms hard across her chest. “What ‘information’ do you have for us?”

Kate is looking a little worse for wear. If Billy had to guess, he’s assume that Kate hasn’t slept since the church. What’s more, she actually looks more battered than she had twenty four hours ago, like she’s been picking fights. Billy can see that her knuckles are swollen and bruised, and bright purple blossoms over the bit of her collarbone that is revealed by her t-shirt. Plus, her hair is greasy and sweaty, pulled back into a ponytail and hanging limply. But there’s a manic gleam in her eye as she bounces on the balls of her feet.

“Oh,” Kate says slowly. “If you all think we’re ready, then I think I have the perfect mission for us.” She pauses and shifts uncomfortably. “Right after the wedding, after Billy took me home, I… did some recon on the Red District.”

There are a few audible gasps. Billy knows about the Red District. It’s infamous and people talk about it the way one would talk about a ghost story, but it’s very very much real. Whole districts in every major city across the country in which the Supremacy gangs are allowed to reign free. Where the worst of the worst—the zealots, the bigots, the racists—all live and operate free of police or government oversight. Officially, they don’t exist. Politicians go on television and assure the public that there are no such places, and that if there were, they would be raided and shut down. Yet the Red Districts thrive. Places where the ingroup lives without laws, free to enact their brand of justice however they see fit. It’s rumored that when a Hard Line violator disappears, they aren’t always sent to prison or to the Cube, sometimes they’re simply dragged away to a Red District and never seen or heard from again. People who haven’t even broken a law, the kinds of people that the government can’t officially arrest; those are the ones taken to the Red District. They’re allowed to exist unhindered as a deterrent, something akin to Hell to scare the majority of the population into submission.

“You went into a Red District and came out alive?” Teddy blurts in disbelief.

Kate just gives him a very serious nod.

“What’d you see there?” Billy asks in a breathy voice.

Kate clenches her jaw again, casting her eyes downward.

“I saw human trafficking, a slave trade,” she says slowly, not daring to look up at the rest of the group. “I don’t know who the people were—probably ‘loose women’ forced into prostitution. But there were some metas there, kept in cages like animals. I think…” Kate trails off, and when she looks up, her eyes have begun to water. “I think that they make them fight. Like, for money, gambling.”
There’s strained sighs from the group, disbelief and disgust all around.

“I also saw that they are holding some kids there, kids on North’s list. He can’t take them into custody until their eighteen so…”

Kate trails off again, but she doesn’t need to continue, everyone understands exactly what she is saying.

A heavy silence falls on the group. Nobody knows quite what to say, though Billy is sure they’re all thinking the same thing: they need to go in there and free whomever they can.

“I don’t know if we’re ready for a raid,” America states tersely.

“So we’ll just let those people rot there because we’re not ready?” Billy cries. America shoots him a harsh look.

“If we go in there halfcocked, then we’ll be in cages right next to them,” America argues.

Billy looks around. Cassie and Teddy are both looking sheepish and unsure. Kate has crossed her arms, body looking heavy with exhaustion. A long, tense silence falls amongst the group. Billy squares his shoulders.

“Kate, if none of these guys will go with you, I will,” he declares, giving Kate his bravest face.

Kate holds up a hand.

“I think America is right though,” she answers, eyes darting to America.

Billy waits for some smart comment from America, but America just looks slightly stunned at the declaration.

“Then why the hell’d you come all the way out here to tell us that?!” Billy almost shouts. “You tell us people are enslaved and you want us to just sit on our hands?!”

“Billy!” America snaps, glaring at Billy. “Nobody is saying we won’t go in. Just not now.”

“Look, I didn’t just come here to tell you that,” Kate offers. America turns sharply to look at her. “I think…I might know someone else who will join the Young Avengers.”

“Who?” Cassie pipes up hopefully.

“Another meta?” America asks.

“No, not a meta. Not everyone on the team has to be a meta,” Kate snaps, exasperated. “You’re not the only ones on watch lists.”

“What watch list are you on, Bishop?” America replies, shoulders squaring as if she plans to fight.

“Jesus, does everything have to be an argument with you?!” Kate cries.

Another awkward silence as America deflates and Kate rubs her temples.

“Look,” Kate finally sighs. “I’m not trying to ruin your meta club here. But the original Avengers weren’t all metas. And, if you’d just trust me, for once, I promise you’ll want to see what this girl has to offer.”
America chews her lip but doesn’t respond.

“Where do we find her? You sure she’ll join?” Teddy says.

“How did you find these three?” Kate asks America, motioning at Billy, Cassie and Teddy.

America shifts her weight. It’s a good question, one Billy has been dying to ask ever since America first showed up in the woods outside his school. But he’s held his tongue so far. Billy watches America carefully.

“I-I had a list,” America replies weakly, flailing her hands. “I had a list, from my…from my mother. It’s…it’s an Arcadian thing, alright, I don’t feel like explaining right now.”

Billy opens his mouth to reply, but America gives him another harsh look.

“One day, Kaplan,” she snaps. “Not now.”

Billy grumbles and crosses his arms, but America is already continuing.

“What’s this person’s name?” America asks, looking at Kate.

Kate shifts, a guilty look on her face.

“That’s…the hard part,” Kate says with a one shoulder shrug. “I don’t really know her actual name.”

America’s brow furrows.

“What is she?”

“I don’t know that either,” Kate admits. “But!” she cries, holding up her hands defensively. “I know how to contact her, and I think if we ask nicely—“

“You’re kidding, right?” America states, tone flat.

“Look, this girl can help us, okay. She’s a fucking genius,” Kate defends. “She taught me everything I know about hacking, and, like, half of everything I know about engineering. She’s on a whole other level. I couldn’t keep up.”

America scoffs as if to say, that’s a first.

“But you don’t know her name or where she is?” Teddy scoffs.

“Deep web, bro,” Kate replies. “But, like I said, I know how to contact her. And, believe me, you’re gonna want to see the shit she’s been working on.”

America huffs and runs her fingers through her fly away hairs.

“Fine, Miss Bishop, how do we get ahold of this ‘genius?’”

Kate’s manic grin returns and she smiles up at America conspiratorially.

“Well, I’ll need my computer,” Kate replies. “She goes by The Prodigy.”

***
Kate is exhausted and sore by the time she slips through her bedroom window. It’s late, well past midnight, and, true to her promise, Colleen had absolutely wailed on Kate. Her knuckles are bruised and swollen, and pop loudly when she pulls herself through the window. She knows that her father is going to be angry with her. Her body guard is sure to have told him she slipped him, and her fencing coach certainly contacted him. But Kate doesn’t care, she can’t care right now, she’s far, far too tired. The past two days are finally catching up to her, and when she reaches her bed, she collapses without even removing her shoes. The room is dark and warm and she can already feel herself drifting to sleep the moment she hits the mattress.

“Miss Bishop.”

Kate’s on her feet in an instant, so quick that she almost knocks her lamp from the table. She reaches blindly for the light switch on the wall.

When light finally floods the room, Kate has to blink a few times before the figure against the opposite wall comes into focus. It’s a woman in dark jeans and a leather jacket, her dyed blonde hair has dark roots coming in, and she lounges against the wall casually like she belongs there. Kate drops into a defensive position, but the woman doesn’t move.

“Who the fuck are you?!” Kate demands in a loud whisper. “What the fuck are you doing in my room?”

The woman rolls her eyes and shifts her weight.

“Lady, I’m about to fuck you up if you don’t tell me what you’re doing in here,” Kate threatens.

The woman just chuckles to herself.

“That would certainly be interesting to see,” the woman replies with a shrug, still so casual that it’s grating. Kate sputters and tries to come up with a reply, but the woman just holds up a photo on her phone. It throws Kate for a loop. She drops her fists in confusion. “Just wanna ask you a few questions, that’s all.”

Kate’s exhausted brain struggles for a moment. The woman is still holding up the phone, stance non-threatening.

“Yeah, well you could have knocked,” Kate finally replies. “Made an appointment. Visiting hours are from four to five every other Thursday.”

The woman chuckles but doesn’t move. Kate huffs and finally takes a careful step closer. She squints at the screen. It’s a picture from a security camera, dark and slightly off center. But Kate knows immediately what the picture is of. It’s her and the rest of the Young Avengers, in the park after the church. Kate furrows her brow, crossing her arms defensively as she straightens.

“Don’t like that one?” the bottle blonde asks. “How about this one?”

She scrolls and the next picture is of a blue light engulfing the group. The third is of an empty park.

“How about this one?”

“Now, I don’t know about you, but that looks to me like one Catherine Bishop in cohorts with an obvious meta-human and known terrorist,” the woman muses. “You teleport often? I hear it’s uncomfortable.”
Kate doesn’t wait another moment, she charges. But the woman puts an arm out and when Kate hits her, she feels like she is running into a brick wall. It throws her to the ground, but Kate recovers quickly, sweeping with her left foot, going for the woman’s legs. But the woman is quick, even in her clunky biker boots, and another second later, she’s lifting Kate off the ground by her waist band, and throwing her bodily across the room like she weighs nothing. Kate collides with her bed, rolling into her pillows and struggling to get her feet under her again before the woman attacks. But by the time Kate has recovered, the woman is leaned against the wall once again, like nothing happened.

Kate climbs slowly off her bed, glaring hard at the woman.

“Odd thing, isn’t it?” Kate asks, slowly rounding on the woman. “A meta hunting other metas?”

“Who says I’m hunting anyone?” the woman asks with a casual shrug.

“You broke into my house with those pictures, asking these questions,” Kate accuses. “Sounds an awful lot like you’re hunting someone down.”

The woman just shrugs again.

“Nah, just doing a favor for an old friend.”

Kate can’t get a read on this woman. She’s tiny—can’t weigh more than 110 pounds—but she is clearly strong and fast. She can’t be a Hard Line enforcer. Kate’s heard of meta-humans working or the government hunting other meta-humans down in return for clemency, but if this woman worked for the government, then she wouldn’t have snuck through the window of the daughter of a Senator. She’s working for someone, the question is just who.

“This house has private security,” Kate warns. “I can have them up here in ten seconds if I scream.”

The woman shrugs again, and her disinterested demeanor is really starting to get under Kate’s skin.

“I’m not too worried about that,” the woman says.

Kate flexes her fists.

“Okay, slugger,” the woman laughs. “I’m not really in the mood too kick your ass. I think we got off on the wrong foot here. My name is Steph and I just want to ask you some questions about your friends.”

“Who sent you?” Kate snarls.

Kate isn’t about to give up her new friends. She’d rather die or spend the rest of her life rotting in a prison cell than betray their trust. Kate steels herself, readying for a fight. She’ll probably lose, but she’s going to go down swinging.

“Just an old friend,” the woman replies lightly. “Maybe you know him. His name is Steve Rogers.”

Kate freezes, brain barely able to comprehend.

“You lie,” Kate accues. “Steve Rogers is…dead.”

It wasn’t made public, because the ID wasn’t certain. But Kate had seen the reports on her father’s closed network a year ago. The autopsy report, the dental record match. The body was currently in deep freeze in some government facility, waiting for President North’s next reelection.

But then another realization hits Kate. Recognition, something from one of the long, stolen reports
“You’re Jessica Jones,” Kate says numbly. “I know you. You were there, during the Great Invasion.”

“Not officially,” Jess says with a wink. “And, according to my driver’s license, my name is Stephanie Lewis.” Kate balks and it just makes Jess laugh. “You want to have that conversation with me now?”

Kate opens her mouth to reply, but there’s a sudden knock on her door.

“Miss Bishop?” one of the guards calls through the door. “Are you alright? We heard some noises, we’re coming in.”

Kate’s head snaps towards the door. She sputters for a moment.

“I’m fine!” she calls.

When Kate turns back, Jess is gone, no trace of her besides an open window. Kate rushes towards the fluttering curtains and the blast of cold air, but there’s no sign of the intruder anywhere. A moment later, the door to her room flies open, two of her father’s guards with their hands on their weapons regard her suspiciously.

“I said I’m fine!” Kate cries, slamming her window shut.

The guards ignore her, searching her room quickly and precisely before radioing someone else.

“Are you just getting in, Miss Bishop?” one of the guards, a man named Andrews, asks in a patronizing tone.

Kate looks down at herself. She’s still dressed, shoes and all. But she doesn’t even have time to reply before Andrews is chastising her like a child.

“Next time, ma’am, use the front door.”

Kate gives him a sardonic smile.

“Great. Now are you guys going to leave or do you want to do a cavity search too?”

“Goodnight, Miss Bishop,” Andrews grumbles as he and the other guard leave the room.

Kate gives the finger to the closed door. As she does, she feels her phone vibrate in her pocket. A text from an unknown number.

“0830, Colton Park.”

Great, Kate thinks to herself. Now an actual real life Avenger wants to meet her at the park to discuss wanted terrorists, and Kate has promised to track down the most notorious hacker on the Deep Web by noon. Her mind is once again going a million miles a minute, and she has no idea how she’ll get to sleep now.

The answer is that she isn’t and she can’t. Not in this house, not now. She tosses and turns in her California King for nearly an hour, exhausted mind and body protesting. But her train of thought is still burning through her mind, questions flying towards her too quickly to hold on to for long enough to think up an answer. When the clock on her phone glares at her with a large, blue 0400, Kate huffs and throws her covers off.
Under some loose boards in her closet are the stolen goods from her father’s warehouse. Kate changes quickly into something black and non-descript, throwing on the biker jacket she won in a game of poker, and slinging her tactical bag over her shoulder. Three blocks down and one block up is a storage space purchased under a fake name, and Kate is there in under thirty minutes. There isn’t much inside, just a zero-gravity bike and a sleek, black sports car. Kate straddles the bike, her aching thighs burning as she wheels it out onto the street. The bike isn’t technically street legal, but neither is the stolen gear in Kate’s bag. She takes off on the backroads, pushing the racer as fast as it can go, and she’s out of the city by 5:00am.

The apartment is a shitty, studio flat; one of five that Kate’s purchased since she turned eighteen last month. Untraceable, money wired through several offshore accounts, rent for a year all up front. The computers inside are mostly military grade, more goods “repurposed” from her father’s many stockpiles. She starts up several search programs: one on her teammates and their new found infamy, one of Steven Grant Rogers, one of Stephanie Lewis, and one of Jessica Jones. While the programs run, she hacks into her school’s closed circuit and reports herself in attendance for the coming day. Then, for good measure, just to shut up the litany in her head, she puts in several large orders from her father’s account to be rerouted through the city.

It’s nearly six in the morning when Kate finally catches some sleep. Open on her computer is an encrypted and encoded message to an old friend.

“You ready to come out of hiding?”

***

Jessica stumbles through an apartment that hasn’t been cleaned in nearly a month. There hasn’t been the time, is the excuse Jess is using this time around. She curses under her breath when her foot comes down on a teething toy and she hops on one leg through the living room.

“Fuck,” she hisses.

“Language,” Luke chastises, appearing in the doorway, holding a massive hand over Danielle’s ear.

“Luke, she’s only four fucking months old,” Jess replies, rolling her eyes. “What are you doing up so early?”

Luke sighs heavily, bouncing Danielle on his hip when she begins to fuss. His face makes it clear that he’s not in the mood for a casual conversation.

“Jess,” Luke says slowly. “Why are you doing this?”

“Because Steve asked nicely,” Jess replies with a shrug, making it over to the kitchen table and falling into a chair, grabbing for the box of Pops against the wall.


Jess huffs, looking up at Luke through her unbearably blonde bangs.

“They’re just kids, Luke.”
“Yeah, and you have a kid of your own now!” Luke replies, shifting Danielle as if in demonstration.

Jess waves him off, pouring the cereal into an already dirty bowl before getting to her feet to head towards the fridge.

“How did you find one of them, didn’t you?” Luke observes, moving his too-large body into the too-small kitchen as a way to block Jess’s escape.


“Jess, think about what would happen if you’re caught with one of them!”

Jess huffs and slams the plastic jug onto the table so hard that the cap comes flying off and milk sloshes out over the table.

“FUCK!” she shouts.

Luke puts his hands over Danielle’s ear again and gives Jess a patented, self-righteous Luke Cage glare. Jess turns slowly to face him. She doesn’t want to fight. So she moves towards him, holding out her arms and taking Danielle, bouncing the baby on her hip as she does something she almost never does: weighs her next words.

“We were heroes once, Luke,” Jess says softly.

“We were what we had to be,” Luke corrects, crossing his arms. “And now, we have to be parents.”

“We could have left New York,” Jess reminds him. “If we wanted to retire in peace and never fight another day in our lives, we could have taken Steve’s offer. We could be sitting on some African beach, getting tan and eating coconuts or whatever, but we stayed.”


“Not the point, dear;” Jess says through her teeth. “We stayed here because we had to. Because we’re both stubborn assholes who weren’t about to give up our home.”

“I swear, that child’s first word is going to be a curse word,” Luke mumbles.

“We stayed,” Jess continues loudly. “That has to mean something. It has to.”

Luke looks at her hard, jaw tight. Jess stares right back at him, not even blinking.

“You can’t save everyone,” Luke finally says, voice sad and distant.

“No, but I can save these idiot teenagers, and that’s a start,” Jess replies.

Luke finally concedes. He doesn’t say as much, but Jess knows her husband. His arms fall too his side and he sighs heavily. Jess tries not to grin too hard. She checks the time on her phone before holding Danielle out to Luke.

“I gotta eat something and then I gotta go,” she says quickly as Luke takes their daughter.

Luke turns into the kitchen, snatching the roll of paper towels off their rack and tossing them to Jess. She pours what little milk is left in the gallon into her cereal before throwing paper towels down vaguely on the mess she’s made of the kitchen table. Danielle has begun to fuss—probably hungry—and Luke carries her into the other room as Jess begins to scarf down large mouthfuls of cereal. As she does, she gets a notification on her phone. It’s a text message, from one of her contacts at the
station.

“William Kaplan.”

A name, that’s a good place to start. That Bishop kid is stubborn and unafraid. Jess had no idea how she was going to get her talk. But if Jess comes in with information, maybe she can squeeze the kid until she spills the rest of the beans.

Jess’s phone dings again.

“His family is in Chelsea. They’re being brought in for questioning today.”

Fuck. That’s not good. Well, it might be good for Jess in the short term—she can tell the Bishop kid that her friends’ actions have consequences, maybe convince her to give them up. But overall, that’s very much not good. Either this Kaplan kid’s parents know where he is, or they don’t. Either way, they’re in danger.

“When?” Jess types back.

“10”

Well that really screws up Jess’s timeline. She gets to her feet, shoving her phone into the pocket of her jeans and grabbing her coat from where she had thrown it on the floor by the door.

“I’m heading out, Luke!” she calls loudly, not waiting for a reply before she’s out the door. It’s seven in the morning. Jess hails a cab, throwing herself into the backseat as she pulls out her phone and goes to work. She opens up an illegal, after market application on her phone as she searches for the William Kaplan in Chelsea.

William Kaplan, better known as Billy. Seventeen years old. Went missing in October after an altercation at his high school. Last seen fleeing his high school. But that’s hardly anything new. People go missing all of the time these days. There’s very little about the incident that Jess can find online. There was no investigation, very little media about it. Just a lonely page, published by his grieving parents, with a tip hotline number and email. One of thousands of such pages, families searching for their loved ones, families that will never get answers. Jess dials the tip line.

“Hello,” a weary sounding woman answers.

“Hi, I think I have some information about your son,” Jess replies.

“William?” the woman asks hopefully. “Have you found him?”

“Ma’am, I think it’s best if we met in person.”

There’s a long silence on the other end of the phone. It’s smart to be wary these days. But Jess only needs her to stay on the line for thirty more seconds.

“Ma’am,” Jess prods.

“What information do you have?” the woman asks, voice hard.

Jess is the one to go quiet this time.

“What information—“

“I know where he is,” Jess replies quickly.
There’s an audible gasp on the other line.

“Where?  Where is he?” the woman asks franticly.

Jess’s phone beeps.  She pulls it away from her ear to find that her application has an address.  Jess puts the phone back up to her face.

“I’ll be in touch,” she says quickly.

She hangs up to the woman on the other line shouting.

Jess leans over the consul in the back of the cab, inputting the address.  It takes almost forty minutes to get there.  Jess is definitely going to be late for her meeting.  The cab pulls up to a nice condominium complex.  Jess climbs out and walks towards the door labeled 206.

When she knocks, a frazzled looking woman answers.  Jess doesn’t wait, she shoves the door open, throwing the woman back, and hurries inside, slamming the door shut behind her.  The woman begins to shout, and her husband comes bounding around the corner, a pistol in his hand.

“Whoa!” Jess cries, putting both of her hands up.  “I’m here to help you.”

“Who are you?!  What do you want?!” the man demands.

“I told you, I want to help you,” Jess says slowly.  “We spoke on the phone a little bit ago.”

The woman has rushed down the hall and stands just behind her husband now.

“That was you?” the woman cries.  “You know where our William is?”

“If you put the gun down, I can explain.  But we don’t have a lot of time,” Jess explains.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” the man shouts.

Jess rolls her eyes and charges.  She disarms the man easily, dropping the magazine and shoving the pistol into her waist band.  The couple scramble further into their apartment like frightened animals, the man shouting at Jess as he goes.

“You!  You-you-you’re one of them!”

Jess pinches the bridge of her nose.

“Look,” she says, putting her hands up again.  “I’m not great at this whole social interaction thing, alright.  I apologize.  But I came here because you guys are in danger.”

The couple exchange a scared look.

“Not from me!” Jess corrects quickly.  “I’m here to help.  But the cops are going to be here this morning.  Because you know that ‘terror attack’ on the church a few nights ago?”

Both nod slowly, with matching wide eyes.

“Well the cops and the government think that Billy had something to do with it.”

Again, the two exchange glances.

“No,” the woman breathes.  “No, not William.  He wouldn’t do something like that.”
“I’m one of the good guys, okay,” Jess says, motioning to herself. “I know I don’t look like it or act like it, but I am. I came here because I’ve been hired by another good guy to figure out if that really was Billy. Okay? And when I find out, you guys will be the first ones to know. But until then, you need to get out of town, alright? Go somewhere safe and when I find your son, I’ll have him contact you.”

Another glance exchanged.

“You really think William was one of the terrorists?” the man asks shakily.

“No,” Jess replies immediately. “No, I don’t think your son is a terrorist. But I do think that the police are after him. And I know that they are going to be coming here in about two hours to arrest you.” Jess pauses, and the couple stare hard at her. “And I think you both know what that means.”

“We always knew Billy was different,” the woman offers weakly. “But he’s a good kid.”

Jess sighs, face softening.

“I agree. I think he’s a good kid too. But he’s going to be a good orphan if you two don’t get the hell out of Dodge.”

“So the police don’t have him? He-he wasn’t disappeared in October?” the man asks, voice getting a bit stronger.

“No, he’s safe,” Jess answers gently. “And, at the moment, my job is to make sure that he stays safe. And that you two stay safe as well. Do you have other children?”

The woman swallows hard and nods.

“Yes, our other son. He’s ten.”

“He’s at school?” Jess asks.

The woman nods.

“Alright. Here’s the deal. I’m going to leave because I need to go make sure Billy is safe, alright? But you two, you’re going to pack some bags, get all of the essentials, and go get your other son from school. Stay calm. Alright? If you show up freaking out, they’re going to get suspicious. You go to his school and you say he has a doctor’s appointment. You get him into the car and you drive west for as long as you can. You have family somewhere else? Some small town somewhere?”

“My sister,” the woman offers. “She lives in Southeast Ohio.”

“Perfect!” Jess exclaims. “You go to your sister’s, alright? Lay low and I’ll find Billy and we’ll work this out, okay?”

Both of them nod like bobble heads. Jess pulls the pistol from her waistband and lays it on a nearby table.

“You’re gonna need this,” she says with a curt nod.

When Jess turns to walk towards the door, the couple suddenly jump to their feet and begin rushing around the house. The husband’s loud footfalls thunder up the stairs. As the woman scurries into the kitchen, Jess grabs her arm.

“Hey,” Jess calls gently. The woman looks up at her with owlish eyes. “Stay calm, alright. If your
neighbors get suspicious, they’ll call the police. Don’t give anyone a reason to give you a second glance. Follow the speed limit. Pack light, just the essentials. Stay calm.”

“Okay,” the woman says shakily. “Thank you. Thank you!”

She hugs Jess then. Jess grimaces, but allows it, awkwardly hugging back.

“Be safe,” Jess breathes as the woman lets her go.

Jess is definitely running late now. She waits impatiently in the back of a new cab. She could get through the city much faster on foot, but Jess knows better than to draw attention. It’s 9:15 when she gets to the park.

The place is small, overgrown and underused. There’s a rusted playset, a faded basketball court, and a half caved in pagoda. Nobody ever comes here anymore, definitely not children. The most Jess has ever seen is a few teens playing basketball on the weed stricken court. But that’s precisely why she chose this park. Fewer onlookers, and definitely no cameras. When she gets out of the car, there is nobody in the park at all. But Jess knows better. She knows that the Bishop girl is smart. And Jess knows that she’s probably been casing the place for hours, because her interest was definitely piqued last night. So Jess walks calmly towards the pagoda, and sits at the creaky picnic table.

Kate Bishop appears a few moments later, hood pulled up and glasses on as she walks quickly from an alleyway across the street. When she sits down across from Jess, Jess can’t help but laugh.

“You know,” Jess muses, “in trying to look inconspicuous, you ended up looking even more suspicious.”

Kate huffs and pulls her glasses off.

“Seriously, somebody is going to think we’re doing a drug deal over here, relax,” Jess laughs. Kate’s eyes dart towards a building across the street.

“You’re not alone, are you?” Jess asks, raising an eyebrow.

“I’m alone,” Kate snaps, pushing her hood down and pulling her long, dark braid out from under her collar. “What do you want from me?”

“I want to talk to your friends,” Jess replies easily.

“Not gonna happen, lady,” Kate retorts.

“Look, what your friends did the other night was brave,” Jess says, voice even. “Brave, but stupid.”

“You gonna report me to the police?” Kate snarks, leaning back and crossing her arms.

“No?” Jess scoffs. “But, like I told you last night, Steve Rogers sent me to track down your friends.”

“Right,” Kate laughs. “Sure, what does ‘Steve Rogers’ want with us?”

“To keep you safe,” Jess replies immediately.

“You don’t have to worry about us,” Kate says.

“No?” Jess retorts, tilting her head. “I just had to help Billy Kaplan’s parents flee the city because
the police are after them.”

Kate’s face falls. She’s not practiced at this, it’s obvious, and it takes her a long moment to recover.

“What do you think Billy will say to that when he finds out?” Jess presses. “Your actions have consequences.”

“Are they safe?” Kate breathes, worry in her eyes.

Jess sighs and takes pity on the girl. She hates to admit it, but Kate reminds her an awful lot of herself.

“For now,” Jess says slowly. “But if any of your other friends have families in the city, or even in the country, then they’re all in danger after what your friends did the other night.”

“What they did?” Kate cries a little too loudly. “What they did is save lives!”

“I know that,” Jess hisses, leaning in closer and giving Kate a sharp look. The girl is almost getting hysterical. “But nobody else knows that. Everybody else believes what the news is telling them: that your friends are dangerous criminals. And that means bad things for their families.”

Kate takes several deep breaths through her nose, her nostrils flaring as she appears to think.

“I can’t speak for them,” Kate finally says, voice slow and even. “I only just met them.”

“Tell me their names,” Jess presses immediately.

“What? Don’t you already know their names? You know Billy.”

“Kate, please. Steve Rogers and I just don’t want to see you or your friends hurt or thrown into the Cube, that’s all!”

“If you or Steve Rogers are going to tell us to stop, we won’t,” Kate says seriously, tone low. “We’re taking a stand. We’re not afraid.”

“What about their families, Kate?”

Kate chews on her lips, eyes wandering back to the building across the street. The girl definitely has somebody with her. Jess resists the urge to turn around and see for herself. Kate leans across the table.

“If I give you their names, you’ll help their families?” Kate asks in a voice close to a whisper.

“Yes.”

Kate swallows hard, eyes once again going over Jess’s shoulder. Her hands disappear under the table.

“Okay,” Kate whispers, nodding to herself. “You know Billy. There’s Teddy Altman, his mother is still in the city. Cassie Lang…” Jess keeps her face even, hiding her recognition of the name. “…I don’t know where her mom lives, but it isn’t New York. And the last one, she doesn’t have any family left and I don’t even know if she has a last name, so…”

Jess nods quickly.

“Alright, Kate. I’m also—“
“I’m sorry, Ms. Jones,” Kate interrupts. The girl sits up straight, eyes moving wildly as she watches something over Jess’s shoulder. “But that’s all I can tell you. My ride is here.”

Kate jumps to her feet at the same moment that Jess turns around to see what she’s been looking at. Jess is met by a sight that she nearly can’t comprehend, and definitely can’t believe. Bright red and gold metal, four fiery repulsors guiding the suit in for a landing. Jess’s breath catches in her throat as Kate runs towards the figure. The helm turns and looks at Jess, gives her a friendly nod before holding out an arm and catching around Kate’s waist. Kate shoves her sunglasses onto her face and gives Jess a small smirk.

There’s a quick blast of energy that blows Jess’s hair back and both figures are gone, shooting up into the sky and disappearing. Jess stumbles to her feet, rushing out onto the frozen grass and looking up, catching only a glint of gold as they disappear into the clouds above.

With numb fingers, Jess pulls her phone from her pocket. She’s barely aware of what she’s doing, dialing quickly, heart racing.

“Jones,” Steve answers. “You got news for me?”

“You saw what?!” Steve cries. From the other side of the room, Bucky looks up at him quizzically.


Jess is stuttering, and it’s nonsense what she’s saying. Steve didn’t know that Jess could become flabbergasted, yet that’s exactly how she sounds.

“Jones, that’s impossible,” Steve insists. “You know that there are no more suits. They all self-destructed when-when…” Even after all these years, it’s still so hard for Steve to say out loud. “…when he died.” Steve takes a shaky breath before continuing. “It was probably one of those government droids, what did you see exactly?”

“No! Rogers, I’m fucking telling you!” Jess practically shouts. “It was an Iron Man suit: red and gold and looking exactly like I remember.”

“Jesus, Jones, calm down!” Steve cries.

Bucky’s brow is furrowed now, giving Steve an insistent, questioning look as he towels off his still wet hair from the shower.

Jess is taking a few deep breaths and Steve hears a shuffling, like she’s walking.

“Look, I got the kids’ names,” Jess says hurriedly. “I found one of them, and she gave me their names, but I still don’t know where they are. And I was talking to her in the park, and suddenly she gets up, says her fucking ride is here, and fucking Iron Man lands in the middle of this fucking park in fucking New York City and grabs her and they fucking fly off!”

“Do you have to tell the story with so many ‘fucks?’” Steve asks.

“Jesus, you sound like my fucking husband,” Jess grumbles.

That makes Steve turn red for no reason.

“So you found the kids?” Steve attempts to clarify.

“Weren’t you fucking listening?” Jess cries. “I have names. We can keep their families safe. But I don’t fucking know where they are, and I have no fucking idea where Bishop went with Iron Man.”

“It’s not Iron Man,” Steve says vehemently.

He’s suddenly angry at the thought of someone impersonating Iron Man, angrier if they somehow have a stolen suit. Bucky’s face is almost pained at this point, and he’s waving his arms frantically trying to get Steve’s attention. But Steve just turns and walks quickly across the room and out onto the balcony.

“You said you have names,” Steve presses. “What are they?”

Those two names, Steve does recognize.

“And there’s one more, but I didn’t get a name on that one,” Jess finishes.

“Hold on,” Steve says. “Cassie Lang, like—“

“Like Scott Lang’s daughter?” Jess finishes for him. “Yeah, I think so.”

“Jesus,” Steve mutters, running a hand through his hair. “Hope was right.”

“Yeah, and Kate Bishop is the daughter of Lourn Bishop.”

“Like the Senator?” Steve clarifies.

“Senator, arms dealer, industrialist,” Jess lists flatly. “All of the above.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Steve half-laughs. “It was his daughter’s wedding right? The other night.”

“Not the same daughter, but yes,” Jess says. “Kate decided to tag along with the other kids afterwards apparently.”

Steve scratches his chin as he thinks, staring out at the lush jungle laid beneath him.

“Okay,” Steve sighs. “Hope can talk to Cassie’s mother. Can you track down Altman and Kaplan? We need to get them to safehouses now before the cops get them.”

“I already got to Kaplan,” Jess replies. “Sent them to Ohio. You want me to get them out of the country?”

“No, send me the information. I’ve got people that can get them out. Is Altman in New York?”

“According to Miss Bishop, his mother lives in the city.”

“Alright, find her, get me the information. I can put people on it,” Steve says, nodding to himself when he hears a knock on the glass. He turns to find Bucky giving him another questioning stare.

“What about the kids?” Jess asks.

Steve sighs again.

“I’m assuming that they’re holed up somewhere safe enough if they haven’t been found yet,” Steve replies, squeezing his eyes shut. “I mean, they’ve got a sorcerer with them, they could be literally anywhere. Their families might have information.”

“And…and Iron Man?” Jess asks uncertainly.

“Leave that to me,” Steve replies, voice hard.

Jess concedes and says goodbye, tells Steve she’ll call when she has more info. Steve tells her to be safe. He knows there’s not much he can say to Jessica Jones, she’s going to do whatever the hell she wants to do. If she wanted protection, she’d ask for it. And in all likelihood, she’s going to pull on this Iron Man string. The mere idea of it has tension between Steve’s shoulders. He huffs and leans against the glass wall that runs the length of the balcony. Behind him, he hears the door slide open.

Steve is grateful that Bucky doesn’t launch into questioning him right away, even though Steve can
tell that he wants to, desperately. But, instead, Bucky just comes up beside Steve, mirroring his position, leaning forward and looking out across the overgrown landscape below. They stay like that for a long moment, listening to the animals and insects and the constant sound of falling water in the near distance. Bucky waits for Steve to speak first.

“Jones saw…” Steve begins slowly, not sure how to say it, or even if he can say it. “…an…Iron Man.”

“What does that mean?” Bucky asks evenly.

“You mean philosophically or…”

Bucky chuckles, and Steve is grateful for that.

“I don’t know,” Steve answers quietly.

Bucky inches closer, closing the space between them so that he can lace his pinky finger around Steve’s. They stay like that for a moment, both just breathing in the humid air, watching the sun drift closer to the horizon. It’s still early, not even dinnertime yet. They had just finished in the shower after a long, stressful day when Steve’s phone rang.

“I think I know what it means,” Bucky says.

Steve looks over at him. Bucky has a serious look in his eyes, still staring out at the jungle, but not really seeing it. His mind is faraway, centuries in the past.

“Do you remember what it was like?” Bucky asks, still not looking up at Steve. “Being like that? Like them? Young. Uncertain about so much, but so fucking sure that you have to do something?” Bucky pauses, biting his lip. “The whole world falling apart around you, felt like it was ending. And you couldn’t just sit there, you had to go do something.”

“Of course I remember that,” Steve breathes.

Bucky looks up at him now, eyes wide, almost pleading.

“You can’t tell them to stop. They won’t stop,” Bucky says. “That’s what it means.”

Steve swallows hard. Bucky’s serious face falls and a half-hearted grin takes its place, as he leans against Steve to jostle him a bit with his shoulder.

“Do you remember when I told you to stop? Do you remember what you told me?” Bucky asks.

“God, Buck, that was almost a hundred years ago.”

“You told me that you had to fight,” Bucky replies immediately. “You said that people were laying down their lives and that you had no right to do any less. Even if it got you killed.”

Steve’s throat has gone dry. Bucky is right, Steve knows that he’s right. Steve can’t fault these kids because, if he were them, if he was young, if the world hadn’t already beaten him down, he would be right there with them. Showing his face, standing up in public and shouting “NO!”

“The world is ending again,” Steve says, voice distant.

“The world is always ending, Rogers,” Bucky sighs, straightening. “The only thing that changes is what you decide to do about it.”
Bucky turns towards Steve, running a hand through his hair and pulling him closer so that he can kiss his forehead. After that, Steve stays motionless, listening to nearly imperceptible sound of Bucky’s bare feet padding through the room. Steve stands there even longer still, staring out across the trees, mind both empty and full at the same time.

Tony Stark is dead, has been dead for a long time. And that’s where the legacy of the Iron Man ends, or so at least Steve has always thought. After the funeral—a surprisingly somber affair, exactly the kind of funeral Steve knows Tony wouldn’t have wanted—Steve had felt numb for so incredibly long. Steve had never been good at losing people, yet losing people seemed to be his specialty. The dark, all-encompassing, inescapable cloud of depression had descended upon him, and he had nearly been lost to it. Tony was only the first of many to be lost to this cause, to Steve’s cause.

The list of names was long, and ever-growing. Heroes falling long before their time beneath the beast that hunts them all, dying because they dared to stand beside Steve. That guilt is something heavy and palpable, it weighs every step Steve takes, every decision that he makes.

Maybe the legacy of Iron Man is not as dead as Steve had thought. Maybe it’s survived. And just maybe, when Steve finally succumbs to the beast, some part of him will survive as well.

Steve can’t decide if that thought is a comfort, or a nightmare.

***

Riri has been in hiding for almost two years now. Left alone with nothing and no one but her computers and her equipment, she often wonders if she’s gone insane. Genius and madness are two sides of the same coin, after all. And Riri has never been certain which one she is. A few years ago, the entire world seemed to agree that she was the former. Because not many twelve year olds are accepted into MIT with a full scholarship. Riri can still remember the pride on her mother’s face, in those brief moments when that same face contorted in absolute terror isn’t clawing along the sides of Riri’s skull.

Being a preteen in college had been difficult, mostly because of the looks. But being a genius at MIT had been almost too easy. It’s not Riri’s fault that she was bored—she needed a hobby and all the robotics clubs at MIT were full of pretentious college kids who didn’t like being shown up by a twelve year old. So Riri had created her own robotics club, so to speak.

Riri had never considered what she was doing “stealing,” per say. Just a reallocation of materials. But campus security hadn’t seen it that way. She was fifteen years old when the police showed up at her mother’s door with a warrant. Riri was “a threat to public safety” and would need to be “relocated.” They were going to seize all of her work; Riri couldn’t stand by idly as everything she had been working on for three years was taken away.

It was a stupid move, putting on the suit. A stupid move that got her mother killed.

Riri’s been alone since then. Alone, that is, until today.

As far as test runs go, this one has gone almost perfectly. Riri hasn’t technically taken the suit out since that fated day two years ago. But when Riri isn’t exchanging computer engineering lessons for Bitcoin on the Deep Web, she’s tinkering, perfecting. Is her suit better than Tony Stark’s suit? Yes. Absolutely. Because she had bought Stark’s design off the Deep Web when she was thirteen. Iron
Man was her starting point, not her goal. And after five years of work, and ten years of technological advances, Riri has a suit that’s better than Stark’s in every way.

The best upgrade? Well, that’s the Liquid Metal tech, by far. A material of her own design—Riri had also purchased Orninion, an alien substance left over from the Great Invasion, on the Deep Web. The calculations on that material alone had taken almost eight damn months. But Riri had finally gotten the combination right. Mixed with a molten Gold alloy and Hydrogen in an incredibly volatile chemical equation, the Orninion had settled into a cold, vicious, conductive material that could be molded, reshaped, hardened, and changed via electrical currents. After that, all it took was forty eight nano-conductive injections along Riri’s spinal column and brain stem and she had the kind of technology that she knew most countries would literally kill for.

“Holy crap,” Kate Bishop breathes, watching as Riri’s suit melts away like water, taking an ill-defined form behind her as Riri steps out onto the concrete. “You were not kidding.”

Riri pulls her hood down, letting her wild hair spring free, before she pushes her glasses back onto her face.

“Catherine Bishop,” Riri says, extending an awkward hand. “Glad to finally meet you in person. You can call me Riri.”

Kate’s eyes are saucers as she shakes Riri’s hand.

“This is too cool,” Kate is saying. “Like, this is better than you made it sound. That’s a legit Iron Man suit!”

“I told you that my design was…perfected,” Riri responds uncertainly. She’s not very good at...other people.

“No, girl, this is better than perfected! Look at this thing!”

Kate is prodding at the floating, shimmering mass now. With a thought, Riri solidifies the mass and it falls with a heavy clang onto the ground.

“I would recommend not touching the Liquid Metal,” Riri says, wiping her hands on her jeans with a small frown. “It is a highly volatile material.”

Kate’s face is still awe-filled as she regards Riri. The sudden scrutiny makes Riri balk, and her shoulders round as she takes a few steps back, ducking her eyes. Her face is suddenly feeling very hot.

“Wait until the other guys meet you,” Kate laughs. “They’re not going to fucking believe it.”

Riri chews on her lip. The suit begins to react to her emotional state, rising up from the ground and opening. Riri almost ducks inside. She hasn’t actually...spoken to anybody face to face in a few years. It’s a little much. The idea of a crowd is making Riri feel a bit nauseous.

“The look on Jones’ face when you showed up,” Kate muses, shaking her head. “And look at these things!” Kate cries, lunging and grabbing Riri’s hand in her own, turning it over to examine the gloves of the repulsor exoskeleton. “Just like Tony Stark!”

“Well, his repulsor design was quite revolutionary,” Riri replies tensely, tugging her hand free. “Though I streamlined the design quite a bit.”

“You are a legit, real life super genius, aren’t you?” Kate laughs, pulling out her phone.
A chime sounds in Riri’s ear piece. Their location has just been broadcasted. Panic flares in Riri’s chest and the suit responds, wrapping around her immediately.

“Who did you just send our location to?” Riri demands.

“Relax,” Kate says. “Just wait till you see this.”

Riri almost flies away. She almost leaves Kate Bishop on that rooftop. She almost goes back to the hole she’s been hiding in and decides to stay there forever. She’s so, so far out of her comfort zone right now. But she doesn’t. She stays standing there because she has to. Because she has to avenge her mother’s death. Because if Riri runs now, she may never get another chance to take a stand again. So she ignores the alarms—both figurative and literal—going off in her head and decides to trust Kate Bishop.

A moment later, a blue light erupts to Kate’s left and Riri watches in disbelief as a boy appears there. There’s nothing spectacular or extraordinary about the boy’s appearance. He’s just a dark haired boy in blue jeans who is staring at her with just as much disbelief in his eyes that Riri’s helmet is hiding in her own.

“Is that…” the boy gasps, grabbing blindly for Kate, not wanting to take his eyes off of Riri.

“It’s everything that you think and more, Kaplan,” Kate replies with a smirk. “Get us out of here. I think the rest of the team is going to want to meet Riri.”

***

Riri Williams is something else. Tall and lanky, hair a mass of tight curls to rival America’s. She’s socially awkward and reserved, nothing like her predecessor. Yet she appears to be just as brilliant and revolutionary as Tony Stark in every way. When she finally came out of her extraordinary suit, Billy could see the discomfort at the sudden fanfare in the girl’s eyes, and his heart went out to her. The rest of the team was losing their minds, and rightfully so. Even America seemed speechless, and that was probably a first. The questions went flying, but Riri’s answers were so technologically precise and full of words that Billy had never heard before, that he doubted anybody understood what she was talking about, not even Kate Bishop, who had just been dethroned as the team’s genius.

When Billy notices Riri’s anxiety peaking, he takes pity on her. He knows that feeling, all too well, after all.

“Hey, how about I take you on a tour of Minas Tirith?” Billy suggests.

Riri’s face lights up at the Lord of the Rings reference.

“What’d you call it?” Kate asks.

Billy brushes Kate off because Riri is nodding frantically, recognizing an out when she sees one.

They walk in silence for a while, and Billy doesn’t press Riri to talk. He can almost feel the relief flooding off of her. As they duck through the small corridors, the ever floating mass of metal hovers just behind Riri. Billy doesn’t pretend to understand the technology, but he bets it must be nice. To always have a literal suit of armor following you around, Billy can see the appeal.
Of course, most of the rooms in the castle are unused. Billy shows Riri the main room, the “shower” room, and the courtyard that they plan to turn into their training area. It’s a short tour. Riri just nods silently along, peering around with wide brown eyes.

“Well, that’s kind of everything,” Billy says with a shrug once they’re back in the main room.

“How did you teleport?” Riri blurts, fixing him with an incredibly serious look, like Billy’s an equation that she’s suddenly decided to solve.

Billy chuckles a bit and shrugs.

“I don’t really know how it works, like, scientifically,” he explains. “If that’s what you’re asking.”

“So how do you control it?” Riri presses, the shimmering mass behind her becoming wide and flat and perfectly smooth.

Billy shrugs again.

“I just concentrate,” he says. “And I say the words out loud, like a spell I guess.”

Riri cocks her head in disbelief. Billy just holds up his hands.

“I would love to run some tests on that,” Riri concludes with a curt nod.

“Okay,” Billy says. “Does that mean you’ll join the team?”

Riri’s face screws up again, and the mass behind her begins to twist and spin.

“I’m still uncertain about the directive,” Riri admits.

Billy can’t help but to laugh a little bit.

“Yeah, I think we’re all pretty uncertain about the directive at this point,” Billy says with a smile. “What did Kate tell you?”

“Miss Bishop told me that you were standing up against the Hard Line Policies,” Riri replies. “However, she failed to specify how precisely. And I didn’t push her to further elaborate. I just…” she trails off, her eyes wandering down the hall over Billy’s shoulder, unfocused. She clears her throat. “However, I am of the mind that the Hard Line Policies are barbaric and need to be abolished immediately. I feared that if I forwent this opportunity, another would not present itself.”

“Do you have family in New York?” Billy asks.

Riri shakes her head quickly, not meeting Billy’s eyes.

“Well, I think that it would be alright if you moved in here. The more the merrier!” Billy says brightly. Riri furrows her brow. “And then decide if you want to come Avenging with us later.”

Riri cocks her head again, finally bringing her eyes to Billy’s and staring so hard at him that he begins to shift awkwardly.

“Really?” she asks.

“Yeah, really. Everyone would love to have you here.”

“Can I…Would I be able to bring my laboratory equipment?” she asks seriously.
“Totally,” Billy replies. “I can teleport it all here. And you can have literally any room you want for it.”

Billy is caught off guard when Riri suddenly closes the space between them and hugs him hard. He hugs her back with a small laugh. She pulls away almost as quickly as she had come, blushing hard.

“I apologize,” she mutters, averting her eyes. “I am not very good at…social interactions.”

“Well, lucky for you, I’m a hugger,” Billy replies lightly.

Riri looks up at him, grinning wide. Her shoulders roll back a bit, the metal mass behind her becoming something akin to a lava lamp.

“Then I would very much like to join your team,” Riri announces with a sharp nod.

Billy’s smile widens even further.

“Well then, Riri Williams, welcome to the Young Avengers.”

Chapter End Notes

Short chapter, but next chapter we get to some action! Yay!
And yes, I replaced Iron Lad with Riri Williams. I'm not a huge fan of time travel lol.
But don't worry, there are gonna be more Young Avengers joining the party ;)
Chapter Seven

Chapter Summary

Whew, this chapter took me forever. Some serious writers block. Let me know what you think! And I should have another chapter coming up real soon.

Teddy struggles to his feet, panting hard. They’ve been at this for hours now, the sun over the courtyard is already beginning to tip low towards the sea. The already chilly weather is getting an uncomfortable bite to it, despite the almost gallons of sweat pouring off of Teddy from the rigorous work out. For her part, America prowls around Teddy like an animal. She doesn’t say a word, just circles and breaths hard through her nose.

“Good,” Kate snaps. “Again!”

Teddy groans. He’s had his ass kicked again and again. No matter the form he takes, he’s continually bested. He tries not to let it damage his ego too badly—America has spent two hundred years training in combat after all, and it definitely shows—but they’ve been training for over three weeks now, and Teddy hasn’t even come close to beating America once.

The training has been grueling. Every morning, instead of going to school, Kate shows up at the castle. They train in hand to hand combat all morning long, Kate shouting directions, correcting their form, running them through drills. After lunch, they practice with their individual powers, pushing their limits, seeing just how far they can go. For Teddy that means having a tablet rapidly show pictures of different people and animals, and attempting to imitate or copy. He’s found his powers do have limits. He can only become so large or so small; he can imitate a person’s outward appearance but can’t acquire their powers; his organs can only shift so much before they become damaged. After that is sparring until sundown. Teddy is always matched with America, their super strength is almost even. Billy and Cassie pair together, keeping the use of their powers to a minimum. Every so often, Kate steps in. She’s always able to best any of them, even America. Her knowledge of fighting styles is immense, and every day after they have finished, Billy takes her home, where she trains with her own teacher, constantly improving.

Riri Williams spends most of her days in her laboratory, equipment all brought over by Billy. Occasionally she joins them in her suit, practicing until she becomes frustrated and retreats. Everyone on the team desperately wants her to officially join, but she insists on keeping her head down for now. She definitely contributes in other ways. After Kate’s tip about the Red District, Riri was able to infiltrate their systems, hacking their cameras, getting building layouts, figuring out how many captives they have. Every night, Riri, Kate, and America hole up in the lab and discuss the plan. Teddy would normally want in on that kind of meeting, but by most nights, he’s so dog tired that he collapses into his new bed, in his new room. Because with Kate’s thievery and Riri’s “reallocation of funds,” their hideout has definitely been upgraded. They each have their own room, with ever growing amenities.

On the weekend, they have what Kate calls a Meelee. She wasn’t lying when she said that she was rich. Every few days she shows up with some new piece of furniture, training equipment, or gadget for the team. One such gadget is a cadre of programmable robots, used by the military for training scenarios. Using their powers and working together, they fight to best the mechanical foes, each
time their settings becoming higher and harder to defeat. The team had struggled through the fights, forced to learn to work together. That was until Riri decided to join them. Once, and only once, she lined up with them. And the team got to learn just how advanced her Iron Man suit really is.

Those robotic enemies barely stood a chance. That was the last time they trained with the droids, because after Riri mowed them all down within seconds, they were definitely going to have to be replaced.

Teddy isn’t sure what he imagined being a super hero was going to be like. But it wasn’t this. Of course, he understands the necessity, and he is unquestionably getting stronger, faster, better. But a day off is long overdue, and the hours bleed into days bleed into weeks, all blending together. He thinks that they could use a day off.

Kate is waiting impatiently for them to begin again, her arms crossed and eyes narrow. Teddy finally straightens and falls into a defensive position, growing plated skin over the new weak spots America had found. But America has put her hands on her hips.

“I think that’s enough for today,” America says, throwing a glance towards Kate.

Kate raises an eyebrow.

“I think we’re ready,” America declares.

“I don’t think so,” Kate retorts.

“Well, I am the captain of this team, and I say that it’s time we start doing what we set out to do in the first place.”

Kate’s jaw tenses, but America holds up a hand, taking careful steps towards Kate.

“I appreciate your help,” America says, voice becoming uncharacteristically gentle. “You’re a good teacher, Kate.”

“The best!” Cassie adds, walking towards them.

“I agree with America,” Billy says, following Cassie. “It’s time for a field test. We need to help those people in the Red District.”

“And when are we going to go to Avengers Manor?” Cassie asks.

Kate nods silently, seemingly contemplating. She shifts her weight back and forth as she thinks and the group moves in tighter. Teddy has to agree with the rest of the group. Maybe it’s reckless, maybe they aren’t ready yet. But this is a war, and Teddy is ready to fight.

“So, captain, what do you want to do?” Kate asks, looking up at America.

America seems a bit taken aback. Teddy is as well. Kate is headstrong, a force of nature. But she’s been espousing the merits of teamwork for the last two months. And America is their leader.

“Well, I think I have a plan,” America says resolutely, face going stony.

The group looks around at each other—everyone wears the same determination on their face. Teddy catches Billy’s eye from across their small circle. Billy nods at him, short and sharp. That’s all that Teddy needs, he’s ready to do this.

“Alright, Young Avengers,” America announces, “time to suit up.”
They may not have the Avengers gear yet, but Kate’s father’s company has multiple military contracts. She’s been periodically raiding his warehouses for the last few weeks (although, Teddy suspects she’s been “borrowing” for far longer), a little at a time. Teddy wonders if her father has started to become suspicious, but Kate has always assured the group that her father barely notices where she is or what she does. She’s been hacking into her school’s systems and counting herself as present and slipping her body guards every morning. Teddy wonders how long she can keep that up before somebody begins to notice. But anytime he asks her, Kate just waves it off and tells him not to worry.

By now, with all of Kate’s pilfering, they have some better costumes. And after much deliberation, Cassie has decided on all of their codenames. Somehow, Hulking stuck for Teddy. He hadn’t liked it much at first, but it was starting to grow on him. There’s something comforting about the throwback. There’s no denying that the Avengers are their inspiration, especially with a name like the Young Avengers. There’s something to be said about brand recognition. Teddy had actually had a long talk with Billy about just that. There’s nobody who knows as much about the Avengers as Billy, save for an actual Avenger. The Avengers had protected the world countless times, had saved lives, had changed the world in so many ways. Public opinion of them was turned by President North. And if the Young Avengers are going to stand up to everything that President North has enacted since then, then taking up the mantle of the original Avengers seems fitting—even if they were still being called terrorists after the church, there are still people out there who know the truth.

Billy is still Wiccan and Cassie, Stature. Cassie had insisted that America be “Miss America.”

“You mean, like the beauty pageant?” America had scoffed. “Isn’t that a little on the nose? I’m not even American.”

But just like Teddy, America had come around to her codename in time.

Kate’s had been a little tougher. Cassie had originally wanted to call her Hawkingbird. But Kate had outright refused.

“It’s Hawkeye,” Kate had said resolutely, in a tone that made it clear it wasn’t up for discussion.

Inside the castle, in the room they had all come to call the Locker Room, they each pull on their uniforms. Cassie in a suit made of a special fabric that could stretch and retain its shape—though there still wasn’t anything that Kate could find thus far that could also shrink as Cassie did. Teddy blushed when he thinks about how many times he’s seen that girl naked after shrinking out of her clothes and unsuccessfully growing back into them. America pulls on her now customary tank top and shorts, with a pair of military grade combat boots and her Captain America jacket. Kate’s costume is probably the most gaudy: a bright purple tank top with armored sleeves and low slung, matching purple pants, accessorized with an obscene amount of weapons, to include a specially made bow and bundle of arrows as archery was, somehow, another one of her strong suits.

Teddy pulls on his simple black, sleeveless, woven Kevlar top and matching bottoms. He keeps his feet bare and his costume roomy, to allow for himself to shift as needed. He finishes zipping up his top and turns around, catching a glimpse of Billy.

Teddy has no idea how long her stares, his mouth open and eyes wide as Billy laces up his boots. His costume is all smooth lines and tight fabric and the silhouette is creates is a bit breathtaking. Billy straightens, not noticing Teddy as he secures a high necked, half cape over one of his shoulders. When he runs his fingers through his perpetually messy hair, Billy finally catches a glimpse of Teddy outright staring.
Billy shifts nervously.

“What?” he half laughs. “The cape too much?”

Teddy shakes himself out of his stupor.

“No,” Teddy replies quickly, breathless for no reason. “Not at all, I think…I think it’s perfect.”

That makes Billy blush and grin his ever-enduring crooked smile. He looks down at himself self-consciously.

“Really? You think it’s alright?” Billy asks sheepishly.

“Alright?” Teddy laughs. “It’s gorgeous!”

Teddy immediately snaps his mouth shut and can feel a blush running up his cheeks. He sputters for a moment as Billy cocks his head.

“Not you, the outfit,” Teddy corrects. “Not that you’re not gorgeous…uh, I mean…we should probably,” Teddy gestures desperately over at the rest of the group.

Billy just grins some more.

“Yeah, probably.”

Riri appears then, her customary owlish look on her face. She and Billy have seemed to bond over the course of the last few weeks. They’re a pair of nerds, and it makes Teddy smile whenever he catches them discussing their favorite fantasy characters or role playing games. Teddy’s even found them in Riri’s lab, playing some video game together, Riri uncharacteristically hyper-verbal as she shouts at Billy to throw his spell or hand her a sword. Even when Billy has real magic at his disposal, he still gets so much enjoyment from the make-believe fantasy worlds. It’s enduring. Of course, Teddy thinks, everything about Billy is enduring.

“Hey there, Williams,” Billy greets casually, shaking Teddy out of his thoughts. “You gonna suit up with us?”

It had taken about a week and half, but Riri was no longer followed around by a floating mass of metal, like some sort of perverted puppy on its owner’s heel.

Riri looks around nervously at everyone in their costumes.

“I think I’m going to man the fort back here, so to speak,” she answers, flailing her hands awkwardly.

“We could really use your fire power out there,” Teddy says, earning him a harsh look from both Billy and Riri.

“Williams is gonna be our eyes and ears,” Kate interrupts, clapping Riri on the shoulder, making the girl jump. “And rescue party if necessary.”

Teddy knows that Kate means it as a joke, but everyone in the group balks at the idea; a harsh reminder that what they’re about to do is dangerous.

America joins their small huddle, a stern look on her face, closely followed by Cassie.

There’s a long, somber moment where they all watch one another carefully. Teddy isn’t sure what
they’re looking for—a sign of weakness, maybe; or a reason to call the whole thing off. In any case, Teddy keeps his face trained. The moment is heavy and seems to stretch on forever. Everyone’s senses are heightened, their nerves are almost palpable at this point. You can feel the tension in the air.

It’s a big moment, and the gravity isn’t lost on Teddy. They’re going back. They’ve been branded terrorists, marked for elimination after their first impromptu mission. And in President North’s world, that means that they should stay away. But they’re not. The Young Avengers aren’t going to be scared away, they’re going to make a stand, and they’re going to show President North and the world that they’re not afraid. This moment is big, bigger than all of them, bigger than anything Teddy ever thought he would be a part of in his life. So even though the fear is there, boiling low in his gut, he puts on his bravest face.

Riri is messing with a tablet, pulling up a hologram of the layout of the compound. America looks around at all of them, gauging their faces. Beside him, Teddy feels Billy’s hand brush against his, his pinky finger looping around Teddy’s. Teddy swallows hard and stares back at America, opening his palm and taking Billy’s entire hand in his.

“We’re ready,” Teddy says with a sharp, meaningful nod.

“Good,” America replies tersely. She looks around at them once more with gravitas. It’s once again heavy, but her face almost immediately breaks into an almost impish smirk. An eyebrow cocked, there’s a faint twinkle in her eye that lets Teddy and all the rest know that America is ready for this, she’s been waiting for this moment and she’s practically giddy at its arrival. “Young Avengers, shall we begin?”

***

Peter has been in-country on some much need convalescence for nearly a month now. His last mission had been…sticky, to put it lightly. But he had gotten his team out alive, and that’s what matters. They’d been on that mission for over a year, deep undercover in Italy. So of course his team had been put in for Green Cycle and allowed some leave. Peter’s been lounging by the pool with Jess for a few weeks now, his team scattered to the wind to catch up on some much needed rest and family time.

When Peter had first met Jessica Drew, he had hated her. A copy-cat, in his mind, and worse: a bad guy. Employed by what remained of Hydra in the early 20’s, a kill order of all metas had come down and she had barely escaped with her life. With nowhere left to go, she had shown up in Wakanda. After a pseudo-trial in which none other than Black Widow testified for leniency, Rogers had assigned Peter as Jess’ handler.

But Jess had grown on Peter. Her parents were both renowned scientists and she had practically grown up in a lab. Bad news for her, because by 15 she was dying of radiation poisoning. In a last-ditch attempt to save their daughter, her parents had injected her with the same experimental spider venom that had given Peter his powers. Then they had shoved her in a genetic accelerator and, fleeing from criminal charges for their human experimentation, had left the country and their still comatose daughter, leaving her in the care of the company that employed them. That company sold her, still in the accelerator, to Hydra. She had woken in an underground training cell, still 15 years old with a new set of super powers, and trained to be the first of a new line of Black Widows. She had been used, abandoned, manipulated, and brain washed. And Peter wasn’t a goddam monster.
He gave her a chance, and she had proved herself beyond his expectations.

They had been inseparable friends for a long time. The Spider Twins, people liked to call them.

Life had been hard since the Great Invasion. There was turmoil and there was pain. There was loss in numbers that Peter could barely comprehend. His own personal losses—Aunt May, Gwen, Mr. Stark—were mere drops in the bucket. But Jess had always been there for him, and he for her. Somehow, in the mess of what was left of the world, they had finally found each other. And there was something comforting about charging into battle with Jess. She was putting herself into danger but she was always unflappable—calm, composed, laser-focused, and a furious force of vengeance on their enemies. She had saved Peter’s life more times than he could count, and he could count pretty high. There was something even more comforting in the moments like this, when the blood and the dirt has been washed away, but there is still so much danger in Jess’ form. That fury, always barely contained, simmering behind her eyes, prepared to exact on anyone who dares cross her. Peter has never known a woman like Jess, and having her is like riding an asteroid—dangerous but exhilarating, every moment knowing that he could burn up in the fire of her soul, but not caring because the ride is intoxicating.

They’ve been in their private villa for weeks now. It’s not large; just a few rooms circling a small lap pool, over an underground gym. The African sun is beating down on them, and the difficulties of the last mission slip like sand from Peter’s mind as Jess’s fingers caress his skin and run through his hair. Jess smells like heaven but she tastes of damnation, and Peter is more than happy to be dragged into the hellfire. His hands clench hard on her hips as she gyrates against him, mouth hot and hungry against his.

A loud buzzer shakes them both from their catharsis. Peter jumps, scrambling at the sound, but Jess simply goes still, throwing her dark hair over her shoulder and staring with narrow eyes at the door across the courtyard.

Natasha Romanoff comes striding through the door, seemingly unimpressed with the vision she is met with. She walks right up to them, green eyes focused on Peter.

“Parker,” Romanoff says coolly, “Major Nomad would like a word with you.”


“Just come with me,” Romanoff replies in a bored tone.

Jess sighs heavily, climbing off of Peter’s lap and not bothering to scoop up her bikini top before she dives into the pool. Peter is ever-clumsy out of uniform, stumbling to his feet and grabbing up whatever clothing he can.

“Should I change?” Peter asks, holding up his flip flops.

“No,” is all Romanoff gives him.

So, in his swim suit and T-shirt, Peter follows Romanoff to the pods. The redhead is brisk as always, barely bothering Peter with a second glance as she leads him into one of the small rail cars.

“Is this about my last mission?” Peter asks uncertainly.

“No,” Romanoff replies once more, not adding anything else. Peter takes the hint and stays silent. He’s surprised when they bypass the official headquarters and meeting rooms, and head instead
towards the far edge of the compound. Major Nomad’s personal quarters. Peter can say that he’s
never been given an invitation to Rogers’ private grounds. That’s not really Rogers’ style. He
prefers formality, Peter knows that well enough. So the fact that the pod stops at Rogers’ personal
villa makes Peter more nervous than ever.

Peter has always had a hard time understanding his relationship with Steve Rogers. Once Captain
America, he had been one of Peter’s heroes. Peter had officially joined the Avengers during the
Great Invasion, the same time that Rogers had reunited with Mr. Stark. Peter had still been a kid, not
even eighteen, and he had been swept up in tidal wave that was the aftermath of the Great Invasion,
just along for the ride and hoping to please, not really grasping exactly what was happening to the
world until it was far too late. Peter had been there when President North instated his first Hard Line
Policy, he had been there when the Avengers were driven off American soil, he had been there when
they had relocated to Wakanda, and he had joined in the battle to defend Bucky Barnes from
extradition (even if he hadn’t fully comprehended the consequences of his actions there). Then Tony
Stark died, and everything happened so quickly. Peter was branded an outlaw, a terrorist. He had
barely gotten Aunt May and Gwen out of the country before the police had come knocking at their
doors. More and more metas arrived in Wakanda every day. There were internment camps popping
up all over the world. There were battles, protests, black ops missions, and rapidly changing political
climates. And somehow, Peter had found himself in the middle of it all.

But Peter had always known that whatever whirlwind he was in, Steve Rogers was in a veritable
hurricane himself. With so many new metas and political dissenters seeking refuge, and a majority of
them looking to fight back, Steve had taken what was left of the Avengers and given them each a
specialized team. Suddenly, Peter had gone from “the kid” to leader of his own special forces. Then
the missions started, and there had never really been time to make any kind of personal connection
with Rogers. Rogers had taken on a new name, a new identity, a new look, and had started a new
team: the Rebels Without Flags. Every interaction Peter had had with Rogers in the last fifteen years
had been short and formal. Peter probably knew more about Steve Rogers than a large majority of
the people in their compound, and he didn’t really know much. Rogers had been used to being a
symbol, so he had transitioned easily from the symbol of America to the symbol of something else
entirely. And Peter knew that that was the way Rogers preferred it.

Peter knew most people thought that Spiderman was part of the inner circle, and maybe he was. But
he had never been interested in the pervasive politics of this place. He had always been more than
happy to leave that to Rogers and the even more elusive King T’Challa. Even though Peter had had
countless one on one conversations with Major Nomad, they had always been formal, always about
the mission, never personal.

Romanoff leaves Peter in front of a large wooden door, turning and stalking away without a word.
Peter balks for a moment, almost calling after her, but eventually turns and knocks on the door. It
swings open on its own, leading Peter into what looks like a large sitting room. Peter steps through
the door, looking about, and his eyes fall on none other than Bucky Barnes.

Barnes is something else entirely. Peter has interacted with him a total of three times. He is an entity
wholly different from Steve Rogers, yet so intricately entwined that it’s impossible to separate the
two. Somehow, this living, breathing man is more legend than he is human. Peter once fought
within an inch of his life to protect Barnes from extradition, yet he’s only spoken a handful of words
with the man. As far as Peter knows, Barnes does what he wants, when he wants, and answers only
to Rogers. Something of an enigma on the compound, when he is spotted outside of Rogers’ private
villa, it fuels weeks of rumors amongst the foot soldiers and refugees of the RWF. Because Barnes
isn’t a soldier, he doesn’t charge into battle like the rest of them, not even at the side of Steve
Rogers. No, his purpose is something far darker and deadlier than a simple soldier. And if he is seen
leaving the compound, everyone knows that it’s because something monumental is about to happen.
Barnes looks up at Peter, face absolutely unreadable. Peter freezes the way he would if he were faced with a jungle cat, and like a jungle cat, Barnes turns and prowls out of the room without a word; all taught muscle and sinew yet not making a sound, not even a footfall. Peter is left alone and uncomfortable for a long moment before Rogers comes striding into the room, hair messy and damp and a grin on his face.

“Peter!” Rogers calls, uncharacteristically bright. Peter doesn’t think that Rogers has ever used his first name before.

“Steve,” Peter replies uncertainly, wishing he had pockets to stuff his hands into.

Steve gets close to him, his hands moving as if he is going to shake Peter’s hand but decides against it. Instead, Rogers takes a few steps back and attempts to sit casually on one of the couches.

“Sit,” Rogers says, smile still in place.

Peter awkwardly sits in one of the arm chairs, wiping his sweating hands on his still damp swim suit. There is a long silence in which the two men simply look at each other, each expecting the other to speak first.

“Sir, what is this about?” Peter finally asks cautiously.

“No need for formality, Peter,” Rogers says, putting his forearms on his knees and leaning forward. “How long have we known each other?”

Peter pauses, doing the math.

“Well, we met in 2016, technically,” Peter replies slowly, a memory he won’t ever forget dancing along the edges of his mind. “So I guess seventeen years?”

“Right,” Rogers says distantly, nodding his head. “How old were you then?”

“In 2016?” Peter clarifies.

Rogers nods vigorously.

“I was fifteen,” Peter says.

“Tony recruited you at fifteen?” Steve asks, disbelief in his voice despite the fact that Peter knows he knows this.

“Yeah, I was pretty young, I guess,” Peter replies, uncertainty still coloring his voice.

“What was it like?” Steve asks quickly.

Peter is a bit taken aback. He settles Rogers with a suspicious stare before shrugging.

“It was…” Peter tries to think back, to a time before, when everything was so incredibly different. “Being honest, it was amazing.” Peter laughs a bit to himself. “I wanted to be an Avenger so badly. It’s all I wanted back then, to be honest. It was my dream and my goal. I wanted to make a difference. But, I guess that’s what every kid wants, ya’know? To feel like they matter. To feel like…like their life will mean something great.”

Peter looks up, not realizing he was talking into his hands. But Rogers had a faraway look on his face, eyes focused on the wall just behind Peter’s head. Peter furrows his brow, but Rogers still seems to be caught in a memory.
Finally, Steve’s face breaks into a half grin. He nods slowly, eyes focusing back on Peter.

“You know, I felt the same way when I was a kid,” Steve says, voice still a bit distant. He cocks his head. “Wanting your life to mean something great.’ That’s a good way to put it.”

Peter looks back at his hands.

“Well, you know,” Peter replies with a shrug. “I think most kids feel that way.” Peter looks back up at Rogers. “Before the world beats you down, forces you to submit…” Peter shakes his head softly, remembering the feeling. That feeling of absolute possibility. “You think you’re invincible. And you think that you’re destined for something. You want to be destined for something. And not just something mundane, ya’know? All the adults around you are telling you that you’re going to follow in their footsteps, that you’re gonna keep your head down and do what everyone else is doing. But when you’re young, you don’t want that. You want your name to be remembered. You want your life to mean something…astronomical.”

Rogers again has a faraway look on his face, nodding vaguely.

“Why are you asking me this, all of a sudden, Major?” Peter presses.

Rogers eyes snap back to Peter’s face.

“Please, you can call me Steve,” Rogers replies. “Like you said…seventeen years.”

“Okay, Steve,” Peter says carefully. “Why are you asking me this?”

Steve gets to his feet abruptly, walking across the room and scooping a tablet up from a nearby table. He taps it a few times, projecting a holographic screen before Peter. It’s a news report, terrorists in New York City, one Peter has seen, albeit briefly while undercover.

“You’ve seen this?” Steve asks.

Peter shrugs.

“They’re kids,” Steve says abruptly. “Meta kids. They call themselves the Young Avengers.”

Peter’s eyes widen.

“From the intel I’ve gathered, they’re all just teenagers,” Steve continues.

“But who is leading them?” Peter asks.

Steve taps his screen again, this time pulling up a picture of a teenage girl with a mess of curly dark hair, caramel colored skin, and sharp, dark eyes glaring into the camera.

“All I know is her name is America. She’s a kid, and she’s from Arcadia.”

“No,” Peter breathes.

Peter knows about Arcadia, because he has been there. Jess got a formal invitation back in 2024 to visit, something rarely offered. The island, risen from the depths of the sea in 2015 by mystical forces that Peter couldn’t even begin to understand, was an absolute paradise—while also being the training grounds for the greatest warriors Peter had ever seen. Their entire civilization was built on the constant training and maintenance of their armies. Every fifty years or so, a group of Arcadians were sent to the surface world to assist with current conflicts. A military force raised in ancient times, they were kept hidden from the world for centuries until the influx of alien invasions forced
them out of hiding. Still secretive and veiled for many years after that, they sent countless warriors to
tip the scales in global conflicts until they were “officially” discovered by President North’s
expeditionary forces in 2025. The island was small, inhabited by no more than 1,000 warrior
women. Yet they held off North’s special forces attacks for four years before succumbing. A
majority of the women were slaughtered on sight, considered too much of a threat to be left alive.
The small minority that remained were taken into custody for experimentation. As far as Peter knew,
there were no survivors.


“Why are you telling me this?” Peter asks.

“Because,” Steve replies, “I was just going to take them into custody and make them stop. They’re
all minors after all. But…” Steve trails off for a moment, eyes drifting. “I remembered that I don’t
get to decide who is and who isn’t a hero. And if these kids want to be heroes, who am I to stop
them?”

“So…” Peter presses awkwardly.

“So I want you to find them and talk to them. I want you running recon on this operation. Because I
thought that if anyone would know what it was like to be in their shoes, it would be you,” Steve says
seriously, head nodding sharply.

“You want me to infiltrate them?” Peter laughs. “If you haven’t noticed, I’m not actually a teenager
anymore.”

“No,” Steve replies shortly. “No, I tried to send someone to infiltrate them.” Steve pauses and grins
to himself. But the smile is gone quickly. “Have you met Jessica Jones?”

“I haven’t had the pleasure,” Peter says with a shrug, and it’s true. He’s certainly heard of Jessica
Jones, but he doesn’t really even know what she looks like.

“Well, let’s just say that what I want now is someone to level with these kids,” Steve laughs
awkwardly, running a hand through his messy hair.

Peter pauses for a long moment. His mind is already made up, it was made up a while ago. As soon
as Steve mentioned teenagers calling themselves the Young Avengers, Peter knew that this was a job
for him. Because a small part of him is still that teenage boy, that kid with bright eyes and a full
heart, wanting nothing but to make the world a better place. Peter doesn’t care what Steve’s
motivations behind asking him might be. Because that kind of determination, that dedication to doing
what’s right no matter what was drained from him, ever so slowly, over the past ten years. Where
once Peter was idealistic and full of hope, he is now cynical and full of nothing but regret and desire
for revenge. But the kid he used to be, the kid Spiderman used to be, that was another person
altogether. That was someone with faith and with hope. And Peter would give anything to return to
that, and somehow, he knows that Steve would too.

“Alright,” Peter replies. He nods and looks Steve in the eye, pausing shortly to take a deep breath.
“I’ll find the kids.”
Kate is with Billy, sweeping the east building. So far, they’ve avoided detection. But they both know that they can’t continue under the radar for long. They move quickly through the lower floor. There’s a man sitting at a desk with his feet up near the first stairwell. A rifle is leaned against the desk. Billy uses his powers to grab the rifle as Kate comes up behind the guy, putting one arm around his throat and the other hand over his mouth, holding tight until the man goes still and slumps in his chair.

They head up the stairs, Billy’s feet never touching the ground, just floating along behind Kate like some sort of phantom. The second floor is being patrolled by two guys with guns. Billy and Kate exchange a glance before splitting up. There’s a flash of blue light, and Billy shakily uses some of the training that Kate has been giving him, lunging towards the guy and electrocuting him with a touch. Kate prefers more hands-on means. She roundhouse kicks the guy hard in the gut, sending him into the wall. He sputters and Kate charges, hitting him in the face with her right fist, followed by her right elbow. She gets her hands on the rifle, kicking the man again to get it away from him before hitting him hard in the head with the butt of the weapon. He crumbles to the floor.

Kate grins, the rifle in hand, when suddenly the weapon turns to sand and tumbles to the floor.

“Hey!” Kate hisses.

“No guns,” Billy reminds her, face looking a little pale.

Kate grumbles, rolling her eyes and following close behind Billy’s fluttering cape. According to Riri, the prisoners are kept on the third floor, in specially designed, power dampening rooms. Kate adjusts the small camera attached to her headband.

“Stop messing with the camera,” Williams chides in Kate’s ear.

Kate grumbles again, but has to keep quiet. Billy has paused at the foot of the next stair case. There’s bounds to be more guards on the third floor. He looks back at Kate with wide eyes. She watches his throat working, swallowing down shaky gulps of air. Kate gives him a concerned look, but Billy just shivers and shakes his head, looking away from her.

“You get the security system reset yet?” Kate breaths to Riri.

“Still working on it,” Williams replies. “Trust me, you’ll know when it happens.”

Kate glances up at Billy and gives him a quick nod. His jaw tightens and he turns towards the stairwell, his feet slowly touching the ground. Kate goes first up the stairs, holding her breath as she reaches the first landing. She unslings her bow, drawing an arrow and nocking it in a practiced motion. Billy meets her eyes once again. Kate is just pulling her gaze away when the alarm begins.

A screaming, repetitive tone, loud enough to wake everyone in three square miles. The emergency lights begin to blink angry red. Both Kate and Billy jump when it begins.

“Team One’s been compromised,” America shouts in their ear, making Kate cringe.

Kate’s attention is drawn by the pair of men bounding down the stairs towards them, hands on their weapons, eyes wide when they see Billy and Kate. Kate takes aim and looses her arrow. It hits the furthest man in the chest, and Kate grabs the end of her metal bow, brandishing it like a club and swinging at the man charging at her. There’s a sickening crack when the metal meets his skull and he goes stumbling down the steps. Kate and Billy jump over the crumpled bodies as they race upstairs.

The next floor has seven men, all turning with furious glares towards them. Kate glances over at
Billy once again. Billy is frozen, mouth opening and closing uncertainly as his eyes stare across the hall.

“Kaplan!” Kate cries.

Billy gives her a surprised glance, pupils nothing but pinpoints. Kate reaches for him, grabbing him around the back of the neck to throw them both to the ground, avoiding the sudden spray of bullets.

“Billy!” Kate shouts over the sound of automatic weapons firing, rolling behind the staircase wall. “Snap out of it!”

Billy has scurried across the floor, back against the furthest wall. He is staring at his hands, chest heaving quickly with short breaths as the spray of bullets creeps towards him. Their assailants go quiet for a moment, and the shooting stops. They begin to shout over one another, demanding to know who Kate and Billy are, followed by the sound of running footsteps.

“Come one, Kaplan!” Kate hisses desperately. “I need your magic ass!”

Billy shakes his head, staring at his hands with a faraway glaze in his eyes. Kate huffs, grabbing another handful of arrows. She throws herself around the corner, taking aim at the closest three men, and burying the arrows into their chests. Kate ducks back behind the wall just in time to avoid another spray of bullets.

“Billy, help me out here!” Kate shouts over the sound of the weapons. “Turn their guns into bubbles or something!”

Billy finally looks up at her, some sort of recognition in his eyes. He shifts, moving across the floor towards Kate. Kate can hear the footsteps coming down the stairs. She grabs another arrow, but isn’t quick enough. The barrel of the rifle comes around the corner first. Everything happens at once. Billy jumps towards the man and Kate watches as his weapon becomes a snake. The man shouts as the viper in his hands twists and bites him. Kate has an arrow drawn now, and she looses it into the man’s forehead.

Kate opens her mouth to say something to Billy, but there is a sudden explosion at the end of the hall. The force of it blow both Kate and Billy backwards. Kate covers her head with her arms as the debris rains down. She can hear the men in the hall shouting and then going silent. Rubble crashes down around Kate. When the dust finally settles, Kate groans and shifts, throwing part of the concrete ceiling off of herself. She struggles to her feet, her equilibrium thrown off and her breath knocked out of her. Stumbling, she grabs for the wall and hauls herself around the corner.

What remains of the hall is a crumbling, burnt out hole. Bodies lay littered in the debris. None of the men remain standing.

“What the hell was that?” Kate coughs.

“That would be… security syst…resetting,” Riri replies, radio transmission breaking up.

“The security system explodes?!” Kate cries.

“No, the… turned off the power dampeners,” Riri explains quickly. “Whoever they are holding…” Riri’s voice fades to static, and then to silence.

Kate coughs again, turning around to find Billy. She catches a glimpse of him, half covered by the collapsed wall, entirely unconscious.

“Billy!” Kate cries, dropping back to her knees and hauling the heavy pieces of debris off of him. Blood leaks from his nose and his left ear. Kate checks his pulse and his breathing. He’s still alive, but he’s probably concussed, definitely knocked out. Kate pulls him into a sitting position against the wall and checks him for other injuries.

There’s a soft fluttering sound behind Kate. The hairs on the back of her neck stand up and she twists quickly. Nothing in the hall behind her has changed. She furrows her brow and turns back to Billy, still checking his torso for injuries.

“Who the hell are you?” a voice asks to Kate’s right.

Kate jumps and snaps her head towards the sound. A form has appeared in the settling dust, lit by the flashing red emergency lights. It’s a boy. He’s tall and he’s thin, dressed in dirty clothes far too large for him. His hair is completely silver, but other than that, he looks exactly like Billy. Kate is confused, glancing back and forth between Billy and this other individual.

“Billy…” Kate asks slowly. “Are you…is this some sort of astral projection thing?”

“What?” the other Billy snaps. “Who are you?!”

“Who are you?” Kate parrots back, demanding.

The other Billy scoffs, posture falling into something bored. But with that movement, he seems to catch a glimpse of Billy, prone on the ground. The boy’s face immediately screws up and he takes a cautious step back.

“Who the hell is that?!” he demands.

Kate is confused. She moves into a defensive position, putting herself between Billy and his seeming doppelganger. Kate doesn’t blink, but the boy disappears. He reappears almost instantly, but now he is knelt down beside Billy.

“What is he?” the boy demands. “A shape shifter?”

“No, a sorcerer,” Kate replies tersely. “What the hell are you?”

“Speedster,” the boy answers slowly, looking up at Kate. “And what are you?”

“I’m the one rescuing your ass,” Kate retorts in a sharp tone. “You and Billy…aren’t friends?”

“I’ve never seen this kid in my life!” he snaps. “Except in the mirror, I guess.”

The kid smiles dumbly at his own joke and Kate can’t help but laugh a bit at this suddenly insane situation.

“Long lost twins,” she mutters under her breath.

The silver-haired boy disappears again, reappearing in the crumbling hallway. The alarm is still blaring, light blinking.

“Hey!” Kate shouts. “We don’t have a lot of time before some more paramilitary assholes show up here. I need to get Billy out of here!”
The kid ignores Kate, approaching one of the heavy metal doors that are still intact in the hallway. He holds out a vibrating hand, placing it in the middle of the door. Kate watches as the door suddenly begins to melt, a hole appearing in the middle, widening until it’s big enough for the boy to duck inside.

“Hey!” Kate shouts.

The silver-haired boy is stepping back through the hole and into the hall, a girl no older than twelve hanging onto his side.

“Help me out here!” the boy snaps, motioning with his head at the young girl who holds onto him weakly.

Kate suddenly remembers the camera on her headband. She hasn’t heard from her anyone through her radio since the explosion, so she isn’t sure if the camera is still broadcasting. She struggles to her feet anyway and wades through the rubble, holding out her arms for the silver-haired boy to hand her the barely conscious girl. The child whimpers in pain, and Kate goes to her knee, checking her out quickly. The child has dirty, matted hair, a sallow face, and sunken eyes so hallow and distant that they make Kate shiver. There are seeping wounds all over the girl’s body, and the filthy hospital gown that clings to her frail frame sticks to the blood and the pus. Kate tries to talk to the girl, ask her her name, but the child’s eyes just stare blankly at the wall. Kate gets her arms around her, hoisting her shockingly light body onto her hip. Kate looks back up at Billy’s twin, who is melting another door.

“What’s your name” Kate shouts over the still blaring alarm, cocking her head, conscious of the camera against her forehead.

The kid turns to reply, but his eyes are drawn to something over Kate’s shoulder. There’s a streak of silver, a blurry flash, as the kid moves so quickly that Kate can barely perceive him. By the time Kate has turned around, two guards are on the ground and the silver-haired boy is ducking into the room he’s just blown open. Another kid, this one even younger, with a twisted, bleeding pair of what could have only been wings on his back.

“Tommy” the boy replies, as Kates kneels to look this new child over.

“Who are these kids?” Kate presses.

“What is this? Sixty Minutes?” Tommy scoffs, melting open another door.

“Sorta, this is all being broadcast to my friend who is going to put it up on the internet for everyone to see,” Kate snaps, grabbing up the winged boy in her other arm.

Tommy steps out of the last room, an older girl following him out with a dazed look on her face. The look on Tommy’s face is almost nearly as dazed as he stares at Kate in disbelief.

“Wait, seriously?” Tommy demands, shifting his weight to support this other girl.

Kate doesn’t have a free hand, a child in each arm, but she nods her head as if in demonstration.

“Headband,” she replies, twisting her head to show off the thin black band.

Tommy moves towards Kate as fast as he can while dragging the other girl along with him. He stares seriously at Kate’s headband, getting close enough to confirm for himself the small camera. His throat is working, Adam’s apple bobbing in a motion that Billy had just been mirroring a few minutes ago. He takes an awkward step back, eyes never leaving the camera.
“My name is Tommy Shepherd,” he states in a loud voice. “I’ve been a prisoner in the Red District for eight months. I was kidnapped from my high school in broad daylight and nobody stopped them. I’m a meta-human and have been forced to fight against my own kind over scraps of food and clean water for my captors’ fucking entertainment. They’ve also been experimenting, weaponizing our powers and testing meta-human controls on us. Some of the human beings they’ve kept locked in here with me is Kara here.” Tommy jostles the girl against his side lightly. The girl keeps her eyes down, not acknowledging her own name. “She has super strength and after she began to refuse to fight, they began experimenting on her by surgically removing muscle mass.” Kate winces sympathetically. “That’s Mikil,” Tommy says nodding at the winged boy in Kate’s arms. Kate looks down at him, directing the camera towards his small frame. “They make him fight with Molly. She’s telepathic. Or she used to be, before they started frying her goddam brain.” Kate shudders again, moving the camera towards the girl on her other hip who stares up at her sadly.

“And me?” Tommy continues darkly, glaring at the center of Kate’s forehead. “I’m going to kill every single one of the bastards who have kept us here.”

“Wait,” is all Kate is able to mutter before Tommy is suddenly gone, leaving Kara stumbling slightly.

“Shit,” Kate hisses, turning wildly. “Shit, shit, shit, shit.”

Kate picks her way back through the rubble, down the stairs towards where Billy is still unconscious. Struggling, she puts the two children down. She can hear Kara stumbling through the debris behind her. But Kate is kneeling down next to Billy, shaking him insistently.

“Billy, please wake the hell up,” Kate begs.

Outside, she can hear a litany of gunshots and shouting. Kate doesn’t know if it’s Tommy or her teammates drawing fire, but either way, Kate has a growing sense of dread. This mission is unraveling quickly.

Beneath her hands, Billy groans and shifts slightly.

“Billy!” Kate shouts a little louder as Kara comes crashing towards her, falling down the stairs and against Kate weakly.

Finally, Billy’s eyes flutter open, unfocused and dazed.

“Oh, thank god,” Kate sighs, turning to help Kara continue her decent to the floor. “Kaplan, come on, please. I need you!”

Billy groans, unsteady hand moving towards his most likely aching head.

“What…” Billy mutters, “…what happened?”

He sits up and look around. Kate watches his expression screw up when his eyes fall on the three, starving strangers huddled together against the opposite wall. His gaze is moving slow, but finally his brown eyes focus on Kate in confusion.

“Billy, can you use your powers? I just need you to get these people out of here,” Kate insists, despite Billy’s face screwing up further.

Billy takes a few slow breaths before he finally nods.

“Where?” he asks before descending into a fit of coughing.
Kate fumbles for her phone, pulling it out and opening the page Riri had given her. A safe hospital for meta-humans and others fleeing North’s Hard Lines. Kate expands the screen to a hologram, showing Billy. Billy shakes his head as if clearing it before nodding slowly. He shoves himself up and moves towards the Kara, Mikil, and Molly. The three strangers watch him warily, and Billy reaches out his hand towards them. There is a bright flash of blue light and suddenly Kate is alone in stairwell.

There are still gunshots and shouting outside, and the alarm continues to blare loudly. Kate glances around wildly, looking for her bow. But it’s nowhere to be found, most likely buried under the rubble.

“Shit,” Kate swears again, struggling to her feet.

Still stumbling a bit, Kate works her way back down the stairs. There is nobody on the second floor, but when she rounds the corner of the ground floor, she sees Tommy standing over a small, pudgy man. The man stutters and shakes, staring up at Tommy who watches him with eyes full of nothing but pure hatred.

“One last test, doctor,” Tommy growls, hands vibrating as he takes another menacing step towards the small man. “To find out how much I can accelerate your atomic structure before it fucking explodes.”

Kate rushes towards Tommy, for a short moment intent on stopping him. But something makes her stop, feet skidding to a halt. And she simply watches, frozen, as Tommy reaches his hands down towards the cowering man. There is a spray of red, and Kate throws up an arm. When she looks again, there is nothing left of the man’s head, and what remains of his pudgy body is crumpling to the floor, stump of a neck spurting blood like a hose. Kate takes a few slow breaths, watching Tommy as he stares down at his victim’s spasming body. After a long moment, Tommy looks up and over at Kate.

“You didn’t stop me,” Tommy observes darkly.

“It wasn’t my place,” Kate replies, voice a bit unsteady.

Tommy nods slowly, swallowing hard.

“So, what now?” Tommy asks, not looking at Kate, just staring at his hands. “Where’s your friend?”

“He got your friends out of here,” Kate says. “But I’ve got more friends, and they’re in the other buildings. I could really use your help.”

“What the hell are you guys doing here?” Tommy demands, a venomous bite to his voice. “Charging into a Red District headquarters building is suicide.”

“We came here to save you,” Kate defends, putting her hands on her hips.

Tommy laughs sardonically, still not looking up.

“I’m not worth saving, you wasted your time.” Tommy pauses for a long beat before he finally looks at Kate from under his overgrown bangs. “And now you and your friends are going to die here.”

With that, Tommy is gone once again, leaving Kate alone.
Chapter Eight

Chapter Summary

CW: panic attack, internalized homophobia, mention of rape

Billy’s knees hit the hard linoleum floor, and he feels himself sprawl against the cold ground. His head aches tremendously and every light, every sound makes it throb. Billy can barely get his bearings, but he knows that there is shouting, surprised gasps and exclamations from all around him. He squints against the harsh light and finds himself in a hospital that he can only barely remember coming to. Struggling to his feet, Billy squeezes his eyes shut. His memories are coming back now, crashing like a painful tidal wave around his mind. The Red District, Kate, the men with guns, the explosion. Pain, both emotional and physical, twists in Billy’s core. He had frozen up, right when Kate had needed him the most. He had frozen up. For all the brave faces he had put on for all these months, when it had actually come down to it, Billy had revealed himself for the coward that he truly is.

For the moment, Billy forces himself to swallow the bitter disappointment in his throat, and instead looks around, eyes landing on a nervous looking nurse approaching him and the three, dirty and broken prisoners he has brought here for medical attention. The other patrons of the hospital are beginning to panic, shouting accusations at Billy. But Billy just lurches towards the nurse.

Before Billy can say a word, though, a blonde woman steps in front of him. Her eyes are narrowed and she regards Billy carefully, inserting herself between Billy and the nurse.

“No, not the smoothest landing there, Peter Pan,” the blonde woman chides sardonically. “Love the outfit.”

“Who the hell are you?” Billy demands.

“Let’s say that I’m a friend of Miss Bishop,” the blonde replies, a strong hand landing on Billy’s arms and wheeling him to face the other direction. “And you must be…God, what did she say your nickname was…Wiccan?” The woman laughs to herself.

“What are you doing here?” Billy snaps, trying to get out of the woman’s grip.

“I was asked to be here by our mutual friend,” the woman replies, voice low as she glances over her shoulder at the crowd that’s beginning to press. “Who the hell are these kids?”

Billy finally gets himself free, quickly taking steps back and away from the woman. The blonde is turning now, crouching in front of the three kids that Kate had told Billy to bring here. When the woman throws her hair over her shoulders, sudden concern painted on her face as she looks over the weak and filthy bodies of the Red District prisoners, Billy recognizes the knit of her brow, the way her eyes hold a sudden fury behind them.

The woman is moving quickly now, calling for doctors, shoving back bystanders. Billy moves towards the woman and this time he’s the one who grabs her.

“You’re Jessica Jones,” he says breathlessly.
The woman’s face balks before settling Billy with a glare.

“Are you a fucking idiot?!” Jessica Jones hisses. “Don’t say that out loud!”

“How do you know Kate?” Billy presses.

“Not the time or place, Wiccan,” Jones snaps. “These kids need medical attention. What the hell are you doing here? Where did they come from? What the fuck did you kids do? Kate told me it was just going to be you.”

Billy shakes his head, having a difficult time comprehending what Jones is saying.

“You know Kate?”

But Jones isn’t listening to him anymore. She’s called over doctors and nurses. For a quick moment, she just turns and glares at him.

“Don’t go anywhere!” she shouts.

“Take care of them,” Billy replies, already taking quick steps backwards towards the door.

“Wiccan, no!” Jess extracts herself from the crowd, rushing towards Billy. Before Billy can disappear, Jess shouts. “I’m the one who got your parents out of the country!”

That gives Billy pause.

“Out of the country?” he repeats numbly. “My parents, I don’t understand…”

“Kate didn’t tell you?” Jess asks, voice a whisper.

Billy’s heart rate is rising. He’s so confused but he can’t stay here. He has to help his friends.

“I have to go,” Billy says quickly. “My friends need me.”

“What did you guys do?” Jess demands.

But Billy doesn’t reply, instead he says the only thing that he can think to say, “Getmeout.”

Cold, wet grass appears beneath his feet. Billy is standing in a small courtyard at the far end of the hospital. He growls in frustration and confusion. He had meant the spell to take him back to his friends.

“Findmyfriends,” Billy says.

Nothing happens.


A frustrated cry rips from Billy’s lungs. He stares down at his hands, entirely plain and non-magical, biting back the urge to cry.

“Forcefield!” he attempts. But the night air remains still and frigid, and Billy is just a teenage boy shouting at his hands.

There’s panic beginning to twist in Billy’s chest. His powers aren’t working. His powers aren’t
fucking working! He’s useless, breaking under pressure, unable to do anything to help his friends. Billy swallows the ever-growing lump in his throat. Why did he think he could do this? Why did he think that *he*, Billy fucking Kaplan, high school reject, faggot outcast, *absolute nobody Billy Kaplan* could be a goddam superhero?

When shit had hit the fan in the Red District, Billy had shown his true colors: he was just a fucking coward, worthless in every sense of the word. Kate and America were real heroes, Teddy and Cassie were brave, Riri was a goddam genius. Who the hell was Billy? Just some weird kid with a grab bag of powers that he barely understands who had somehow convinced himself that he could follow in his heroes’ footsteps, that he could be a goddam Avenger. That idea is downright laughable. A bitter, sardonic chuckle echoes through the night as Billy falls onto his knees, eyes still on his worthless hands.

Then there was Jessica Jones, a real fucking Avenger, not a fake like Billy, telling him that his *fucking parents* have fled the country? His family—his mother and his father and his brother—are in danger, and it’s because of Billy. Because Billy decided to play dress up, he decided to pretend to be a hero, he decided to act like he stood for something, and now his family is in danger. Billy’s been a fool. What the hell did he think would happen? Of course his family is in danger, and it’s all Billy’s fault. After years of keeping his head down and his mouth shut, Billy had thought he was being brave by standing up and saying no. But he should have known better. He hasn’t accomplished anything, he’s just put his family in danger for his own vane, self-serving fantasy.

His costume feels ridiculous now. Who the hell does he think he is? A cape? Seriously? Fumbling and struggling against tears, Billy grabs for the cape over his shoulder, tearing at it desperately. Next, his fingers go under the edge of his mask, tearing it off his face and throwing it into the cold night air. And now, he truly feels worthless. His friends are still in danger, facing men with weapons who want to kill them, and here Billy is, crying in a dark courtyard.

A hand lands on Billy’s shoulder. He flails, turning quickly and throwing it away. At first he thinks it must be a security guard for the hospital, or maybe Jessica Jones. But, instead, he’s staring up at a pair of serious green eyes. The woman withdraws her hand, clasping it to her chest, but her face is strained with concern. And Billy knows that face, those eyes. It’s the woman from the bus stop, all those months ago. The woman who had convinced him to pretend that he was something more than his pathetic self.

“You,” Billy breaths.

The woman goes to her knees in front of Billy. She’s dressed as oddly as before, several ratty scarves around her face, hiding most of her features. But her eyes betray her emotions, full of concern and an unfathomable sadness.

“William,” the woman whispers.

“Who the hell are you?” Billy demands, pushing himself back to put some distance between himself and this woman, who is incredibly too close. “What are you doing here?”

“You called me,” the woman answers plainly, as if this was obvious.

“No I didn’t!”

The woman is reaching a thin hand towards him again. Billy ducks it, clambering to his feet.

“You found your brother,” the woman says softly, voice thick with an emotion Billy can’t identify. “I knew you would.”
“Lady, what the hell are you talking about?!” Billy spits. “Who the hell are you?”

The woman rises to her feet with an otherworldly grace. Her movements are fluid and inhuman and entirely disconcerting. She grips her hands against her chest and watches Billy with those unblinking green eyes.

There is a long pause. Billy waits. He waits for her to say something, to do something. But instead she just stares at him as if she plans to memorize his face.

“Well?” Billy demands. “Aren’t you going to fucking tell me to be brave? Touch me and give me my powers back? Tell me that you’re my guardian angel or some shit?” His voice is cutting and bitter, but the woman doesn’t move. “My friends are in danger!” he shouts. “Help me!”

The woman cocks her head.

“Then go to them,” she replies so quietly, Billy barely hears her.

“I can’t!” he cries. “My powers are gone!”

Billy can’t see the woman’s mouth, but he can tell that she’s smiling a sad smile by the way her eyes squint. She moves towards him, seeming to glide like a phantom across the frozen grass. Billy doesn’t move, he doesn’t duck away from her outstretched hands. He lets her smooth palms run along his cheeks, holding his face gently and forcing him to look into her eyes.

“Breath,” she commands softly.

“I am breathing!” Billy defends, still not pulling himself out of her grip.

“No,” the woman says with a small shake of her head. “Breath. Feel. Touch. The world around you, it dances with energy. Close your eyes.”

Billy doesn’t hesitate. Her touch is so comforting, warm and soothing. His eyelids slip shut.

“Do you feel it?” the woman asks.

Billy nods vaguely, because he can. A low hum all around him, he can feel the ground, the grass, the trees, the breeze. It all buzzes with a soft energy, like a low burning fire. He can see it all with his mind’s eye, feel it all around him. And he can sense something warm and dark red seeping off of the woman, connecting with his own vibrant blue and electric energy. Running from her fingertips like oil on water, it threatens to engulf Billy but he isn’t worried.

“Now think of your friends,” the woman directs, fingers running along his cheeks and coming to rest just behind his ears.

It takes a moment, but the image of Billy’s friends comes lazily into his mind. They’re nothing but smudges of vibrating color, but Billy knows that it’s them. There’s America, a swirling pond of blacks and blues, looking like a riptide. Kate, a dark and deep royal purple, collapsing in on itself like a black hole. Cassie, shocking yellow energy streaks of lightning bolts. Riri, something mellow and silver with faint streaks of red, an ambiguous mass. And finally, Billy can see Teddy, a wave of black with a core of bright green, like the color of leaves when the sun shines through them.

“Do you feel them?” the woman asks, drawing Billy to reality.

“Yeah,” he breaths, nodding slightly.
“Reach out to them, find them.”

In his mind, Billy reaches his own electric blue appendage towards his friends. There’s resistance, but Billy pushes past it, shoving back the invisible barrier that separates him. As soon as he does, the picture becomes clearer. It’s not a pretty picture, it makes Billy cringe. He can feel his friends’ fear, their pain. Teddy grips an unconscious Cassie to his chest, his back against a brick wall. America is in front of him, throwing punches wildly, the look in her eyes like something seen on the face of a cornered animal. Kate flits past a background of a crumbling building, heart racing and determination so full and infallible that it fills Billy with courage.

“Open your eyes,” the woman whispers.

Billy does so. The real world crashes around him, but when his vision focuses, he realizes that he is staring at a sparking, dark blue circle. It looks odd against the cold and dark surroundings. But through it, Billy can see the courtyard of the Red District headquarters building. Billy gasps and blinks, but the visage doesn’t disappear. It’s a portal, one streaming from his own mind, his own fingers.

Looking around, the woman is gone. Just like before, she has disappeared without a trace. Billy takes a few grounding breaths. He’s confused and uncertain, but he brushes those thoughts away. Because he doesn’t have time to think about that now.

Billy doesn’t hesitate. He charges towards the portal, leaping through. He can feel it fold behind him, and suddenly, he is in the middle of the fray. Bullets are flying, and a dozen eyes turn onto him. Supremacy gang members turn their weapons on Billy. But with a single thought, the weapons turn to dust. With another thought, the men collapse.

“Whoa,” somebody says to Billy’s left.

Billy turns and finds himself staring at his own face. It takes him a moment to comprehend what he’s seeing. It’s like looking at another version of himself, like staring into another dimension. It’s Billy’s own face, but sallow and tired. Dark circles under his eyes, hair absolutely silver, body lean and emaciated. His doppelganger stares slack jaw at Billy. The silver-haired boy takes a careful step towards Billy.

“We really do look alike,” the boy laughs. “What are your powers? You just fucking destroyed those guys!”

Billy’s brow knits.

“Who are you?” Billy asks.

But there’s no time to answer. Because, a moment later, a grenade lands between the two. The other boy’s eyes go to it and then there is a streak of silver. Billy blinks, but the boy and the grenade are gone. There’s an explosion on the second story balcony of a nearby building.

Billy’s attention is then drawn to Kate. She comes charging through a doorway nearby, immediately engaging with two men. She’s all deadly movements and murderous intent. The first of the two men hits the ground unconscious. Kate gets her legs around the second, throwing him to the ground, and Billy watches her hand snatch up a piece of broken glass from the ground. She brings her fist back, ready the drive the glass into the man’s neck. Billy acts quickly, separating the two and throwing the man hard against a wall. Kate hits the ground, furious eyes falling on Billy.

“Glad to see you’re alright,” Kate says, cocking her head.
Kate gets to her feet, closing the distance between them quickly. She looks Billy up and down.

“You get those kids to the hospital?” Kate asks.

“I did,” Billy says slowly. “But you’re gonna have to tell me why the hell Jessica Jones met me there.”

There’s another explosion, drawing both of their attention.

“Later, Kaplan,” Kate replies briskly, hand falling on Billy’s shoulder. “First, we need to get out of here alive.”

At that moment, Billy’s seeming twin appears again in a streak of silver. He’s got a cocky look on his face, half grin almost predatory as he appraises Kate and Billy.

“So, you idiots have a regress plan, or did you think that the Supremacy gang was just gonna play nice?” the silver-haired boys laughs.

“Oh, you wanna hang out with us now?” Kate asks sarcastically, eyes on her wristband.

“Eh,” the boy shrugs. “It’s not every day that you meet your long lost twin.”

“We are not twins,” Billy defends.

“Whatever you say, Merlin,” the boy says with another shrug.

“I’ve got backup inbound in two minutes,” Kate replies, looking up. “And if you’re gonna hang out with us, then you’re gonna have to fight with us.”

The boy cracks his knuckles, a wicked look on his face.

“Purple,” he drawls, “it would be my genuine pleasure.”

Teddy’s heart feels like it is about to break out of his chest. It beats wildly against his ribs, pumping nothing but liquid hot terror through his veins. Everything around him is moving slowly, his brain struggling to comprehend everything that is happening. Because Teddy knows that he’s about to die.

It’s an odd sensation. His life isn’t flashing before his eyes, he doesn’t feel the melancholy acceptance of fate. Instead, there is nothing but fear, and his mind seems to be slowing everything down as a way to cope, a way to take inventory before it fades to black permanently. In Teddy’s arms is Cassie, her body limp and bleeding, eyes shut and blonde hair caked with red. Teddy is leaned up against a brick wall, crumpling to the ground in slow motion. There is a sharp pain in his abdomen, something warm seeping across his front that he is certain is his own blood. His body has reverted back to his wholly human self against his will and he has no idea why. But he’s weak and growing ever weaker. His eyes roll wildly, trying to catalog what is in front of him. America is still fighting ferociously. There is blood on her face as well, but Teddy knows that it isn’t her own. Her teeth are bared, and she swings her fists wildly, looking like a caged and cornered animal. But they’re surrounded on all sides, funneled into a court yard like fools, and their foes wield weapons
that Teddy has never seen before.

Teddy has no idea where Kate or Billy are. Their radio contact had cut off a while ago. They’re probably dead, and that makes Teddy feel like he might cry. His heart twists painfully, and he has no idea if it’s the thought of never seeing his friends again or the blood loss he’s suffered that causes him to cry out. There’s a sickening crack, and Teddy watches America hit the ground. Every weapon is turned on Teddy now, and there is a wicked glint in every eye that watches him. Teddy wants to close his eyes, but he doesn’t. He doesn’t even let himself blink. Instead, his face goes hard and he stares as bravely as he can at his killers. Protectively, instinctively, Teddy’s arms tighten around Cassie.

When he opens his mouth to speak, blood runs down Teddy’s chin. He coughs and struggles, and one of the men closest to him just laughs, taking some sort of sick enjoyment in Teddy’s suffering.

Several things happen at once, and Teddy can’t even comprehend what he’s seeing. There is a bright burst of fiery light that Teddy is certain is a bullet with his name on it. But instead, there is an explosion that blows his would-be murderers backwards. Two pairs of legs hit the ground in front of Teddy. When Teddy looks up, he once again nearly begins to cry. Billy is turning, looking down at him, face twisted in panic and concern. Behind Billy, Riri’s suit glints with reflected light, her repulsors firing wildly and blowing their assailants back. Bullets ricochet loudly off of her, but a bright blue light has engulfed Teddy now. Billy kneels beside him, and Teddy can see his mouth moving but the ringing in Teddy’s ears is too loud.

Something is spreading through Teddy. Whether it’s relief or death, Teddy doesn’t know. But it’s warm and it’s consuming. His vision is narrowing to nothing but a tunnel. Teddy can feel his lips moving, but he doesn’t know what he’s saying. He feels fingers on his face. He looks up. Billy is moving closer to him, face streaked with sweat and dirt, mouth still moving. Teddy feels like he’s falling or he’s flying, he can’t tell which, but he doesn’t think that he’s actually moving.

The ringing in Teddy’s ears turns into a howl, the thumping, whining sound of his own heart beating wildly. The last thing he sees are brown eyes, and then the darkness swallows him. Teddy exhales.

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“Welcome North Nation. It is the 15th day of February, 2033. I am John Alex, your host. And I can undoubtedly, with butterflies in my stomach, which I never have, even speaking in front of thousands of people in a hall, I can unequivocally tell you that this is going to be the most important broadcast hands down that I have ever done. Now we have not been blindsided by this new meta movement, but it’s almost like a bus that ran me over ten years ago, it’s old news to us. But the new news is that it’s now breaking nationwide and worldwide.

“Many of you have probably already heard that last night, that the government officials and families and a whole community came under attack. This was a meta-human terrorist attack, plain and simple, people. I’ve seen the pictures and videos, okay, I’ve been given the pictures, and I can tell you with 100% certainty that the terrorists who attacked last night are the same exact terrorists who attacked almost a month ago and destroyed a church in the middle of a wedding!”

Peter scoffs audibly. He hates John Alex. He’s a crazed, mentally unstable, conspiracy theory
pedaling idiot who doesn’t know how to speak in complete, grammatical sentences. Yet, his is the
top rated, government backed and funded radio talk show in the country. As unfortunate as it is,
Peter knows that many Americans are starting their morning with John Alex’s voice in their ears at
this very moment. The Young Avengers struck again last night. The dossier is open on the table
next to Peter. And it’s John Alex’s job, as mouthpiece of the President, to spin the story.

“But these meta attacks itself is a red herring. I hope you’re listening to me. Because I’ve seen the
police reports, I’ve seen the videos, I’ve seen the crime scenes, and I’ve connected the dots, people.
A lot of you are scared, and you should be scared. If a group of freaks can destroy a community in
one night, you should be scared. But I’m telling you now, you’re scared of the wrong things. We
are at the crossroads, and the entire enemy battle plan that we’ve reverse engineered is designed to
make you afraid of the wrong things.

“Fact: on January the 17th, Steve Rogers, the disgraced leader of the biggest band of freaks and
unpatriotic traitors known formally as the Avengers, Steve Rogers was captured on camera by a
security camera at the Avengers Manor in New York. Fact: twenty four hours later, there is a meta
terrorist attack on the Church of America in New York. Fact: on January 20th, the Iron Man was
seen at a park in New York. Fact: last night, several apartment buildings came under attack by meta
humans, the people in those apartments defended themselves with their weapons, and multiple eye
witnesses place Iron Man at the scene.

“People, these are not just random attacks. These are systematic and planned, this is the beginning of
an all out war on our country. We kicked them out, we got rid of the meta scum that crawled
through the streets like vampires, drained us of our money and our resources, sucked our blood, and
brought destruction for the sake of destruction. We kicked them out, we rounded them up, we threw
them in jail and threw away the key. But Steve Rogers is still out there. Tony Stark is still out there.
And they have been planning a war against our country for fifteen years. I’m telling you, people,
these are not random attacks. These are not random attacks!

“Today is a day that will be remembered forever in the hearts and minds. In future generations of not
just Americans, but people worldwide who have rediscovered liberty and freedom. We are living on
the edge ladies and gentlemen. This will be my most important broadcast in my 17 years of being on
air. This is it, ladies and gentlemen.”

Peter rolls his eyes. He wishes that Alex would skip the hyperbolic preamble and just get to the
point. The man loves to hear himself talk, that’s for certain.

“We have warned of this, we have exposed it, we have seen the meta preparation and now things are
unfolding exactly as we knew they would! The enemy’s tools is the dumbed-down population. And
they don’t even outnumber us. And I’m going to make some huge announcements here and try to be
calm. I’ve written like 7 pages of notes here I want to go over with you here today. Now this is not
complex, but this is not dumbed-down radio. This is a blueprint. If you put the energy in tomorrow,
next week, next year, this is the beginning. Everything else has just been a build-up, the orchestra
tuning up before the orchestra begins their true presentation. We are at the threshold of absolute
history.

“But we, through historical research, and thousands of whistleblowers from inside the system, inside
the meta armies, many of which were killed or imprisoned – remember many people died to bring
you this information – the only reason I’m alive right now is because people were willing to be
imprisoned and killed. They killed thousands of people. They arrested Congressmen and tortured
them. They, they hijacked aircraft and handed over Congressmen to the North Koreans. They can try
to keep this down. Those of us that came before the current awakening. We stand on their shoulders.
So this isn’t a game. I want to telegraph that to you right now.
“And what I’m going to say today, and what I’m taking up now is the most dangerous thing I’ve ever done, and I feel no fear. I only feel fear that I will not execute this properly, and it’s not fear, it’s more of a gripping, bracing realization as if the hand of God is wrapped around my heart saying ‘Don’t screw this up. You may be killed doing this, so in your greatest moment of resistance, ringing the bell, signaling the beginning. The restoration and the spirit of 1776. Don’t screw this up, Alex.’ And I’ll tell all of you this as well, you don’t screw this up either.”

“Jesus Christ!” Jess shouts, a web hitting Peter’s phone and toppling it off the table, making the room go silent. “He really loves the sound of his own voice.”

Peter turns quickly to look at Jess across the room. She has an annoyed, pinched look on her face, hands on her hips and glaring at the offending phone.

“I have to listen to that!” Peter cries, bending to pick his phone up. “It’s the first official comments about what happened in New York.”

“Well, not really,” Jess says slyly, walking across the room to stand beside Peter, holding out her phone. “The Young Avengers have made their own statement and they have a serious hacker on their team because it was force pushed to like 85% on the wireless devices on the planet.”

Peter grabs the phone from Jess’s hands and presses play.

The first shot of the video is of America Chavez—no mask, no video alterations to hide her identity—glaring into the camera. She is dirty, her clothes are torn, her hair is a tangled mess. One of her eyes is swollen and bruised, and Peter guesses that her nose is broken as well. Her arms are tightly crossed over her chest, and for a long, slow moment, she simply stares at the camera. Finally, she opens her mouth to speak.

“In the coming days, you are probably going to be hearing a lot of statements from the White House and the new outlets, telling you about a meta human attack in New York City. They might tell you that it was carried out by the same people who ‘attacked’ the Church of America last month. They might tell you that the attackers were terrorist, meta humans with an agenda, out to hurt you and your families. They might tell you plenty of other lies. But that’s all that they are. Lies.”

Again, America pauses, muscular arms flexing. Peter has a sinking feeling in his stomach. The visage of a battle-damaged Arcadian warrior mean-mugging the camera isn’t exactly going to put anybody at ease.

“My name is America Chavez. I am from the island-nation of Arcadia. My entire family was murdered by President North’s army. And I am the leader of the Young Avengers. I can stand here and try to convince you that I am not the bad guy. I could talk for an hour about the terrors that are the Hard Line Policies. But I’m not going to. Instead, I’m going to show you something that the White House will never show you. I’m going to show you real footage of what happened last night.”

The shot changes to a shaky camera shot of a darkened series of buildings. At the edges of the video, one can catch glimpses of other bodies moving alongside whoever holds the camera.

“This is the Red District Headquarters in New York City,” America states gruffly in a voiceover. “In this place, Supremacy gangs are allowed to operate freely. In these buildings they keep their kidnapping victims, individuals who are mostly underage, who are grabbed off the streets based on flimsy suspicion, and who the police refuse to rescue because of their supposed ‘crimes.’ Children are kept here as sex slaves, or they are forced to fight for the entertainment of the men who live here, or they are experimented on by disgraced doctors who have been stripped of their license. The Red
Districts are real. The rumors are *all true.*

The video cuts to the inside of one of the buildings, a stairwell. The carrier rounds a corner and America’s voice disappears, replaced by audio from the hallway. Machine gunshots, men shouting. The carrier of the camera hits the floor, ducking away from the fire. There’s an explosion. The video cuts next to a dirty and emaciated unknown boy helping a frail and bleeding girl out of a cell in the remains of the blown out hallway. More cuts, more starved children dressed in filthy hospital gowns. Another cut to a large room separated into cells by dirty sheets hung on string. A hand reaches out and pulls one of these makeshift curtains back to reveal a metal-framed hospital bed. On it is a girl, wrists chained to the frame. She stares at the camera with empty, faraway eyes. The video cuts some more. The hand pushes back more curtains, and the scene is the same every time. Teenage girls, restrained on dirty beds, vacant stares in their drugged expressions. Peter’s stomach twists.

Another camera shot, this one back in the blown out hallway, the boy from earlier with silver hair is talking straight at the camera.

“I’ve been a prisoner in the Red District for eight months. I was kidnapped from my high school in broad daylight and nobody stopped them. I’m a meta-human and have been forced to fight against my own kind over scraps of food and clean water for my captors’ fucking entertainment. They’ve also been experimenting, weaponizing our powers and testing meta-human controls on us. Some of the human beings they’ve kept locked in here with me is,” there’s a loud beep over the girl’s name. “She has super strength and after she began to refuse to fight, they began experimenting on her by surgically removing muscle mass. That’s beep.” The camera moves down to a small, winged boy. “They make him fight with beep. She’s telepathic. Or she used to be, before they started frying her goddam brain.”

Another cut. This time, a skeletal woman who looks to be in her late teens is standing in front of a blank wall. Her eyes still seem clouded, but she stares at the camera with as much fury as she can muster.

“I was kidnapped from my home in the middle of the night by a Supremacy gang,” the girl says in a shaky voice. “I don’t know how long I’ve been here. But I know it’s been years.” The girl’s eyes fill with tears and she looks away. “They keep me drugged up and tied down and they—they—they rape me every single day.” The girl glances around, blinking back the tears in her eyes. “This is the first time I’ve been outside since they took me.”

The video cuts back to America, a strained look on her face.

“The Young Avengers went to the Red District to rescue the people that society has deemed worthless. Twenty three people, seventeen of them under the age of eighteen, were rescued from that place last night and taken to a safe location to receive medical attention.” America pauses, glare growing even hotter as she grits her teeth with a look of absolute, righteous fury on her face. “If saving their lives makes us terrorists in President North’s country, then we’re fucking terrorists. But know, that if one day, a new Hard Line Policy is passed that makes you an outlaw, that makes you a target, that gets you sent to a place like that, know that this terrorist organization, The Young Avengers, will be there to stand in President North’s way and say, ‘No fucking way.’”

America nods to herself, eyes moving away from the camera for a moment. She shifts, arms falling to her sides and shoulders rolling back.

“We have no official affiliation with the Avengers of the past. We’ve never met them, we’ve never spoken to them. But we have chosen this name because once, the Avengers protected this world from the greatest threats. President North disbanded the Avengers, he declared war on them, he
decimated them. Because President North and his Hard Line Policies are a great threat. Most of us have spent our lives living in the shadows, keeping our heads down, staying silent as our rights and freedoms are stripped away.”

America shakes her head slowly.

“No longer,” she growls.

Abruptly, the video ends, cutting to black.

Peter realizes suddenly that he hasn’t been breathing. He takes a quick, shaky breath, looking up at Jess.

“Holy shit,” he breathes. “She just declared war on President North.”
Chapter Nine

Chapter Summary

CW: mentions of rape

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Teddy wakes up, the only thing he can comprehend for a few agonizing seconds is a sharp, almost unbearable pain in his abdomen. His nostrils flare as he takes a few slow breaths. He can smell rubbing alcohol and the scent of a fire, but underneath that he smells something like cold, mountain air—sharp and fresh. His mouth is unbearably dry and he’s got a serious migraine digging at the space between his eyes. Slowly, he cracks open his eyes.

Teddy realizes that he is lying on his side on a mattress that is set on the floor. He squints, because the first thing he sees is the lit hearth of the Young Avengers’ common room. Nearby, on another mattress on the floor, is the prone shape of Cassie, her shoulder bandaged. Teddy’s arms feel heavy, but he uses his numb fingers to gingerly brush his abdomen. Even that small amount of pressure causes a spark of pain, and he withdraws his fingers quickly. But there is no doubt that he is shirtless and wrapped in bandages of his own.

That’s when Teddy feels the weight and warmth at his back. Somebody is on the bed next to him. Rolling as carefully as possible, he maneuvers himself onto his back. Looking over, he sees dark hair stuck up at odd angles, falling over features that look absolutely otherworldly in the firelight. Billy is still dressed in his costume, still stained with soot and dirt, fast asleep next to Teddy.

Forcing himself upright causes Teddy to cry out in pain, despite how hard he digs his teeth into his lower lip. He continues pushing himself up though, suddenly desperately worried that Billy is injured as well. His cries stir Billy from his sleep though, and his eyelids fly open. Abruptly, Teddy is staring into twin pools of amber, bright and ethereal. For a long moment, Teddy just stares. But then Billy begins to turn red, blinking quickly and shifting in the bed, sitting up and pushing himself away from Teddy. Teddy almost protests, but Billy moves fluidly and is swiftly sitting upright and cross-legged on the other side of the bed.

“How are you feeling?” Billy asks in a worried whisper, eyes going to the bandages around Teddy’s middle.

“Hurts,” Teddy grunts, fingers grazing the bandages once again. “What happened?”

“You shouldn’t move too much,” Billy says, gaze returning to Teddy’s face. “I-I tried my best to heal you.” He pauses, an almost haunted look crossing his perfect features. “There was…a lot of blood. Does it hurt badly?”

Teddy nods slowly, taking shallow breaths.

“’S hard to breathe,” he gasps.

Billy leans forward, one soft hand going to Teddy’s back and the other landing on his chest.
“You should lay down flat,” Billy whispers, helping Teddy recline back to the pillows. Billy’s hands leave him and come to hover above his injury. “Nopain,” Billy breathes.

A blue smoke so dark that it’s almost black emits from Billy’s palms, cascading down against Teddy’s bandages like fog against the bay. Almost immediately, the pain is gone. Teddy gasps at the suddenness of it. Even his headache is gone. Teddy can’t help but smile dumbly at Billy.

“Thanks,” Teddy smiles.

Billy give him a curt nod and once again withdraws to his end of the mattress. There’s a long silence, but it isn’t awkward or heavy. Teddy knows that he’s staring, but he doesn’t care and he doesn’t try to stop himself. Billy shifts, reaching for something, and comes back with a bottle of water, holding it out as an offering. Teddy accepts it gratefully, chugging down half the bottle.

“So what happened?” Teddy finally says, wiping his mouth. “At the Red District. The last thing that I remember was…”

Being surrounded. Thinking he was going to die. That they were all going to die.

“Ambush,” Teddy finishes numbly, gaze moving to the fire because he feels suddenly weak and sick.

It truly had been an ambush. Kate, Cassie, and Teddy had met almost no resistance on their way into the building. A few guards, nothing that America hadn’t been able to handle without blinking. They had gotten to the basement and they had seen…oh God, they had seen. Riri’s stealth recon had warned them. At least a dozen women, Kate had said before the mission. The Supremacy guys called them “the Haram.” Teddy doesn’t know what he had been expecting. Prisoners, certainly, but not that. Not nineteen girls, teenagers, most no older than himself. Drugged, starved, covered in filth, dressed in rags or nothing at all, restrained and just left there. Those that could speak at all told stories so horrid that it makes Teddy feel filthy, like the absolute horrendous wrongness of that place had stained his very soul. Some were kidnapped. Others were dropped off there by their parents when they had been caught having sex with their boyfriends or, worse, their girlfriends. At least one of them had been dragged there by an ex-boyfriend. Angry at being broken up with, he had given her up to a fate worse than death.

America and Teddy had gotten to work immediately breaking the chains. Cassie had gone almost comatose, shaking like a leaf. Most of the women couldn’t stand upright, some didn’t even open their eyes. That’s when they were ambushed. Cassie hadn’t seen the group of men coming down the stairs. There to get their fucking fix, their disgusting joking mood had changed immediately when they saw the Young Avengers. They hit the alarm and started shooting. America had told them that they needed to draw the fire away from the girls. Teddy had barreled straight into the men, transforming into something massive and demonic that had made the men scream like frightened children.

The trio went up to the first floor, and that’s when their utter lack of tactical training really became evident. Because their enemy knew what they were doing, they had practiced this. And it took them no time at all to funnel the Young Avengers into the courtyard. There, they were sitting ducks, fish in a barrel. Guns on all sides, on every story, more gang members roused from bed by the alarm showing up every second. Cassie grew tall enough to sweep through the men on the second story with an arm. Teddy had put Kate’s training to good use.

That’s when the gang members brought in…something. Some kind of weapon. Teddy hadn’t seen it, hadn’t realized what was happening until it was too late. But all of a sudden, their powers were gone. Cassie shrunk back to her small self. Teddy became human. America’s strength left her.
America was still a fighter. She didn’t need her super strength to hold her own. But Cassie and Teddy were so jolted by the sudden loss, that they became useless. Cassie was shot in the shoulder. Teddy dragged her to cover. More men and more guns.

Then Teddy was shot.

“Well,” Billy sighs, drawing Teddy back to the present. “Riri showed up and had significantly higher fire power. Those guys had you surrounded, but they weren’t exactly being smart about it. They were clustered, and Riri blew half of them away in half a second. America, Kate, Tommy and I took out the rest.”

Teddy swallows. Of course he had been useless. Of course he had failed.

“Who’s Tommy?” Teddy hears himself ask hollowly.

Billy shakes his head.

“He’s…one of the meta kids who was being held prisoner there,” Billy explains slowly.

Great, so even one of the captives was more useful that Teddy.

“We got everyone to a…safe hospital,” Billy continues distantly, eyes vacantly gazing into the fire. “I was able to use my powers to patch Cassie up pretty well. You were a little harder.”

Teddy can’t help but smile a little bit, despite how miserable he is feeling about himself.

“So you saved everyone?” Teddy prods playfully.

Billy turns and looks at Teddy, his stare still distant. He shakes his head slowly, looking down at his hands.

“No,” Billy admits, sounding as broken as Teddy feels. “I actually…” Billy swallows, struggling hard with whatever he’s about to say. Teddy pushes himself up a little, cocking his head. “I froze up,” Billy admits, voice breaking a bit. “And then my…my powers stopped working.”

“Everyone’s powers stopped working,” Teddy replies. “They had some sort of weapon.”

“No,” Billy interrupts. “Not at the Red District. Those weapons didn’t actually affect me. At the hospital after I took the first few prisoners there. I—”

Billy trails off and doesn’t continue, just keeps staring hard at his hands, blinking quickly. Teddy pushes himself fully upright, moving closer to Billy.

“What happened?” Teddy whispers gently.

Billy shrugs miserably.

“I don’t really know. My powers stopped working and I felt…I was afraid you all were going to die and I was helpless and…and,” finally, Billy looks up at Teddy, eyes shining a bit, “…and I think I might be going crazy.”

“Why?”

“I keep…keep seeing this woman.”

That takes Teddy aback a bit. His brow furrows and Billy turns quickly away.
“Seeing, like a hallucination?” Teddy asks uncertainly.

“I don’t know,” Billy groans. “I’ve seen her twice now. She-she just shows up.”

“When did you see her before?”

Billy collapses in on himself a bit.

“The last time I felt like a fucking loser,” he spit.

Teddy moves even closer to Billy. Without hesitation, he reaches out and grabs Billy’s hand in his own. Billy jumps a bit at the movement, looking down at their hands. But he doesn’t pull away.

“You’re not a loser,” Teddy says with such earnest force that he surprises even himself. Billy blinks up at him staggered. “Billy, you’re not. You’re brave and you’re strong and you’re so smart. And you have the most amazing powers I’ve ever seen. And,” Teddy pauses, leaning a little closer, “you’re a Young Avenger.”

That makes Billy smile. A real smile, bright and slightly crooked. Teddy is grinning too. He tightens his grip on Billy’s hand.

“It was our first real battle,” Teddy continues. “We all felt like we could conquer the damn world twenty-four hours ago. It wasn’t perfect. You don’t think I feel like shit for getting shot and being pretty much useless?” Billy makes a face like he’s going to say something, but Teddy presses on. “The important thing is that we got those people out of there and we all lived. We did it, Billy. We did what we went there to do. We saved people and we stood up to the bullies. And you fucking helped. You saved my life. You saved Cassie’s life. You’re a goddam hero, Kaplan.”

Teddy stops, taking a sharp breath, because Billy is staring at him hard. Teddy can’t read his expression. Wide, brown eyes stare into Teddy’s own. And then Billy moves.

It’s quick and it’s sudden. Billy’s handtightens in Teddy’s, tugging himself forward and closing the space between them. Billy’s lips land on Teddy’s. Teddy is frozen for a moment, surprised. But then he moves, he parts his lips and he leans forward.

And just like that, they’re kissing. Teddy’s entire body feels light as a feather. His head hums pleasantly, no particular thought stronger than the others. He opens his mouth wider and kisses Billy back, his other hand coming up and tangling in Billy’s dark locks. Encouraged, Teddy presses even closer, his own hand coming up under Teddy’s arm to grip his shoulder blade lightly. Teddy is breathless in all the right ways. Everything feels right, so fucking right. Billy’s lips are soft and warm and wide and perfect and if Teddy died in this very moment, he would die with a smile on his face.

They move against each other, the kiss growing longer, hotter. But it isn’t frantic. It isn’t nervous. It isn’t furtive. Every kiss Teddy has ever gotten up to this point has been rushed, fearful. Every moment tainted by the fear of being found out, being caught. But not now, not here, not with Billy. There is nothing but pure and perfect intent.

Billy pulls back first, but he doesn’t break away from Teddy’s grip. He leans back a bit, eyes still closed, and Teddy watches his tongue dart out to lick his ruddy lips, and Teddy is fascinated by the movement.

“Sorry,” Billy breathes.

Teddy laughs a little.
“For what?” Teddy asks.

Billy’s long lashes part, and for a moment, they stare into each other’s eyes, each searching the other’s gaze for regret or fear or confusion, but neither find it. Billy doesn’t say anything else, his arm just tightens and he leans in, kissing Teddy again. Teddy’s eyes fall shut.

This kiss is shorter, gentler. Soft, pink lips like angel’s wings against Teddy’s mouth, and Teddy is ready for the Rapture.

Billy pulls back for real this time, releasing his hold on Teddy, but still stays close. They’re both a bit out of breath, and for a long moment they just breathe in each other’s scents. Billy smells like freshly fallen snow, like mountain spring water, and Teddy drinks it down like a man dying of thirst. Teddy swallows, barely aware of his own lips moving until he hears himself speaking.

“Will you be my boyfriend?” Teddy asks.

A small look of shock and surprise passes Billy’s face, but then his expression settles into something entirely and perfectly happy.

“Of course,” Billy replies, his crooked grin piercing Teddy’s heart, his words making Teddy’s stomach do a backflip.

Billy changes Teddy’s bandages, does a little more magic, gives Teddy some painkillers. Their fingers run along each other’s skin, stealing touches and exchanging smiles. When Teddy falls back asleep, the crackling of the fire lulling him towards his dreams, it’s with Billy’s arm wrapped around his chest and the brunette snoring softly behind him.

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Kate is tired. She’s always tired these days, it seems, but today the exhaustion feels like it has seeped past her bones and into her very core. Like a weight hung around her heart, it makes every movement laborious and slow. But Kate knows that even if she tried, she couldn’t sleep. Not now, not yet. So, instead, she stands in the dimly lit, chaotic room that is Riri’s laboratory, fingers massaging the bridge of her nose as Riri darts around like a pinball.

America, on the other hand, is absolutely stock still, weight leaned on her palms as she stands over a nearby table, eyes on the computer screen. She hasn’t moved much in the past hour. Riri had made quick work of editing the video, barely phased by the battle. America hadn’t wanted any preparation on her part. They had made sure Cassie and Teddy were going to live and then America had grabbed Kate and demanded that they film that instant.

“It needs to be raw,” America had said with a serious set to her jaw. “It needs to be real.”

They had shot their video and then Riri had worked her magic. Their statement has been made, and most people with a mobile device has seen it by now. The floodgates have been opened, and thousands upon thousands of responses are coming in. But, so far, the only commenter that America really cares about has kept silent.

So much has happened in the past twelve hours, and Riri has bound from one project to the next. Currently, she is digging out a circular saw, a large odd-looking weapon laid out on a nearby table, like some science classroom frog Riri is preparing to dissect. Riri pauses, saw in hand, tugging down
a pair of goggles before leveling Kate with a stare.

“How much longer are you guys going to be in my lab?” Riri demands, gloved hands going to her hips.

“What the hell is that thing?” Kate croaks, vocal cords raw from screaming over gun fire.

“It’s a power dampener,” Riri responds. “And I need to know how it worked so well on a variety of powers.”

Kate sighs, conceding. She approaches America slowly. Kate puts a hand on America’s shoulder, and America jumps like a startled cat.

“We’re trending,” Kate says carefully when America turns to give her an annoyed look. “Come on, let’s let Riri do her science project. We both need food and showers.”

America shrugs Kate’s hand away violently, standing bolt upright in a halted motion.

“He hasn’t responded,” America growls, eyes still on the screen. “No news coverage, nothing.”

“America, you got a serious head injury last night,” Kate says more forcefully. “Even super heroes need food and sleep. We’ll set notifications on our phones, alright? We’ll know the minute President North says anything.”

America huffs, but her body relaxes a fraction. Her exhausted eyes move about the room as if seeing it for the first time. Riri’s saw is whining high and loud now, digging noisily into the metal of the weapon. America and Kate both wince at the sound.

“Alright,” America finally conceded. “We have much to discuss.”

“After food and showers,” Kate insists.

America rolls her eyes but doesn’t respond, she just turns and strides out the room. Kate follows her and watches America take the turn towards the shower. So Kate keeps walking until she’s in her room.

Alone, for the first time since they got back, the weight of what has happened comes crashing down around Kate. It’s heavy and it’s crushing, making Kate’s chest tighten. This was their plan. The mission had been dicey but it was a success. The video had turned out better than expected. And now the world knows, the whole world knows.

What comes next, Kate has no fucking idea.

For the first time in a long time, Kate feels out of her depths and wholly her age. Her knees buckle, partly from exhaustion, and she falls to her bed. For some reason, Kate thinks of her father. The crooked bastard is bound to find out now, what Kate’s been up to for the past month, maybe even longer. Kate doesn’t really care at all what her father might think. Kate’s been ready to be rid of the old man for a while now, ever since her mother’s death, especially since that night a few years ago. Kate had gone to her father, tears in her eyes, shame on her face, and told him what had happened. Her father had just looked at her in disgust, and that’s when Kate knew their relationship wasn’t worth saving.

Kate has a new family now, a better one. But, while her father might not care much about losing Kate personally, Kate being one of the “meta terrorists” is going to destroy him publically and politically. Kate’s glad for that fact, but she has no idea what repercussions that might hold.
And that’s just the tip of the iceberg.

Kate forces herself to her feet, peeling off her dirty, torn costume. The mirror on her wall reveals Kate’s battle scars. She’s not a superhuman, she is vulnerable flesh despite the years she has spent training. Tonight has proven that, and it’s a fact about herself that Kate hates. Her humanity is fragile, and her body is covered in bright purple bruises. Kate turns away from the mirror, grabbing up a robe from where it’s been discarded on the floor.

When Kate walks through the common room, she finds Billy and Teddy in the kitchen area. They’re both tearing through some sandwiches, but Billy stops when he sees Kate. He gets to his feet and Kate pauses because Billy has an accusatory look on his face.

“Are you going to tell me why Jessica Jones was at the hospital now?”

Kate balks. She licks her lips, gaze flitting about. Teddy is looking at them with a furrowed brow.

“Kate, she told me that my family has fled the country!” Billy says a little louder now.

Kate sighs. Shit.

“What did you think was gonna happen, Kaplan?” Kate retorts, sounding bitchier than she intended.

“What is that supposed to mean? How do you know Jessica Jones?”

Kate huffs again, throwing herself into one of the chairs and massaging her temples where her migraine is growing ever sharper.

“She found me,” Kate admits.

Teddy is fully invested now, sitting upright despite his injuries, and staring at Kate.

“And,” Kate continues wearily, “she told me that if I told her our names, she would make sure our families were safe.”

“You told her our names?” Billy cries.

“Yes, Billy. Everyone on earth is going to know our names by the end of the day. What exactly did you think that video was gonna mean?” Kate snaps.

“When did Jones contact you?”

“Right after the church.”

Billy looks almost furious. He sputters angrily, hands on his hips.

“And you didn’t tell us that an Avenger came looking for you?” Billy almost shouts. “Didn’t tell us that you told her our names? That our families were in danger?”

“Of course your family is in danger!” Kate cries, getting to her feet. “All of our families are in danger because of what we’ve chosen to do!”

“Except yours,” Teddy says suddenly, now on his feet. “Isn’t that right?”

Kate tries to come up with a response, but can’t. She falters for a moment.

“Look, I told Jones that we needed a doctor who wouldn’t give us up to the police. I didn’t tell her
why. Would you rather have been dropping those prisoners off with someone who would send them right back to a Red District?” Kate hisses.

This time, it’s Billy who is speechless. His frame softens.

“And yes, I told her your name. Because the police were heading to your house to arrest your parents that day,” Kate continues.

Billy suddenly looks hurt.

“Why wouldn’t you tell me that?” he asks, voice a bit broken. “Why would you keep that from me?”

“Because I told her not to.”

All three turn to see America striding into the room, hair wet, face set.

“Why?” Billy demands.

“Because we had a mission,” America replies, unflappable. “We were training. Your families are safe, that’s what matters.”

“How are we supposed to trust you if you keep things like that from us?” Teddy counters.

America is standing perfectly still, shoulders broad, somehow staring at all of them at once.

“This is the price,” she states, not even blinking. “This is the price of what we have decided to do, what we have decided to become. I’m sorry we kept this from you, but were your families safe before? Kaplan, were your parents safe after what happened at your school? Altman, was your mother safe if you had been caught breaking into Avengers Manor? Nobody is safe under the Hard Line Policies. Nobody.”

The whole room is silent for a long minute. Billy and Teddy exchange glances. Kate just lets her exhausted eyes fall on her own feet.

“It’s been a long day,” America finally says. “We all need sleep. Teddy, you’re injured and should be resting. We can reconvene tomorrow and discuss this then.”

Billy and Teddy both nod vaguely, sitting back down at the table. America, it seems, falls into her military training when she is tired. All sharp nods and stiff movements and commanding tones. Kate looks up and catches America’s eye. America gives her once of those short, curt nod. And then, a very small smile. It surprise Kate, and she smiles back. Despite their differences, despite their initial disagreements, Kate realizes that she and America are becoming friends.

Then the exhaustion hits Kate again. There is still so much to do, it feels, so much to discuss. But now isn’t the time.

They completed their mission. They saved lives. They made a statement. There’s nothing else Kate can do now, but wait.
“I assume you’ve seen this?” Peter asks, a little breathlessly.

He’s barged into Steve’s quarters, something he never imagined he would do. He’s not really the barging type. But he has to talk to Steve.

For his part, Steve glances up wearily from the tablet he had just been reading from. He doesn’t say anything, just looks at the video on the holo-screen and nods slowly.

“What are we going to do?” Peter presses too quickly, tripping a bit over his words.

“What do you mean what are we going to do?” Steve asks, brow knitting.

“We—we have to have a response to this! We have to come out in support of them!” Peter cries excitedly. “We’re the **Avengers**! We have to support them.”

Steve is shaking his head.

“No,” Steve laughs. “No, the mission hasn’t changed. You find the kids, bring them in. Rebels without Flags will be saying nothing in response to that video.”

Peter almost chokes. He’s taken aback by Steve’s seeming utter indifference.

“But—but you saw what America Chavez said!” Peter replies, moving quickly towards Steve. Steve gives him a warning look, stopping Peter in his tracks. Peter flails a bit, not sure what to say or do. He can’t believe what he’s hearing.

“Parker,” Steve says tiredly, “we are a refugee camp, number one. Officially, we are not an army. And we are definitely *not* the Avengers.”

“You’re really not going to say or do anything?” Peter asks anxiously.

“Most of the world thinks that I’m dead, Peter,” Steve snaps, suddenly loud. “I prefer to keep it that way.” When Steve sees Peter’s flabbergast expression, his face softens a bit. “The missions we carry out are covert for a reason.” Steve pauses, eyes going vacant. “Do you not remember what happened the last time we took a public stand against President North?”

Of course Peter remembers that.

“It’s the same thing that will happen to those kids if we don’t get to them first,” Steve finishes sadly.

“What are we doing here if not standing up to President North?” Peter retorts immediately.

“Protecting people,” Steve replies, voice hard and eyes matching, settling on Peter with laser focus. “We have 12,000 non-combatant refugees living here under our protection. *That’s* what’s important. Saving lives. Taking a stand for your own ego only ends in death.”

Peter shakes his head. He can’t believe what he is hearing. This man was once Captain America, standing for what he believed in was his entire identity.

“I’m not some stupid kid anymore,” Peter says thickly.

“Then stop acting like one,” Steve snaps.

Peter knows that the conversation is over. Steve is turning away, face hardened. Peter’s stomach churns with disbelief and disappointment. His hands curl into fists, but he just nods curtly.
“Yes, sir,” Peter growls, turning sharply and storming out of the room.

Peter’s mind is a whirlwind as he pounds through the garden. He doesn’t even notice when the body detaches itself from the shadows. Peter almost barrels headfirst into none other than Bucky Barnes.

It’s silly and childish, but fear flares in Peter’s gut when he comes eye to eye with this beast of a man. Barnes is stark still, staring down at Peter with a look of mild interest. Peter takes a few steps back. He’s known this man for far too long to still be afraid of him, but there’s something entirely disconcerting about Barnes.

“I want to help,” Barnes growls before Peter has time to recover from the shock.

“W-what?” Peter sputters.

Barnes swallows hard, gaze moving up and down Peter once before shifting a second story window behind Peter. Barnes is silent for a long time, and Peter isn’t sure if the man is weighing his words or simply waiting for Peter to say something. Peter bites his lip and is about to speak when Barnes beats him to it, just as abrupt as before.

“Steve Rogers means everything to me.” The sentiment is sweet, entirely out of place on the lips of this hunter. But the words make Barnes’ frame soften a bit. He looks back at Peter. “But in this, he is wrong.”

“You…heard us?” Peter asks awkwardly.

Barnes just raises an eyebrow. Of course this man heard Peter’s conversation, he wears shadows the same way he wears clothing, he hears everything.

“Right,” Peter mutters. “What do you mean you want to help?”

“I mean that I want to join you, I want to find these kids, and I want to help them kill President North.”

The statement is hard and certain. In Barnes’ mind, Peter is certain that North is already dead. Because if the Winter Soldier has decided your fate, you might as well have been hand selected by the Grim Reaper himself.

“You think you can find them? The Young Avengers?” Peter asks slowly, trying not to dwell too long on the implications of what Barnes just said.

“Of course I can find them,” Barnes states with a small laugh. “I’m the Winter fucking Soldier, remember?”

Peter has some questions. Is Barnes going to tell Rogers? Should Peter tell Rogers? Should Peter tell anyone? How are they going to find these kids? What are they going to do when they do? But Peter doesn’t get a chance to ask, because Barnes is speaking again.

“I’ll have a jet ready to leave from LP 14 at 0300 tomorrow.”

Peter nods vaguely. Barnes gives him a sharp look and then slips back into the shadows from where he came.

And just like that, Spiderman has teamed up with the Winter Soldier.
Whew, i stayed up way too late writing this chapter, but i just had to get it done. Hope you guys enjoyed!
Chapter Ten

Chapter Summary

CW: NSFW scene, mention of rape and violence

Snow falls quietly on the courtyard. The fresh layer of powder mutes the grunts and huffs that Kate emits. She doesn’t know how long that she’s been out here. It’s been a while, but she isn’t cold. Sweat pours down her body, and she ignores the pain of her broken ribs and the tinge of her fractured wrist. Billy’s spell had healed her enough, she can’t afford to lay around sickly. A muted kind of fury boils within Kate, pointed in no particular direction. It’s the fury that has driven her for years now. And the insidious voices the whisper in the back of her brain and scratch at the inside of her skull are only silent when she is pushing herself to her limit.

A kick to the center of her makeshift dummy splinters the wood, causes her faceless foe to slump to one side. A growl rips its way through Kate’s throat. Heart rate spiking, she bicycles her feet, looking around at the courtyard. Before she can have a coherent thought, she runs. Her father had made her do gymnastic for six years when she was young, back before her mother left. Kate does several quick front handsprings, landing with a twist and using the momentum to carry her forward, she kicks herself up a wall, reaching for an ancient stone arch. She grabs the slippery stone and hauls herself up onto it before the snow beneath her fingers loses her her grip. Kate doesn’t stop, vaulting over a small wall and bringing herself up into a crumbling tower. She rolls and leaps from the top, hitting the opposite wall. Her fingers find a small grip on a protruding stone, and she bounds from the wall to the ground, barrel rolling and springing to her feet.

Kate dashes across the courtyard, ignoring the pain in her side. Screaming into the muted air, she flings her fist at her broken dummy, cracking its base. She rounds on the thing, front kicking the mess of broken wood and straw across the courtyard. Turning quickly, Kate rushes towards a pillar on the opposite end of the yard. But just before she hits it, a shadow detaches itself from behind. Kate doesn’t think, she twists and slings her leg at the shadow.

America huffs, the breath knocked out of her, but she doesn’t move. Instead, she parries. Kate’s mind is so disassociated that she barely recognizes this new foe as America. Instead, she shouts and swings. America ducks and lands an elbow in Kate’s tender side. Kate clamps down on the pain, letting it fuel the fire inside of her.

They fight, and Kate doesn’t hold back. She gets America against a wall, but the other girl uses her super strength to shove Kate back before charging and flipping Kate onto her back. America gets on top of her, pinning her arms with her knees before grabbing Kate in a front headlock. Kate can’t move, can’t do anything against America’s strength except sob miserably and tap out.

America releases her immediately, climbing to her feet and holding out a hand. Kate wipes a bit of blood from the corner of her mouth, ignoring America’s hand. She gets to her feet, turning her back on America immediately.

“We need to talk,” America says.

Kate ignores her, sprinting across the courtyard and kicking off a wall to lunge herself into a second story walkway. America doesn’t need the assistance, she jumps easily from the ground to the
“Kate!” America calls after her as Kate prowls away.

Still too far gone, Kate runs and grabs a wooden arch, swinging herself upward and scaling the wall onto the roof. America is on her tail, catching her arm and forcing Kate to swing around and face her.

“I’m not in the mood!” Kate roars.

America doesn’t seem phased by Kate’s fury. If anything, she looks sympathetic. Kate expects America to admonish her, tell her she should be inside healing. But she doesn’t.

“How many men did you kill last night?”

Kate is stunned silent. She looks into America’s eye, searching for her motive. But America never betrays her emotions on her face.

“What’s it matter?” Kate demands.

“Young Avengers don’t kill,” America replies firmly, her grip on Kate’s arm tightening.

“I never agreed to that,” Kate spits.

America releases her, taking a few steps back. But still, her face is unreadable. Kate just pants, breath coming up in short clouds in the cold air. The sweating on her body is quickly cooling, and Kate shivers. America, always impervious to the weather, wears shorts and a white T-shirt, not bothered by the snow.

“Kate,” America says slowly, crossing her arms, “I’m ready to lead this team with you. But we need to be on the same page.”

“They deserved to die,” Kate hisses, also crossing her arms, but more from the cold.

America studies her for a long moment.

“They weren’t your first.” It’s a statement, not a question.

The bottom drops from Kate’s stomach. The whispers in her brain begin again and Kate can feel herself collapsing in on herself.

“Billy and Teddy are right, we can’t be keeping secrets from one another,” America says carefully.

Kate laughs, dry and sharp.

“That’s rich coming from you,” she retorts.

America takes a slow breath through her nose, nostrils flaring. Her gaze wanders over Kate’s shoulder, mind far away for long moment.

“Fine,” America says with a sharp nod. “I’ll tell you my story if you tell me yours.”

Kate swallows. She’s never told anyone about that night, or the nights that followed; about her first kill. But as soon as she thinks about it, she wants to tell America, she needs to. It’s been a secret, massive and caged and taking up so much space in her mind, that there is rarely space for anything else. Kate needs to release that monster if she is going to be a part of this team, she’s known that for
Kate nods slowly, shoulders tight. Without giving herself time to back out, she stalks past America and makes her way back down to the ground level, back into the courtyard. America follows silently. Kate ducks back under the narrow walkway, bending to grab up her wool poncho. She yanks it over her head, wrapping herself in warmth before putting her back to the stone wall and lowering to the ground. Kate pulls her knees tight to her chest, wrapping the loose poncho around them, and burying herself inside the safety of it. America looks down at her uncertainly, but finally takes a careful seat next to Kate against the wall.

Kate doesn’t wait. She’s already decided to tell her story, and she knows that she can’t pause. Because if she stops, she knows she won’t be able to get it all out. So, staring blankly at the snowy yard, Kate begins.

“I was fourteen,” Kate starts, voice flat. “My mom had…died a year before. I was back living with my father. I hated having to take the limo to and from school. So I slipped my body guard and walked home through the park.” Kate pauses, jaw tightening as she swallows hard, unsure if she’s going to be able to say it. “Three guys grabbed me. I was too…too weak to fight back.” Kate forces her eyes open against the cold, willing herself not to cry.

“They put me in a van, knocked me unconscious. When I woke, I was in this filthy sub-basement, just a hole in the ground. I heard the guys talking, they were working for a-a political opponent of my father. They were going to ransom me. But-but first—”

Kate’s voice breaks and she bows her head into the warm folds of wool, hiding her tears from America.

“They held me down and-and raped me.” Kate’s voice is thick and muffled, and she can’t bear to look up at America right now. “All of them, five in total.”

Kate stops again, unsure if she can go on. She sniffles, wiping the tears from her cheeks and not daring to look up.

“They thought I was unconscious afterwards. They left the room. I got up and was…was I was able to sneak past them and get out. I had no idea where I was, but I took a cab and I-I couldn’t go home, couldn’t face my father like that. So I went to a motel. Didn’t go home for two days. When I finally did…” Kate finally dares to look up. America is watching her with a careful expression. Kate immediately looks away, focusing instead on a gnarled tree in the middle of the courtyard. “My father had barely even noticed I was missing. I went and I-I told him what happened and he just…God, he just looked at me like he was ashamed of me. He told me that I could have ruined his fucking political career, that it was my fucking fault for slipping my body guard.”

“What’d you do?” America asks, voice a whisper.

Kate shrugs miserably.

“For a few months, nothing. Tried to pretend it didn’t happen. That’s what my father told me to do. But then…then I saw one of the guys on the news. He was running for fucking Mayor.” Kate purses her lips, a sudden sour taste in her mouth. “So I broke into one of my father’s warehouses and stole some gear. I snuck into the guy’s house. Lewis was his name. He told me that I could have ruined his fucking political career, that it was my fucking fault for slipping my body guard.”

Blood, there had been so much blood. It had surprised Kate, how much there was. It poured out of the man and covered Kate, warm and slick. At the time, it had felt like a baptism, like Kate was
being reborn. Killing the man had killed a part of Kate, the small, girlish part of herself. Something calloused and angry took its place. Kate had eased him to the ground, twisted the knife in his chest, and watched his eyes. The horror, the recognition, and the slowly fading light until he became nothing but a quickly cooling body.

“I hunted them all down,” Kate says, voice barely a whisper.

One by one. Some had been easier than others. But Lewis had had information about them all on his phone. Two more were dead by the end of the night. All it had taken was Kate using Lewis’s phone to demand a meeting in a parking complex nearby. Kate had shot the first in the back of the head and he had dropped. The sound of his body on the concrete was like a bag sand hitting the ground. The other had pulled a gun, he had fought back, but Kate shot him through the chin. He spasmed as he died, like a fish.

Kate’s fourth kill had been harder to find. It took her three weeks, but she found him buying drugs in an alleyway and ambushed him. He hadn’t expected it, but he had fought back. He broke Kate’s hand, but she still got the knife into his stomach, then she had slit his throat.

The last one came to Kate. He actually applied to be a part of her father’s security team. Kate had been eating breakfast when he came striding down the hall. He had smiled at Kate when he saw her. Kate hadn’t waited. She grabbed a kitchen knife, chased him down the hall, and sunk the knife into his neck before he even heard her coming. He died at the foot of the stairs. Getting rid of the evidence was hard, but Kate was meticulous and she knew how to erase security footage, she had been doing it to sneak out of the house for over a year. She had dumped the man’s body in the river, stealing one of her father’s SUV’s to transport it to the docks.

“You didn’t get caught?” America asks, uncharacteristic awe in her voice.

“No,” Kate replies, shaking her head. “Nobody suspected the fourteen year old daughter of Senator Bishop. And I was careful. That next week is when I went to the dojo and met my sensei.”

A hand lands on Kate’s arm. Kate looks up in surprise to find America staring at her with wide, empathetic eyes. Kate swallows.

“So yeah, I killed those Supremacy guys, and I’ll kill more if I get the chance. They did terrible things to those girls, to the prisoners. They deserved to die.”

Kate expects America to say something, expects her to tell her not to kill anymore, but she doesn’t.

“I understand,” America says softly, and Kate is surprised once again. America’s voice betrays emotion that Kate has never seen on America before. “I want to kill President North for what he did to my people. And I’m going to.” America’s voice hardens once again, the usual fury and righteousness that carries her back. “If I get the chance-when I get the chance, I’m going to kill him.”

Kate looks over at America but doesn’t say anything. This time, it’s America with a vacant stare, eyes on nothing in particular.

“You want to know my past?” America asks with a vague nod. “My people were ancient. We had libraries older than the earliest civilizations known to you. Our High Priestess said we came from the stars to save this world. For centuries, our people lived among yours. We were natural born warriors, and when we fought in Man’s wars, we wrought devastation and brought decisive victory. But we quickly learned that we were being used by mankind. We retreated to our island. But Men still sought us out, they begged us to join their battles, they paid us handsomely to cleave out their
empires. When we refused, they attacked. We built up walls, and the ancient force that brought us to this planet would chose nine warriors. They were the Alpha-Force, honor bound to protect the island and our people to their deaths. But still Men came. So our magic sunk the island to the bottom of the ocean. We still sent diplomats and military advisors to the surface world though. We surreptitiously influenced wars and politics, we gave up our secrets to those we trusted to harbor peace. But Mankind always disappoints and peace never lasts.”

America takes a deep breath, eyes still glazed. Her hand is still on Kate's arm, so Kate pulls her own hand from within her poncho and put it on top of America’s gently. She jumps at Kate's touch, but doesn’t pull away.

“President North says he discovered us, but that isn’t true. One before him, much like him, sent forces to seek us out, using old mythologies to find us. He sent his head scientist, a man named Schmitt. The Alpha-Force destroyed his forces, but not before he had kidnapped one of our own. He wanted our strength, our long lives, and he thought our blood held the secret. He used our blood and forced other scientists to create a serum that would change him, make him stronger and deadlier. It only disfigured him. But one of his scientists escaped and he realized that the magic that protects us would not allow an evil man to have our strengths. So he found a man that he thought was good, and he gave him the serum.”

“Steve Rogers,” Kate breaths, eyes wide. America nods slowly, still not looking at Kate. But her hand twists in Kate’s, until their fingers are interlaced.

“When the Earth was attacked by Thanos, the magic, the force that imbued us with power and that had brought us to this planet to be its protector, rose us to the surface once again. Our armies deployed and fought the invaders across the globe. I wanted to go, I wanted to fight. But my mothers would not allow it.

“After the invasion, we thought that we could become citizens of this world once again. But we were wrong. So wrong. And soon, the American military arrived. I didn’t understand it. My mothers had named me America because when I was born, the United States of America was a young country. Rebels who believed in democracy and rejected monarchy and the High Priestess told us that this new country would do great things, becomes a beacon for freedom. So I was named America. When the American military arrived, I was so confused. I’d never been to the US before, and I still believed that it meant freedom and democracy.”

America pauses, pain twisting her face. It strikes Kate suddenly how old America really is.

“Mamie was a diplomat, she was away when the invasion began. I-...I never saw her again.” America’s voice breaks. Kate has never heard America sound so raw and broken before. “Mama was part of the Alpha Force. She fought to her death to protect the island. The Arcadians fought for years. So many died. But Mama knew what was going to happen after the High Priestess died. I had joined the fighting, the defense of my home and of my people. But Mama found me one night and she took me into the Temple, deep into the core of the island. There was as stone.” America pauses, moving. Kate looks over at her and America pulls on a chain around her neck. From beneath her shirt, she shows Kate a small, non-descript shimmery black rock. “It’s a piece of a star. And for our entire history, the High Priestess has used it to choose the next Alpha Force. I didn’t know how it worked, but my mother told me to take it and to use it to find the next Alpha Force. And then...she said goodbye.”

There are honest tears on America’s cheeks. She doesn’t move to wipe them away, instead, she glares bravely ahead of her, throat working.

“My aunt helped me escape the island. And then I was on my own. It took me years to learn how to
use the stone. I had almost given up hope. I was going to find President North and kill him on my own. And then it happened. I was holding the stone, begging it to show me what I needed for the hundredth time, when I had a vision.”

“A vision?” Kate asks breathlessly.

“It was…like a dream. Everything was hazy. But I saw nine people, each of them in a different place. I couldn’t make out all of them. But I saw myself. And then I saw Cassie, and Billy and Teddy. I could see where they were, I knew exactly where to find them. I saw myself meeting them. I saw myself in the woods outside of Billy’s school. I saw myself on the roof with Teddy. I saw myself in the diner with Cassie. I tried to see the rest, but then the vision ended. And I haven’t been able to have another.”

“Who else do you think you were supposed to see?”

America finally looks over at Kate, eyes wide and earnest.

“Well…you.”

Kate’s mouth snaps shut. America looks suddenly sheepish, eyes going to their intertwined hands.

“I-I know that at first I didn’t want you on the team. I didn’t understand the vision at first. I thought I was only going to see other women. Then I thought that the team was only supposed to be metas. But…then there was you. And you brought us Riri. And you told us about the Red District. And the video was your idea. I-…I think we were destined to meet.”

Kate swallows, suddenly far too warm. America’s amber eyes move up and meet Kate’s. Kate can’t break her gaze away, and for a long moment, they simply stare.

“You were meant to be on this team, Kate,” America breathes. “And you and I were meant to lead it to bring down North. I know it.”

Finally, Kate looks away.

“So, who do you think the other three are?” Kate says slowly.

“What do you mean?” America replies.

“You said there were nine in your vision. Who are the other three people?”

America shifts.

“I don’t know,” America admits.

Suddenly, Kate has an idea. She sits up straight, realization hitting her. Puzzle pieces, muddled and confusing until this moment, suddenly seem to fall into place.

“I think I know the next one,” Kate cries breathlessly.

America cocks her head.

“Who?”

Kate smirks. America isn’t going to like it. Kate isn’t necessarily a fan either. But she suddenly has a suspicion, and she needs to know if she’s right.
Loud rock music makes the walls of the weight room shake. It’s a habit that Steve has picked up, but Bucky can’t remember exactly when it happened. He can remember a time when all Steve wanted to listen to was swing music, big band jazz, the kinds of sounds that Bucky and Steve had grown up with. Bucky thinks of that time, the time before, so very long ago, when Steve was just Steve, *his* Steve. Before he belonged to the Army, and then to the country, and then to the world. When Steve was so small that he could fit himself against Bucky’s chest and they would dance barefoot in their sweltering, tiny apartment, the sounds of the city below just as loud as their old radio. To think of that time makes Bucky’s heart twist painfully. Because both of those men are now long dead.

Bucky thinks that the rock music began after Tony died. Back when the entire world went to hell and the tight control that Steve had held over himself and his surroundings at all times had unraveled in his hands. He’s never been able to pick up the pieces. And Bucky knows that that reality eats away at Steve. Steve has had to give up so much. Not just comfort, not just the people he loves, not just the control he craves, but the very parts of himself that he thought defined him. His very morality has been stolen from him. Any illusion that he could be a perfect, infallible symbol of freedom and of bravery have been shattered. Without that, Steve has been floundering.

It hurts, to see Steve like this, using loud, angry music to drown out the voices in his own head. But Bucky understands it. Because his own reality, his own identity had been stolen from him in a similar fashion, all the way back in 1945. And maybe that’s why they still love each other, even though neither is the man that they once were. They’ve both changed, irreversibly, into something they struggle to understand. They wrap themselves in their misery, and in their grief, and in each other. When they’re together, they don’t have to lie, they don’t have to hide, they don’t have to pretend to be the things that they’ve told the world they are. Bucky doesn’t have to be a silent killer and bringer of vengeance, Steve doesn’t have to be Major Nomad, the face of a rebellion and protector of the injured and degraded. They can just be Steve and Bucky, the broken, bleeding beings that they truly are.

From the shadows, Bucky watches Steve curling a 200lb dumbbell. Sweat glistens on his skin, and his brow is furrowed in concentration. He’s pushing himself, always pushing himself. Trying to be something bigger, better, stronger. As if physical strength can make him emotionally stronger. If only that were so.

The dumbbell hits the padded ground, and Steve looks up at the mirror on the wall. His eyes search the darkened corner where Bucky hides, and Bucky knows that Steve see him, knows he’s there.

“Are you going to just stand there and watch?” Steve says, dropping his gaze and going to the rack to select another weight.

Bucky detaches himself from the shadows. He should have known better than to think that he could hide from Steve. He crosses the room, and Steve’s eyes track him in the mirror. Steve doesn’t turn, and Bucky moves until he is just behind him.

The moment is heavy and it is long. Bucky is about to betray Steve, betray his trust and his authority. Bucky opens his mouth, but no words come. He’s never been good with words. What
can he say right now? I’m leaving. I’m betraying you. I’m doing the exact thing you’ve begged me not to do for so long. I have to do this. I’m sorry.

Words, they’re just words, and they don’t mean a thing. No words will change what is about to happen, it won’t save Steve from the hurt that is to come. So, instead, Bucky reached forward, grabbing Steve’s wrist and turning him around to face Bucky. Steve takes a sharp breath when he sees Bucky’s face. But Bucky doesn’t wait, doesn’t allow Steve the time to say or do anything. He leans forward and kisses him.

Steve pulls back from the kiss first, trying to catch Bucky’s eye. He knows. He knows that something is wrong. Bucky knows he can’t hide from Steve. They’ve known each other for so long, they’ve loved each other for almost a century. There is no deceiving Steve. But Bucky doesn’t allow him the chance to ask. He grabs Steve hard by the waist and the shoulder and pulls him back in for a bruising kiss.

Because Steve loves Bucky, he knows that Bucky isn’t going to speak, so Steve won’t bother to ask. Steve leans into the kiss, knowing that all the Bucky needs to convey is going to be conveyed by his body.

Bucky doesn’t wait. This isn’t going to be slow or sweet. The alchemy between them is immediately frantic and desperate, a burning blue flame. Bucky’s hands rove hungrily across Steve’s body, and Steve leans into him, still slick with sweat, skin heated and growing hotter. Bucky kisses along Steve’s jaw, down his neck. He bites, teeth sinking into Steve’s warm skin, hard enough that Steve hisses. But Bucky doesn’t let up. He wants to mark Steve, he wants to leave the evidence of his love on Steve’s skin. He wants the bruises to remind Steve of him until Bucky returns. So Bucky bites hard enough to draw blood, and Steve lets out a moan, rough and low, and he grips Bucky to him tighter, encouraging him. Bucky lets up and moves to a spot lower on Steve’s neck, closer to his shoulder, and bites again.

Meanwhile, Bucky’s hands moves across the canvas of Steve’s skin. He traces well-known scars and muscles and bones, fingers grabbing the edge of Steve’s shirt and ripping it up the front without a second thought. Bucky’s mouth moves down Steve’s body, biting, sucking, marking. Steve throws his head back. His gasps and moans egg Bucky on. Bucky takes Steve’s nipple into his mouth, sucking hard until its pert and rough in his mouth. Widening his lips, Bucky bites here too. The sound this elicits from Steve is filthy and raw.

Sex is violence. It is raw, carnal. Sex between Bucky and Steve leaves marks, scars even. For Steve, every bruise and cut is a reminder that Bucky is here, he is real and he is alive and he loves Steve desperately. Even after all of these years, Steve fears that Bucky will leave him again. And the onus that burns in Bucky’s stomach nearly consumes him. Because he is leaving him, and he knows that Steve will press his fingers into the bruises on his skin for days to come as he wonders where Bucky is, why he left, what he’s going to do. Steve is going to blame himself. He’s going to eat himself up inside, wondering what he did wrong. And the knowledge of that truth nearly makes Bucky’s knees buckle. He wants to assure Steve. He wants to promise that he is going to return. But he knows that none of it will do any good.

Bucky’s name is on Steve’s lips, whispered and moaned like a prayer. The guilt lances through Bucky, because he knows. He knows that he is Steve’s temple, his priest, his god. Steve’s knees hit a bench and he crumples against it as Bucky goes to his knees. Steve’s cock is hard and pressing desperately against his shorts. Normally, Bucky would tease. He would take his time. He would work Steve over until Steve was begging, pleading, frantic. But not today. Today, Bucky pulls down Steve’s shorts and watches as his cock springs free, wasting no time as he gets his lips on the tip and swallows him down. Steve makes a strangled sound, hands skittering across Bucky’s
shoulder until they get a grip. Steve’s nails dig hard into the skin of Bucky’s flesh shoulder as Bucky bobs his head. Bucky wants to remember Steve’s taste, his smell. He drinks down Steve’s essence, the anti-venom to this world.

Bucky is Death and Steve is Life. This has always been the truth. Bucky lives in shadow, and Steve is brilliant light, a burning star that guides Bucky through the night. Even when Steve’s light dims, even when he seeks out the shadows himself, he is always Bucky’s North Star.

Steve’s hands run through Bucky’s hair, his strangled voice beginning to plead. He begs to come, like always. Bucky nods desperately and a moment later, Steve is pouring down his throat. Bucky drinks it down, the elixir of his life.

They’re both sweating, panting, desperate. Steve turns over on the bench, but Bucky puts a hand on his hip to stop him. He wants to see his face, his eyes. So Steve shimmies back onto the bench as Bucky stands, his own cock painfully hard. Bucky grabs Steve’s thighs, shoving them back to expose him. Bucky bends, lavishing Steve’s hole hungrily. Steve’s breath comes in short bursts. He continues to moan Bucky’s name, and it’s the most beautiful song in the world, the sound that will get him through the next few weeks. In Bucky’s pocket is a bottle of lube. He pulls it out and pours some onto his fingers.

The preparation is short because Bucky’s need has grown ravenous and furious. He pushes a finger inside Steve and immediately, Steve’s body relaxes against Bucky’s ministrations. Bucky moves his finger in and out, loosening Steve up. Steve’s back is arched hard against the bench, and Bucky takes a moment, leaning back and looking over Steve’s body. He is beautiful, Bucky has always thought so. And Steve is never more beautiful than he is in moments like this. The words on his lips are jumbled, a mixture of pleading and Bucky’s name. Bucky adds another finger, scissoring because he needs to be inside of Steve right now.

When Bucky pulls his fingers out and slicks up his own cock, he looks over Steve again. Steve’s eyes are screwed shut. Bucky lines up his cock and leans over Steve.

“Open your eyes,” Bucky begs.

Steve complies immediately. Blue. Bucky’s sky, Bucky’s heaven, Bucky’s redemption.

Bucky pushes inside of Steve as he bends over and kisses him, bruising and hungry. Steve’s arms wrap around Bucky, strong and holding him against his chest as Bucky begins to thrust. Steve never intends to let Bucky go, that much is clear. His arms are tight across Bucky’s back.

Steve knows. He knows what Bucky is going to do. He knows he is going to leave. Because Steve can read Bucky’s body like the Holy Bible. Steve’s eyes are wide and he is laid open, raw. When Steve speaks, it is almost a sob.

“I love you.”

They lose themselves in each other. Sweat and need. Eyes as blue and as expansive as the sky above. Their bodies speak the words that they cannot say themselves.

_I love you._

_I need you._

_You are my everything._

_I’m sorry._
Kate searches the castle for Billy. He isn’t in any of his normal haunts—not in his room, not in the common room, not in Riri’s lab. Kate is growing frustrated, she needs Billy to take her to the hospital. She needs to speak to Tommy. Just when Kate is about to give up her search, she turns a corner and freezes, not prepared for what she finds.

Billy’s back is arched against the wall of the narrow hallway. Pinning him there is Teddy, and their lips are locked hungrily. Their hands are on each other, slipping under shirts and waistbands. Kate puts her hands on her hips and clears her throat.

Immediately, the boys separate, both blushing hard. Teddy digs his hands into his pockets, ducking his head and rushing to the other side of the hall. Billy sputters, hands flailing.

“Kate,” he gasps nervously.

Kate chuckles.

“Finally,” she says. These two have been dancing around each other for weeks now, stealing glances when they think the other isn’t looking, awkwardly flirting during training. Kate strides forward, clapping Teddy on the shoulder with a grin. “I ship it,” she says with a wink that only makes Teddy blush harder.

“I need you to take me to the hospital,” Kate says to Billy.

“Oh, ok,” Billy replies weakly, nodding.

Billy makes a circular motion with one of his hands. Kate watches as a few feet away, reality seems to tear itself into two. A blue circle sparks and looking through it is like looking through a window. It’s a portal, leading to a darkened hospital hallway.

“I didn’t know you could do that,” Kate exclaims, looking at Billy speculatively.

“New trick,” Billy says sheepishly.

Kate inclines her head.

“Thanks.”

Doctor Temple is a warm, unflappable presence in a frenetic world. Her brow is perpetually pinched, and she emits plenty of heavy sighs, but nothing seems to truly phase her. She’s pretty, Kate thinks, her long hair pulled into a tight bun at the nape of her neck. Dr. Temple is in her fifties, at least, and Kate wants to ask her where she came from and how she knows so much about meta-human care. The rooms that hold the rescued prisoners are in a secret wing, accessed only through Dr. Temple’s fingerprints, maned by only two nurses that Dr. Temple tells Kate are working off the clock. Kate has no idea how to thank them all.

Kate follows on Dr. Temple’s tail as she checks all of the patients. With some food and medicine and IVs, they’re all looking significantly better.
“What do you want me to do when they’re ready for release?” Dr. Temple asks at one point on her rounds.

“Uhm,” is all Kate can think to say.

Dr. Temple sighs.

“I’ve seen your little video announcement,” Dr. Temple says slyly. “If you kids are planning to do this hero stuff full time, you’re going to need to plan better. These patients just can’t stay here. I can get their info when they’re healthy enough, contact their families if they want. But I have a feeling that a majority of these kids are going to have nowhere to go.”

Kate hadn’t really thought about that.

“They can’t go back to the States,” Kate says slowly, and Dr. Temple gives her a pointed look as if that was obvious. “So where can they go?”

Dr. Temple exhales and massages her forehead.

“I can talk to Steve Rogers,” Dr. Temple sighs. “He can probably take them in.”

“You know Steve Rogers?” Kate asks suspiciously.

“What do you think I’m doing here?” Dr. Temple replies. “Rogers stationed me here for emergencies. I used to work in the hospital at the base in Wakanda.”

So that explains how she knows so much.

“How do you know Jessica Jones?” Kate asks.

Dr. Temple gives a dry laugh.

“Let’s just say that Ms. Jones and I go way back.” Dr. Temple looks Kate over. “You remind me a lot of her when she was young.”

Kate isn’t sure if that’s a compliment. She withers under Dr. Temple’s scrutiny, glancing around the room vaguely.

“Where’s Molly?” Kate asks, eyes falling on the empty bed.

“What?” Dr. Temple says, looking up and glancing at the bed as if she is just noticing it for the first time. “I-…I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?” Kate demands, panic flaring in her chest.

Dr. Temple drops the tablet in her arms to the bed, hands moving towards the sheets and pillows. She sits down, staring hard at the empty bed as if Molly might just appear if she wills it hard enough.

“Shit,” Dr. Temple whispers to herself, fingers running along the starchy sheets.

“What happened to her?” Kate cries, sounding frantic as she moves towards the bed.

“Someone came and got her,” Dr. Temple replies, voice even and eyes closed. “Dammit, they messed with my memory.”

“Who?”
“A sorcerer, I know the signs,” Dr. Temple says, opening her eyes. “It’s, unfortunately, not the first time.”

“A sorcerer?” Kate cries. “The hell is a sorcerer?”

“What do you mean? You have a sorcerer on your team,” Dr. Temple half laughs.

“No we don’t,” Kate replies slowly.

“What do you think Billy Kaplan is?” Dr. Temple says, getting to her feet. She doesn’t wait for Kate to suss out her meaning. “The one that came and took Molly was young, your age. Japanese I think. Dressed like something out of a 90s grunge movie. She wasn’t alone, but that’s all that I can remember.”

“You seem awfully calm about that,” Kate accuses.

“If she was working for the government, she would have taken them all, not just Molly,” Dr. Temple points out.

That doesn’t do anything to assuage Kate’s worries, but that’s the moment that Tommy Shepherd decides to appear in the room.

“Purple!” he cries, arms wide. “Come to visit me?”

Dr. Temple gives Tommy an annoyed look.

“Actually, yes,” Kate replies. She turns and nods at Dr. Temple. “Thank you, doctor.”

Kate leads Tommy out of the room. With some food and clean clothes, the kid seems even more high energy than before, which Kate didn’t think possible. He vibrates slightly, seemingly incapable of being still.

“So, I’ve been thinking, Miss Robin Hood,” Tommy says before Kate can speak. “I wanna join your band of merry men.”

“Really,” Kate replies, inclining her head.

“Well it’s not like I have anywhere else to go. I’m not going back into the foster care system. I’ve burned too many bridges anyway, I’ll probably be arrested if I try to go back to Indiana. I might have blown up my school’s gymnasium.”

“So you don’t know who your parents are?” Kate presses.

Tommy shrugs.

“My folks died when I was seven. I bounced around foster care ever since.”

Kate nods. She pretends to be considering it. In truth, she came here solely to get Tommy back to the castle. She’s got a theory, but she’s not quite ready to reveal her suspicions.

“Alright,” Kate says finally. “You can join the team.”

Tommy’s face lights up.

“But there’s one rule,” Kate interrupts his small celebration before he can say anything. “There’s only one smart-mouthed asshole on this team, and that’s me.”
Tommy laughs, grin widening.

“You got it, Purple.”

“Well then Tommy, welcome to the Young Avengers.”

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The alarm that tells Steve that there is someone at his door wakes Steve from a dead sleep. His dreams are haunted, inescapable. The television is still on across the room, more reports of worldwide riots beginning as a result of that damned video those kids released carelessly, unconcerned with the repercussions. But that’s not why Steve feels sick to his stomach at the moment. Dread has settled in the pit of Steve’s gut, churning painfully ever since Bucky had fucked him in the weight room. Steve could smell it in the air, feel is against Bucky’s skin. A secret, one Bucky didn’t trust Steve enough to tell him.

Sure enough, when Steve turns over, the other side of the bed is cold. Steve bites his lip and tries not to dwell on it, because whoever is at his door is pressing the buzzer repeatedly. Steve rolls out of the bed, turning his back on the place where Bucky is supposed to be, trying to trick himself into ignoring the emptiness of the space.

“Ms. Jones,” Steve says wearily when he opens the door. “It’s the middle of the goddam night, what are you doing here, Steve wants to say. “I was not expecting you. I thought you preferred to stay in New York.”

“Yeah, well, when I heard this shit, I had to bring this one to you in person,” Jess retorts, arms tightening across her chest.

“Bring me what in person, exactly?” Steve asks, voice strained.

“Ellen Altman.”

Steve furrows his brow. He’s spent the last few weeks relocating families, and questioning them about their children’s whereabouts. He has the names the Kate Bishop gave up, but the team calling themselves the Young Avengers has apparently been growing. The Iron Man impersonator still makes Steve uncomfortable. Video has surfaced of this new Iron Man arriving in the Red District, their advanced weaponry destroying the Supremacy gang members like an afterthought.

Hope had tracked down Peggy and Blake Burdick, and Peggy had answered the door with a look of expectation on her face.

“That was Cassie on the news, wasn’t it?” the woman had said in a tired tone.

Cassie had, apparently, been missing for over a year. Blake, being a cop, had exhausted his efforts in searching for her. But her mother had seemingly known better.

“That girl was always getting into Scott’s old things, stealing those damned Pym particles and trying to reenact her father’s glory days,” Peggy had explained to Hope. “You know what kind of girl she is. Never gave up hope on her father, always insisting that she’d be a super hero one day. No matter what I said to her, no matter how many times we told her that it was dangerous and that it would end up terribly, she wouldn’t give up that dream. Ever…ever since Scott died, she wants to honor his
memory by reliving it.”

Peggy was a stubborn woman. And she refused to be relocated, wanting to remain where she was and wait for her daughter’s return.

The Kaplans had been next. Steve had sent Sam to relocate them to Toronto. Mrs. Kaplan had been frantic and desperate, begging Sam for information about her son. The day he disappeared, his phone had been disconnected and he had vanished without a trace. Not that surprising for someone using sorcery, but the Kaplan’s had absolutely no idea about Billy’s powers. Therein had been the first big revelation: William Kaplan was adopted. Sam had spent almost a week trying to open up lines and track down Billy’s whereabouts. Because they boy, apparently, didn’t know.

“We were…going to tell him when he turned eighteen,” Mr. Kaplan had said with a glaze in his eyes.

As far as a search for Billy’s biological parents went, Sam had hit a dead end. No line of questioning panned out, no leads presented themselves. Even in the files at the adoption agency, it seemed as if Billy had just appeared at the orphanage one day. Nobody had any memories of who had dropped him off or when. Even the Kaplan’s seemed to be drawing blanks as to how or why they had decided to adopt a son. They were a newly married couple, perfectly capable of conceiving children of their own, planning on traveling the world before they settled down and had children when one morning, they got up, walked down to the orphanage, and adopted a six month old William. They never regretted it, and they never even thought to tell the boy, insisting to Sam that they had to wait until he turned eighteen.

The entire affair set off some serious red flags. The last Steve had heard, Sam was following some threads in New York, pulling old files and trying to figure out exactly where this kid had come from. Sorcery was obviously involved though, and a majority of sorcerers were slaughtered years ago. This kid was probably in way more danger than he could imagine. If he’s using magic, then he can be tracked by Mordo. Billy probably doesn’t even know what the Sorcerer Supreme is, let alone that the man will be coming for him any day now.

Steve had prayed that that would be the worst of his worries when it came to these kids.

“What is it?” Steve asks Jess, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “It can’t be weirder than this Kaplan kid’s deal.”

Jess just laughs.

“Wanna bet?” Jones retorts, cocking an eyebrow.

Steve’s stomach sinks. He should have known better. Jones had volunteered to relocate Ellen Altman. That’s the last Steve had heard of it, expecting a debriefing sometime soon once Jess had gotten the woman settled in Canada or Finland or wherever. But here Jess was now, in Wakanda, a look on her face that makes Steve dread whatever is about to come. Jess turns on her heel and begins marching through the front garden, towards the rail car.

“Jess, just tell me,” Steve insists, following Jess as she directs the car to take them to the barracks.

“You wouldn’t believe me,” Jess laughs. “And I don’t even think I would get it right if I tried.”

“I am really not in the mood, Jones,” Steve groans. “Just tell me what it is.”

Jess throws a devious glance over her shoulder, eyebrow cocked as they get out of the rail car. She remains stubbornly silent, ignoring Steve’s persistent questions and angry silences as they walk into
the building and start down the hall. Steve huffs again, running his hand through his hair as Jess’s pace quickens. He follows her down the hall, all the way to the end. When they get to the door, Jess turns, a serious look on her face.

“I’m really sorry about this, Rogers,” Jess says solemnly.

“Just open the damn door,” Steve grumbles.

Jess turns the handle and the door swings open. Inside is a woman—a Skrull woman. Skin green and thick, a strong, square chin and large, pointed ears; all indicative of her species. She looks odd, dressed in a pink button up and a pair of blue jeans, both practically bursting at their seams to adapt to the woman’s naturally large size. She looks up from where she has been pacing nervously when Steve walks in, fear and desperation showing on her face. Her eyes dart between Steve and Jess expectantly.

“Steve, let me introduce you to Ellen Altman,” Jess announces with a sweep of her arm.

Steve sighs and leans against the frame of the door.

“So, Theodore is a Skrull,” Steve surmises.

The Skrull woman tenses, shoulders tightening as she looks at Jess.

“You didn’t tell him?” Ellen asks, tone accusing.

Jess puts up her hands defensively.

“Lady, you’re gonna have to tell him that story your damn self,” Jess replies.

Ellen takes a few shaky breaths, eyes landing on Steve.

“Teddy is not a pure Skrull,” the woman begins unsteadily. “And he is not my son.”

Steve swallows hard, nodding a bit.

“Okay,” Steve replies slowly.

“And if I cannot find him soon,” Ellen continues, “it may bring war to this planet. A war that will destroy you all.”

Steve feels himself crumpling as the air escapes his lungs. He shoots an accusatory glance at Jones, but Jess just shrugs as if to say “I told you so.”

“Okay, Ms. Altman,” Steve says, motioning to the small table across the room. “Why don’t we have a talk?”
Billy stands awkwardly beside Tommy Shepherd. Kate’s motions animatedly at them with her hands as the rest of the team looks at them with scrutiny in their eyes.

“Well?” Kate presses. She’s come to some kind of conclusion that she’s hoping someone else will understand, but so far, nobody has.

“Well, they look the same,” Cassie says with a small shrug. “Are you guys long lost twins?”

Billy wants to say no. He doesn’t want Tommy to be his twin, the kid is nothing like him. He’s hot-headed and super confident. Even still looking half-starved and dressed in a hospital gown, Tommy stands with his shoulders thrown back and a look on his face that tells Billy that he was probably popular in school.

“When’s your birthday?” Billy suddenly asks.

“August 15th,” Tommy replies.

Shit.

None of this makes sense. Tommy looks like a skinnier, silver haired version of Billy. And they have the same birthday. They have to be twins. But why would Billy’s parents not tell him that he had a twin brother? Why didn’t they keep Tommy? Are Billy’s parents not his real parents? Oh god, is he adopted? Why wouldn’t his parents tell him that? Why wouldn’t they have adopted Tommy as well?

Panic is flaring in Billy’s chest. He feels the tendrils of a panic attack digging into his frontal lobe. Billy balls his hands into fists, digging his nails into his palms. Concentrate.

“So they’re twins?” America surmises with a shrug. “That’s weird but—“

“No!” Kate interrupts. “Not just twins. A speedster and a sorcerer, who does that remind you of?”

Every face is blank, watching Kate for the answer. But suddenly, the pieces fall into place in Billy’s mind.

It can’t be. It’s not possible.


Kate grins like a fool, pointing hard at Billy. Realization spreads across the faces of his team members.

“So what are you saying?” Tommy scoffs. “That Mr. Wizard and I are related to the Maximoffs? Don’t be ridiculous. I know my biological parents, they died when I was a kid. Billy and I are not related.”

“Only one way to find out,” Kate replies with a maniacal smirk.

An hour later, they’re all in costume. Tommy’s been given some of Billy’s clothes to wear and a mask. Billy is feeling light headed. His mind has been racing. Could Tommy really be his twin brother? Could they really be related to the Maximoffs? What would that mean? How and why and
when and every other question darts through Billy’s head, giving him a migraine.

Teddy appears at Billy’s side, grabbing his hand.

“You alright?” Teddy asks carefully.

Billy swallows hard and looks up at Teddy. There’s been one particular thought his mind keeps racing back to, a memory.

*You found your brother, I knew you would.*

“The green-eyed woman I told you I’ve been seeing,” Billy says slowly. “When I saw her at the hospital, she told me that I had found my brother.”

Teddy’s brow furrows and he takes a small step closer to Billy, a comforting presence, grounding him with a touch of his cheek.

“I think I know who the green-eyed woman is, Teddy,” Billy admits, closing his eyes. “I think it’s Wanda Maximoff, the Scarlet Witch.”

Teddy makes a small noise of surprise.

“I thought she died,” Teddy says slowly.

“So did I,” Billy replies, still not opening his eyes. “She killed all those people, and the news said that she was killed right after.” Billy shakes his head, finally looking up at Teddy again. “But, it all fits. I think she’s the Scarlet Witch and…and I think she might be my mother.”

Teddy’s face is hard and Billy can tell he’s trying to process what Billy’s just said. Billy can barely process it himself. But before either of them can speak, Kate comes striding towards them.


The rest of the team moves closer, all in their costumes, even Riri. Billy turns, opening a portal at the other end of the room. Through it, Billy can see a dusty, cluttered basement disappearing into a vast darkness. He swallows hard, giving Teddy’s hand a squeeze before pulling away and stepping through.

Lights flicker on when Billy steps into the basement, some of them popping and extinguishing immediately. The place is a mess, clearly ransacked years ago. But at the far end of the room is a massive metal door. The rest of the team follows Billy through the portal.

*Nocameras,*” Billy says, lifting a hand. There’s a pop and then a crash as several small hidden cameras come tumbling to the ground, broken.

“Good thinking,” Kate says as she brushes past Billy, eyes on the metal door.

The door is massive and has clear signs of someone trying to break in. There are scratches and burns, small dents and grooves. Government forces or looters, most likely. But the door held them off. Whatever it’s made of, it’s strong. As soon as they’re close, a screen lights up, inlaid in the metal, projecting a holographic box. Kate looks over it.

“Identify,” a disembodied female voice commands.

“Alright, Billy,” Kate says carefully. “Moment of truth.”
Billy swallows hard again, glancing over at Teddy who gives him a reassuring nod. Kate steps aside as Billy moves forward, holding out a hand and pushing it into the box. The screen whirs and the projected box turns bright blue and begins to twist. The box grows until its enveloped Billy’s arm, and then his chest, and then his face. A retinal scan nearly blinds him. And then the light disappears. There’s a ding, and a small door opens at the base of the screen.

“Please provide genetic sample,” the voice directs.

Nervously, Billy puts his hand inside the small opening. There’s a prick on his middle finger, and Billy hisses, withdrawing his hand. The screen turns yellow and displays the word “Analyzing.”

The entire team waits with baited breath. The moment seems to stretch on forever, and Billy suddenly forgets how to breathe. Then the screen lights up green.

“Welcome, William Maximoff,” the female voice says brightly.

The shock barely has time to settle into Billy’s bones before there’s the hiss of an airlock releasing and the door in front of them groans. Cassie, who’s been bouncing on the balls of her feet, immediately grabs the edge of the door and pulls it open.

Inside is a perfectly pristine, brightly lit room. It’s like a locker room, but so much more. Massive metal doors cover the walls, and above each is a name.


The names go on and on, and the rest of the team rushes through the door excitedly like kids on Christmas morning.

Billy, however, is still frozen, still trying to comprehend exactly what was just confirmed. Kate watches him carefully, not following the rest of the team.

“What does it mean?” Billy asks.

Kate puts a hand on Billy’s shoulder.

“It means you’re a legacy, Kaplan,” she says with an encouraging grin. “We’ll test Tommy next. But first, come check out all of this cool stuff.”

Inside, Cassie already has the Ant-Man locker open and is tugging on the costume with a look of absolute glee on her face. America is just staring at the opened Captain America locker, the costume inside on a mannequin, other pieces set out carefully. Riri isn’t interested in costumes and is already in the room beyond, banging around. Kate branches off, making a bee-line to the Hawkeye locker. Teddy is opening as many lockers as he can, and Tommy is digging through drawers, grabbing random pieces of costumes and tugging them on.

Billy follows the sound of Riri, rounding the corner and realizing that he’s standing inside an armory. Weapons of every kind cover the walls and every surface. Massive metal drawers open up to reveal more. Gauntlets, web shooters, pistols, rifles, war hammers, bows and arrows, widow’s bites, everything one could think of seems to be in this room. And Riri is on a very specific scavenger hunt.

Billy continues past the armory, down the brightly lit hall. He rounds the corner and finds another massive metal door, identical to the one they’ve just come through. A screen lights up and a voice asks Billy to identify.
“Tommy,” Billy calls. Because all of this stuff is neat, and he’s excited for the upgrade, but he also needs to know. He has to know the truth.

Tommy appears beside him, dressed in mismatched gear from different lockers. Billy nods at the holographic box. Riri also peers around the corner.

“What do you think is in there?” Riri asks. “It’s a hidden room inside a hidden room.”

“Only one way to find out,” Billy replies.

Tommy chews on his cheek for a moment, suddenly looking nervous. Billy wonders how he feels about this. Is he as shocked about finding out that he has a twin brother as Billy is? Tommy puts his hand into the box. The box expands, it scans his retinas, it asks for a genetic sample.

“Welcome, Thomas Maximoff.”

The door swings open, but Tommy and Billy can only stand and stare at one another. Billy has no idea what to say, he doesn’t know what this means. But Tommy suddenly grins, brilliant and crooked, a mirror image of Billy’s own smile.

“I’ve always wanted a brother,” Tommy proclaims.

And then he’s hugging Billy tightly. Billy freezes, surprised at first, but then he hugs back.

Because, holy shit. Billy has a twin brother. And they’re somehow related to the Scarlet Witch. Wanda Maximoff might even be their mother.

“Maybe there’s a computer in here,” Billy says once Tommy has released him. “It might have some information about us on it. Do you really think Wanda Maximoff could be our mother?”

Tommy’s face screws up.

“Didn’t she kill like three million people?” he asks. “And who would be our father?”

That’s a good question, but Billy doesn’t have the time to answer, because Riri is calling out for him from inside the room.

The scene inside the room is almost gruesome. It’s a laboratory of some kind, and in the middle of the room is a table. And on that table is the Vision.

What remains of Vision’s body is limp and dull. Part of his arm and his entire left leg is missing. But worst of all, most of his head is caved in. Synthetic organs and wires spill from his broken cavities. It’s a dead body, perfectly preserved because it’s not a body at all.

“What happened to him?” Tommy breathes.

“Thanos,” Billy answers. “When he invaded, he tore the Mind Stone out of Vision’s head. It killed him.”

Riri is bounding around the lab, turning on the computers and machinery.

“He was trying to fix him,” she announces. “Tony Stark was trying to fix him. But…”

“He died,” Billy finishes for her.

Riri turns, moving towards the body of Vision slowly. Her liquid metal mask molds to her face,
showing the curious look on her face. Billy can almost see the idea in her mind. She wants to fix him. She wants to bring Vision back to life.

“What are you guys do—holy shit,” Kate gasps, coming into the room, eyes landing on Vision.

Billy watches as Riri reaches for what remains of Vision’s head. There’s a sudden brilliant flash of light, blinding Billy. He hears Riri scream, and abruptly every machine in the room comes to life, blaring loudly. The table is shaking and Billy rushes across the room. Riri is on the ground, seemingly ejected from her suit. Billy helps her to her feet, but her eyes are fixed on what is happening before them.

Riri’s suit hovers above the ground, the liquid metal twisting violently into random shapes. On the table, Vision’s body has begun to shake and spasm, arching off the metal surface as if being pulled towards the suit. Another flash of bright light, and the liquid metal turns to a single, cascading river, rushing across Vision’s body, replacing the parts that are missing, molding itself to him.

“My suit!” Riri shouts. “It’s—it’s merging with him!”

Another flash of blinding light and suddenly Vision sits upright and launches himself from the table. Kate shouts, but Billy can’t understand her. There’s movement across the room, the rest of the team pushing through the doorway.

And then there is silence. Across the room, Vision is very much alive, and huddled over himself, hovering just above the ground. Every eye is on the prone form. The moment stretches on and on, nobody sure what to do, or even what just happened.

It’s Cassie who moves first. She detaches herself from the group, dressed in her father’s old suit, and walks towards the huddled body. When she reaches out and puts a hand on his shoulder, Vision flinches and looks up with wide, confused eyes.

“It’s okay,” Cassie says gently, smiling.

Vision unfolds himself, straightening slowly. His yellow eyes move from face to face before settling on Cassie, who hasn’t moved away from him. He swallows and looks down at his hands.

“What are you?” Cassie asks.

“I-…” his voice crackles robotically at first. “I believe I’m the Vision.”

***

“So where are we going?” Peter asks carefully.

They’ve been in the air for an hour now, and nothing but uncomfortable silence has existed between Peter and Barnes. They’ve been flying north, but Barnes has yet to reveal exactly where they are going. For a moment, Peter thinks that Barnes isn’t going to answer.

“The London Sanctorum,” Barnes grunts, eyes still on the horizon.

“Sanctorum?” Peter doesn’t know much about sorcery other than that it exists. He’s heard of Sanctorums, places imbued with magic where sorcerers, when there were sorcerers, liked to hang
out. “What’s there?”

“The Kaplan kid is a sorcerer,” Barnes replies with a shrug. “The magic he’s using can be tracked.”

“And…you know how to track it?” Peter asks slowly, still not certain what the plan is.

“No, but there’s devices at the Sanctorums that can. We can’t go to Hong Kong because that’s where the current Supreme has set up his base, and we can’t go to New York, because North has it guarded. So we’re gonna have to sneak into the one in London.”

Barnes finally looks back at Peter, and sighs when he sees Peter’s confused face.

“The kid is clearly using magic to get himself and his friends around. Meaning that wherever he is using it the most is probably their base,” Barnes explains in an annoyed voice.

“Oh,” Peter says. “Right.”

Silence, again.

“Aren’t there riots in London?” Peter presses.

He can see the annoyed look on Barnes’ face in the reflection of the glass.

“Yes, which will make it easier to get into the Sanctorum,” Barnes growls.

“Right,” Peter mumbles.

Before the silence can settle between them once more, a question tumbles from Peter’s lips of its own accord. It’s a question he’s been dying to ask, and it breaks free from his mind and is in his mouth before he can even realize what he’s saying.

“Why do you want to kill President North?”

Barnes freezes, and Peter immediately regrets his actions. He holds his breath as Barnes seems to bristle.

“Because he’s a tyrant,” Barnes says stiffly. “Don’t you want to see him dead?”

“Killing President North won’t send us back in time. It won’t undo the last fifteen years.”

And if Peter is being honest with himself, he knows that a meta-human killing President North won’t do anything but make North a martyr. It would prove that North was right, that metas are a threat. Surely that’s why Steve Rogers hasn’t taken any direct action against North or the United States. And if Rogers understands this, then Barnes must as well.

Barnes puts the jet on auto pilot, turning to look Peter in the eye. It takes Peter aback for a moment, because there’s a raw emotion there that Peter wasn’t expecting. Barnes looks wounded.

“Because,” Barnes begins, voice hoarse, “that man used me as an excuse to kill and imprison hundreds of thousands of people. The things I had done, the things I was forced to do, the things that haunt every single second of every single day, the things that I will never be able to atone for. I should have turned myself over. God knows I wanted to. And I was going to. You probably don’t know that. Only Steve and T’Challa ever knew. But North didn’t really want me, he didn’t really want justice. He wanted a goddam excuse to hunt people down. I was that excuse. He started his war before I even had the chance to give myself up. And then he told the world that it was because of me, because I was so dangerous, that I was such a threat to this world that all meta-humans and
“anybody that North just plain didn’t like had to be locked up in the Cube, or dragged into a Red District and tortured, or simply killed in the streets.”

Barnes stops abruptly, turning sharp and staring hard out the window into the night sky.

“I already had innocent blood on my hands,” Barnes continues, voice shaking. “And now I’m drowning in it.”

When Barnes looks back at Peter, his eyes seem darker. There’s something behind them, something deep and unknowable, something that makes Peter go cold.

“If he wants me to be a threat, then I’ll be a threat.”

***

“You’re the Vision?” Kate parrots numbly, staring at the strange form before her. He looks like the Vision that Kate remembers from old videos on the internet, that odd, humanoid being. But fused with Riri’s suit, he’s different somehow, in a way that Kate can’t put her finger on.

“I…am,” Vision says slowly. “But I am not.”

He stares at his hands as if they fascinate him.

“What is that supposed to mean?” America demands, her heckles raised. She fallen into a defensive position, eyes narrowed.

“I have the memories of the…man that was once the Vision,” this new Vision hybrid states. He shakes his head carefully. “But I am not him.”

Vision floats across the room, moving through the table and the equipment like a phantom. He stops in front of a holographic screen that flickers when he touches it.

“Mr. Stark was repairing me. Without the Mind Stone, he had to…improvise. So I am not the same as I was.” Vision cocks his head, still staring at the screen. “He could not repair my body, but my consciousness he was able to piece together.” Vision turns and looks at Riri, who seems to shrink under his scrutiny. “You’re suit is miraculous. Orninion?”

Riri nods.

“Fascinating,” Vision breathes, once again looking at his hands.

“I want my suit back,” Riri announces, pushing out her chest.

“I’m afraid I cannot do that,” Vision replies.

“Why the hell not,” America snaps.

“Because, I don’t know how. It seems to have fused with me quite permanently.” Vision turns back to the screen. “Like I said, Mr. Stark was searching for an element with which he could repair my body, but he died before he could complete the task.”
"Scarlet Witch killed him," Tommy states plainly.

Vision turns and faces the group, still hovering ghost-like over the ground.

"No," he says, the first sign of true emotion on his face. "Miss Maximoff would never do such a thing."

"Well she did," Tommy retorts. "Everyone knows it. She killed millions of people with a spell."

Vision cocks his head and looks at Tommy as if seeing him for the first time.

"You're her son," Vision observes simply.

"What?!" both Tommy and Billy cry at the same time.

"How do you know that?" Kate demands.

"Like I said, I have all of the memories of the former version of the Vision. And I have access to all Avengers files, past and present." Vision floats closer to Billy, who flinches away from him. But Vision just looks at him for a long moment. "Wanda wanted children so badly. My former self was her husband. But I could not biologically reproduce, of course. So Wanda sought the help of other sorcerers. She used very ancient magic to pluck two souls from the Netherworld. But the being from whom she had stolen the souls wanted them back, and a terrible war that eventually killed me was beginning. So she had to send the babies away. I died before I learned what happened to them." He pauses, eyes going blank for a moment. "And there is no mention of what happened to the children in the archives. But you are her sons. The genetic tests that allowed you into these quarters confirmed that."

"What happened to her?" Billy breathes, so quiet that Kate only barely hears him.

Again, Vision pauses, eyes glazing over.

"She was here, trying to access this very room when she was caught by the authorities. The video evidence of what occurred after that has been erased. All that I can see is that she was drugged. She could not have been the one who cast the spell that killed so many. She was unconscious at the time."

"You can see all of this?" Tommy presses.

"What happened to her after that? Where did she go?" Billy asks frantically.

"I don't know."

Vision floats through the room once more, solid objects sliding through him as he goes. He stops in front of a reflective surface, a metal cabinet, and observes himself carefully. Kate watches him, mind trying to process everything she’s just learned.

"You have access to all the Avengers files?" Kate clarifies. "All of the files from the past? And everything from the base in Wakanda?"

Vision blinks at his reflection and inclines his head. His skin, shimmery and silver before, slowly turns to a shade of dark, forest green.

"I have access to all information on the internet. But some is encrypted and safeguarded. It would take me time and perhaps physical access to a port to be able to read those," he replies thoughtfully.
Kate grabs for America, who is still tensed and defensive. Pulling her closer, she looks America in the eye.

“I think he is supposed to join the team,” Kate whispers.

“What?” America snaps. “I don’t know what the hell he is, and I don’t trust it.”

“You said nine people were in your vision,” Kate points out. “He could be one of them.”

“He’s not a person,” America defends, crossing her arms.

“Actually,” Vision interrupts, turning towards them, “I was granted personhood in 2015. Legally, I am a person.”

America gives Kate a pointed look, but Kate brushes her off, addressing Vision instead.

“We’ve started a team, the Young Avengers,” Kate begins.


“The what?” America demands.

“Postulated by Doctor Stephen Strange, the Avengers Failsafe was a theoretical eventuality that proposed that if the original Avengers team were to fail or be annihilated, others would reveal themselves to take their place. Doctor Strange used the Time Stone to glimpse the future. Mr. Stark built the Avengers Failsafe program into his security apparatus. It’s the reason you were able to access this place.”

“You’re saying that-that we were destined to become Young Avengers?” Billy cries.

“No, not destined. Simply that the continuation of the Avengers Initiative was assured,” Vision replies easily. “Strength encourages strength. It also invites contest. The events of this timeline are predictable because human nature is predictable.”

“You’re making my head hurt,” Tommy complains.

“No,” Riri gasps. “I understand.” The rest of the team looks at her, confused. She flails her arms uselessly. “Don’t you guys get it? President North has his damned list, all of the people that he considers a future threat based on their past actions. If we weren’t doing this, someone else would. That’s what North is afraid of, that’s what he tries to prevent by throwing people into the Cube.”

“I think North is just a dick,” Tommy grumbles.

“It’s simple social evolution,” Riri exclaims. “Meta-humans aren’t a fluke. Super heroes aren’t a fluke! The alien invasions, none of it is accidental or inconsequential. It’s just…progress.”

“Okay, Stephen Hawking,” Tommy says. “So you’re saying nothing we do matters then?”

“No, it matters greatly,” Vision interjects. “You awoke me, you healed me. I am meant to assist you in your quest.”

“This isn’t a game of Dungeons and Dragons,” Teddy snaps suddenly. “This is our lives.”

Billy puts a hand on Teddy’s arm.

“Exactly,” Billy says. “This is our lives. This is the lives of everyone on this planet. We’re the
Failsafe. We’re here to put things back on track.” Billy takes a slow breath, looking up at Vision. “Mr. Stark understood that, didn’t he? He saw something like North coming. He knew he couldn’t fix you, but somebody someday could.”

“Precisely,” Vision replies with a curt nod, feet finally touching the ground. “And so now, I must help you.”

America huffs loudly, running a hand through her hair. All eyes turn to her, even Vision. Her jaw works furiously.

“Alright, so Vision’s on the team?” America finally grumbles.

“Vision’s on the team,” Kate replies with a smile.
Chapter Twelve

Without her suit, Riri had felt naked, exposed, like a nerve. The team had decided to take only the things that they could carry from the Avengers Mansion, locking the door and knowing that they could come back for more. It’s safer here, America had said.

But Riri hadn’t been interested in colorful costumes or iconic weapons. It was the technology that she wanted. The little things, the things that Tony Stark had built and perfected himself. A beta of the Widow’s Bite. The blueprints of a web shooter. The genetic programming of his Iron Man suit. Because if Riri was going to have to build a new suit, she wanted it to be better, upgraded.

At first, Vision seemed like a curse. He had hijacked her suit, the suit that she had spent five years perfecting, the suit that was more technologically advanced than anything in the world. But when Vision followed her into the lab, Riri realized that Vision was no curse, he was a blessing. Because Riri hadn’t been able to fill her arms with everything that she wanted to take from the Mansion. But every plan, every blueprint, every program, Vision had access to it all with nothing but a thought.

It was Vision’s first show to true humanity, his intense interest in helping Riri build a new, better suit. With Vision, Riri didn’t have to go through black market back channels to get the Orninion she needed. Vision could find as much as she needed with a few moments of thought, slip through the walls of wherever it was being guarded, and be back in time for dinner.

Vision is the perfect lab assistant. And his base programming, the JARVIS program, had been the one who helped Tony Stark build his original Iron Man armory. It only takes a single, sleepless week and the prototype for Riri’s new suit is ready. With Vision’s help, Riri has no need for a repulsor exoskeleton beneath her liquid metal skin. They use nano-technology to weave it into the Ornion. And that’s not the only upgrade.

After the fight at the Red District, Riri had been single minded in acquiring one of their power dampeners. She was able to analyze the thing, and reverse engineer a dampener for the dampener. A sonic wave that would cancel out the weapon’s frequency, rendering it useless.

“Well, Vision,” Riri says, wiping some sweat from her brow. Her new and improved suit hovers in its completed form in front of her. “What do you think?”

Vision’s feet touch the ground beside her, and he looks over the suit pensively.

“I think that Tony Stark would be jealous,” Vision proclaims with a nod and a humanizing grin.

Riri’s heart clenches at the compliment. She tells herself not to get teary. Because maybe Tony Stark is her hero. And maybe having Vision around is the next best thing to having Tony Stark being her mentor. And maybe a part of Tony Stark lives on in Vision. So Riri smiles like fool and turns and gives Vision a hug.

“Let’s take it for a test drive.”

***

The riots are intensifying. Los Angeles, New York, London, Paris, Tokyo, Cape Town. Those are
the biggest hit. It’s only a matter of time before the heads of state retaliate, and Kate knows that the world is holding its breath, waiting to see how President North will respond. So far, he has been silent, absolutely silent. No response to the video, no news coverage of the riots in the States, nothing. And nothing is a bad sign. It means that whatever retribution President North is planning, it’s going to be massive, it’s going to be swift, and it’s going to be deadly.

Kate bites her nails and watches news coverage of the Paris riot. Her French isn’t great, but the videos speak louder than the reporters words possibly can. Masses of Hard Line violators taking to the streets, marching past the Eifel Tower, a band of meta humans at their front. Kate understands what’s happening. The Young Avengers were the spark that was needed to light the powder keg of underlying resentment and pain in the marginalized dregs that society has cast out. The fuse is burning, and Kate wonders what the explosion will be.

There’s a knock at her door that draws Kate’s attention away from the television. Kate turns the volume down and clears her throat.

“Come in,” she calls.

The door swings open to reveal America, eyes immediately watching Kate carefully from where she is leaned against the frame. America’s eyes flit briefly to the screen.

“We’re going to have to do something soon,” Kate says, eyes on her hands in her lap. “These protests and riots are our fault. We can’t just sit in the shadows.”

“We wait for North to respond,” America states, straightening and walking towards the bed that Kate is sitting on.

“It’s been over a week,” Kate points out. “Whatever response he has planned, it could get bloody.”

“Then we face that when it comes,” America replies.

Silence falls between them. Kate keeps her eyes on her hands, unsure what to say or do.

“I think we need some team bonding time,” America states suddenly.

Kate looks up at her and half chuckles.

“What like movies, popcorn, and pillow fights?” Kate laughs.

America inclines her head.

“Is that a traditional bonding exercise for battle teams in America?” she asks.

Kate rolls her eyes.

“Alright, what do Arcadains do to bond?”

America smiles devilishly. It lights up her face, and Kate is surprised when her own stomach backflips at the brilliant grin.

“We drink.”
The night is cold, and the frigid air bites through Billy’s coat and scarf. Teddy keeps an arm slung around Billy, pulling him in tight. Teddy is like a furnace, and Billy leans into the warmth. Up ahead, America leads them along the wooded path. The rest of the team follows, buzzing with nervous energy. America had kept her explanation of her plans for the night purposefully vague.

“We can’t go to a bar, we’d be recognized!” Teddy had said.

“Plus, we’re not 21,” Billy had added.

But America had just given them an impish grin and told them that she knew a place.

On the trail ahead, Billy spots smoke billowing from an unseen chimney. The frozen ground crunches under their feet as the crest the hill. In the small valley below sits a stone building. Thick curtains cover the windows, and the place looks deserted except for the smoke spiraling above it. America’s pace quickens as she hurries down the incline, and the rest of the team tries to keep up.

America knocks on the heavy wooden door, and a panel at eye level slides open, like some kind of old-timey speakeasy.

“Avits nevrintir,” the person behind the door says in a low voice.

“Avits immunitir,” America replies.

The door swings open, revealing a tall woman dressed in leather. Her eyes light up when she looks at America.

“Ivin lo America Chavezsha?” the woman cries in the same strange language.

“Mas,” America grins.

The woman smothers America in a bear hug, jabbering in the foreign language so quickly that Billy can’t catch it all. She steps back and looks at the rest of the group.

“The Young Avengers!” the woman cries happily, throwing open her arms. “Welcome!”

America turns back and gives the team a smile. Billy’s never her seen her look so happy. He realizes suddenly that this other woman is probably Arcadian. The shroud of anger and tightly held control that usually covers America seems to have suddenly lifted and she leads the group through a narrow hallway and out into a crowded bar.

Every head turns towards them. The place is filled with mostly women, all built with broad shoulders and tight muscles like America. The room is lit on one end by a fireplace, and low hanging Christmas lights crisscross across the ceiling. The chatter in the room falls silent as their group crowds the entrance.

“Tentlee van graus Young Avengers!” the woman from the door announces loudly to the bar.

Faces light up and suddenly, unexpectedly, the Young Avengers are being applauded. Women get to their feet, approach the group, holding out their hands to shake. Billy is clapped on the shoulder and given excited words in languages he doesn’t understand. Teddy leans towards Billy.

“What’s happening?” Teddy whispers nervously.

Billy realizes that he’s grinning like a fool. He looks up at Teddy, eyes wide and excited.
“They know who we are. I think they’re congratulating us!”

A smile splits Teddy’s face, and Billy doesn’t ever think he’ll ever get over how absolutely handsome Teddy is when he smiles. Billy can’t stop himself from getting on his toes and grabbing Teddy in a kiss. Teddy grabs Billy’s hand, holding it tight as he looks around the room, shoulders rolling back. This is what it must feel like, Billy realizes, to be a super hero.

A short, red-haired woman nearby begins to sing a song in that same strange language the Billy can’t place. Another woman joins in. Then another. Soon, every woman in the bar is singing the song. Its cadence is low and rough, something tribal and full of pride. They pound their chests to the beat. Billy watches America’s face light up before she joins in, singing the loudest, throwing up her arms. The women hiss, shout, stomp their feet. America darts into the center of the room, motioning the rest of the team to follow. The song is growing faster and louder. Billy is still grinning, and when he begins to stomp along to the beat, one of the women claps him on the back and shakes him, smiling at him while she sings loudly.

The song crescendos and turns into shouting and ululating. The women cheer and clap and shout until America holds up a fist and the room falls silent.

“Avasti lon carni Arcadia sevre!” America cries.

“AVASTI LON CARNI ARCADIA SEVRE!!” the entire room shouts back.

Glasses clink. Someone shoves a wooden mug into Billy’s hands. He holds up his drink, caught up in the moment, a moment of revelry and excitement, even if he doesn’t understand exactly what is happening or what is being said. The emotions in the room roll through in palpable waves, and it’s contagious. Pride, excitement, elation. Billy thunks his wooden mug against a glass of a woman nearby who holds hers out, and then he drinks the sweet tasting liquid down.

America, red faced and happy, stumbles towards them through the crowd.

“Arcadian wine!” she cries, holding up her own glass. “This is a hero’s welcome! The song we sing when warriors return victorious from battle in Arcadia.”

She lifts her glass to her lips, drinking down the contents in a few gulps before flinging the thing at the wall. When it shatters against the stone, the crowd breaks into applause. America nods at the rest of the team. Billy looks down at his half filled mug, bringing it to his mouth and swallowing the whole thing down, before throwing his mug at the wall as well. More cheers. The rest of the team soon follows suit, drinking down the wine and throwing their glasses and mugs at the wall.

Teddy downs his drink and throws his glass hard, shouting happily. He turns, grabbing Billy around the waist, caught up in the emotions in the room, and bends, dipping Billy back. Teddy kisses Billy deeply, hot and passionate. Onlookers whoop and whistle. When they straighten again, Billy is blushing and breathless.

Billy looks around. There’s a smile on every face, even Vision’s. America moves in even closer, a blonde woman handing her another mug as she goes. Grabbing for as many of her team members as she can, America grins like a fool, happier than Billy’s ever seen her.

“Welcome to Little Arcadia!”

***
Kate’s never seen America more ecstatic. She buzzes with energy, darting about the room, talking to nearly every patron there in rapid Arcadian. Kate sits on a stool at the well-worn wooden bar, drinking a thick, dark ale. She can’t keep the grin off of her face. The cloud of fear that has rained on her teammates since she’s known them has cleared away. On the dance floor, Cassie is attempting to teach Vision to dance. Billy and Teddy have wrangled Riri into a drinking game that a pair of towering Arcadian women is decisively beating them at. Tommy darts around the room at super speed, showing off for the women, flirting unabashedly with every single one.

Kate grins over her mug. She thinks back to her old life. Kate had been popular in school, she had been invited to many parties, and had snuck into many bars. But she had never had fun at these outings, not like this. There was always a disconnect, a wall between herself and the people she called her friends. Everything that she did with them felt like an act, like a performance.

But not here, not now. Kate feels alive, truly alive and in the moment. A happiness so real and fulfilling makes her feel lightheaded. Well, happiness and the Arcadian ale.

A handsome man with a dark complexion and high cheekbones sits in the stool next to Kate. He smiles at her brilliantly. He’s one of only a handful of men in the bar. Kate wonders who he is.

“You are an Avenger, yes?” he asks in a thick accent.

Kate returns his easy smile.

“Young Avenger, yeah.”

“You are very brave,” he compliments, turning to look out at the crowd in the bar. “The Arcadians do not sing that song very often. It is a great honor.”

“How did you…” Kate motions with her hands vaguely.

“Get invited to this bar?” the man finishes for her.

“Yeah,” Kate laughs.

His face falls a bit and he falters.

“I fight with them, when the United States attacked their island,” he replies tersely. “Once, they invited many renowned warriors to their island. Diplomacy. I was sent by my King, T’Challa. I was still on the island when the invasion began.”

“You’re Wakandan?”

The man inclines his head. His dark eyes move over Kate slowly, seemingly sizing her up. Then he shifts, hand going to his pocket. A moment later, he slides a gold coin across the bar top towards Kate.

“Know that you are not alone,” he says, voice dipping low. “There are many warriors who wait only for a call to arms.”

Kate picks up the coin. It’s heavier than it looks. She turns it over in her hand, admiring the intricate swirling patterns etched into its surface. When she looks up, the man is gone, darting through the crowd across the room. Kate furrows his brow. She almost calls out to him, confused. He’s moving towards the door. Just before he disappears from sight, though, he turns to Kate and winks. Then
he’s gone.

Carefully, Kate pockets the coin. Her head is feeling fuzzy from the alcohol. And before she can overthink what just happened, America comes vaulting through the crowd. She’s sweating, flushed, and smiling, clearly a little drunk. Whether she’s drunk on alcohol or elation, Kate can’t tell. But she suspects it’s a little of both.

America turns towards Kate, hand immediately grabbing Kate’s. The warmth of her hand travels up Kate’s arm and curls around her heat.

“Kate Bishop,” America announces. “Share a drink with me.”

Kate laughs.

“Alright.”

America turns and motions for the bartender. She says something in Arcadian to the woman. The bar tender raises her eyebrows and looks at Kate. Her stare is surprised and appraising. It makes Kate flush. But the bar tender nods and bends down. When she straightens again, she has two hollowed out bull horns in one hand, and a dusty, opaque bottle in another.

America holds the horns as the bartender pours the drinks inside. When Kate reaches for one, America tugs them out of her reach, giving Kate a suddenly very serious look.

“Listo mos sestumi invistir,” America states solemnly, carefully holding out one of the horns. “Kate, you are my warrior sister. We drink this to our future victories, and to the bond that we share as sisters in arms. This drink is saved only for a true bond.”

There’s a gravity in America’s words and in her stare that sends a chill up Kate’s spine. She reaches for the offered drink. Kate’s fingers brush along America’s when she takes the horn, and that brief touch causes goosebumps to erupt along her skin.

“Warrior sisters,” Kate says, and it’s a promise.

When they drink, Kate doesn’t break America’s serious stare. The liquid goes down smooth, but burns her tongue and throat. It almost immediately makes Kate feel dizzy, but she can’t stop staring at the amber of America’s eyes. They stare for a long moment, and the drink, or something else, makes a warmth spread through Kate’s core. America smiles again, getting suddenly to her feet on the edge of her bar stool and thrusting the horn up in the air.

“Amvi ca sestumi invistir!” she shouts.

Every Arcadian woman in the bar stops whatever they are doing. They shout and cheer, holding up their drinks and then downing them.

America tumbles back onto the bar stool. Kate realizes that she’s staring, but she can’t stop. America’s hair is even more flyaway than normal, falling into her face. Without realizing what she’s doing, Kate reaches forward and tucks one of the strands behind America’s ear. America goes still, the horn still in her hand tumbling to the bar with a clatter.

America opens her mouth like she is going to say something, but stops herself. She bites her lip carefully, and Kate can’t help but watch the movement. Whatever that last drink was, it’s hitting Kate hard. She feels warm and happy and like she’s floating on air. America grabs Kate’s hand again. She leans in close, and for a moment, Kate forgets how to breathe.
“Come dance,” America breathes in Kate’s ear.

Kate ducks her chin and nods carefully. America bounds to her feet, hand on Kate’s tightening. She pulls Kate to her feet and leads her through the bar to the dance floor. Kate catches a glimpse of Billy and Teddy, dancing together, chest to chest and hands on the other’s skin. Then America spins her and Kate twists breathlessly towards America. The music that plays is odd, like nothing Kate’s heard before. It’s…tribal and driving. America’s hips twist hypnotically. She grabs Kate by her lower back and pulls her closer.

“In Arcadia,” America shouts over the music, “we danced all the time.”

America throws her head back, back bending as she shakes her hair and grins wildly before snapping upright, and twisting, dragging Kate with her.

“Here, you move your hips like this,” America directs, putting her hands on either side of Kate’s waist.

Kate is having a hard time breathing. Every breath she takes is America’s scent—something earthy and dark. America’s fingers dig into Kate’s hips and as America moves, she moves Kate’s hips along with her. Kate fumbles at first, but eventually she gets the rhythm. It’s inherently primal, twisting and stepping and gyrating to a low bass drum. Kate feels dizzy again. She looks around and sees the other Arcadian’s dancing. They bend and move, throwing their hair and stepping in close to their partners. Some dance in pairs, others in groups. Three women are trying to teach Billy and Teddy the dance now, and that duo is picking up the dance much more quickly than Kate is.

America steps back, bending, rolling, dropping and crawling one moment, and then unwinding herself and throwing her hips. The dance is mesmerizing to watch, and Kate thinks that the air around her is getting far too warm. America grabs Kate by the back again, pulling her close.

“Just feel the music,” America says, eyes suddenly dark, pupils blown.

Kate gulps. America leans in again.

“It’s like a fight. Like a battle. Just listen to your body.”

Kate takes a slow breath and lets her eyes close. She imagines herself in the dojo, an opponent before her. Her body moves on its own accord, she lets her brain turn off for a moment. The song changes, something quicker, and the Arcadians in the bar cheer.

Kate opens her eyes. This dance involves a lot more jumping, more quick movements and spins. This one, Kate can do. She lets herself get lost in the movement, in the music, in the crowd. She is like a satellite, orbiting America on the dance floor. One moment, she is chest to chest with a stranger, the next Billy is laughing wildly in her arms, and then she leaps into the air and America is grabbing her by the waist, bending her over backwards.

The song changes again. The women make a chain of bodies, moving in and out to the beat, kicking and twisting. America throws an arm over Kate’s shoulder and presses her one direction and then the next. Kate feels herself begin to grin. She catches a glimpse of Cassie and Vision across the circle. Vision looks tense, uncomfortable, but Cassie is giggling like a fool, taking to the dances like a fish to water.

When the song ends, America grabs Kate’s hand again and pulls her towards the bar, ordering two ales. Kate is out of breath, sweating like she’s just run twenty miles. America smiles at her brilliantly.
“You like the music? The dance?” America asks breathlessly.

Kate nods like a bobble head. The bar tender slides them their drinks, and Kate picks hers up and drinks down half of it, suddenly thirsty. She turns and looks back at the dance floor. She sees Riri dancing with a group of Arcadians, a careful smile on her face. Tommy has three frustrated women trying to teach him the dances, but he can’t stop vibrating.

“This was a good idea,” Kate says loudly, turning to look at America.

America’s smile softens and her eyes find their teammates.

“I came here a lot when I first lost my home,” America admits sadly. “There are not many free Arcadians left. But we all know of this place.”

“If this is what Arcadia was like, I’m sad I never got to see it,” Kate says, and then immediately regrets it, because America’s face falls. “I-I mean—…I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to…” Kate flails uselessly.

“No, it’s fine,” America replies. “It’s a compliment. This place is only a tiny slice of what Arcadia was like. But it reminds me of home.”

The song changes, and America’s melancholy melts away. She looks up with a grin.

“I love this song!” she exclaims. “Would you dance with me again?”

Kate nods and a moment later, she is being pulled towards the dance floor. This song is slow and deep. Kate closes her eyes. America’s hands on her and their weight is grounding, comforting. But her touch is something more. America is close to her, they are almost chest to chest, and her hips move in languished circles, brushing against Kate’s. When America dips her backwards, Kate goes loosely.

America tugs Kate upright, and there is no space between them. Kate’s hands land against America’s collar bones, and her eyes flutter open. America is staring at her in a way that makes Kate’s stomach twist. She swallows hard, going still. Panic flares in her chest and she takes a quick step back out of America’s grip. America’s brow furrows, but Kate doesn’t say anything, she just turns and hurries away.

The frigid air outside is a sharp contrast to the sweltering humidity inside. Kate breathes through her nose, digging through her bag for a cigarette. She hasn’t smoked one in a while, but she knows they’re at the bottom of her purse. She finally gets one between her lips, cold fingers struggling to light the end.

The door swings open, and America appears, glancing around until she finds where Kate is standing, frozen against the wall. Slowly, America moves towards her, grabbing the lighter from Kate’s hand and flicking it to life, holding it out. Cautious, Kate leans forward and inhales.

“Thanks,” Kate mumbles.

America doesn’t say anything, she just watches Kate take a few desperate drags.

“I’m sorry,” Kate blurts.

“For what?” America asks.

Kate motions at nothing in particular with her free hand. She’s left her coat inside and she’s quickly
becoming cold. The snow falls slowly around them, and every breath comes out in a puff of mist.

“I’m-I’m not...good at this,” Kate blabbers, shaking her head. “At having friends, at being close to people. I don’t know. I-I just get close to people and I freak out. Because I’ve never had that. I’ve only ever been close to my mother and-and she died. And now I’m freezing my ass off, saying nonsense to the pretty Arcadian girl that I think I might like but I’m afraid to like and-and-and I know five ways to break someone’s wrist but I don’t know any ways to express my feelings and-“

“Can I kiss you?” America interrupts.

“W-what?” Kate stutters.

America steps dangerously close to Kate. Slowly, she reaches up and grabs a strand of Kate’s hair and tucks it behind her ear, a mirror of the motion Kate had made in the bar. Kate’s chest tightens.

“We are warrior sisters. No bond is stronger,” America whispers.

Kate takes a shaky breath and nods.

America closes the space between them. Her lips, heated and wide, land on Kate’s, and she kisses her deeply.

The cigarette tumbles from Kate’s fingers. The snow falls around them, and the buzzing in Kate’s head suddenly goes silent. There is nothing but the sound of the snow falling gently around them, and beating of America’s heart. Kate leans closer to the heat of America’s body and America’s arm winds around Kate’s back, pulling her in tighter.

Kate kisses America back. And for a single, beautiful moment that stretches on and on, Kate feels really, and truly alive.
Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Summary

CW: underage sex

Kate has a hangover. That Arcadian alcohol was not messing around. She stumbles out of bed, wrapping herself in a purple silk robe. The memories of the night before, however, are crystal clear in her mind. She smiles to herself, not afraid to look at her reflection as she adjusts the mess of her hair.

She isn’t going to overthink this. She isn’t going to analyze what happened last night to the point that she drives herself mad. That’s what the old Kate Bishop did, the broken Kate Bishop. But Kate Bishop isn’t just Kate Bishop now. She’s Hawkeye, a Young Avenger. And last night, she kissed a beautiful Arcadian girl.

Kate can charge into battle without fear. She can face down an enemy with a smile on her face. She can slit a man’s throat and not lose a night of sleep. But as she pads down the hall, her heart feels like it’s seizing in her chest. She’s nervous, truly nervous. But she ignores it.

Of course America is in the part of the castle they’ve come to call the gym. Of course the Arcadian isn’t feeling the effects of the alcohol in any way. It makes Kate smile to herself when she finds America wailing on a punching bag. Kate pauses in the shadows, hiding behind a doorframe, and just watches. America moves with a fluid kind of grace that Kate has worked for years to try to achieve. Kate’s good, but she’s nowhere close to America’s level. The girl fights the same way she dances, and Kate wonders if that’s how she fucks. It’s that thought that heats her face and forces her to step into the room.

When America spots her, she turns and smiles brilliantly. Kate opens her mouth to say something, but America just strides purposefully across the room and grabs Kate around the back, pulling her in close and kissing her breathless.

Kate gasps, dizzy, and kisses back. When America pulls away, she is still grinning. It’s infectious, and Kate can’t help but smile back. For a moment, Kate forgets why she came in here.

“Do you want to go on a date with me?” Kate asks hurriedly before she can get too nervous to say it.

America’s grin grows even wider, and she leans in and kisses Kate again.

“Of course,” America says when she pulls away again. “Where do you want to go?”

Kate can’t help but giggle like a school-girl. She puts her hands on America’s chest and just stares for a long moment. America’s amber eyes seem to swirl, and Kate can’t help but watch.

“I have a place in mind,” Kate replies finally. “Just be ready by…three this afternoon. You know, time change and everything.”

America bites her lip, her eyes going dark. When Kate goes to pull away, America’s arm just tightens.
“Or you could stay here with me,” America says darkly, eyes going to Kate’s lips.

Kate detaches herself from America’s grip. America pouts dramatically, but Kate just laughs and shakes her head.

“Three pm,” Kate repeats. “Fifteen hundred.”

America sulks even harder, and Kate didn’t realize that America could make puppy eyes like that. It makes walking away hard. But Kate just shakes her head. Finally America rolls her eyes, turning back towards her punching bag.

“Fifteen hundred,” America parrots back. “Three pm.”

“It’s a date.”

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When Billy wakes in the morning, it’s to the smell of syrup. He cracks his eyes open, finding himself in Teddy’s room, in Teddy’s bed, the memories from the night before sluggishly working their way through his mind. The bar, the exuberant Arcadians, the dancing, the way Teddy had kissed him, stumbling home and collapsing into bed beside Teddy. But Teddy isn’t in the bed next to him, instead, when Billy looks around, he finds Teddy standing at the foot of the bed with a tray in his hands. Billy grins.

“Are those pancakes?” Billy asks, realizing how hungry he is as he eyes the crowded tray. “Are you bringing me breakfast in bed?”

Teddy smiles shyly, a blush spreading down his neck and across his bare chest.

“Chocolate chip pancakes,” Teddy replies with a sheepish shrug. “I-I didn’t know what you…”

Billy sits upright, grinning wide.

“Chocolate chip pancakes are my favorite!”

Teddy smiles handsomely and it makes a warmth spread through Billy’s core. Carefully, Teddy comes around the side of the bed, setting the tray down on Billy’s lap. Billy snatches up the fork excitedly, tearing off a piece of the stack of pancakes and taking a bite. The pancakes are at least 75% chocolate chip and they’re amazing.

“Mmm,” Billy moans around the fork, savoring the sweetness before licking his lips. Teddy watches the movement, enraptured. “They’re perfect.”

Teddy watches Billy take another bite, seemingly entranced, until Bill grabs his arm and tugs.

“Come on, you big idiot, I can’t eat all this by myself,” Billy laughs, pulling Teddy towards him.

Careful not to disrupt the tray, Teddy climbs into the bed. Billy hands him the fork, and Teddy takes several quick bites. Chewing, Teddy’s head thunks against the headboard of the bed, his eyes closed. Billy watches him with a grin. Teddy cracks and eye open, holding the fork out to Billy.

“I might have a hangover,” Teddy admits.
Billy giggles around a mouthful of pancakes, reaching for a glass of milk.

“I’ve never…gotten drunk before,” Billy says with a shrug. “I wasn’t exactly the most popular kid in school.”

Teddy levels him with a serious stare.

“Well, then the kids at your school are idiots,” Teddy states solemnly. “Because you’re, like, the best person that I’ve ever met.”

Billy playfully punches Teddy’s shoulder, jostling him. Teddy grins, but keeps watching Billy.

“I’m serious,” Teddy says with a nod. “I had a lot of fun last night.”

Billy puts the fork down and returns Teddy’s stare.

“Me too.”

They finish the enormous stack of pancakes together, chatting casually about the night before, about the music and the dances, about the Arcadian women, about how they have never seen America happier. All the while, they tangle their feet and legs together under the covers playfully, inching ever closer together.

“Do you think Kate is going to want us to do training today?” Billy asks. “Because I want to just stay in this bed all day and watch movies. Can we do that?”

Teddy smiles.

“We can do that,” Teddy replies slyly. “Or this.”

When Teddy kisses Billy, his mouth tastes like chocolate and syrup. Billy licks along Teddy’s lips, leaning into him until the tray upturns in his laps. They both laugh like fools, grabbing up the empty plates and glasses before they can make a mess. Teddy carefully moves the tray off the bed before promptly crawling across the sheets and straddling Billy’s body, leaning down to resume kissing him.

Teddy’s fingers run along Billy’s skin, feather-light, goosebumps erupting wherever he touches. Billy shivers as Teddy’s lips work his way across his jaw and down his neck. Billy’s heart rate quickens. He’s never had somebody touch him like this, though he’s fantasized about it plenty of times. And here Teddy is, like something out of Billy’s most far reaching fantasies, hands on Billy’s heated skin. Billy feels breathless and light headed. Teddy’s only been kissing him for a few minutes, and already Billy feels painfully hard. He nearly jumps out of his skin when Teddy’s large hand moves down to cup his erection.

Teddy pulls back, a worried look on his face as he withdraws his hands. Billy groans at the loss of contact, looking up at Teddy desperately.

“Don’t stop,” Billy pants.

“Are you sure?” Teddy asks, and the earnest look in his eyes makes Billy want to grab him and never let go.

“So fucking sure,” Billy promises.

Teddy grins and leans down again, mouth going to Billy’s exposed left nipple. The warm, wet touch
of his tongue on the sensitive flesh makes Billy’s back arch. Again, Teddy’s hand rolls across the
tent in Billy’s boxers, and Billy makes an absolutely wrecked sound. Billy’s heart pounds against his
ribs, and he can hear its beating in his ears, the rush and ebb of blood. Teddy is kissing a line
towards Billy’s navel, and Billy’s hands skitter across Teddy’s broad, muscular shoulders and
through his messy blonde hair.

When Teddy’s tongue runs along the sensitive flesh stretched over Billy’s hipbones, Billy squirms.
A heavy hand lands on Billy’s chest, holding him still. Billy’s head rolls back and he realizes that
he’s whispering one word over and over.

“Please…please…please,” Billy pants with his every breath.

Teddy grabs the edge of Billy’s boxers with his teeth and tugs them down. Billy’s back arches
again, and only Teddy’s hand on his chest prevents him from flinging himself from the bed with
excitement. Teddy has paused, and when Billy looks down, he’s grinning up at Billy devilishly.

“You’ve done this before?” Billy gasps.

Teddy shrugs and takes Billy’s cock into his hand, causing Billy to jump again.

“Once or twice,” Teddy says with a wink.

And then Teddy’s lips are on Billy’s cock and Billy can barely remember how to breathe. It’s too
hot, too soft, too wet, too much. There are strangled, pleasured noises that Billy barely realizes are
coming from his own mouth. His hands slap hard against the headboard, searching for a grip.

Billy knows he isn’t going to last long, and he doesn’t want this to end. He tries to speak, but
Teddy’s tongue is suddenly forked in his mouth and wrapping around Billy’s cock in a way that
makes Billy shout. The plus side of having a shape shifter give you a blow job, Billy thinks. He’s
going to come, but he doesn’t want to, not yet. So Billy grabs for Teddy’s shoulders frantically,
tugging at him.

Teddy looks up at Billy, cock falling from his mouth and that sight alone makes Billy’s throat feel
thick. God, he doesn’t want him to stop, and Billy is so close. Billy’s tongue seems unable to form
words, so he just motions frantically with his hands.

“Are you alright?” Teddy asks, again with earnest concern in his gaze.

“Yeah,” Billy wheezes. “Just…just come here.”

Teddy complies, crawling up along Billy’s body.

“I want to touch you,” Billy pants, a desperate whine in his voice.

Billy’s cock aches at the loss of contact. Shimming onto his side, Billy paws at Teddy’s sleep pants.
Teddy helps him, shoving his waistband down towards his knees. Billy once again forgets how to
breathe when he sees Teddy’s cock. He can’t get his hands on it fast enough, and Teddy grunts
when Billy finally gets his grip around it.

Suddenly, Billy is hypnotized by the face Teddy is making. Head thrown back, forehead covered in
sweat and plastered with his blonde hair, lips kiss bruised and red parted as he pants, face flushed.
He gasps and groans at Billy’s touch. Billy jacks him slowly, and Teddy’s hips begin to thrust
against Billy’s hand. But after a few moments, Teddy’s green eyes flutter open, and he grabs
desperately for Billy’s back, pulling him closer by his hips.
In one big hand, Teddy grabs both his and Billy’s cock. The contact makes a filthy sound erupt from Billy’s mouth, and his hand clenches into Teddy’s sweat slick hair, dragging him into a sloppy kiss. Teddy thrusts against Billy’s cock and the sensation is more than Billy can handle. Billy’s own hips move of their own accord in stuttered movements. Their cocks slide against each other’s, slow and languished.

“I-I’m gun come,” Billy manages to moan.

“Yeah,” Teddy encourages breathlessly.

Billy closes his eyes, he’s so fucking close. Just a few more pumps. He can feel his orgasm like a physical thing gathered in the pit of his groin, about to burst free. When Teddy grabs the back of his neck and forces Billy to open his eyes, it’s the absolute wrought look on Teddy’s face that pushes him over the edge.

Billy screams when he comes, spilling over Teddy’s cock and hand and his own abdomen. Teddy drags him into a desperate kiss, still thrusting against Billy’s over sensitized cock three, four more times and then he’s coming as well. Warm and sticky and Billy groans at the sensation. Teddy’s hand, covered in both of their seed, releases their cocks and runs up Billy’s chest, along his jaw, into his hair. Billy’s head falls back, because it’s all more than he can handle. His heart is still thumping erratically as Teddy uses a massive arm to cradle Billy against his chest. Billy goes to him, body loose, laying a check against Teddy’s pectoral, panting like he’ll never get enough oxygen again.

“That was…” Billy breathes, unable to find the words.


Billy pushes himself up slightly so he can see Teddy’s eyes. Teddy’s gaze is on the ceiling, eyes wide and a love-drunk smile on his face. Billy almost can’t believe that that just happened, that he just lost his virginity to this beautiful boy. Billy is a super hero with magical powers living in a castle and he has the most perfect, most gorgeous boyfriend on the entire planet. Even his wildest dreams never came close to this reality. And this is reality. Billy laughs at the absurdity of it all.


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The snow falling in the park is beautiful. Kate’s always loved this park. She’s snuck across the border more than once to visit it. It’s getting dark, and cold, so there’s not many people left in the park. Kate basks in the silence and in the bitter bite of frigid air. She’s in a ridiculous dress and a fur, something she’s only worn once before to her cousin’s wedding. She pulls the fur tighter around her, leaning in closer to America. The woman is like a human space heater. And Kate has to admit, she was surprised at just how well America cleans up.

Instead of her usual tank top and combat boots, America is wearing a pair of form hugging capri dress pants and a tunic jacket over a sheer white shirt. Traditional Arcadian formal wear, America had told Kate, but the lines and planes the outfit had made on America’s body had left Kate breathless. For her part, America hadn’t been able to keep her eyes off of Kate.

The carriage that they’re in creaks and the horse whinnies, throwing its head, the beasts hoofs on the concrete the only other sound in the winter-scape. America’s arm tightens around Kate’s shoulders
and Kate lets herself be held, something she’s always been adverse to in the past. But with America, it’s different, and Kate doesn’t know why. But she’s promised herself that she isn’t going to over analyze, so she leans her head against Kate’s chest and watches the snow falling on the park.

“The snow is very beautiful,” America purrs, her voice rumbling in her chest. “I never saw snow until I left Arcadia.”

Kate smiles.

“Well it snows plenty in Toronto,” Kate replies. “I used to come to this park with my mother.”

“Was your mother a brave warrior like you?” America asks.

“Braver,” Kate breathes. “She made me who I am.”

“I wish I could have met her,” America replies.

Silence falls between them again, and Kate presses herself closer to America’s warmth. A carriage ride is a little corny, Kate knows. But for some reason, she’s feeling corny. The idea of romantic gestures has always turned Kate’s stomach in the past. She had plenty of boys who liked her at school, she’s been on a handful of dates. But they’ve always felt like a farce, a façade. Like Kate was playing “girl on a date” in a movie, it had always felt dishonest. But not now, not here.

The restaurant that they ate at was a hole in the wall Italian place that Kate’s mother used to take her to. She knows the owner, knows he would never sell them out. He had seated them in a small back room, away from any prying eyes. The dinner had been intimate and the privacy had made Kate nervous at first. But America had put her at ease, smiling and chatting and never letting a dull moment fall between them. They had talked about all kinds of things, things that should have made them both sad. Their families, their pasts, their old friends, their old lives. But it hadn’t been sad. It had been amicable and it had been nice. It was nice to talk about those things without pain, without the sorrow that Kate is used to.

Kate pulls back from America’s grip, looking up into her eyes. Carefully, she leans forward and kisses her, breathes in her scent, basks in her presence.

America stiffens. Kate retracts, thinking she did something wrong. But America is on guard suddenly, looking around wildly.

“Kate, the carriage isn’t moving,” she says, voice a low warning.

Suddenly, the carriage driver whips around, throwing away his top hot and coat, revealing a black mask and black fatigues. Both Kate and America straighten, immediately defensive.

“I unhitched the horse,” the man growls. “Didn’t want him getting in the way.”

Kate reaches for the knives strapped to her thighs while America lunges forward. But the driver twists, kicking out hard and landing his foot hard against the side of America’s head. America is thrown from the carriage, hitting the ground with a thud, unconscious.

Kate vaults herself out of the carriage and out of the way of the attacker. She rolls along the snowy ground, throwing her fur away from her and ripping a slit in her dress so she can get to her knives. She falls into a defensive position in front of America’s motionless body, panic twisting in her stomach. But this is a different kind of panic, not like what she’s felt about going on a date with a girl she likes. This is the kind of panic that fuels her, that makes the fire that burns in her gut turn to an inferno.
“Buddy, you picked the wrong girl to fuck with,” Kate snarls.

The attacker doesn’t wait, he swings. Kate throws up her arms and deflects him, parrying with her knife. The man dances out of her reach, avoiding her blade and grabbing her wrist, twisting and forcing her arm behind her.

“You smell nice,” the man says. “Like lilacs. You on a date?”

Kate spins and throws the man over herself, and his back slams into the snowy ground. Kate lunges, throwing a punch, but he rolls out of the way and springs to his feet.

“Good,” he praises. “Nice form.”

Kate furrows her brow and swings a kick, but the man back bends out of the way. Come on, America, she thinks desperately, wake up. Kate lands a kick to the man’s chest when he comes back up, forcing him to stumble a few steps back. Kate presses the advantage.

Something’s not right. The man in black isn’t attacking, he’s only defending. Knives line his chest, still in their holsters, and a sword sets against his hip. He hasn’t pulled it. He’s not trying to hurt Kate.

Kate throws a haymaker, and the man leans just out of her reach. Kate growls, frustrated. The man is toying with her.

“Nice work,” the man says, dodging another one-two punch. “Aggressive, controlled.”

Kate finally catches him off guard with a sweep at his knees. He goes to the ground, but uses the momentum to sweep under Kate’s arms and hit her hard in her lower back, throwing her to the ground. She springs off the back of her hands, on her feet immediately. The man in black seems to pause, impressed.

“You don’t fight scared or panicked,” the man says. “That’s good.”

“What the fuck do you want?!” Kate screams. She notices that America is beginning to stir.

Kate charges, trying to put as much distance between this man and America as possible, keeping her eyes open for any of his backup. So far, he seems to be alone.

“I wanted to see you work firsthand,” the man replies, reaching for something. Kate snarls and throws her knife, but he dodges it easily. “No filters, no drills.”

The man takes two quick steps towards Kate, crowding her. She flinches, immediately moving to break his grip. But he just grabs the front of her dress. His brings his hand up to eye level. In it is a business card.

“And now, I want to see you shoot,” the man says slyly. Kate shoves out of his grip, but he doesn’t move, just holds the card out. Kate stares at it, dumbstruck. “Tomorrow, bring your bow. Tell no one.”

“How stupid do you think I am?!” Kate hisses, knocking the man’s hand away. “That I’d just come waltzing into some warehouse so you can kill me?”

“If I wanted to kill you, you’d be dead already.”

And Kate knows it’s true. He hadn’t pulled any of his weapons, he hadn’t gone on the attack. He
was testing Kate.

“Help your friend home, then come see me tomorrow,” the man says, stepping close to Kate again and tucking a card into the strap of her dress. With that, he turns and darts into the woodline, disappearing in the shadows.

Kate grabs the card and looks at it. It’s an address in New York. Shit. Swallowing hard, she tucks the card into her bra and out of sight and grabs up her fur before rushing to where America is beginning to struggle to her feet.

“What happened?” America groans, looking around wildly as Kate gets her upright. She’s defensive, ready for attack.

“Park Ninja,” Kate replies, holding America steady. “He’s gone now.”

“What?” America gasps, still looking around nervously. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Come on,” Kate says, grabbing America by the arm. “We need to get out of here.”

Billy had opened up a portal in an abandoned store front just down the street, they need to get back there and get home. Kate’s mind wheels. She should tell America what happened, she should tell her about the card, the address, the invitation. But she isn’t, and Kate knows that she’s not going to. Because Kate deals in secrets, and it’s a hard habit to break. So she steers America towards the street, ignoring her questions.

“I’m sorry,” Kate says when they finally get to the store front. “Worst date ever.”

“No,” America replies immediately. “I just want to know who attacked us.”

“Probably a bounty hunter,” Kate lies. “He probably saw us at the restaurant and thought he’d bring us in for a reward. We fought and he ran off. He knew I had his number.”

They make it through the portal, into the common room of the castle, where Billy and Riri are playing video games on the couch. Billy turns casually and closes the portal before realizing how beat up Kate and America look. He gets to his feet immediately, rushing over.

America waves him away, a hand to her head. Kate drives her towards her bedroom, asking Billy to bring some ice. Once in America’s room, America tears of her jacket, throwing it ruefully on the ground. Kate helps her to her bed.

“He really fucking got me,” America says miserably. Kate knows how she must be feeling. Knocked out at the beginning of a fight, it’s humiliating.

“He knew you were stronger, wanted to take you out first,” Kate lies again. “He knew what he was doing.”

America grins unexpectedly.

“He underestimated you,” America laughs, looking up at Kate. “That was his mistake.”

Kate forces herself to smile.

“Yeah, probably.”

Billy brings the bag of ice in and Kate holds it to the swollen lump on America’s forehead. America slumps back onto the bed, hand on the bag, eyes closed. When Kate gets up to leave though,
America catches her wrist.

“Stay,” America pleads quietly.

Kate swallows hard.

“Okay,” she agrees breathlessly.

That night, America falls asleep quickly, holding Kate to her chest. Kate, on the other hand, knows she isn’t going to be able to sleep. She stares at the wall in the dark, counting America’s heartbeats as the hours creep by. The card is still digging into the skin of her breast. Is Kate really going to do this? She had lied to America. She had fallen back on old habits because, deep down, Kate knows that she hasn’t really changed. And now she’s going to betray America’s trust, right at the moment that America is beginning to trust her completely.

The pain of that betrayal twists in Kate’s chest, even as she carefully extracts herself from America’s arms. Even as she creeps through the darkened castle. Even as she pulls on her costume and grabs the bow she stole from the Mansion. Even as she sneaks into Teddy’s room where Billy is asleep beside Teddy, as she wakes Billy quietly and begs him to keep her secret.

Billy doesn’t like it. He looks at her with a pained expression.

“Why do you want to go to New York?” Billy asks.

“I just need to check something out,” Kate lies again. “I promise I’ll be back by the end of the day tomorrow. Just…just don’t tell America where I went.”

“You want me to lie?” Billy whispers, with a look on his face that says that he doesn’t think he can.

“I’ll be back tomorrow,” Kate repeats. “I’ll call you so you can open the portal.”

Billy’s jaw works for a long moment. But finally, he sighs and holds up a hand. A portal opens against the wall, showing a New York City street at dawn.

“Thank you, Billy,” Kate says earnestly.

But Billy just gives her a disappointed stare. Kate turns away from him, pulling her trench coat tight around her costume, and steps through the portal.

The building of the address on the card is a nice one in Manhattan. Somewhere far from where the protesters are still swarming the streets of the city. It doesn’t look like a murder shack, or a meth lab, or a place where people go to get arrested and turned over to the authorities. But what the hell does Kate know? Nowhere is safe in New York, especially now that she’s technically a criminal. Kate watches the place for an hour. Business men and women go in and out. It looks like a high end apartment building.

To hell with it.

Kate’s name is on the doorman’s tablet. He doesn’t call the police or even look at her like he recognizes her name, he just leads her through the building. Kate’s nerves pique when she follows him through a seedy back room. But then he unlocks a door and shows her an elevator, closing and locking the door behind her. Nervously, Kate pushes the only button on the wall. The doors open immediately, like the elevator was waiting for her. There’s only one button inside the elevator too. Kate presses it and the elevator begins to climb. There’s a pleasant ding, and the elevator doors slide open again.
“Holy shit,” Kate breathes.

A sandy-haired man stands before her in a large, studio style training room. He smiles easily at her.

“Hey there, Kate,” he says, holding out a hand. “I’m—”

“Clint Barton. You’re—oh, my god, you’re Hawkeye.”

Kate grabs his hand, shaking it for far too long.

“No more, I’m not,” Clint says. “From what I hear, you’re Hawkeye now.”

“Oh, uhm, about that,” Kate stutters.

“I also hear that the name isn’t the only thing of mine that you have now.”

His eyes fall on the bow slung across Kate’s back.

“I—I-…” Kate is never at a loss for words, but she’s at a loss for words now.

Clint holds up a hand.

“Like I said last night, I just want to see how you use it,” Clint states, raising an eyebrow.

Clint turns and motions Kate to follow. She unslings the bow, holding it to her body possessively before going after him. Hawkeye, the real Hawkeye, is going to test her, to see if she’s worthy of using his name.

No pressure, Kate, no pressure.

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“She…was going to get something from her father’s house,” Billy lies awkwardly, holding up his hands in front of him defensively.

America is furious.

“And you just let her go?!” America roars. “We got attacked last night, Kaplan! And you sent her into the middle of New York fucking City with no backup?!”

“I-…” Billy can’t think what to say, because he’s realizing suddenly what a stupid mistake that he’s made.

Teddy steps between them defensively.

“You know Kate,” Teddy snaps. “She does what she wants, when she wants. None of us can stop her.”

“But he didn’t have to help her!” America retorts, brow furrowing impossibly deeper.

“She said she’ll be back by the end of the day,” Billy adds weakly. “She-she’s going to call me.”

“She can’t call you if she’s been thrown in the Cube!” America points out furiously. “Or dead.”
Billy swallows hard.

“Find her!” America demands. “Now!”

“Okay,” Billy agrees quietly. He takes a few steps back, because America’s rage is a very real thing, bleeding off of her in waves of dark red, clouding Billy’s internal vision. He closes his eyes and searches his mind for Kate’s familiar, purple energy. “KateBishop,” Billy whispers to himself. “KateBishopKateBishop.”

Instead of purple, though, Billy sees something massive and so black that it seems to be consuming all the light around it. A black hole, barreling towards him in his mind’s eye so intensely that Billy actually stumbles backwards and throws his hands up defensively.

When his eyes fly open, both Teddy and America are looking at him with worried expressions.

“What is it?” Teddy asks.

“I-“ is all Billy can get out before there is a blinding light erupting from the middle of the room.

Light isn’t the right word for it though, because it isn’t light, it’s darkness. The same dark force that had clouded Billy’s mind’s eye, exploding forth in the middle of the common room. Teddy and America and thrown across the room, hitting opposite walls and staying there, frozen and stuck. Billy has no idea what is happening, what he’s seeing. The darkness billows like black fog through the room, and from its center, a man steps forward.

This man is mostly unremarkable. He’s short, dark skinned, and dressed in a plain black robe. But his eyes, his eyes are bottomless pits of black, and those eyes fall on Billy, making him go cold.

“Hello, Little Wizard,” the man says in a low voice, taking another menacing step towards Billy.

Billy is frozen in fear and confusion. When he tries to move, he finds that he can’t. Something, some kind of force, is holding him in place.

“I’ve been looking for you,” this man says, moving across the room is far less steps than it should take. He’s mere inches from Billy now, looking him up and down with the eyes of a predator. “Don’t you know that your Supreme doesn’t allow the practice of Sorcery without his explicit approval?”

“Who are you?” Billy gasps, struggling to speak, struggling to even breathe.

The man laughs, and the sound is wicked and full of malice. He holds up an arm, and when he drops it, the black smoke that has been swirling sickeningly in the middle of the room rushes towards Billy.

The darkness smothers him, consumes him, swallows him whole. Billy feels his feet leave the ground. The world around him disappears. All he can see are those eyes, staring straight into his very soul.

***

Kate’s arms ache. She doesn’t know how long she’s been at this, but it’s been hours. Ten targets set
across the range, and all ten are filled with arrows. Kate’s fired at least 200 arrows in the last few hours. And Clint Barton doesn’t seem ready to let up any time soon. He watches Kate’s form, making small corrections, but rarely speaking. He just watches.

In the last ten minutes, Clint’s stepped forward with a bow, making impossible shots without even looking. He shows Kate different footing, repositions her elbows, criticizes her breathing. But Kate’s been hitting the bullseye every time. She’s not as perfect as Barton, but she’s still good. And so far, Clint has seemed quietly impressed.

At least, Kate hopes he’s impressed.

“You can’t make that shot,” Kate says as Barton slots an arrow. “Nobody can make the Robin Hood shot. I don’t care how good you are.”

“Oh, yeah?” Clint asks, eyeing her sideways. “And why is that?”

“Because it’s physically impossible, that’s why,” Kate retorts. “It’s a myth that’s been busted again and again.”

“So glad you’ve started to address me as one of your elders, worthy of respect.”

“Was that disrespectful?” Kate laughs.

“Tell you what, grasshopper. Let’s make it interesting,” Clint dares. “Say, fifty bucks?”

“Fifty bucks?” Kate scoffs. “Dude, I’m rich. Unless you want to put your Am-Ex Black on the table…”

“Alright then, Rich Girl,” Clint interrupts. “How about this. I make the shot, and you give me back my bow.”

Kate stiffens.

“But-“

“But what? If the shot is impossible, then what’s the worry?”

Kate swallows. Clint presents the bow he’s holding.

“I paid about three hundred bucks for this junker of a bow at a sporting goods store in Jersey. These arrows came in a bundle of one hundred for forty bucks,” Clint says. “There’s absolutely no art in this equipment. So here’s what’s gonna happen. I’m gonna make that impossible shot with this store bought crap, and you’ll give me back my bow.”

“And, if you don’t?” Kate asks carefully. “What do I win?”

Clint casually checks the straightness of one of the crappy wooden arrows.

“Then you get the name, the bow, and I’ll personally make sure that Steve Rogers stays out of your hair. You’ll be free to run your team how you like.”

Kate can’t find her voice. She feels like a child, holding the bow she stole from the Mansion to her chest protectively. Clint slots the arrow and pulls it back.

“Look, I don’t want to get all life-coachy on you,” Clint says, eyeing the target. “But you’re gonna miss every shot you can’t be bothered to take.” His arm firms and he breathes out his nose as he
looks over at Kate. “That’s not living life. That’s just being a tourist. Take every shot, Kate. If it’s worth caring about, no matter how impossible you think it is…you take the shot.”

Clint doesn’t even take his eyes off of Kate as he looses the arrow. Kate watches the arrow hurl towards the target. She watches as the arrow hits the back of another arrow that’s buried in the center of the bullseye. And she watches with a sinking feeling as the second arrows splits down the middle, wood peeling away until the arrow Clint fired buries itself in the bullseye.

The bow in Clint’s hands clatters to the ground. He turns and strides towards the door without looking back.

“It was nice to meet you, Miss Bishop,” Clint calls over his shoulder. “Leave the bow.”

When Billy comes to, he has no idea where he is. The room he is in is cold, frigid. His panicked breath comes out in clouds. He tries to look around, but he realizes that his head is strapped down. With increasing terror, he realizes that his entire body is strapped down.

“Release me,” Billy demands.

Nothing happens.

Sinister laughter wafts from a dark corner that Billy can’t see.

“That won’t work here, Little Wizard.”

That dark-eyed man comes into view, looking over Billy with a sneer, the way one looks at an ant about to be crushed underfoot.

“Who are you?” Billy demands, voice shaking. “What do you want?”

The man laughs again.

“Who am I?” the man shakes his head. “You know so little about the power you use so carelessly. I am the Sorcerer Supreme. And as for what I want? I want to tear that power from your body. You haven’t earned it, and I won’t allow you to misuse it any longer.”

Fear paralyzes Billy. His entire body is shaking from the menace in the man’s glare.

“You’re going to kill me?” Billy surmises numbly.

The man inclines his head.

“The process will probably kill you, yes,” he says as if discussing the weather and not murder.

There are tears on Billy’s cheeks, he can’t stop himself from crying. But that only makes the man’s eyes grow even darker.

“Look at you, you’re weak,” the man spits. “You don’t deserve the power you’ve been given. That’s why I’m going to take it back.”
“I’d like to see you try,” Billy snarls.

Billy doesn’t know where his sudden steely bravery comes from. But it only makes the man’s manic grin widen. He laughs, and it sounds like gravel on metal, grating and predatory. The man lifts his hand into Billy’s view. In his hand is a golden pick and a small hammer. Lobotomy tools, Billy realizes. Billy’s nostrils flare and he struggles against the binds that hold him. The man settles the cold metal against the inside corner of Billy’s right eye.

“This may hurt,” the man says almost gleefully.

He pulls back the hammer. Billy holds his breath, nothing but utter terror filling his body. He thinks of his team. Of his parents. Of Teddy.

A brilliant red light fills Billy’s eyes. He thinks that it must be blood. Billy closes his eyes as the wave of red washes over him and prepares for pain, for death.

The straps that hold Billy release and Billy slides to the ground. When he opens his eyes, a figure stands before him across the room. A woman. Brilliant red hair, sharp features, bright green eyes filled with vengeful fury. The man with the black eyes flies backwards, but before he can hit the opposite wall, he catches himself in midair, bounding on nothing to the ground.

“Mordo,” the woman snarls. “Leave my son alone!”

Billy’s heart clenches. This woman is Scarlet Witch, Wanda Maximoff. This woman is his birth mother.

Mordo laughs, falling into a defensive position, clicking his tongue.

“What do you think they’ll do to you when I deliver you to the Cube? How did you like your last stay there?”

Wanda doesn’t answer. Instead, she draws her glowing hands across themselves, producing a sharp and deadly weapon made of red energy. Mordo whips his arm outward, a spear of black energy appearing in his hand. He doesn’t pause, charging immediately. Instead of parrying, Wanda holds out her other hand, casting a red orb of light around Billy.

Billy shouts as he watches Mordo sink the spear into Wanda’s shoulder. Wanda twists, striking with her own weapon. Billy pounds on the sides of the orb, but they’re as solid as metal. Inside, Billy is helpless. All he can do is watch.

Wanda and Mordo fight, and it’s not like anything that Billy has ever witnessed before. They summon weapons made of energy, fire sparking balls of energy at each other, appear and disappear at will, and follow none of the laws of physics that Billy is accustomed to. Mordo appears to be winning. He’s faster, his magic is stronger. Wanda is thrown back again and again, but she continues to get to her feet and parry. With a war hammer of red energy, Wanda wallops Mordo in the head. The man goes down, limp.

The ball of energy around Billy disappears and Wanda stumbles towards him, wounded and bleeding. Frantic, Billy grabs for her, trying to stop the blood that pours from her body.

“I’ll be fine,” Wanda says, grabbing Billy’s wrists and forcing him to look into her eyes.

Billy doesn’t know what to say, what to do. He stares into her green eyes, so full of emotion that just looking at them makes Billy feel incomprehensibly sad. Wanda reaches a bloody hand towards him, cupping his cheek gently. Warm, red energy cascades across his body, settling at the base of his
spine. It burns at first, and Billy hisses at the pain.

“Now he won’t be able to find you,” Wanda promises with a nod. “But you and your friends can’t stay in that castle. He knows of it. You must leave.”

Billy is still at a loss for words. All he can do is nod dumbly. Wanda gives him a sad smile.

“My son,” she breathes, tears falling down her face. “You have so much work to do. I wish I could save you from what is to come.” Her stare is intense and mournful, tears falling rapidly from her lashes. “But I cannot.”

“W-what does that mean?” Billy asks desperately.

“Go, you must go. Save your friends. Save Teddy.”

“Save Teddy? Save him from what?” Billy cries.

But Wanda is withdrawing her hand. Behind her Mordo is stirring. Wanda turns and looks at him with a furrowed brow.

“I will take care of him, go!” she commands, getting to her feet.

“Wait, Wanda—**mom**, no!”

But the room around Billy is fading. He’s being hurled through space against his will, teleported by Wanda. Billy reaches for her. But she’s too far away. The last thing Billy sees is Wanda summoning a sword.

And then she’s gone.
Chapter Fourteen

The helplessness that Teddy feels as he watches Billy disappear is unlike anything he’s ever felt before. The morning that he learned that Jacob had been killed walking home from Teddy’s house, Teddy thought he would never feel more destitute, more despaired, more terrified than in that moment. But he was wrong. Because as his body is held against the stone wall by an invisible force and Teddy is forced to watch the man in the black robes approach Billy the way a wolf approaches a rabbit, Teddy feels like his heart is being torn from his body. His super strength does nothing against the magic that is holding him against the wall. Teddy is simply a spectator.

The billowing, black smoke envelops Billy and this stranger, and then they are gone, leaving Kate and Teddy in a common room that is in absolute shambles. Whatever this stranger had brought with him, it was a destructive force that tore through stone like mist. And that destructive force had been focused on Billy, it had taken him away and there was absolutely nothing that Teddy could do.

Teddy’s knees hit the ground, numb. America is already jumping to action, she already has a plan, she always has a plan. Tommy is the first one to arrive at the scene, of course, closely followed by Vision.

“Vision!” America shouts. “Can you find where they went?”

Riri is there next, and America is asking her a similar question. Cassie stumbles in, a confused look on her face. She rushes to where Teddy is still knelt on the floor, motionless and useless.

Cassie is asking Teddy questions. She asks what happened, who was it, why did they take Billy. Teddy answers to the best of his ability, numbly watching America ask Tommy exactly how fast he can run.

But Teddy knows. He knows that they all take Billy’s power to teleport instantly to any place on earth for granted. They’ve never made backup plans. They’ve never acquired any other mode of transportation.

“Teddy!” America shouts, her harsh gaze falling on him. “Snap the fuck out of it!”

Cassie helps Teddy to his feet, leads him over to the group.

“I can only access security camera footage,” Vision is saying. “And I am not finding Billy anywhere that has surveillance.”

“It was another sorcerer who took him,” America replies. “Where would he take Billy?”

“From your description, I would assume Billy was taken by Mordo, the current Sorcerer Supreme. His headquarters are in the Hong Kong Sanctorum,” Vision says.

“Hong Kong,” America repeats. “Tommy, how fast could you get there?”

Tommy’s face twists.

“I’ve never…gone that far before,” Tommy admits. “I-I don’t know.”

“Riri? In the suit?” America cries, moving immediately onto the next option. Because America is a doer. Her standard operating environment is crisis.
“I can reroute a pilotless RedJet to our location,” Vision offers. “That would have us in Hong Kong in two hours.”

“That’s too long,” Teddy says with numb lips. “Mordo is going to kill Billy.”

That reality is cascading over Teddy. He knows it’s the truth. He knows that Billy doesn’t have long. They can sit here and discuss strategy all day, but none of it is going to matter. Even if Vision is right and Billy is in Hong Kong, there’s no way to get there fast enough without sorcery.

“A sorcerer, we need a sorcerer,” Teddy hears himself say.

It’s at that moment that a red light erupts across the room. It splits, opens, disappears, leaving Billy kneeling on the ground. Teddy’s heart seizes and he rushes towards Billy in disbelief. There is blood on Billy’s face, and his brown eyes are empty and glazed. Teddy practically collides with Billy in his hurry to get to him. Tears streak paths through the blood on Billy’s cheeks. Billy’s chest rises and falls rapidly, and he won’t look at Teddy, staring at something that only he can see, arm outstretched and reaching.

Teddy crushes Billy to his chest, feeling tears of his own welling in his eyes, tears of relief. He leans back and examines Billy’s body for the source of the blood, but he seems to be unharmed.

“Whose blood is this?” Teddy cries, wiping at the streaks of red on Billy’s cheeks.

“My mother’s,” Billy answers in a flat voice.


Billy blinks a few times quickly, looking around as if only just now realizing where he is. He looks up at Tommy and nods seriously.

“She-she saved me,” Billy says, a little louder this time.

Finally, Billy’s eyes fall on Teddy.


Billy shakes his head, ignoring Teddy’s question and looking around until he finds America is the crowd of faces.

“We have to get out of this castle,” Billy tells her. “We can’t stay here. He knows.”

America doesn’t ask who “he” is. She doesn’t ask any questions actually. She just nods and kneels down in front of Billy.

“Find Kate,” America tells him. “She’ll know what to do.”

Billy swallows. His eyes find Teddy again. Teddy feels Billy’s shaking fingers run along his cheeks, wiping away Teddy’s tears. And then he disappears again.

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Billy’s mind seems only capable of one thought at a time. Maybe he’s protecting himself by not
overthinking. Or maybe he’s gone into some sort of survival mode. But his mind seems singular, one directive at a time.

Find Kate.

First it’s find Kate. Find Kate. Find Kate. Kate’s in a terrible mood when Billy finds her, but when he tells her what’s happened in stunted sentences, she changes from despondent to worried. America was right. Kate does know what to do. She scribbles an address in Jersey on a piece of paper, tells Billy she’ll meet the team there. She won’t return to the castle with Billy. She has something she needs to take care, she tells him.

Move the team.

Move the team. Bags are being packed when Billy returns. Mostly costumes and weapons. The rest is going to have to stay in the castle for now. America is angry when Kate doesn’t return with Billy, but Billy can only shrug and show her the piece of paper. Thirty minutes later, they’re moving.

Kate hadn’t been kidding when she called this place a safe house. When they arrive, they’re standing outside of a run down, single story house on a nearly empty street. Shuttered windows and dilapidated porches surround them like skeletons in a graveyard. The inside is just as gutted. Peeling paint on the walls, trash and broken, water logged furniture the only décor inside the warped walls.

“Are you sure this is the right place?” America demands nervously.

Then they hear the sound of a motorcycle slowing to a stop outside. A few moments later, Kate comes striding into the filthy house with a tactical bag slung over her shoulder. She leads them through the empty rooms to a bathroom. She reaches for the cracked hot water handle of the shower, turning it several times. Suddenly, the entire water stained bathtub groans and swings upwards, revealing a metal staircase.

“Jesus, Kate, what is this place?” Billy gasps once the lights have flickered to life.

The ceiling is low, and the walls are plain concrete. Blast doors guard both ends of the long room. It looks like a doomsday prepper’s bunker, in all honesty. But there’s far more than just shelves of canned food and an air filtration system. No, it’s far more high tech and specialized than that. The room they are standing in is a training room. Racks of weight line the walls, punching bags hang from the ceilings, wooden wing chungs are scattered about. There are several doors leading to places unseen. From where Billy stands, he can see some sort of forensics lab to his left, and an armory to his right. As Kate leads the team on a stunted tour, she shows them a small shower room, four plain bedrooms, a kitchenette, a panic room filled with weapons, a garage with sports cars and motorcycles, and a pair of fucking holding cells.

“The garage lets out on a forest path near Pike Street,” Kate tells them. “The doors are all reinforced and there are security cameras at all the entrances.”

“When were you going to tell us about this place?” America demands.

“I guess right now,” Kate shrugs. The team looks at her in disbelief and she holds up her hands defensively. “I’ve been working on this place for a few years now. I have several properties in New York, but none of them are as secure as this place.”

This bunker, more than anything, demonstrates the depths of Kate’s paranoia, something she keeps tightly lidded most of the time. Billy knows that Kate was mostly raised by her mother, who was
part of a resistance movement against the Hard Line Policies. They lived hard, moving place to place, never truly safe, always afraid of death until death came for the elder Bishop woman. Only now is Billy realizing what an effect that must have had on Kate when she was young.

“We’re gonna have to double up on rooms for the time being,” Kate continues, brushing past the scrutiny placed on her. “There’s an unfinished wing that has some empty rooms that we can get some beds for. I’ve been moving my vehicles here over the past two months, but it’s probably best if we lay low for a while. If you guys don’t want to stay here, I can start moving some money around, get us somewhere out of country.”

When Kate wanders away, Tommy leans in close to Billy.

“Man, I thought I was fucked up,” he mutters under his breath, giving Billy a pointed look. “But that girl is ten kinds of fucked up.”

“Don’t say that about her,” Billy defends immediately. “If it wasn’t for her, we’d have nowhere to go.”

Tommy shrugs and darts off, presumably to claim a room before anyone else.

Teddy hands Billy the bag he packed for him, and suddenly Billy realizes how absolutely exhausted he is. The singular minded thought process that has carried him through the last few hours has slowed, and the events of the day are finally hitting him. He almost died and was saved by his goddam Avenger birth mother.

Luckily, Teddy puts a strong hand on Billy’s shoulder and drives him towards the bedrooms. The room is plain—a double sized bed on a metal frame, a chest of drawers, a tiny closet, and a space heater. They put their bags on the bed. Billy shoves his hands into his pockets awkwardly. Teddy has been watching him like a hawk ever since he returned to the castle, worried eyes growing dark shadows. Billy tucks his chin, unsure what to say. But Teddy beats him to it.

Closing the space between them in an instant, Teddy grabs Billy in a tight hug. It’s crushing and almost uncomfortable, but Billy doesn’t pull away. Instead, he allows Teddy’s weight to ground him, to bring him down to earth from where his head was in the clouds. Billy turns his head and listens to Teddy’s heartbeat, a steady, comforting sound. And Teddy holds him as if he never intends to let go.

It’s going to be okay, Billy tells himself. This is what he signed up for, after all. Nobody said being a super hero was going to be easy. It could be worse, Billy could be alone. He could not have Teddy, he could be sitting by himself in this room right now, mind spiraling towards dark places.

Teddy doesn’t say anything, he just keeps a hand on Billy’s shoulder and drives him out the room and down the hall, into the shower room. Still silent, Teddy goes to the large basin of a bath tub and begins to fill it with steaming water. Billy catches a glimpse of himself in the mirror. He’s dirty and he’s still blood stained, the streaks of his mother’s blood dried on his cheeks. Billy gives himself up to Teddy’s ministrations, allowing him to strip him out of his dirty and torn clothes and pushed towards the tub. The water is scalding, but Billy doesn’t wince. He wants the heat to burn it all away. A moment later, Teddy climbs into the tub after Billy, pulling him flush against his broad chest and wrapping his strong arms around Billy’s center. Billy shudders at first, but Teddy doesn’t let go, he doesn’t let up until Billy finally relaxes back against him.

“It’s going to be okay,” Teddy says in a low voice as if he can read Billy’s thoughts. Or maybe Teddy is just reassuring himself. “Everything will be okay.”
Kate finds America in one of the bedrooms, standing perfectly still with her arms crossed, angrily staring at a wall. Swallowing hard, Kate holds up her hand and knocks on the open door. It takes a moment, but finally America gives her a sideways glance.

“Wanna be roomies?” Kate asks sheepishly.

America just huffs and rolls her eyes. She doesn’t respond, instead she walks further into the room, putting distance between herself and Kate. Kate takes a careful step across the threshold.

“You know, Kate,” America finally says in clipped tones. “Every time I think I have you figured out,” she shakes her head, mostly to herself it seems, “you disappear in the middle of the night or you suddenly have a fully stocked bunker that you never bothered to mention to anyone.”

“I-...”

But Kate has no defense, nothing that she can put into words.

“Are you gonna tell me where you went today?” America snaps. “Where you were when Billy—your teammate was kidnapped by another sorcerer?”

Kate feels herself deflating. But America doesn’t wait for a response.

“I thought that you and I were going to lead this team together. I thought that we were warrior sisters. I thought that that actually meant something to you.”

“It does!” Kate defends, but it’s weak and she knows it.

“Is all of this just a game to you?” America snaps, voice growing louder. “An experiment? A way to get away from your daddy?”

Kate gasps, sharp and pained. The words cut deep, and America knows it. She looks like she immediately regrets saying it, taking a step towards Kate before hardening again. She doesn’t take it back.

“This is hard for me,” Kate whispers.

“What is hard for you?”

“This! All of this! Having friends. Trusting people. You...you and me.”

America gives Kate a sharp look that makes her voice die in her throat.

“You think that this isn’t hard for anybody else?” America cries. “You think this isn’t hard for Cassie? Or for Billy or Teddy? Or for Tommy who was held prisoner?”

Kate’s eyes drop to her feet.

“It’s hard for all of us. But the rest of us aren’t keeping secrets. The rest of us aren’t running our own agendas,” America practically shouts.
“I’m sorry,” Kate sobs.

“I’ve covered for you, with the team,” America continues. “When you met with Jessica Jones and didn’t even tell me for two weeks, I covered for you. When you made secret plans at hospitals with doctors hired by Steve Rogers, I covered for you. But if you’re not willing to be all in on this team, the way the rest of us are, then you don’t deserve to lead it!”

Silence, heavy and heartbreaking falls between them. Kate’s eyes are growing cloudy. Because America is right. She doesn’t deserve to lead the team. She doesn’t deserve their trust, she doesn’t deserve their loyalty. Kate’s been doing what she always does, what she’s done since her mother died. Sneaking off in the middle of the night to steal and pillage, stock piling weapons and telling no one, withholding information from the people that trust her, meeting up with people secretly and giving over trusted information.

“Where were you today?” America repeats.

“I…” Kate wants to lie. The lie is in her throat, ready. She’s been working on it ever since she lost her bow. Stealing information from her father’s computer. That’s what she’s been planning on saying. “I met with Clint Barton.”


“He was the carriage driver,” Kate explains in a small voice, still staring at her feet. “After he knocked you out he gave me an address, said he wanted to see me shoot.”

“Are you kidding me, Kate?!” America roars. “You actually went?!”

Kate nods miserably.

“He had a mask on in the park, he could have been anyone! He could have been luring you somewhere to interrogate you! And you actually fucking went?! What did he want?!”

“To see me shoot,” Kate defends, finally looking up. “That’s all.”

“Stop lying.”

“I’m not lying!” Kate cries. “But he…he took the bow. We…made a bet and I lost and he took the bow.”

America looks so dumbstruck that she’s at a loss for words.

“He said if I won the bet he would keep Steve Rogers out of our hair and that I could keep his bow that we got from the Mansion,” Kate says hurriedly.

America shifts on the balls of her feet, uncrossing and recrossing her arms.

“Keep Steve Rogers out of our hair,” America mutter angrily. “Did it ever occur to you that the reason he gave you that address and asked you to come there with the bow was just so that he could get it back?”

Kate opens her mouth, but she has nothing to say, because no, it hadn’t occurred to her.

“I’ll get the bow back,” Kate finally says.

“It’s not about the fucking bow, Kate!” America snaps. “It’s about you, sneaking off in the middle of the night to meet with another Avenger without telling anyone! For the second goddam time!”
Kate’s shoulders slump and her eyes fall once again to her shoes.

“So, no, Kate, I don’t want to be your roomie,” America finishes, turning her back on Kate in disgust.

On numb legs, Kate backs out of the room. She stumbles towards the training room, thinking nothing in particular. The only thing that she can feel is shame. Her eyes are bleary and she bites her lip hard until the tears go away. She isn’t about to be seen crying.

Kate heads in the general direction of the garage. She needs some air. She needs some time to think. But she doesn’t get to the garage. Because in her pocket, her phone begins to buzz. With shaking fingers, Kate pulls it out and looks at the screen. Unknown number.

“H-hello?” Kate stutters, picking up the call.

“Katherine,” a familiar voice snaps. Kate’s stomach sinks. She knows that voice. It’s her father. “We need to talk.”

***

The streets of London are congested with protesters and the atmosphere is one of a city on edge. Angry faces and screaming voices are screwing hard with Peter’s Spidey Senses. The sea of people extend as far as Peter can see on every side. He struggles to keep up with Barnes, who darts through the crowd. Peter wishes he could just shoot and web and get himself above the crowd, but Barnes had told Peter in no uncertain terms that they could not be recognized. That means no costumes, street clothes and ball caps instead. Peter readjusts his sunglasses, shoving past a woman waving a sign, trying to keep his eyes on Barnes’ bulky shoulders. For such a big man, he shimmies through small spaces with incredible ease.

They’re still eight blocks away from the London Sanctum, and it’s taken them an hour to make it this far. On the edges of the crowd, protestors grow violent, smashing windows and overturning cars. It’s clear to Peter that the silence from government officials from the past week is going to cause a full on riot. Already, in other cities around the globe, riots have broken out. Yet no government leaders, including President North, have made an official statement. That fact alone makes Peter nervous.

Without warning, the crowd suddenly seizes and begins moving in the opposite direction. Peter is nearly thrown to the ground, and he looks around wildly for Barnes. That’s when Peter hears the screams.

About a mile away, an explosion rocks the ground. At first, Peter is certain that the protest has tipped into a riot. But then he hears the gunfire. Immediately, Peter’s ears pick out the sounds. Five gun: four automatic rifles, M4s most likely, and one 50 caliber machine gun. The screaming of the crowd grows louder. The wave of bodies crashes against Peter again, people running away from the sounds of gunfire. Peter loses his footing and goes down.

Peter shoves his sleeve away from his web shooter. Just as he is about to fire a web at a nearby building to pull him from the bedlam, a pair of strong hands grabs him by the shoulders and hauls him to his feet.

“Sentinels!” Barnes shouts over the din of the crowd, pointing towards the sound of gunfire.
Peter’s stomach sinks. Sentinels haven’t been deployed in over ten years. A deadly robotic police force developed by an American scientist using salvaged parts of Ultron’s army, they were placed at the front lines during North’s war against the Avengers. Sentinels killed dozens of the strongest and bravest super heroes Peter has ever known. They were shelved after the war, deemed far too dangerous and unpredictable to be used for every day policing. Stunted versions are used for military training, as Sentinels are able to observe and copy the powers of the adversaries that they face. But an unarmed populace wouldn’t stand a chance against a cadre of Sentinels. If they’ve been deployed against the protesters, this is going to turn into a blood bath.

Looks like President North has made his statement.

Barnes doesn’t pause, even for a second. He’s off, cutting through the crowd and disappearing. Peter swallows, pulling off his sweat shirt. Underneath is his costume, and Peter yanks his mask over his face before shooting a web towards the nearest building.

Swinging over the crowd, Peter finally gets a clear view of what’s happening. Barnes was right. Five Sentinels, metal monstrosities, stand menacingly at the far end of the street, firing indiscriminately into the crowd of fleeing civilians. Peter keeps his distance, launching himself towards the building to their far right, landing on the roof.

He has to take out their guns, or the pile of bleeding, screaming bodies at their feet is going to keep growing. Peter fires web grenades at the muzzles of their weapons. The webs explode, clogging the barrels, causing several of the oversized weapons to backfire. Two of the Sentinels attempt to free up their weapons, but the other three all turn towards Peter.

“Oh, shit,” Peter says to himself, leaping off the edge of the building just before a parked car thrown by a Sentinel collides with the spot where he was just standing.

Peter is suddenly wishing that he had radio contact with Barnes. They had been stupid not to put in earpieces. Peter uses two webs as a catapult, flinging his weight into the chest of the nearest Sentinel. He knows from far too much experience that they’re top heavy, and the Sentinel stumbles to the ground, crashing loudly.

That’s when Barnes appears, two Skorpions in hand. He fires at the furthest Sentinel, aiming for the throat. It’s the most heavily protected spot on the robot, but it’s also where its microprocessor is located. The Sentinel takes the bait, charging for Barnes. Peter swings around behind it, hitting it hard on the back, causing it to crash to the ground. Barnes doesn’t wait, he uses his metal arm to lift a manhole cover free and brings it down on the back of the Sentinels neck, beheading it in one fluid movement.

Meanwhile, Peter takes on another two Sentinels. He can’t keep an eye on Barnes, but he knows that the Winter Soldier can hold his own. Peter webs the Sentinels together, and while they struggle to free themselves, the first Sentinel Peter attacked gets to its feet and goes airborne.

The Sentinels aren’t after Peter and Bucky. They’ve been programmed to take out the protesters. The last Sentinel follows its brother, flying towards the opposite end of the crowd, aiming to cut them off and mow them down. Peter knocks the webbed up Sentinels to the ground and leaves them for Barnes.

As the Sentinels land at the opposite end of the street, they finally free up their weapons and begin firing again. Peter’s insides burn as he watches civilians get hit and go down. He lands, grabbing up a motorcycle and flinging it with all of his strength at one of the Sentinel’s heads. The other turns and aims its weapon at Peter. He uses a web to avoid the spray just in time.
The Sentinels are smart, and they separate, one launching into the air to hunt down more protesters while the other goes for Peter. The Sentinel is bigger, but Peter is faster and stronger. It doesn’t take the Sentinel long, though, to recognize that most of Peter’s advantage is in his web shooters. And with two rapid laser fires, Peter’s web shooters burn away from his wrists and he’s suddenly grounded.

“Parker!” Peter hears Barnes roar. “Get down.”

Peter flattens himself to the concrete. The sound of a 50 caliber is all the Peter can hear. He turns to find Barnes firing the stolen weapon, so massive that he almost looks ridiculous wielding it. But a few moments later, the Sentinel’s head hits the ground, its body crumpling behind it, beheaded by the spray of bullets.

For the second time in a quarter hour, Barnes hauls Peter to his feet.

“I’ll get the last one,” Barnes says. He doesn’t sound panicked or worried. On the contrary, there’s a gleam in his eye that tells Peter that Barnes relishes chaos. “Get these people off the street.”

Barnes doesn’t wait, he takes off once again. Peter tries not to feel too bitter about being demoted to cat herding. But when Peter turns and sees the street, he feels hallow. Because the streets have nearly emptied by now. The only people left are the dead and the dying. Blood floods the concrete, pained screams and moans waft through the air. And Peter knows that this was North’s doing.

There is no violating the Hard Line Policies. Even in London, North’s absolute power can’t be questioned. As Peter’s breath hitches, as he scans the bodies for those still alive, Steve Rogers’ words drift through Peter’s mind.

Do you not remember what happened the last time we took a public stand against President North?

***

“I hope you understand what your little excursion has cost me.”

“I don’t really care what it’s cost you,” Kate spits.

“Associating with meta terrorists, Katherine? I had to pull every favor I had. So you have one chance.”

Her father is trying to waste time on the call, Kate knows it. She pulls the phone away from her ear, quickly opening the black market application that Riri had added to her phone weeks ago. It scrambles her phone signal so that her location can’t be pinpointed.

“You can come home right now and turn yourself over. I’ve been promised leniency for you,” her father is continuing. “You have until midnight.”

“I know you know I’m not coming back home,” Kate replies, holding the phone back up to her ear. “Who else is listening on this call? Huh, Daddy? I’m not an idiot. And I’m not giving you any information about where I am or who I’m with.”

“The Sentinels have been deployed,” her father retorts loudly.
Kate laughs. Her bunker is reinforced for nuclear blasts, there’s no way a Sentinel could get in here.

“Sentinels, Daddy?” Kate scoffs. “That’s old tech.”

“Oh, the Sentinels aren’t coming for you, Katey,” her father warns, voice saccharine and patronizing. “No, there’s something far worse coming for your freak friends.”

Kate tries to keep her breathing even. She won’t give anything away, ever her fear at that statement. It’s a lie, she tells herself, there’s nothing worse than the Sentinels.

That’s when Cassie collides with Kate, face flushed and speaking so quickly that Kate can barely understand her.

“Midnight,” her father repeats. “After that, there’s nothing that I can do for you.”

“Well, it’s been great catching up, Daddy,” Kate replies sweetly. She hits the end call button so hard that her phone almost tumbles from her hands.

“Kate!” Cassie cries. “You have to come see! The news! Come see!”

Cassie’s hand, sweaty and cold, grabs Kate’s and Cassie drags her towards the laboratory. Inside, Riri and Vision are silently watching a computer screen with wide eyes.

“…will not allow domestic terrorism to continue in our country.” It’s President North at a podium, and his small, dark eyes stare hard into the camera as if daring anybody to contest him. “My fellow Americans, my fellow citizens of the world, this is our test from God. Will we allow anarchy and disorder to consume us? Will we allow terrorists to take the peace and a freedom that we have fought so hard to achieve? My answer is, no. No we will not let radical groups infiltrate our communities. No we will not let our citizens die in their beds, murdered by an enemy. No we will not allow fear and mysticism replace order with chaos.”

He pauses, his knuckles white on the edge of the podium.

“To the terrorists who feel that they have free reign over our citizens, I tell you that you will not succeed. I was chosen to lead the Free World, by the freedom loving citizens of this country and by God himself. That is a sacred pact, and I will never betray the faith of those who have put their trust in me. So to the citizens of this country and of the world, I tell you not to fear. I tell you that the threats that you dread will be eliminated, decisively and completely. And to the terrorists,” he pauses, a vein popping from his forehead as he stares bullets through the camera and right into Kate’s soul, “I say…I do not bow.”

With that, North turns on his heel and strides away from the podium. Immediately, the camera view cuts to a city street. New York. A crowd of protesters. A view that Kate has seen plenty in the last few weeks. But instead of chanting and waving signs, the protesters are screaming and running.

Sentinels, their faces glowing red, fire weapons into the crowd. No mercy. No discrimination. The fleeing protesters fall to the ground, bodies riddled with bullet holes.

Kate isn’t breathing. The view changes. A different city. The same situation. Again, it changes. And again. In every city, the Sentinels step emotionless over piles of dead bodies.

Far away, as if hearing her from underwater, Kate realizes Cassie is speaking.

“Kate, what do we do?”
Chapter Fifteen

Eli’s body aches, his muscles protest, his injuries burn. Nothing could have prepared him for this. Not his super strength, not his hours of training, not any of the nights he’s spent on the street stopping petty crime. Because this is so far beyond knocking out a drug dealer. Terror is a real thing in his chest, and it has claws that dig into his heart, and it has a voice that screams at him to run. But he isn’t going to run. His grandfather wouldn’t run, so Eli is going to stand his ground.

You’re going to die, a small voice in the back of his mind tells him.

If I am, I don’t care, this is worth dying for, a stronger voice replies.

But Eli is just one guy and a rational part of himself tells him that there’s no way he can take on twenty murder-bots.

“Then I’ll die trying,” Eli growls, pushing himself to his feet.

He’s already taken out one of the robots. It had taken him thirty excruciating minutes. First, he had taken off the robot’s arm, then its leg. But it had kept going. Eli had learned its weak spot though. Take off the head. That’s easy enough. Well, easy is a relative term. But Eli isn’t going to give up.

The robot knocks Eli back once again, and he feels another rib break. The robot is concentrated on Eli now, which is a good thing. At least it’s not still chasing protesters. So Eli forces himself to his feet yet again and darts between the robot’s legs. It gives chase, and Eli is a fast runner. The robot can fly, and it fires lasers at him that Eli barely dodges. Eli cuts hard around a corner. He wants to lead the bot away from civilians. So he takes another hard turn through a narrow alleyway.

But when Eli comes out on the street again, his stomach sinks. Because he’s made a rookie mistake. And it’s probably going to cost him his life.

Eight robotic faces turn to face Eli. Eight weapons raise. Eli throws himself behind a parked car. He knows it probably won’t do much good, but he’s running on auto pilot at this point.

There’s a bright blue light to Eli’s left. He thinks it must be another bot. He throws his arms over his face instinctively, in a pathetic attempt to protect himself. But no pain comes.

When Eli opens his eyes, he can barely believe what he’s seeing.

Iron Man uses a repulsor beam to tear a robot in two up the middle. Vision phases his body into a robot’s head before hardening, and ripping the head to pieces with his arms. A streak of silver knocks the feet out from under one of the robots and then a massive green beast with wings uses his bare hands to tear the bot’s head off. A small blonde girl suddenly isn’t so small, growing until she’s twice the size of one of the fifteen foot tall robots, grappling with it easily before crushing it underfoot. A boy in a cape seems to wield lightning as he fries another robot.

Eli steps out from behind his hiding spot, yelping and cheering. Because he knows who these people are. He knows what they are.

The Yong Avengers!

“The cavalry is here!” Eli shouts excitedly.

A girl with a long black pony tail and dressed in a tight purple outfit looks Eli up and down. And Eli
knows her. She’s the new Hawkeye. Eli struggles to keep himself from smiling too much like an idiot.

“Who the hell are you supposed to be?” she asks, taking in Eli’s costume.

“I-I’m…” Eli clears his throat and squares his shoulders. “I’m Patriot,” he finally replies in a deep voice.

“Alright…Patriot,” Hawkeye says slowly with a raised eyebrow. “Can you fight?”

Eli laughs.

“I’ve been fighting my whole life, ma’am,” he replies seriously.

It’s that moment that a robot choses to fire a laser at the spot between Eli and Hawkeye. The girl gives the robot an annoyed look, unholstering an odd looking weapon from her hip. She takes aim and fires. A massive ball of purple energy hurls towards the robot, hitting it in the neck and blowing a hole through the metal. The robot crumples to the ground immediately.

“Necks the weak point, Patriot,” Hawkeye says with a shrug. “You wanna be a Young Avenger?”

Eli’s heart is twisting in his chest. Because, fuck yes.

“There’s nothing I want more in the world,” Eli replies breathlessly.

Hawkeye nods before giving Eli a wicked smile.

“Alright, then, Patriot,” she says. “Tag team?”

***

The Young Avengers are working like a team, a well oiled machine, and there’s nothing more beautiful. Teddy is smiling when he uses a massive fist to demolish the face of the Sentinel that America has knocked to the ground. It takes only minutes for nine Sentinels to fall, sparking and disabled, pummeled to nothing but a pile of spare parts by the Young Avengers.

Billy is also smiling when his feet touch the ground, and he reaches for Teddy immediately, pulling him for a kiss. Tommy makes a face at them before rolling his eyes.

Kate jogs towards them, and behind her is a stranger. He wears a bright blue, double breasted military jacket and red pants. He wears a small mask and his expression is one of practiced seriousness, but there’s a gleam in his eye that betrays his excitement.

“Who is this?” Teddy asks.

“This…” Kate says, looking behind her at her new friend, “is Patriot. He wants to help.”

America draws even with Teddy and Billy and gives Kate a venomous glare.

“Picking up stragglers, are we?” America spits bitterly.

“I can fight,” the boy Kate called Patriot defends, taking a step towards America. “I have super strength.”
America laughs and glances towards Teddy.

“Join the club, kid,” America scoffs.

“He’s been on ground,” Kate snaps, taking a defensive step in front of Patriot. “He knows where the rest of the Sentinels are.”

Teddy rolls his eyes and wonders when the posturing between Kate and America will end. He thought that when he saw them making out at the Arcadian bar that that meant the end of the dick measuring contest. But apparently not.

“Alright, then,” America replies coolly. “Where are the rest of the Sentinels?”

“Uhm,” Patriot says sheepishly, glancing at Kate for help.

“I have six on twelfth and fourth,” Vision answers for Patriot. “Three in Times Square. And the other two are airborne heading towards the docks.”

“Alright. Teddy and Cassie, you’re with me,” America states with a nod. “Tommy, Billy, Vision, you head to Wall Street. And Kate,” America pauses, venom in her voice, “you, Riri, and your new friend will go to the docks. We got fliers on every team. Get the Sentinels distracted so your teammates on the ground can get to the Sentinels weak spot. Stay on the radio, call for backup if needed.”

America doesn’t wait, she nods at Teddy. He stretches his wings, grabbing America and Cassie around their waists. Before he pushes off from the ground, he glances at Billy. Billy gives him a reassuring nod and smile. It’s all Teddy needs.

They find the Sentinels they’re after pretty quickly. The robotic monstrosities are hard to miss on the emptying streets. Civilians have fled, taking cover in buildings, hiding from the murderous robots. America nudges Teddy, telling him to drop the girls. America hits the ground hard, the concrete splintering under the force of her. Cassie grows to the size of a building as she drops, landing lightly on massive feet. Almost playfully, Cassie grabs two of the Sentinels in her oversized palms, crushing their heads together.

One of the Sentinels looks at Cassie, a blue light scanning her quickly before it suddenly grows too, until it’s even taller than Cassie. Cassie gasps, but she doesn’t let the sudden change cause her to pause. Without hesitation, she lunges for the thing.

Teddy dives towards the head of one of the other robots. It fires a laser at him that grazes his wing. He hisses at the pain, but ignores it, grabbing the thing by the head and ripping it from its neck in a swift moment.

America moves like a jungle cat, climbing up the long limbs of another Sentinel, sweeping behind its back to avoid the lasers it fires. She punches it hard, several times in the back of the neck, until she rips back with her arm. In her first is a motherboard, and she holds it up like it’s the heat of an enemy. The robot falls forward, and America strolls off of it casually, tossing the sparking hard drive away from her.

A moment later, one of the Sentinels scans Teddy with the same blue light. In an instant, it’s covered in thick metal plates. Teddy barely dodges its fist. But Cassie is there, walloping it in the head, ripping the thing off like she’s picking a flower.

“Team two has subdued adversaries,” Vision’s crisp, monotone voice announces in Teddy’s ear.
“Then you can come help us out,” Kate replies, sounding out of breath.

It doesn’t take Teddy, Cassie and America long to take down the six Sentinels. And it’s only a few minutes more before the other teams announce success. Teddy is almost giddy.

“Let’s see what North says about that!” he whoops victoriously, landing beside America who has barely broken a sweat.

The team meets up at the docks, some looking a little worse for wear. Kate has a heavily bleeding arm, but she swats Cassie away when the blonde tries to fret over it. Patriot is panting, looking around excitedly. He opens his mouth to speak, but America cuts him off.

“We gotta get out of here,” America tells the team.

“I’m coming with you,” Patriot says immediately, sweat pouring down his face.

“No, you’re not,” America retorts.

Kate gives America a hard look, marching forward and grabbing America by the arm and dragging her away from the group. They have a hushed, furious conversation that Teddy can easily hear with his enhanced ears,

“We should take him with us,” Kate hisses.

“No,” America snaps.

“Nine people, America,” Kate retorts. “Patriot would make nine.”

“I’m not bringing him with us. We have no idea who he is.”

“You didn’t know who I was,” Kate points out.

America scoffs.

“Yeah, how’d that turn out?”

Kate falls silent, a hurt look on her face.

“He fought with us,” Kate finally says. “You can be mad at me all that you want. But you can’t deny—”

Kate is cut off with a harsh hand to her lips. America gives Teddy a suspicious glance before pulling Kate further away, out of range.

When they return, America looks annoyed. She glares at Patriot.

“You can come with us, but if you betray us…” America pauses dramatically, eyes sharpening, “Kate will kill you.”

Patriot waits for someone to laugh at the joke. But every face is stony.

“Fair enough,” Patriot replies nervously.

“Alright, Billy, get us out of here,” America commands.

When they get back to the bunker, America advances on Patriot, shoving him hard against a wall.
The entire team watches. His eyes go wide, surprised as America glares at him. America opens her mouth to speak. But before she can, a sound comes from the shadowed corner of the training room.

It’s an applause.

“Great work….Young Avengers.”

Nine faces turn to see who has spoken. Kate moves first, reaching for her weapon. But before she can, a face appears from the darkened corner. None other than the Winter Soldier himself detaches from the shadows. He is clapping slowly, a bored look on his face as he looks over the team. Nobody speaks, frozen in stunned silence. It’s Kate who moves first.

“How did you get in here?!” Kate demands.

The Winter Soldier laughs. From behind him, Teddy sees another body moving, but he can’t make out who it is.

Before anyone can more or speak, before the Winter Soldier can say anything more, before America can release Patriot and advance on the intruders, there is an explosion to Teddy’s right. Stone rubble and dust fills the room, and for a moment, everyone is blind. Teddy blinks away the particles in his eye, trying to see and understand what is happening. There’s a low laughter coming from the source of the explosion and Teddy charges. It must be Mordo, Teddy thinks, come again for Billy. And Teddy will die before he allows that beast to take Billy again.

But as the dust clears, it isn’t Mordo that Teddy is suddenly face to face with. Instead it’s a man, but not a man. An alien. A Skrull alien. His heavy jaw and green skin giving him away. And he looks at Teddy with triumphant, predatory eyes.

“Dorreck Vii,” the Skrull says in a low voice. “I have been searching for you for many rotations.”

Before Teddy can move, before he can even speak, the Skrull has a hand around Teddy’s throat. He feels like a hook has wrapped around his navel, pulling him apart. Desperately, Teddy turns and looks behind him at his team in the settling dust. His eyes find Billy’s. Billy’s eyes are wide and confused. And then the room around Teddy begins to disappear, piece by piece like a puzzle falling apart.

Teddy blinks and his team is gone, the bunker is gone, but the Skrull still has a fist around Teddy’s throat. The Skrull pulls Teddy in close, but Teddy shifts, swinging a massive fist at the Skrull’s head. The Skrull releases Teddy, and Teddy stumbles to the ground. Getting his feet under him, Teddy runs down a narrow, metal hallway. He doesn’t know where he is, but as he passes odd, twisted and glowing technology, the likes of which he’s never seen, he has a growing and sinking suspicion of where he’s been taken.

Teddy bursts through a metal doorframe and into a large open space. It’s a bridge. And through the thick glass at the front, Teddy can see the Earth far below, surrounded by the dark expanse of space.

It’s a spaceship. Teddy is on a spaceship. The Skrull’s spaceship. Dread and helplessness twist in Teddy’s stomach. Before he can think of what to do, before he can even remember how to breathe, something hits him in the back of the head.

Teddy hits the ground, unconscious.
“What did you do with him?!” Billy shouts, rushing at the Winter Soldier with furious energy sparking from his fingertips.

The Winter Soldier doesn’t flinch, he just looks Billy over with a mildly interested look on his face.

“We didn’t do anything with him,” a voice from the shadows answers evenly.

Spiderman, costume and all, comes striding out of the darkened corner to stand beside the Winter Soldier. Kate nearly chokes at the sight of him.

“How did you get in here?!” Kate demands.

The Winter Soldier just scoffs.

“We’re Avengers,” Spiderman answers for him. “A locked door isn’t exactly the biggest obstacle we’ve faced.”

“You’re not Avengers,” America scoffs. “You gave up.”

Spiderman seems to shrink at the accusation, and Kate knows that he thinks it’s true.

“Who took Teddy?!?” Billy shouts urgently.

“That was a Skrull,” the Winter Soldier replies with a shrug.

Billy advances on the Winter Soldier, hurling a ball of electric energy towards the man. The Soldier dodges the attack easily, twisting in a fluid movement and using his metal arm to shove Billy back. Billy snarls, and Kate has to rush forward, throwing herself in front of Billy to stop him from doing something stupid, like starting a fight with the world’s most notorious assassin.

Billy gives Kate a frantic look, before taking a few steps back. His eyes glaze over, turning bright blue. He’s muttering Teddy’s name, searching for him.

“What are you doing here?” Kate demands, turning to glare at the pair of Avengers.

“Looking for you,” Spiderman replies.

“What do you want?”

“To help you,” the Winter Soldier says, voice gruff and low as he gives Kate an unsettling look, like he’s sizing her up. It makes Kate shiver. “You’re trying to take out North. We want to help.”

“We also need you to come with us,” Spiderman interrupts, giving his partner a look that Kate can’t distinguish from beneath his red and blue mask. “You kids have been reckless.”

“We’re not going anywhere with you,” America snaps, rushing forward to Kate’s side.

The Winter Soldier is surveying the group. His eyes land on Vision for a long moment.

“Is that really you, Vis?” he asks with a laugh.


“And you’re helping these kids?”
“It’s what Mr. Stark would want,” Vision replies with a nod.

“Still Tony’s lackey, even after you both died,” the Winter Soldier scoffs.

Vision’s face flashes with anger, a real, human expression twisting his features.

“I found him!” Billy announces suddenly, grabbing Kate’s arm wildly. “He-He…he’s on a spaceship.”

“The Skrull probably took him back to his cruiser,” the Winter Soldier replies.

“Well I’m going to get him back,” Billy snaps. He looks around at his teammates. “Who is coming with me?”

“You can’t go onto a Skrull cruiser,” Spiderman pipes up.

“You going to stop me?” Billy dares dangerously.

“Look, everyone needs to calm down, alright?” Spiderman says, voice growing louder to address the entire room. “We can help you get your friend back. But you can’t just go onto Skrull cruiser all willy-nilly. Skrull cruisers are warded against sorcery. You try to teleport there, you’ll end up in open space, suffocating to death. We have the tech to intercept their transport beams. But…” he pauses, looking at Billy like he knows he isn’t going to like the answer, “…that’s in Wakanda. So, if you come with us—”

“We’re not falling for that,” America snarls. “We’re not going with you to Wakanda so that Steve Rogers can throw us in some cell ‘for our own safety.’ We know what we’re doing. We just took out twenty Sentinels.”

“Sentinels that were murdering civilians because you kids—” the Winter Soldier begins, but America cuts him off.

“Don’t you dare!” she cries. “Those Sentinels were killing civilians because President North doesn’t give a shit about the lives of his citizens. All he saw was people questioning his will, and he can’t abide by that.”

“Do you want to save your friend or not?” Spiderman asks. “If you do, then the only option you have is to come with us.”

“He’s telling the truth,” Vision offers. “The Rebels Without Flags base has the technology to get us on the Skrull cruiser.”

“Plus,” Spiderman adds, glancing nervously at the Winter Soldier, “Teddy’s mother is in Wakanda and she knows why Teddy was taken.”

“Why?!” Billy demands.

“I don’t know. The update Rogers gave me just said he was in danger, it didn’t specify—”

“We’re not going to Wakanda,” America repeats, cutting Spiderman off.

Billy turns to America, grabbing at her wrists.

“Please, America. We-we can’t leave Teddy on that spaceship!”

“We’re not going to. We’ll figure it out on our own,” America promises.
“Look, we don’t want to have to use force here,” Spiderman begins precariously.

America barks in laughter.

“Bring it on, old man,” she dares.

America looks like she is truly ready to take on two trained and experienced Avengers. If Kate doesn’t stop her, she’s going to get into a fight that even she can’t win. These two don’t have their reputations for nothing. Kate huffs, pushing past Billy and grabbing America by the upper arm. America refuses to move at first, glaring at Kate angrily. But finally, she allows herself to be dragged across the room.

“I think we should go,” Kate whispers once she’s sure they won’t be heard.

“If this is your doing, Kate,” America growls. “If you told them where we were, I swear—“

“I didn’t!” Kate snaps. “Look, I get it. You don’t fucking trust me. You think that I’m secretly scheming to undermine you or some shit and that I have a direct line to every living Avenger. But we need to get to Teddy. We don’t have a lot of time. We have no idea why the hell a Skrull kidnapped him. The RWF base is going to have the resources we need to answer a lot of questions that we have. And my father said that North has something worse than the Sentinels coming for us. I don’t like the sound of that. Wakanda might be the safest place for us right now. I think we need to go to Wakanda. And until we face Rogers ourselves, he’s going to keep sending his minions after us.”

America scoffs, rolling her eyes.

“And,” Kate continues, “I think you should talk to Rogers yourself.”

America gives Kate a questioning glare.

“If anybody is going to convince Steve fucking Rogers that North needs to be taken out…it’s you.”

America swallows, expression softening for a moment. She stares hard into Kate’s eyes, but Kate doesn’t even blink. She watches as America’s jaw works, the sign that America is considering it.

“Fine,” America says finally. “But we go just to get Teddy back. I’m not letting Rogers put a leash on us.”

America brushes past Kate before she can add anything else. Kate follows a few steps behind. America charges straight at the Winter Soldier, not even flinching when he gives her a severe look. The man exudes violence, but Kate can see past his trumped up demeanor. She can see the man behind the name, someone broken and human. But that doesn’t make him any less frightening. Somehow, it does the opposite, it makes him even scarier. He has a neatly lidded desperation about him, like someone who is willing to do anything to get what he wants. But America is fearless, and she stares the legendary assassin down in a way that dares him to make a move.

“We’ll go with you,” America declares. “And you’ll help us save Teddy.” It’s a demand, not a request.

“We’ll help you save your friend,” the Winter Soldier assures evenly.

“Alright,” America says. She turns to look at the team, eyes falling on Patriot for a moment. The kid has been silent since arriving at the bunker, watching them all with stunned eyes. Kate’s sure that he’s having a hard time believing what’s happening. It strikes Kate just how outlandish their lives
have become. They’ve just taken out a squad of murder-bots, before being confronted by two
Avengers and having their friend kidnapped by an alien from their secret underground hideout. The
ludicrous nature of it all makes Kate want to laugh. She can only imagine how Patriot is feeling.
America seems to consider him. But Kate knows that she’s going to have to let him come along.
He’s seen far too much to be left behind.

“We’re going to Wakanda.”
“This is Kl’urt, the Super Skrull, transmitting to all Skrull Member-Worlds. I have recovered Dorreck Vii. I repeat, Dorreck Vii, the Emperor’s heir, is in my custody in Earth’s orbit. If anyone can hear me—“

“I keep telling you,” Teddy snaps. The binds that hold him have he leaned forward, making it difficult to breath. “I’m not Skrull.”

Thick metal binds hold tightly onto Teddy’s wrists, ankles, and middle. He’s been struggling against the binds, attempting to transform. But he can’t, something is stopping him from changing. And now he slumps exhausted against the uncomfortable binds. The Skrull, Kl’urt, turns and observes Teddy for a long moment. Almost thoughtfully, Kl’urt steps away from his transmitter and walks towards Teddy, hands behind his back.

“My name is not Derrick Vii, or whatever,” Teddy states, gasping for air as the bind around his middle tightens.

“Oh no, my liege,” Kl’urt replies, leaning down to look Teddy in the eye. “You are Dorreck Vii, heir to the Skrull Empire. Of that, I am certain.”

“So you usually restrain your royalty, then?”

“Only when they’re extremely volatile. And extremely valuable.”


“You are very valuable,” Kl’urt says, straightening. “Your return to the Skrull Empire will finally bring about the annihilation of the Kree enemy.”

Teddy laughs, and even that movement hurts.

“And how do you figure that?” Teddy wheezes.

“Because, the year of your birth, I abducted the Kree Captain Mar-Vell, hoping to win the Emperor’s favor, and the hand of his daughter, the Princess Annelle.” Kl’urt wanders through the bridge, brow furrowed at the memory. Teddy struggles to keep his eyes on the Skrull, huffing against the metal digging into his abdomen. “Convinced I intended to usurp him, the Emperor had me imprisoned. Months later, I heard rumor that Annelle, though unmarried, had given birth to a male hatchling. And that when the Emperor discovered the identity of the hatchling’s father, he condemned the infant to death.” Kl’urt pauses, glancing back at Teddy to find him enraptured in the story. With a grin, Kl’urt continues. “But before the sentence could be carried out, the princess’s nurse ferried the child off-world. To reunite him with his father.”

“You know who my father is?” Teddy gasps.

Kl’urt smirks.

“You believe me?”

“No-I…”
“I was freed from prison,” Kl’urt continues. “Named Super Skrull and dispatched to find you and carry out the sentence.”

“You’re going to…kill me?”

“No, my liege.” Kl’urt leans in close to Teddy’s face. “The Skrull Worlds have fallen into civil war. The Kree enemy executed the Emperor many rotations ago. The Princess Annelle was abducted, and war between our worlds continued as the Empire descended into chaos. Now, I must return you, the last remaining heir to the Emperor’s throne, so that you can reunite the Skrull Member-Worlds, and strengthen the Empire so that we may destroy the Kree threat once and for all.”

Kl’urt straightens, waiting for Teddy’s reply. But he has no idea what to say, what to do. He pants, incapable of anything but stunned silence. He can’t believe the story, won’t believe it. It isn’t possible. He’s lived in New York City his entire life with his mother.

“But my mother…” Teddy manages to mutter.

“The Princess’s nurse,” Kl’urt corrects. “She has kept you protected for many rotations, shielding you from me. I have searched many planets, many systems for you and for the traitor E’lin.”

“She’s not my real mother?” Teddy asks weakly.

“No. She is simply the Skrull who smuggled you out of the Empire. I suppose I should thank her when I find her. Without her intervention, you would not have survived to lead the Empire.”

Teddy’s mother is Skrull. Teddy’s mother isn’t even his real mother. Why wouldn’t she tell him? How could she keep something so massive from him? Her words from their last conversation come back to Teddy.

*Teddy, wait. Please just wait. There’s something I need to tell you.*

Where is she now? Did she know that Teddy would be found when he left? She had to have known. She was going to tell him, and Teddy hadn’t given her the chance.

From down the hallway, there is a loud crash that draws Teddy out of his thoughts. He strains to look up, but his neck is growing sore and exhausted from struggling to keep his head upright in the uncomfortable binds. He sees Kl’urt stiffen, hand going for the weapon on his hip. But before he can reach it, a streak of silver darts into the bridge and knocks Kl’urt to the ground.

“I knocked but nobody answered,” Tommy smirks, rounding on Kl’urt.

“Tommy!” Teddy cries, relieved.

Kl’urt lunges to his feet, trying to grab Tommy, but Tommy is too fast. Tommy darts back down the hall and Kl’urt falls for it, giving chase. He’s fallen for the bait, and the moment Kl’urt is out of the bridge, Billy appears beside Teddy.

“Ted!” Billy gasps, going to his knees.

Teddy could almost cry from relief. Billy makes quick work of the binds that hold Teddy, and Teddy collapses to the ground. Billy’s hands are on him immediately, helping him upright.

“Are you hurt?” Billy asks frantically.

“I’m fine,” Teddy replies, massaging his sore wrists. “Just…get us out of here.”
Billy’s face twists.

“I can’t teleport us out of here, there’s some sort of warding."

“How did you get here then?” Teddy asks.

“It’s…a long story, just come on.”

Billy helps Teddy to his feet and they stagger towards the corridor. Inside, Tommy darts about, Kl’urt transforming and twisting his body, trying to land a hit. Vision slides through the wall, joining the fight. Kl’urt finally hits Tommy, and Tommy crashes to the ground.

“What can you do to me, wraith?!” Kl’urt demands, rounding on Vision.

He throws a punch, but it goes right through Vision’s head. Angrily, Kl’urt grabs his weapon and fires, but it gives similar results. Vision moves forward, putting a ghost-like hand through Kl’urt’s chest.

“I can solidify my hand within your chest cavity just enough,” Vision says calmly. Kl’urt seizes and falls to the ground. “To render you unconscious.”

America appears on the other end of the hall. She rushes forward, looking Teddy up and down.

“You’re alright?” she asks in clipped tones.

“Yeah,” Teddy replies. “Where is everyone else?”

“Limited number of people that could be transported. Let’s get out of here.”

Teddy nods, leaning against Billy whose arms are still tight around Teddy’s waist. Teddy finally feels steady on his feet when suddenly the ship is thrown dangerously to the left, shuddering at the force of some kind of impact. The team is thrown to the ground.

“What’s happening?!” America shouts over the sound of metal grinding on metal.

“Another deep space craft has intercepted the cruiser,” Vision reports, hovering above the ground, unaffected by the sudden shifting of the ship. “We need to leave now before they disable the transporter.”

Teddy is on his feet again, hauling Billy up after him. America has already taken off down the hall towards the transporter, vaulting around the corner as the ship shudders unsteadily again. Tommy disappears after her. Teddy keeps a tight grip on Billy, nodding to Vision as they taken off after Kate.

“Your highness,” a weak voice calls as they begin down the corridor. Teddy turns to find Kl’urt stirring. Teddy pauses, despite Billy tugging him to follow America. “Your people, your family need you.”

“What family?” Teddy asks, unable to stop himself.

“Teddy, what are you doing? Come on!” Billy insists.

“Just, one second.”

“We don’t have a second!” Billy cries, but Teddy pulls his hand from Billy’s grip.
Teddy kneels down in front of Kl’urt. The Skrull watches him with wary eyes.


Kl’urt’s face falls.

“Unfortunately, Annelle was…killed in battle.”

Teddy takes a shuddering breath.

“And…my father?”

“Your father…” Kl’urt begins.

The ship collided hard with something, throwing Teddy to the floor again. Alarms scream throughout the ship. There’s a screeching, unbearable sound from the bridge, and Teddy watches the Skrull’s eyes widen in recognition and fear. Before Teddy can say anything, a bright light comes from the bridge. A volley of lasers erupt down the hall, hitting Kl’urt in the chest. The Skrull shouts, falling back away from Teddy. Billy grabs Teddy, pulling him out of the line of fire.

“It’s alright, child,” a deep voice calls from down the corridor. Teddy blinks through the smoke, watching as three massive figures appear at the end of the hall. They wear metallic exoskeletons, wielding considerable weapons. “The Super Skrull will not harm you or anyone else ever again. The Kree protect their own.”

One of the three bodies steps forward, approaching rapidly. Billy grabs Teddy protectively, moving to put himself between Teddy and these new attackers. Through the metallic helmets, Teddy can see light blue skin and massive black eyes.

“And you are one of us.”

***

“We’ve got eyes on the cruiser but…you’re not gonna like this, Steve,” Natasha says nervously, moving through the situation room.

Steve scoffs, because what else is new? He doesn’t like any of this. He doesn’t like that Parker used the Kaplan kid’s sorcery to bring them to the RWF base without warning Steve. He doesn’t like that Parker hadn’t stopped them from using a reincarnated Vision to hijack outdated tractor interception technology to board the Skrull cruiser. And he really doesn’t like that Bucky had sat by during all of this, never stopping the children from going into space and never strong arming Parker into notifying Steve the second they returned to Wakanda because Bucky is clearly running his own agenda that he isn’t bothering to tell Steve about. Steve hasn’t liked any part of this situation ever since Ellen Altman had told him her story.

“The Super Skrull is not the only threat,” Ellen had said. “Kl’urt, that is the name of the Super Skrull. He kidnapped the Kree Captain Mar-Vell and delivered him to the Skrull Emperor. He could not have known, of course, that Mar-Vell and the Princess Annelle, the Emperor’s daughter had been carrying on a lengthy and torrid affair. I remember when I learned that Annelle was with child. She was so terrified. She knew what her father would do when he found out. The Skrull gestation period is incredibly short by human standard. Only seven weeks in Earth time.
“Annelle attempted to escape the Throne-World with Mar-Vell, but the Emperor caught them. He executed Mar-Vell on the spot, imprisoned his daughter in his stronghold, planning to kill the half-breed infant when it was born. I was the attending nurse. I had known Annelle since we were children, and she begged me to smuggle the child away. When I saw him—“ Ellen had choked up, staring at Steve as if begging for his forgiveness. “I was supposed to deliver the infant straight to the Emperor, but I boarded a deep space vessel instead. At first I intended to take the child to the Kree warship, but I quickly learned that they had no intention of allowing the half-breed to live. I sought a safe planet. Earth seemed the safest at the time, somewhere the Skrull or the Kree would never look. I had no choice but to raise the child as my own. I am the only family that Theodore has. I never told him the truth. I shielded him from Skrull and Kree terra-scans for almost twenty years. I assured him that he was only a shape shifter, nothing more. It’s—it’s all my fault…”

The Super Skrull, Ellen had assured Steve, would still be searching for Teddy. But he wasn’t the only one. The Kree Imperial Militia would certainly also be searching for Teddy. Because war has weakened their forces, and after their military commander, Mar-Vell had been slaughtered by the Skrull Emperor, they would have a very specific, very insidious intention for Mar-Vell’s only child.

This week had been a disaster. Steve had had to send several special force teams to take down the droves of Sentinels that had been dispatched not twelve hours ago against protesting, mostly unarmed civilians. Already, two of his team had been killed by the Sentinels, and the battles are still raging. Steve had been about to board a RedJet himself, not about to sit idle as his team died in his name, when he was stopped by Natasha with the information that a Skrull cruiser had entered Earth’s orbit.

Of course, Steve wasn’t the only one who knew of the cruiser. The International Space Station had dispatched several exploratory vessels, but peacefully welcoming aliens isn’t North’s way. No, at this very moment, North is repositioning his arsenal of extra-orbital defense missiles.

Then a security camera feed had shown none other than those blasted kids digging around a dusty warehouse at the edge of the compound. Four of them had gotten onto the cruiser before Steve had been able to intercept the group and taken them into custody. The damn kids had fought tooth and nail. Steve hadn’t even had the chance to dress down Parker and, by extension, Bucky, before he had to get back to the situation room with Natasha. Because whatever those four kids were about to do on board an alien vessel is going to cause the kind of fallout that Steve has nightmares about.

Thoughtless fallout seems to be the name of the game for the Young Avengers.

“What is it?” Steve asks warily, voice strained.

He hasn’t slept in nearly three days. Nat gives him a look that is almost apologetic before changing the view on the holo-screen at the head of the room to show the intercepted video feed from one of the exploratory vessels from the International Space Station that’s approaching the Skrull cruiser. Except, the cruiser is no longer alone.

A Kree warship, so massive that the Skrull cruiser is dwarfed in comparison, looking like a toy beside the thrumming, purple energy thrusters and black meteoric metal frame. The Skrull cruiser is trapped in a tractor beam, being pulled on board the warship.

“That’s not all,” Nat adds slowly. Steve gives her a harsh glance but she just watches him with hardened, green eyes. “The extra-orbital missiles have been armed. They’re just waiting on a launch code.”

“How much damage can they do to that ship?” Steve asks, glancing back up at the screen.
“Enough.”

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“The Super Skrull,” Teddy begins weakly, staring up at the figure that towers over him menacingly. Billy’s hand is so tight around Teddy’s wrist that he thinks it might be cutting off circulation.

“The Super Skrull is a terrorist,” the newcomer insists vehemently. “And he is not your concern. I am Lieutenant Av-Rom from the Kree Imperial Militia.”

“Kree,” Teddy repeats on numb lips.

“Yes. And you are the son of our mightiest warrior, Captain Mar-Vell.”

“I don’t understand…” Teddy says weakly.

“As you must know, the Kree and the Skrull have been at war, fighting for universal supremacy for generations,” Av-Rom replies. Teddy nods vaguely. He knows next to nothing about intergalactic politics. But he has heard that the Kree and Skrull war has been raging for millennia. The Kree were backed by Thanos, and when Thanos invaded Earth in 2018, intending to retrieve the infinity stones protected by the Avengers, he brought with him an army of Kree warriors. Aiming to stop him from completing the Infinity Gauntlet, the Skrull had also arrived on Earth and the battles had destroyed dozens of cities. “Mar-Vell was killed by the Skrull Emperor, but the Kree received word shortly after that Mar-Vell had a half-breed son.”

“So…so I’m…half Skrull, half Kree?” Teddy surmises uncertainly, barely believing the words coming from his own mouth.

“No,” Av-Rom answers so sharply that it makes Teddy jump. “Your father was Kree, so you are Kree. By ancient Kree law, the mantle of warrior is passed from father to son. Every Kree male is required to fill his father’s armor once he comes of age. And as Mar-Vell was an officer of the Kree Battle Forces, that means that you are now determined by Kree law to take up his mantle. I will escort you to berth.”

“What?!” Billy cries for Teddy.

“I’m sorry that you came all this way,” Teddy replies slowly. “But I’m not leaving Earth with you.”

“According the Kree law, you have no choice,” Av-Rom says, body stiffening. The Kree soldiers behind him raise their weapons. “Take him, men.”

Lucky for Teddy, Billy is quicker than him, casting a force field around them both before the Kree soldiers can fire. Tommy comes charging through the corridor, kicking the feet out from under the Kree before America hurls herself towards them. But America is evenly matched for strength against the Kree, and they have weapons and armor. Billy drops the force field, and when Teddy tries, he finds that he can finally transform. It’s not long before the fight turns into a full on brawl.

“Why…can’t…I…ah!” America dodges a laser fired at her head, sweeping the legs of the Kree and raining punches down on him. “…take them out!”

“The Kree’s advanced technology and natural strength makes them one of the most dangerous and
powerful races in the universe,” Vision answers, almost casually reaching a ghostly hand through the head of one of the Kree soldiers, knocking him out.

“Arcadian, eh?” Av-Rom says, jumping in to take on America. “How fascinating. We haven’t seen an Arcadian in the universe for many rotations. I’m sure our scientists will be excited to examine a specimen such as yourself.”

Teddy is pinned when he watches Av-Rom finally best America. She slumps to the ground, unconscious and Av-Rom grabs her by the upper arm, giving Teddy a glance that is a bald-faced dare before turning and hauling her towards the bridge.

Teddy separates himself from the Kree he’s fighting, leaving him to Vision and Tommy as he gives chase to Av-Rom, Billy tight on his tail. The bridge of the Skrull cruiser has a massive hole blown in the side, and Av-Rom drags America through it. Teddy doesn’t think, he ducks through after them.

Teddy’s stomach sinks when he finds himself in the bay of another, more massive space ship. Twenty Kree point their weapons at him, and Av-Rom drops America, turning to give Teddy a triumphant look.

“It’s your choice, son of Mar-Vell,” Av-Rom announces. “Turn yourself over now, or your friend will die.”

Billy, Vision, and Tommy are soon beside Teddy, and Teddy is desperately wishing that there was more of them.

“Their technology makes them powerful,” Vision says quietly. “Until you use it against them. Thomas, William, as we practiced?”

Teddy turns, unsure what Vision is talking about, to find Billy grinning conspiratorially at Vision. Before Teddy can ask, Billy grabs him by the upper arm. Tommy disappears in a flash of silver towards the Kree soldiers, returning not a moment later with America, leaving Av-Rom stunned. Billy steps forward just as Tommy grabs hold of Teddy. A blue force field is cast around their small ground, but Billy holds a hand out through the field that Vision reaches for.

When Billy’s fingers brush Vision’s, Vision’s entire body lights up with bright red and yellow energy. His body is growing, expanding, and across the room, the soldiers are shouting as their weapons are yanked from their hands by an invisible force. Then Tommy touches a vibrating hand to the force field.

The explosion is absolutely massive, yet contained. The white hot light blinds Teddy for a long moment, and his ears are ringing when Billy releases him. When Teddy can finally see again, every Kree is on the ground, yet there is no damage to anything else. Tommy whoops and cheers.

“That was badass!” Tommy declares certainly.

“What just happened?” Teddy asks.

“I transferred Tommy’s powers into Vision, and he used it to blow up their guns…I think,” Billy replies with a shrug. “Come on, we gotta get out of here.”

“That may be difficult,” Vision says. “The Skrull ship has been disabled.”

“I could teleport us then,” Billy offers, brow pinched.

“Are you certain that you could move us through space?” Vision asks. “My understanding is that
sorcery outside of Earth’s atmosphere is rather different.”

Billy swallows and Teddy knows that Billy doesn’t think he could do it.

“Then what are we gonna do?” Tommy cries.

“At this moment, twenty extra-orbital missiles are about to be fired upon this ship,” Vision adds.

“Not helpful!” Tommy groans.

“May I suggest an alternative form of transportation?” Vision asks thoughtfully.

***

“Are you sure you can fly a Kree star ship?” Billy asks, eyeing Vision nervously.

“No,” Vision replies casually, holding out a hand to the odd black metal shaft in front of him. “But I will once I have patched myself into the system.”

Thin, liquid metal lines begin to run from Vision’s fingers to the steering shaft in front of him. The ship blinks to life, lit by low blue lights.

“Alright, let’s get the hell out of here,” America says nervously, holding a hand to her head.

“Why are we bringing him again?” Tommy asks, glancing at the unconscious and bleeding Skrull at their feet. “It’s already crowded enough in here.”

“I have some questions for him,” Teddy replies.

“He kidnapped you!” Tommy points out.

“Yeah, well, now we’re kidnapping him.”

“Let’s just get out of here!” America snaps. “Vision.”

“I’m in,” Vision says. “Shall I input coordinates for the RWF base?”

“I think the RWF base is the last place we want to go to right now,” Billy argues. “The first thing Steve Rogers is gonna do is turn Teddy over to the aliens to avoid an invasion.”

“How about we get off the ship that’s about to be blown up first,” Tommy snaps. “And then decide where to go after that, huh?”

“Very well,” Vision shrugs.

The small ship shifts and detaches from its port. Within moments, the thrusters have the star ship cruising away from the massive Kree warship. Billy’s stomach flips uncomfortably as he peers through the front of the ship and stares down at the Earth below.

“Shit,” Billy whispers to himself. Teddy gives him a look. Billy shrugs and offers a small grin. “First time in outer space.”

“Dorreck,” the Skrull groans, pulling Teddy’s attention.
Without pause, Teddy goes to his knees.

“Is it true?” Teddy demands. The Skrull’s uneven eyes fall on Teddy’s face. “My father was a Kree? Captain Mar-Vell?”

“It is true,” the Skrull admits. “You are half Kree, half Skrull.”

“I thought Captain Marvel was a woman,” Tommy says.

The Super Skrull gives Tommy an annoyed glance.

“Carol Danvers was a human woman and intergalactic explorer. The Kree Captain Mar-Vell rescued her from near death and used his own blood to heal her, giving her many of the powers of the Kree. But healing her weakened him, and I captured the Kree Captain shortly after. When he died, I was told that the human Carol Danvers took on the name Captain Marvel and used her powers to defend the Earth when Thanos invaded in the Earth year 2018. The last I heard, she commands the Nova Corps.”

“I understood like four words of that story,” Tommay snarks.

“So what happens now?” Teddy presses, drawing the Skrulls attention back to him. “What are the Kree and Skrull going to do?”

“The Skrull woman who raised you has kept you protected but…now that the Skrull and the Kree know you are on Earth, they will not stop until one of them has you.”

The star ship rocks dangerously, cutting the Super Skrull off. Billy struggles to his feet to glance out the cockpit. His eyes widen as he watches a series of missiles detach from the Earth’s atmosphere, heading straight for the Kree warship. Several have already made impact, and a silent wave of fiery light rushes towards them through the vacuum. Vision maneuvers the star ship expertly though, dodging the explosion with ease before pitching the ship in nose dive towards the planet.

“We’re entering the stratosphere,” Vision announces. “Everybody hold onto something.”

Billy goes to the ground, grabbing to Teddy who has braced himself against the metal interior of the ship. The ship tilts and shakes violently, but Vision seems to be having no trouble driving the ship in through the atmosphere. The overall effect feels like riding in a jeep over a Rocky road.

“What are we gonna do when we get to the surface?” Tommy asks, an uncharacteristic nervous look on his face.

America seems to be mulling over that silently.

“The UN has extra-terrestrial invasion prevention measures,” Billy points out. “We’re gonna be seen in this ship.”

“I believe that may be the least of your worries at the moment,” the Super Skrull adds uneasily.

“What—” is all that Billy can say before suddenly, Vision begins to spasm. His eyes are wide sparking with white hot electricity so violent that the rest of the team has to flatten themselves on the floor. A moment later, Vision slumps forward, unmoving, and the smooth flight pattern of the star ship disappears, turning instead into a violent tail spin towards the ground.

The G-force of the spin traps the rest of the team against the sharp metal edges of the interior of the ship. The Super Skrull struggles towards the controls, arm around his still bleeding middle.
“Billy!” America shouts. “Do something!”

Billy closes his eyes, trying to ignore the nausea feeling in his gut from the tight spirals.

“StraightOutStraightOutStraightenOut.”

Ever so slightly, the ship’s plummet slows, just enough for the Super Skrull to shove Vision aside and grab the controls of the ship.

“What are you doing?” America demands, finally able to haul herself up alongside the Skrull.

The color drains from Kate’s face when she sees whatever the Super Skrull sees. Billy rights himself, shoving up just high enough to peer out the cockpit.

Skrull cruisers, eight of them, dart through the clouds and towards the star ship. As soon as Billy sees them, the ship is hit again and they begin to fall dangerously.

“Why are they attacking us?!” Tommy shouts.

“We are in a Kree star ship that holds the son of Mar-Vell,” the Super Skrull replies. “The Skrull auxiliary must have heard my transmission.”

Behind Billy, Teddy gets to his feet, transforming. When Billy turns, Teddy looks like a Skrull—green skin, heavy jaw, pointed ears, and massive bat-like wings.

“Teddy, what are you doing?” Billy asks slowly.

“I’m going out there,” Teddy replies, face resolute.

“You’re the reason they’re here,” America snaps.

Teddy gives America a unyielding scowl, and Billy knows that there is nothing that any of them can say or do to change his mind. Despite the fear twisting in Billy’s stomach that makes him want to shout at Teddy not to go, that makes him want to cast a force field around Teddy and never let him leave, Billy knows he has to let Teddy do whatever he has set his mind to.

“They mean to stop them from trying to kill us,” Teddy says in a low voice. “Kl’urt, lower the cargo door.”

Billy steps forward, grabbing Teddy’s hand.

“I’m coming with you.”

Teddy’s face softens for a moment and he looks at Billy with wide appreciative eyes.

“Alright,” Teddy says. “Let’s do this.”

The back of the star ship splits open as the rest of the team grabs hold of something. Before the door is even fully open, Teddy is out, wings wide as he flies straight towards the oncoming fire. Billy rolls his eyes at his stupid, brave boyfriend before following.

The Kree star ship veers hard to the East and away from the fire from the Skrull cruisers. Teddy darts right into the middle of the formation, coming to a halt midair and mean mugging the cruisers. Billy finally catches up with him.

“It’s like you want them to capture you!” Billy shouts, casting a protective shield around them both,
lest the Skrulls keep firing.

But the cruisers seem to have taken notice of Teddy, and they’ve halted their pursuit of the Kree star ship. Instead, they hover in midair in a tight circle around Billy and Teddy.

“They’re my people, Billy,” Teddy replies carefully, eyes on the cruisers.

“We’re your people, Ted. The Young Avengers!”

There’s a series of high pitched sounds as the Skrull transport beams cast Skrull warriors out of their cruisers. Each have the same bat-like wings that Teddy has, and they carry large blasters in their arms. But before the Skrull’s can make a move, a volley of lasers come hurling from the clouds, colliding with the Skrull cruisers and sending several of them smoking and spiraling towards the ground.

“What was that?!” Billy cries, trying to see through the heavy, gray cloud cover.

A moment later, twenty small black Kree star ships dart through the cloud line like menacing vultures. The Skrull ships that still remain exchange fire, and lasers bound off of Billy’s shield. He’s suddenly and violently grateful that he thought to put it up.

Billy grabs Teddy, dragging him away from the epicenter of the firefight. He resists, but Billy doesn’t hesitates to use his magic to force Teddy towards the ground. Billy teleports them to the nearest field that he can find.

“Billy!” Teddy shouts as soon as they are on the ground. “What are we going to do?! We—...I...I brought a full on alien invasion. I have to stop it!”

Billy swallows hard, eyes on the brilliant lights in the clouds above them, looking like some kind of bizarre electric storm. He doesn’t know where the star ship carrying America, Tommy and Vision is. He doesn’t know if the Super Skrull has taken them prisoner. He doesn’t know where they are. He doesn’t know where the rest of his team is. And he doesn’t know what to tell Teddy. Billy’s breath is caught in his chest, tight and painful. Because Billy has absolutely no fucking idea what to do.
Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Summary

CW: rough sex

The first ship to shakily land in the overgrown field is the hijacked star ship flown by the Super Skrull. America darts through the cargo door first, but she doesn’t get across the field fast enough, because the rest of the Skrull and Kree ships are quick to follow the hijacked ship. In moments, the field is swarmed with Skrull and Kree soldiers, weapons on high ready, each group advancing on Teddy. Billy steps furiously in front of Teddy, as if he intends to protect Teddy against the war forces of two alien races.

“I’m going to get us out of here,” Billy mutters under his breath.

“No,” Teddy says, putting a hand across Billy’s chest. “We’re not running.”

“Teddy,” Billy whines nervously.

“Go get the others,” Teddy replies firmly. “I’ll be fine.”

Billy tugs frantically on Teddy’s hand until Teddy finally looks down at him. His brown eyes are wide and afraid. Teddy puts a hand to Billy’s cheek.

“I promise that I’ll be okay,” Teddy assures earnestly.

Billy doesn’t look like he believes it. But he nods anyway, giving Teddy one last, long look before disappearing from beneath his fingertips.

The Skrull and Kree have closed on Teddy now, and every eye is on him. He puts up his hands, shifting to his human form slowly.

“We can solve this without bloodshed,” Teddy begins uncertainly.

“As the son of Mar-Vell, you are a conscripted soldier in the Kree military force,” one of the Kree interrupts. “You will come with us now, or we will be forced to escalate things, and this planet will suffer.”

“No!” one of the Skrull shouts. “He is the only heir of Emperor R’Kill. His birthright is the Skrull throne, and we will not allow the Kree to take him.”

Before Teddy can say anything else, a RedJet sweeps suddenly into view and lands smoothly a hundred yards to Teddy’s left. The Kree and Skrull immediately turn their weapons on the jet as the rear door swings open.

Several people come striding unflinchingly from within the jet. Leading them is a massive figure that charges towards Teddy with an unmatched fury and confidence. It takes Teddy a long moment to realize who it is.

It’s Steve Rogers. But it isn’t the Steve Rogers that Teddy remembers. It’s not the Steve Rogers on
old magazine covers. It’s not the Steve Rogers that appears in the pictures that accompany news reports. No, that Steve Rogers was the clean cut, clean shaven, blonde haired and blue-eyed embodiment of American freedom. That is not this Steve Rogers.

This Steve Rogers is grizzled, to put it lightly. Dark, scruffy hair and a beard hide most of his features. A nasty scar runs the length of his face, cutting right through one of his eyes. That eye is now the color of a storm cloud—dark grey and angry. The only real evidence that this is actually Steve Rogers is the other eye. The uninjured eye is bright blue and unmistakable.

Behind Rogers is a dark haired woman in a red body suit, and a spindly, dangerous looking woman with short red hair that Teddy realizes suddenly is none other than the Black Widow.

Teddy remembers the time when Greg had pressured Teddy into mimicking Rogers’ appearance. Teddy knows now that he got it wrong, so wrong. It’s not just his outward appearance that Teddy had gotten wrong. It’s the way Rogers walks, the way every step he takes seems to hold enough weight to shake the earth. It’s the way Rogers’ shoulders are thrown back in a broad presentation of unquestioned authority. It’s the way Rogers rounds on Teddy, glaring at him in a way that makes Teddy feel like a naughty child.

“Theodore,” Rogers growls, turning to look at the Skrull and the Kree in the field. “Get on the jet, now.”

Teddy shivers at the way Rogers says his name. Teddy doesn’t hesitate. That naughty child feeling doesn’t go away as Teddy drops his gaze and heads towards the jet. The Kree and Skrull protest, but Rogers stops them with a single movement, holding up his hand and looking around in way that tells the aliens that he’s in charge. Teddy is just a child. And Steve is an adult, here to clean up his mess.

Teddy keeps his eyes on the ground. He can feel himself literally shrinking. He doesn’t look up as he climbs into the jet. Inside, he finds Peter Parker, Spiderman without the costume, looking sheepish. He has the same expression on his face that Teddy has.

Teddy opens his mouth to ask Parker what Rogers is going to do when a small pop announces the arrival of Billy, Tommy, America, Vision, and the Super Skrull. Billy is on Teddy in an instant, worried hands fluttering against Teddy’s chest.

“We should get out of here,” Billy breaths, casting a suspicious glance at Parker. “Now, before Rogers comes back.”

“We can’t leave, Billy,” Teddy replies dejectedly.

“He’s going to turn you over to the aliens!” Billy cries.

“What are we gonna do then? Run and hide? For how long?” Teddy snaps.

Billy looks hurt, and Teddy regrets his tone. But he doesn’t take it back.

“Dorreck,” Kl’urt pipes up, hesitant. “Let me help you.”

Teddy gives Kl’urt an incredulous look.

“Why do you want to help me?” Teddy asks. “You kidnapped me.”

Kl’urt glances around. He’s still bleeding, his greenish blood soaking his uniform and the arm he holds against his wounds.
“Your father saved me once. Even though I had taken him as my prisoner,” Kl’urt begins. “Even though we battled often, both great warriors of our races. He saved my life. I sought only to return you to your family, Dorreck. You must believe me. But——” his green eyes move around the faces of the Young Avengers, pausing on Billy for a long moment. “I realize that your family is here on Earth. And I cannot force you to take your rightful place. I cannot take you from your family, it would dishonor the debt that I owe to your father.”

Kl’urt reaches for Teddy’s hand. Billy nearly slaps him away, but Teddy puts a hand on Billy’s shoulder and steps forward, taking the Skrull’s blood slick hand.

“I may die soon from my injuries,” the Super Skrull says earnestly. “I would die without honor if I allowed my debt to your father to go unpaid. Just—just promise that one day, you will consider your lineage, consider your people. The Skrull need you. They need a leader who will bring peace to the galaxy.”

Teddy glances at their intertwined hands. He doesn’t know what to say. He can’t comprehend the idea of going to outer space to lead an alien army. But Kl’urt doesn’t wait for Teddy’s reply, doesn’t expect him to make any grand promises at the moment. Instead, he tightens his grip on Teddy’s hand to draw Teddy’s gaze back to the Skrull’s face.

“Let me help you.”

***

“You cannot protect the youngling, Captain Rogers,” the Kree soldier closest to Steve growls.

Steve rolls his eyes.

“Be-Nell, is that you?” he asks, squinting at the helmeted figure before him. “How long has it been? Do you remember what happened the last time you and I fought?”

“The battles of the past have no effect on the present situation,” Be-Nell snarls. “The half-breed must come with us.”

“The Kree only want the boy to keep him away from the Skrull, from his rightful place on the throne!” one of the Skrull defends angrily, pressing closer than comfortable to Steve. “They will most likely slaughter the boy once they leave this system.”

“Do you really wish your planet to become a battle ground once again, Captain?” Be-Nell interrupts. “We will raze this planet as long as the youngling is here. Turn him over, now.”

“I’m not a captain, anymore,” Steve scoffs. “And you’ve all come all this way for a teenager?”

“For the heir to the Skrull throne!” the Skrull leader shouts. “He was not born on this planet, you have no claim to him as protector of Earth.”

“I didn’t know you were protector of Earth, Steve,” Jessica Drew laughs beside Steve.

“I’m not,” Steve says. “The real protector of Earth will be here soon, and he really doesn’t like aliens.”
“Is that a threat?” Be-Nell replies in a low voice.

“North has a whole thing about alien invasions,” Drew shrugs, unflappable. “It’s how he got elected. His forces are on their way here now.”

“So war it will be,” Be-Nell says loudly.

“No!” Steve snaps. He huffs angrily. He doesn’t have enough people for a fight, even if he would be stupid enough to let the kids join. Swallowing, Steve turns and looks at Nat. “Go get the boy.”

Nat turns towards the jet, but she doesn’t get far. Teddy appears as if called, hands balled in nervous fists. He takes in the field for a long moment, eying the Skrull and the Kree and Steve in the middle of them all. Slowly, he walks down the ramp and comes even with Steve.

“Look, kid, I’m sorry about this,” Steve says quietly. “You gotta make a decision.”

Teddy turns two thoughtful, wide green eyes to Steve. The look he gives him is unsettling. Steve hadn’t expected that kind of gaze from the kid. Just moments ago, Teddy had been frantic, nervous, and afraid. But now, a calm has settled over him that is almost eerie.

“Worry not, Captain Rogers,” Teddy says with a nod.

Without another word to Steve, Teddy steps forward between the two groups of aliens. There’s a gravity and command in his movements as he holds up a hand to stop the muttering that has begun in the crowd of blue and green faces.

“If I leave this planet with one of you, you both agree that any further hostilities will not involve Earth?” Teddy asks in a loud voice, giving serious looks to the leaders of the Kree and the Skrull.

Hesitantly, both sides agree. Teddy pauses for a long moment, a haughty look on his face that seems out of place. He seems to be deliberating, though his face is mostly expressionless. Finally, he nods.

“Very well, I will go with the Kree.”

The Skrull begin to shout angrily, but Teddy holds up his hand again.

“My father was Kree. Therefore I am Kree. I will serve the time I am required in the Kree Battle Forces. After that time, I reserve my right to return to the Skrull Throne-World.”

Steve is taken aback and utterly speechless. He didn’t expect the kid to agree to leave Earth. All Steve can do is stand stiffly and watch as the Kree and Skrull begin to argue, with Teddy in the middle shouting them down, telling him that he’s made his decision, that they have no further business on Earth.

From the jet, someone comes running. They shove past Steve and grab Teddy around the shoulders. It’s the Kaplan kid, sobbing theatrically, begging Teddy not to go. Teddy stiffens, extracting himself from Billy’s grip.

“I’m sorry, William, truly,” Teddy says loudly. “But this is the right thing to do. I cannot stay on Earth and risk the lives of those on this planet. I will always cherish the memories of our time together.”

Billy falls to his knees, sobbing wildly as Teddy turns and walks towards the Kree. On numb knees, Steve moves forward and hauls Billy to his feet. The kid grabs desperately at Steve, pleading with him to stop Teddy from leaving.
“No!” Billy cries. “Please! Please don’t make him go! Please do something!”

“There’s…nothing I can do,” Steve replies slowly as Billy begins to cry against his shoulder. But Billy doesn’t try to chase Teddy or fight against Steve’s firm grip. He just weeps, openly and deeply.

The Kree leader has his hand on Teddy’s shoulder, leading him towards one of the hovering star ships. The rest of the Kree move quickly, boarding their vessels as the Skrull scowl and move reluctantly towards their own. Just before Teddy boards, he turns and looks at Steve.

“Thank you, Captain,” Teddy calls with a small salute. “Please take my friends home.”

With Billy screaming and sobbing against Steve’s chest and a silent Jess and Nat behind him, Steve watches as one by one, the ships lift into the air and take off. They dart into the sky, disappearing in the low cloud cover. Steve can barely hear them over Billy wailing in his ear. The moment the last ship disappears, Steve turns and looks at Nat.

“Are they really gone?” he asks.

Nat looks at the holo-screen against her wrist.

“They are leaving Earth’s orbit, trajectory is deep space,” she replies cautiously.

Immediately, Billy straightens and falls silent, tugging out of Steve’s firm grip. Steve lets him go, heart aching for the kid, but Billy doesn’t spare Steve a glance. He looks around the field instead, wiping tears from his cheeks.

“They’re actually gone?” Billy asks in a surprisingly steady voice.

“Yeah, kid,” Steve answers gently. “Look, I’m sorry but—“

Billy doesn’t wait, he waves his arms at the jet excitedly, a self-satisfied grin on his face. Confused, Steve turns around.

“It worked!” Billy shouts. “They bought it!”

“Bought…what exactly?” Jess asks, following Billy’s gaze.

Steve watches as Teddy, another Teddy, appears on the ramp of the cargo door. He’s smiling like a fool, rushing towards Billy.

“I think you might have oversold it,” Teddy says to Billy with a shrug and a smug grin before grabbing him for a bruising kiss.

“What’s…happening?” Nat demands.

Breathless, Teddy turns and looks at Nat, smile still firmly in place on his face.

“The Super Skrull is now a Super Spy,” Teddy offers as an explanation.


“The Super Skrull…” Steve repeats. Steve’s met the Super Skrull, once before. The leader of the Skrull forces that fought against the Kree that Thanos brought with him to Earth in 2018. And Ellen Altman had said that it was the Super Skrull that would be dispatched to hunt Teddy down. “I don’t understand.”
Teddy and Billy are soon met by their friends. America Chavez, who even in apparent victory glowers at Steve. The new Vision, somehow looking different than the Vision Steve once knew, yet also very much the same. And an unbearable silver-haired speedster with a cocky grin who looks exactly like Kaplan. They chatter amongst themselves happily until Nat steps severely in the middle of their tight group and demands an explanation.

In an almost annoyed tone, Teddy explains that the Super Skrull had been the one who abducted him, before calling for backup from his fellow Skrull. The Skrull and the Kree, however, didn’t know that Kl’urt had been taken with the kids when Vision hijacked a Kree star ship before the missiles could take out the warship. The Super Skrull turned out to have a soft spot, and offered to take Teddy’s form in order to infiltrate the Kree. Billy had used a spell to heal his wounds, and Kl’urt had assured the kids that as long as he was acting as a spy in the Kree Battle Forces, the Skrull would leave Teddy alone and the Kree would be none the wiser.

“You kids just adverted a major planet-wide invasion,” Jess tells the Young Avengers once their story is done, giving them all appraising looks. “Nicely done.”

Steve gives Jess a harsh glance. Because he still isn’t sure exactly what to think of everything that just happened, but he sure as hell isn’t about to reward these kids with compliments for bringing waring aliens to Earth. Jess shrugs him off, rolling her eyes and heading back to the jet. Steve is about to order the kids on board when Teddy grabs his upper arm in a bruising grip.

Steve gives the teen a vicious look that makes Teddy release him and take a few cautious steps back.

“Where are our friends?” Teddy demands, putting on a brave face as he stares Steve down.

“Your friends are back at my base,” Steve says coolly. “Which is where the rest of you are going right now.”

America Chavez, stony silent for the entirety of the story, opens her mouth to say something.

“That’s an order,” Steve growls. “UN forces are still on their way here. So we’re—all of us—leaving.”

He turns and strides towards the jet, giving Nat a look that tells her to make sure the kids follow, before anyone can say anything else.

But as Steve makes his way towards the cockpit, he can’t help but be the tiniest bit impressed. That’s one major crisis adverted, and Steve didn’t even have to get his hands dirty. Maybe there’s more to these kids than he thought.

***

“You can’t hold us prisoner here,” the angry little brunette snarls yet again.

She’s paced the entire edge of the complex, tried every door and window, picked every lock that she can. Bucky rolls his eyes. This compound is a fortress. Bucky would know, he helped build it. And it was made to hold worse things than an angry teenager in, and keep even uglier things out.

“You’re not a prisoner,” Bucky recites for the umpteenth time. “And, you’re on my base, so I can do whatever I want with you.”

“Is that a threat?!”
Bucky drops his head, massaging his temples.

“No, it’s not a threat,” he grumbles. “Go eat a sandwich or something. There’s literally a pool in there, go for a swim.”

“Ha!” the brunette shrieks. “You have to tell me if my friends are alright.”

“Sweetie, you’ll know as soon as I know.”

Bucky can tell the girl doesn’t like being called sweetie. She glowers at Bucky from behind the gate, jaw tight.

“I thought you said that you wanted to help us,” she replies, voice dipping low.

Bucky’s shoulder blades tighten, but he doesn’t turn to face the girl.

“You haven’t exactly proven that you’re worthy of my help,” he answers, eyes on the jungle.

“Why do you want to kill North?” he asks, rolling his eyes again.

Bishop hisses. “And I know that you want to kill North just as much as I do.”

Bucky laughs.

“And why do you want to kill North?” he asks, rolling his eyes again.

Bishop doesn’t reply. She’s stone silent and Bucky curses under his breath. She’s baiting him, he knows it, but he can’t help himself from turning to look at her. When he does, a chill runs up Bucky’s spine. Because the look in the Bishop girl’s eyes is unsettling. It’s dark and it’s deep and it’s hallow; twin black holes consuming everything around them. And it scares Bucky because he knows that look. He’s seen that look in the mirror far too often. It’s the cold, emotionless stare of a killer. A predator’s eyes.

And while Bucky is watching Kate, Kate is watching Bucky. If you stare into the abyss, Bucky thinks, the abyss stares back. Kate smirks, dark and conspiratorially.

“You don’t want Rogers to know,” she says. It’s not a question, it’s an observation.

This girl is good.

“You don’t want your friends to know either,” Kate continues, cocking her head. “You’ve probably told them that you want revenge for some slight. But,” she pauses, raising an eyebrow at Bucky’s stunned expression, “it’s not revenge that you want. Not really.”

“Stop it,” Bucky commands, quickly turning his back on the girl.

“You want them all to think you’ve changed.” She’s still talking, voice like tar, slippery and insidious. “But you haven’t. Because the truth is, you’ve always been this way.”

She’s toying with him. Bucky fucking knows it. And she’s fucking good at it. He isn’t going to let her bait him. She’s just a kid. Just a fucking kid.

“Your daddy teach you to be such a bitch?” Bucky replies lightly.

He hears Kate’s teeth click together. Guess he found her button.

“If you’re gonna play mind games, little girl,” Bucky warns. “Then you’re gonna have to learn how
“You’d know all about mind games, wouldn’t you, soldat?” Kate hisses, fingers curling around the bars of the gate. Bucky forces himself to keep his eyes forward and body motionless. He’s underestimated the girl. That was his mistake. He didn’t think that these kids knew how to play dirty. But Kate clearly has some experience lying with the dogs. “I bet you play them with Steve all the time.”

Bucky can’t stop himself from smiling just a bit. He turns, looking Kate right in the eye with a cocked eyebrow.

“I have my Captain America,” he replies. “And you have yours.”

Kate’s jaw works, but she says nothing. Checkmate, Bucky thinks.

“At least mine knows that I’m a predator,” Bucky continues. “Does America know what you really are?”

Kate opens her mouth to reply, but Bucky hears the unmistakable sound of a RedJet in the distance. He sighs, pushing himself off the wall, giving Kate one last glance.

“That was a good game, sweetie,” he calls over his shoulder. “Let’s play again soon.”

Bucky winks at her and watches as her shoulder muscle spasms with her effort not to let her emotions seep onto her face.

The jet sweeps in for a landing in the courtyard, rear door lowering immediately. Drew comes out first, herding the group of teenagers off the jet like a sheep dog. The big blonde one is back, so clearly he’s been saved from the Skrulls. His arm is tight around Kaplan’s shoulders as they stride off the jet looking exhausted. Nat darts off the jet like a cat, moving to the fence and inputting the code, releasing the captured teenagers within so they can reunite with their friends. Bucky tunes out their chattering, their regaling of adventures, but keeps an eye on the Bishop girl. As soon as her teammates are in sight, the façade of happy teenage girl is immediately in place. She smiles and she hugs and she asks what happened. She’s very good, Bucky thinks to himself.

Steve is the last one off the jet. He hides it well from everyone else, but Bucky can see that he’s exhausted and exasperated. His eyes fall on Bucky and an unconscious hand brushes along his collarbone, in the spot where Bucky knows he left a hickey last week. But Steve doesn’t say anything to Bucky, he walks past him and towards the group of teenagers.

“You’ll all be staying in my villa tonight,” Steve announces tersely. “Tomorrow, we’ll be… debriefing you one by one.”

“You can’t keep us here,” Kate immediately retorts. “Billy can help us leave any time we want.”

Steve forces himself not to roll his eyes, even though Bucky can see that he wants to.

“Billy is welcome to try. But this placed has been warded by a much more powerful sorcerer than him against much more powerful sorcerers than him,” Steve says tersely. He doesn’t wait for the kids to reply. “Nat will give you your room assignments.”

With that, he turns and strides into the villa. The Young Avengers shout and whine like the teenagers that they are, and Bucky ignores them all as he chases after Steve.

“We starting a boarding school?” Bucky calls once he’s caught up to Steve on the stairs.

“Unsealed,” Steve informs him. “That’s the only way we can stop the Skrulls.”
Steve gives Bucky a sideways glance.

“Buck,” Steve grunts. “I’m exhausted and I have too much shit to deal with right now. I’m not in the mood for…whatever it is you want.”

Steve speeds up, turning down a hallway towards their bedroom. Well, his bedroom. Bucky gets the feeling that he’ll be sleeping on the metaphorical couch tonight.

“Since you brought them here, you can be on babysitter duty,” Steve says over his shoulder before closing the door.

Bucky halts, staring at the smooth wood of the door with a sinking stomach. He doesn’t hear the lock click. Bucky almost reaches for the handle. But in the end, he decides against it. Not now, he tells himself firmly. Later tonight, once Steve has showered and eaten and maybe gotten some sleep. Besides, Bucky’s betrayal isn’t over. He’s back in the compound but Kate Bishop was right, the little bitch.

And in being right, she’s given Bucky exactly what he wanted.

Steve will never help Bucky do what needs to be done. It’s not in his nature. Bucky had thought that Parker’s determination meant that he was ready to take the next step, but Bucky had been wrong. No, everyone on this compound, whether they know it or not, is wrapped around Steve’s finger. Even Romaoff, whose loyalties have always been difficult to pin down, would never disobey a direct order from Steve.

Kate was right about Bucky because she’s like him. They wear the right clothes, they keep their masks firmly in place, they surround themselves with the kind of people that they pretend to be, but underneath all of that is a darkness, a wickedness that can never been washed away. Bucky’s been wicked from the moment he was born. He’s lived his entire life knee deep in blood. For a while he had convinced himself that he did the dirty work so that Steve Rogers wouldn’t have to. He finished Steve’s fights, he got the blood on his hands so that Steve could keep his clean. At least, that’s what Bucky told himself during the war.

Then he told himself that Hydra made him this way. And he told Steve that Hydra made him this way. And maybe, for a time, Steve believed it. Maybe Bucky believed it too. But then Bucky put himself back into cryo freeze because he knew deep down that was a lie. It’s always been a lie.

Bucky Barnes is a predator. He was born a predator and he will die a predator. He surrounds himself in shadows and slinks through the dark alone. But today, he found a pair of eyes in the dark, a fellow creature stalking its prey. And now he knows, Kate Bishop is a predator too.

***

Kate stares numbly at the twin sized bed in the guest room/cell she’s been assigned. A pile of street clothes is laid neatly on the crisply made bed—a plain white t shirt and some sweat pants, both in her size—and everything about Steve Rogers’ personal villa is warm and clean, but Kate can’t shake the feeling that she’s in a den of snakes. She knows, logically, that this is the safest place to be at the moment. With an alien invasion and the Sentinels’ slaughter, not to mention her father’s foreboding warning, Kate is sure that there’s plenty of people calling for her head. But she wouldn’t know, she hasn’t seen the news, and when she asked, she was told no.
Mostly, she’s trying to decide what to say to Steve Rogers tomorrow morning when he demands an explanation for everything that the Young Avengers have done. She knows that Rogers is going to tell them to disband, and that he’ll threaten to keep them locked up on this base if they refuse. *For your own safety,* he’ll almost certainly tell them. So Kate’s already working on another plan in her head, one not including the help of Steve Rogers. She knows that there are other people on this base who will help the Young Avengers if Steve Rogers decides to boot them. The question is how she convinces them to help out a group of teenagers.

Kate is pulled from her thoughts by the sound of her door being thrown open. She turns sharply and finds America standing in the doorway, looking uncharacteristically breathless. Kate’s stomach sinks, she doesn’t want to have another argument right now, especially not after what the Winter Soldier had said to her a few hours ago.

*At least mine knows that I’m a predator. Does America know what you really are?*

“America,” Kate sighs, but America doesn’t wait for Kate to finish. Instead, she throws the door shut behind her and crosses the space between them in two quick steps.

Kate is surprised when America grabs her hard around the waist and hauls Kate towards her. She’s even more surprised when America lands a bruising kiss on Kate’s lips. Kate is still for a long moment, shocked by America’s sudden change of heart. But eventually, she softens, kissing America back.

“What’s that for,” Kate breathes when America pulls back.

“I’m sorry,” America says in a rushed whisper. “I’m so sorry, for the things that I said, and for the way that I treated you when we got to the bunker. It was inexcusable.” America gives Kate a devastatingly earnest look. “Will you forgive me?”

“Yes,” Kate replies immediately.

America pulls her in for another kiss. Kate wants to ask why America changed her mind. She wants to ask a lot of questions. But America’s hands are suddenly hungry, roaming across Kate’s body with a kind of desperation that Kate didn’t think America was capable of. America turns sharply, still kissing Kate passionately. Kate’s back hits the wall so hard that she loses her breath, and America crowds her frantically.

Kate’s hands tangle in America’s hair, a sudden and sharp need burning through her core. She opens her mouth, pulling America to her and running her tongue along her lips. America pants against her and when Kate catches a glimpse of her eyes, her pupils are blown wide and she looks at Kate with the same frantic desire that Kate is feeling.

America’s hands move down Kate’s body, pawing at her skin tight purple suit. Kate reaches for the zipper under her armpit, struggling to force it down. America notices her movements, sweaty fingers grabbing for the zipper and tugging at it urgently until it finally comes free. With a fluid movement, she pulls Kate’s suit off her arms and down around her waist, one hand coming to cup Kate’s breast and the other dipping down and grabbing Kate’s leg to hike it around her hip.

Kate rolls her hips against America, encouraging her hungry hands as America begins to kiss down Kate’s neck. Kate’s head thunks back against the wall hard and her breath comes in raspy bursts as America’s lips trail along her collar bone. In a graceful movement, America dips, grabbing both of Kate’s thighs and lifting her from the ground. Kate makes an incredibly unsexy sound, the cross between a shriek and a grunt. She doesn’t like being lifted, but her protest dies in her throat when America’s lips lock around Kate’s nipple.
Kate knows what’s going to happen. And she wonders off-handedly how much experience America has with sex. Two hundred plus years on an island of only women, Kate is sure that America is probably a far more advanced lover than Kate. For some reason, Kate takes that as a dare.

Legs tightening around America, Kate grabs a fistful of the other girl’s hair and drags her back into another hungry kiss. There’s violence coiling in their bodies. Kate can feel it in her own gut, the consistency of oil, threatening to stain her very soul. The alchemy between them is dark and unknowable, some ancient black magic, and when Kate moves, America catches the dare in the way she shoves off the wall, landing cat-like on the carpeted floor.

America crashes against Kate again, grabbing her harshly and dragging her into a kiss before tearing away almost immediately. The way they move against each other is suddenly more like a fight than love making. They struggle for dominance while also not being able to keep their hands off each other. America is stronger, and Kate knows she can’t win in a wrestling match. But she surprises the other girl when she twists them where they stand, getting America’s feet crossed. America is unbalanced and Kate shoves her hard against the bed, immediately pouncing on top of her and crawling up her body.

Kate grabs America’s soot stained white tank top and shoves it over her head, bending to grab her nipple in her teeth. America spasms against Kate’s ministrations, reaching for her. Kate sits up again, grabbing America’s wrists and pinning them to the bed before sweeping back in for another kiss.

America gets her legs around Kate’s middle, using her strength to flip them on the bed so that she’s on top. With a surge of violence, America grabs Kate’s suit and rips the rest of it from her body, throwing it behind her as if it offends her. Kate grabs America around the shoulders, hauling her down for a kiss, but America dodges it, instead latching her lips on Kate’s neck. They struggle against each other, but America is stronger, and she holds Kate down, mouth trailing down Kate’s body once again.

The only thing Kate can feel as America moves lower and lower is want. She wants this, more than she can remember wanting anything. She thinks of all of the people she’s fucked before. Each of them—and there had been many—had meant nothing. Just a distraction from the constant pain that drives Kate forward. Kate had used them and she knows it. But Kate doesn’t want to use America. She doesn’t want this to be the first and last time they fuck. She doesn’t want America to just be another line on her cigarette case. So with shaking hands, she grabs America’s face from where she’s kissing along Kate’s hip bones.

America looks up at her with a worried look, and Kate knows that she’s probably afraid that she was being too rough. Kate could laugh at that notion, because there’s no such thing as too rough in Kate’s opinion. But Kate can’t say that, she needs to say...something else. Her mind, however, is drawing a blank for words.

“I’m sorry, too,” Kate gasps, surprising even herself with her words.

America’s face softens.

“I forgive you,” America whispers.

Kate’s face splits in a grin and her head falls back against the bed. America still isn’t moving though, so Kate rolls her hips insistently. America remains still though, and Kate looks up at her.

“Are you alright?” America asks sincerely.
“Yes,” Kate replies immediately. “Just…” Kate wraps her legs around America, sitting upright and grabbing America until they are chest to chest. Kate brings her lips against America’s. “…I like it rough.”

Kate feels America grin wildly before suddenly a hand snakes up and wraps around Kate’s throat, shoving her hard back against the bed. Kate half gasps, half moans at the movement, and America crowds over her, leaning down until her lips are against Kate’s ear.

“Like this?” America asks, tightening her fingers around Kate’s throat.

Kate’s reply is an absolutely filthy keening sound. America, spurred on, grabs Kate’s wrists with her other hand and pins them above her head. With both fists’ grip bruising, America leans forward slowly and kisses Kate chastely on the lips.

“Yes,” Kate gasps. “Just like that.”

With one hand still on Kate’s throat, America releases her wrists and reaches between Kate’s legs. Kate is soaking, throbbing wet and she makes a sinful, guttural sound when America’s finger slides into her. America adds a second finger almost immediately, leaning down and moaning against Kate’s mouth.

“You’re so wet,” America breathes.

Kate nods frantically, eyes flying open to find America watching her with a rapacious stare.

“Fuck me,” Kate gasps.

“Oh, you want me to fuck you?” America teases, cocking her head.

“Yes, please, please, please fuck me,” Kate pleads, barely in control of the words coming out of her mouth.

America pulls her fingers out and Kate shudders at the loss of contact. Her eyes are closed again when she feels America’s fingers against her lips. Kate can taste herself on America’s skin and she sucks the fingers into her mouth without thinking. America shoves her fingers hard against Kate’s tongue, forcing her mouth open before leaning in and kissing Kate filthily, licking along her own fingers still in Kate’s mouth. The move is so absolutely debauched, that Kate shudders.

America pulls back again, but tightens her grip on Kate’s throat to the point that Kate is gasping for air. Kate’s hands are moving of their own accord, grabbing at the flimsy metal bed frame with one hand and gripping America’s wrist in the other. When America shoves her fingers back into Kate’s pussy, she is not gentle, and Kate nearly sobs.

Kate was not wrong, America knows exactly what she’s doing.

There is no control left in Kate’s body. Her entire being is screaming in pleasure, and she’s certain that with whatever oxygen she can get in, she’s being incredibly vocal. America’s fingers know exactly where to go, exactly what to do. The stimulation is everywhere at once, and Kate is beginning to lose her mind, literally. She’s floating off the bed, she’s no longer in her own head, she’s somewhere else and she never wants to come back.

When Kate comes, her entire body spasms desperately, but America thrusts her hips against Kate hard and holds her down. America releases her hold on Kate’s neck, and the rush of oxygen sends Kate spiraling. She screams and shudders. She hears another sound besides her own breathless voice, and it takes Kate a moment to realize that America is chuckling.
That *fucker*.

Kate takes advantage of America’s distraction, still coming down from her orgasm, to flip America on the bed so that Kate is straddling her. America looks up at Kate surprised, and Kate gives her a wicked grin.

It takes a second to get America’s skin tight jean shorts off of her, but Kate doesn’t hesitate. She leans down immediately, slotting herself between America’s legs in a fluid movement.

America tastes the way rainfall smells. Her back arches beautifully at the contact of Kate’s tongue. She makes breathy, vulnerable sounds that Kate doesn’t think she will ever tire of. America is *gorgeous* like this, laid out and gyrating in pleasure against Kate’s mouth. Her curly mess of a hair falls around her sweat soaked face as a blush climbs up her neck and blossoms across her chest, turning her tawny skin the color of crystalized amber. There’s an exposure and softness to her like this that Kate knows that nobody else sees, and that fact alone drive Kate.

When America comes against and into Kate’s mouth, she gushes like a ripe berry, soaking Kate’s sheets in a way that Kate knows she’s going to love trying to avoid later on tonight. A high pitched and panting moan escapes America’s lips as her legs tighten around Kate’s shoulders. America’s orgasm comes in waves, each one making her jerk more violently. She finally arches so high that she leaves the bed before collapsing against the mattress in an exhausted way.

Kate smiles, extracting herself from between America’s legs and climbing up her body. America’s arms moves heavily, one of them coming around Kate’s shoulders and bringing her down against her chest. America plants a kiss against Kate’s sweaty forehead before letting out a tired sigh. Kate tucks her chin, listening to America’s slowing heart rate.

Happy. Kate is happy. And that feeling is a glowing ember, warming her from the inside out, burning away the black oil that had filled her insides before.

Neither of them say anything as they come down. Each is too breathless and tired. Kate suddenly feels like she might fall asleep there, naked against America’s chest. Normally, the thought would make Kate’s stomach turn. She usually *hates* intimacy. Every other time she’s had sex, she’s immediately grabbed her clothes and left, her lover staring after her with a confused and hurt look that made Kate feel powerful. But now…now Kate is strangely okay with staying here in America’s arms and falling asleep.

“Thank you,” America says suddenly, tearing Kate out of her thoughts.

Kate lifts her head and puts her chin against America’s breast bone. But the other girl is staring at the ceiling with a dumb smile on her face. Kate chuckles.

“You’re…welcome?” Kate replies uncertainly.

America shakes her head. There’s something that she wants to say, but Kate can see whatever it is receding.

“What?” Kate prods.

America’s brown eyes flit downward and meet Kate’s gaze.

“In Arcadia…” America begins, “…sex is a kind of…magic.”

Kate giggles, girlish and light.
“Well, that was certainly magical,” Kate laughs. “And fun.”

America jostles her, an annoyed look twisting her features.

“I’m serious,” America insists. She shakes her head again, looking back up at the ceiling. “Never mind,” she mumbles.

Kate huffs.

“Oh, come on. I’m sorry I laughed.”

“No,” America says stubbornly. “I don’t want to talk about it now.”

Kate rolls her eyes and leans her head back against America’s chest.

“Well,” Kate says after a moment of thought. “If that was magic, then you just cast one hell of a spell.”

America laughs at that, and it’s light hearted and easy. Kate smiles to herself.

“You’re happy,” America says intently. “I can…feel it.”

Kate lifts her head again, waiting until America looks down at her again.

“Yeah,” Kate whispers. “Yeah, I’m happy.”

“Good,” America replies with a nod.

With that, they both settle against each other. Kate knows that they are going to have to get up soon. She knows that they’re going to have to have a team meeting. But for this moment, a perfect, suspended moment, Kate just allows herself be happy.
Eli is in way over his head. Like, so insanely in over his head that he can barely function. He runs through the past twelve hours over and over again, trying to suss out how exactly he ended up where he is. Because this shit is absolutely insane.

He had started out the day like he had every day for the past week, heading out to join the protest against the Hard Line Policies. Then he fought some killer robots only to be saved last minute by the Young Avengers. The media calls the Young Avengers terrorists. But to the protesters, to the circles that Eli runs in, the Young Avengers are folk heroes. Somehow, Eli had ended up at their base, because the new Hawkeye had vouched for him with the new Captain America, only to witness the new Hulk being abducted by aliens.

In that moment, Eli had truly thought that watching an alien kidnap a teenager would be the craziest thing he saw today. But, damn, was he wrong.

Because moments later, Spiderman and the Winter Soldier had appeared and the new Thor had used his magic powers to transport them all to freaking Wakanda. Eli was on the Rebels Without Flags base for about six minutes before some lady in a red body suit had shown up with a backup security force to stop the other half of Eli’s new acquaintances from using stolen alien tech to beam them up to the alien space ship. They had been forced to give over their weapons and equipment and locked inside the actual Captain America’s house. Two hours later, Captain America shows up with the rest of the Young Avengers and tells them all that they’re gonna have a sleep over in his villa.

Oh, and then he hears someone having overtly loud sex a few rooms down from the one he was assigned.

At the moment, Eli is sitting awkwardly on the floor of a large, open design living room, surrounded by the Young Avengers in pajamas, grilling him on his loyalties and trying to get their stories straight before Steve Rogers drags them over the coals tomorrow morning.

Eli’s grandma is going to be so pissed at him.

“How’d you get your powers?” the young Captain America whose real name is actually America asks.

“I inherited them,” Eli replies carefully. America is watching him like a trapped rat, waiting for him to squirm.

“How?” America follows up immediately.

“Give the guy a break,” Kate Bishop, the new Hawkeye, chides from the other side of the couch.

Eli doesn’t mind the question. In fact, he’s happy to answer it. Sitting up a little straighter, he looks America in the eye.

“My grandfather was the black Captain America,” Eli says, jutting his jaw unconsciously.

Questioning eyes fall on Eli from every corner.

“You probably don’t know about him. Isiah Bradley,” Eli continues proudly. He will tell his grandfather’s story for anybody who listens. “After Steve Rogers went into the ice in the forties, the US government used his blood to try to recreate the serum. They tested their creations on a unit of
black soldiers who had fought in World War II, without their permission. Of the 300 ‘participants,’ my grandad was one of only six survivors. The government covered it all up. But my grandad used his powers to destroy all the remaining serum that he could find, all across the globe, so nobody could be turned into a test monkey again. And for his troubles, the government locked him up in Leavenworth and erased all evidence that he ever existed. It took forty years for them to release him. They made him take a new name and new identity. By the time he was seventy, the half-assed serum had deteriorated his mind. But he’s still kicking, and he told me all of his stories. The costume that I wear is the same one he wore back then.”

“How old is he now?” Wiccan asks.

“One hundred and seventeen.”

Eli feels a sense of pride at the awe-stricken faces all around him. Only America watches him with speculative eyes.

“Why haven’t I heard about this?” America asks, but the usual bite to her tone is gone.

“The government covered it all up, like I said. But lots of countries experimented with serum replications in the mid to late 1900s. Tons of people died.”

America is making a face that Eli can’t decipher, but it looks a lot like shame. Her gaze on Eli has become something less suspicious and more inquisitive.

“And you inherited the serum’s powers from your grandfather?” America presses. “So your mother or father had powers as well?”

“My…father, yeah. Though I didn’t really know him. I was raised by my grandparents,” Eli replies.

“Would you say your super strength is even with your grandfathers, or has it become diluted?”

Eli furrows his brow. He doesn’t know why America is so interested, but it’s off putting.

“Why do you want to know?” Eli asks.

America takes a breath, opening her mouth as if she intends to reply to Eli, but Kate Bishop beats her to it.

“America is Arcadian,” Kate explains, leaning forward and cutting America off. “Every super soldier serum is derived from Arcadian blood. I…think,” Kate gives America a speculative glance, “that she’s just…concerned with the effects of the serum.”

America’s jaw works, eyes darting between Kate and Eli.

“I didn’t know that anybody who had been given the serum had…reproduced,”America says tersely.

“Oh,” Eli replies, mostly to himself.

He looks hard at America, as if seeing her for the first time. He didn’t know that there were any Arcadians left, and he definitely didn’t know that Arcadians were the source of the super soldier serum. Eli knows very little about Arcadians. Nobody knows much about them, and Eli wants to know more.

“So how old are you?” Eli asks.
America leans back, crossing her arms tightly, not liking the line of questioning being turned on her. “She’s... old,” Kate answers for America. They share a glace that Eli can’t dissect.

“So, Eli!” Teddy injects brightly. He’s sitting on the floor as well, leaned against Billy’s legs. He gives Eli a friendly, easy smile, not the kind of expression Eli would expect from someone who was abducted by aliens earlier today. “Do you want to join the Young Avengers?”

Eli’s chest seizes. He looks around the rag-tag group surrounding him. They really are a grab bag group of misfits. Tommy and Billy, twins identical in appearance but almost polar opposites in personality. America Chavez, codename Miss America, constantly stony and unreadable, and apparently part of an ancient race of warriors. Vision, looking just like the old videos of him, yet somehow different, floating above the ground like a phantom and watching the humans chatter the way one watches puppies play. Teddy, a shape shifting, alien abducted, and aptly named Teddy Bear of a human being whose presence is easy and warming. Cassie Lang, Ant-Man’s daughter, all blonde pigtails and bouncing energy who just seems to be happy to be along for the ride. Riri Williams, an apparent genius and the new Iron Man, who sits with her knees drawn close to her chest and watches the group silently from beside Billy. And Kate Bishop, so drop dead gorgeous that Eli has a hard time talking to her, and thrumming with pent up energy at all times.

Eli doesn’t think that there’s a group of people that he would like more to join.

“Of course,” Eli gasps, breathless for no reason, smile splitting his face. “I would love to be a Young Avenger.”

A million things enter Eli’s mind. What are his friends going to say when he tells them that he’s been asked to join the very group that they’ve been obsessively following for the last few weeks? What is his grandma going to say? What is his grandad going to think about Eli continuing his legacy? What about school? What exactly did Eli just agree to? But he doesn’t ask any of those things right now, he’s sure that he’ll have time later. Right now, Eli just basks in the excitement.

Teddy leans forward, clapping Eli on the shoulder with a smile.

“Welcome aboard, Patriot.”

The rest of the team is still asleep, exhausted after the days affairs, but not Kate. Kate had fallen asleep beside America after the team meeting, around midnight local time. But Kate didn’t sleep long, she never sleeps for very long. It’s three in the morning when her eyes fly open, suddenly and completely awake, knowing that she won’t be able to get back to sleep. So instead, she’s decided to take full advantage of the work out areas of the expansive villa. She wails on a plastic dummy, pushing herself until her muscles burn and ache, until the howling in her head that awoke her quiets to a hushed rustling against the back of her skull.

Kate doesn’t see Bucky Barnes enter the room. One moment she’s alone and the next, she glances in the mirror on the wall and nearly jumps out of her skin because Barnes is standing just a few feet behind her. She hadn’t even heard him approach. Whirling about, she eyes Barnes suspiciously. He looks odd, dressed in nothing but a pair of sweat pants, barefoot and shirtless. Kate’s breath catches in her throat at the way his muscular chest bristles tensely, her eyes tracing the spot where his
scarred skin meets the smooth metal of his left arm.

“I told you this wasn’t a prison,” Barnes says as a way of greeting.

Kate is still stunned and unmoving when Barnes walks briskly past her. He grabs the dummy around the shoulders and hauls it to the wall. Kate watches him with suspicious eyes.

“I was using that,” Kate protests when Barnes turns back to her.

“I thought you’d like to go another round, little girl,” Barnes replies lightly, putting his hands behind his back.

“I’m not a therapist,” Kate retorts, forcing herself to shrug casually and turn her back on the beast of a man as she moves towards the rack of weights. “Sorry.”

“I don’t mean that kind of fight,” Barnes chuckles.

Kate can feel his eyes in the middle of her shoulders, and it’s like being watched by a panther in the jungle. He’s sizing her up. Kate meets his gaze through the mirror, watching his face for a sign of what he’s thinking, but his expression is one of trained indifference.

“You want me to spar with you?” Kate scoffs.

The thought should terrify her. This is the Winter Soldier, after all, the most deadly human being in modern history. But the thought of fighting him doesn’t terrify Kate, it exhilarates her.

Barnes shrugs easily.

“Only if you think you can handle it,” Barnes says. “I’m not in the business of hurting little girls.”

Kate grinds her teeth. She knows that Barnes is calling her that because he knows she hates it. She isn’t going to let him goad her. If this is a test, then she isn’t going to fail.

“Anymore,” Kate corrects, raising an eyebrow, still watching Barnes expression in the mirror. “You’re not in the business of hurting little girls anymore.”

Kate watches Barnes’ shoulders tighten. She knows that the comment has gotten to him, though he is struggling not to show it. But there’s a sudden glimmer in Barnes eye that lets Kate know that the game is on. She turns to face him, body tightening.

“What kind of rules?” Kate asks, slowly rounding on Barnes.

Barnes shrugs. And then he moves. It’s lightning fast, and Kate didn’t think a man so massive could move so quickly. But in half a breath, Barnes has crossed the ten feet between them and lands a hand in the middle of Kate’s unready chest. The force is like a train colliding with her, and as Kate stumbles back a few steps, she knows that she’s going to have a bruise there.

“No rules,” Barnes growls. He doesn’t wait for Kate to regain her footing, he presses his advantage, whirling a kick that Kate only barely dodges. Throwing herself out of the way sends Kate to her knees, and she rolls with the momentum, kicking a leg out and propelling herself forward to throw a punch at Barnes that he isn’t expecting. He smiles as he dodges the punch. “Life doesn’t have rules, little girl.”

Barnes doesn’t fight the way Clint Barton had. Barton had held back, he had been testing Kate, he had let her get the upper hand several times. Barnes, on the other hand, doesn’t give Kate an inch.
His sheer mass and strength make him difficult to parry. He uses his size to his advantage, and when he hits, he hits hard. Kate barely blocks his fists from breaking her jaw, and she spends all of her energy dodging and dipping, never getting the chance to go on the attack. Barnes pushes her back and back until he catches her off guard, grabbing her hard by the throat and throwing her bodily to the ground.

Kate’s breath is knocked out of her and pain lances through her body. Barnes takes a few steps back, prowling around her like an angry jungle cat. Kate struggles to catch her breath, to even move at all.

“Get up!” Barnes barks.

Kate forces herself to roll onto her front and shove herself to her feet. If Barnes is going to beat the shit out of her, she’s not going to let him see her in pain. She drops into a defensive position. Barnes moves in a way that’s hard to track, bobbing and weaving until he can overwhelm Kate with his strength and throw her again to the floor.

But Kate doesn’t cry out, instead she lets the pain fuel her. She growls angrily, shoving herself to her feet again and this time, not letting Barnes attack first. She hurls herself at him, but he uses his metal arm to block her and throw her hard against the rack of weights.

“Is this the best you’ve got?” Barnes scoffs.

Kate is panting, exhausted. She doesn’t have super strength and endurance. She’s just human. But she isn’t going to let that stop her. She thinks of Colleen, of the dojo, of the lessons Kate had been taught about fighting an opponent bigger and stronger than her.

“You’re smaller and quicker,” Colleen had said. “Attack like a hawk. In and out. You’re a smaller target, and you’ve got talons.”

Kate grits her teeth, putting distance between herself and Barnes.

“Running away, little girl?” Barnes chides. Kate knows he’s trying to get under her skin. Kate wants to think of a comeback, but there is nothing but fiery fury in her mind. She can only snarl and rush forward. She catches Barnes off guard with a roundhouse at his head. When he barely dodges that, Kate lands and throws her other leg, hitting Barnes hard in the chest and sending him back a few steps. Kate retreats again, rounding on Barnes before he can recover and track her. With a running start, Kate kicks off the nearby rack of weight and gets her legs around Barnes neck. With the momentum, she throws him backwards and hard onto the mat. He hits with the force of a meteor, and Kate doesn’t wait, grabbing his flesh hand in her arm and wrenching it backwards.

Barnes throws punches over his shoulder with his metal arm, hitting Kate hard on the thigh, but she doesn’t flinch. She wrenches on the arm lock as Barnes attempts to get his feet under him. Kate tightens her lower hold around Barnes’ neck until Barnes begins to sputter, but he doesn’t tap out, instead he attempts to throw Kate off of him.

“Tap out!” Kate demands, pulling Barnes arm back to far that she’s sure she’s going to pop it from its socket.

Barnes only snarls and rolls. Lifting his trapped arm with his superior strength, he slams Kate against the ground again and again. There is pain, Kate is certain that Barnes has broken at least a few of her ribs, but she doesn’t let up, tucking her head to protect it and tighten her legs until finally, finally Barnes metal hand taps her thigh twice.
Kate releases Barnes and rolls to her feet, making sure Barnes doesn’t see her flinch at the pain in her side. She expects Barnes to say something, but he doesn’t. He gets to his feet and then attacks again.

Kate dances out of his reach, getting behind him and shoving him towards the rack, landing a wicked punch on his left cheek when he turns to catch himself. He’s blinded, dazed, but still fucking swinging. Kate darts out of his reach. She expects him to give chase, but he doesn’t. Instead, something small and silver flies past Kate’s face, grazing her cheek, drawing blood. It’s a knife and Kate has absolutely no idea where Barnes has pulled it from, but he’s got another in his hand.

Kate back bends out of the trajectory of the second knife, and Barnes charges, shoving her to the ground. But Kate is ready this time, twisting her hips to grab Barnes in her lower guard again.

“Knives?” Kate pants. “Not fair.”

“Like isn’t fair, sweetie,” Barnes growls, spinning and throwing Kate against the wall.

Kate catches glimpse of one of the knives, driven into the wall beside her head. Kate doesn’t pause to catch her breath, instead she moves like she is dodging Barnes’ punch, and grabs the knife in right hand. She doesn’t think that Barnes has seen it, and she rushes away from him.

She continues backing away, drawing Barnes towards her. Barnes eyes light up because he thinks he has her cornered.

“Poor choice,” Barnes chides as he charges for her.

Kate back kicks off the wall behind her, getting one leg up over Barnes’ shoulder. Barnes falls for it, reaching around himself to grab Kate around the middle. She grabs Barnes beneath the arms with her legs and leans in close. The knife is in her hand and she presses the cold steel to Barnes’ throat until she draws blood.

A shocked look crosses Barnes’ face as he glances down at Kate’s hand. His grey eyes meet Kate’s with a look of genuine impressment.

“Very good,” Barnes purrs, releasing Kate. She lands on the floor as smoothly as she can without wincing in pain.

“You’re not half bad, Bishop,” Barnes says, walking calmly away from her, wiping the blood from his neck. “A quick learner, that’s good.”

Kate isn’t sure what to do or say. All of a sudden, the cumulative pain of the sparring session is hitting her. Her very bones ache, there’s blood running down her face, and she’s sure that she’s gonna need Billy to do a healing spell on her. It hits her that she just went a few rounds with the fucking Winter Soldier. She might have even bested him twice.

“Did you know I had the knife?” Kate pants. “Did you let me win?”

Barnes gives Kate a mischievous look, but he doesn’t reply. Instead, he winks and then turns and leaves the room.

“Wait!” Kate calls after him.

But he’s already gone.
America sits before Steve as still as a statue. Her steely glare could be etched from stone. She doesn’t move, doesn’t even blink, she just follows Steve with her eyes as he paces before her, trying to decide what to say to the girl.

He’s spent a majority of his morning interviewing each of the “Young Avengers.” Most of them had been just as stubborn as Steve had expected. Some had asked about their families, others about what was happening with the Sentinels. But they had all promised Steve that they weren’t going to give up their quest, whatever that quest was. “Stop North” or “End the Hard Line Policies” were the most popular answers. Their blind optimism and puffed up righteousness reminds Steve of himself when he was young, so sure that if he just got behind a cause, he didn’t need any real plan of action, his hard headedness alone would achieve him his goal.

Steve’s conversation with Kate Bishop had been the most revealing, even if she said the very least. She had come limping in, a fresh wound on her face that she refused to tell Steve where she got. From what Steve could tell, it was Kate and America calling the shots as far as the team went. But Kate had been intriguing. Not so much for what she said, but how she said it. Steve’s known plenty of assassins in his long life, and Kate Bishop carries herself like an assassin. Deadly, confident, firm, and cold.

“How many people have you killed?”

It was a question Steve had asked all of the teens. Some of them got teary eyed or nervous when he asked it. A few of them had exact numbers. Three was the most, from Tommy Shepherd, the speedster. Others went into detail, as if asking Steve for his forgiveness. But most said none, and Steve had believed it.

Kate though, she just looked at Steve like he was telling a joke, pursed her lips and stared Steve dead in the eye.

“I haven’t killed anybody.”

Kate’s a good liar. Practiced. She’s the kind of liar who lies to herself first. She repeats the lie in her head until even she believes it, and when somebody asks her a question, the lie comes easier than the truth. Steve wouldn’t know the signs if he hadn’t spent a majority of his life in love with such a liar. Kate lies the way Bucky lies.

“Look, America,” Steve begins, “I’ve spent all morning talking to your friends. They’ve told me what you guys want to do.”

Steve has to get this just right. He has to convince America not to go after North. If he can convince America, she’ll convince Kate, and they’ll convince the rest. He has to make America understand.

“I used to be like you once,” Steve continues. America keeps her face mostly expressionless. “I thought that if I was just brave and strong enough, everything would be alright, that I would be able to hold back all the evil in the world. I truly believed that. And when one of my best friends, a man I trusted with everything that I had, told me that it wasn’t that easy, when he begged me to accept limitations, I told him no.”

America blinks at Steve slowly, but doesn’t show any recognition of the story.

“He told me that if I persisted, something worse would come. He warned me that I couldn’t keep
going the way I had been for my entire life. And I just covered my ears. I thought I was right. I thought I knew better. But I didn’t. He was right, something worse did come. And now…” Steve pauses looking quickly out the window and away from America’s discerning glare. “Now so many have been lost and killed. There’s blood on my hands that will never be washed cleaned. I was forced to accept my limitations.”

America is still entirely silent. Steve huffs, sitting quickly in the chair across from her.

“Tony Stark warned me, America. He warned me that if I didn’t fall into line, the retributions would be devastating. And I didn’t listen to him then.” Steve pauses again, steeling himself. “I could have prevented North, I could have prevented the public’s turn if I had only listened to Tony back then, America. Everything that has happened since has been my fault. I-I’m only trying to help you kids. I know that you probably want revenge for what happened to Arcadia. And I get that. I know how you feel, I was young once too but—“

“I’m not young,” America snaps suddenly.

The break in her silence takes Steve aback.

“What?” he asks.

America scoffs, abruptly getting to her feet. She leans forward across the table, resting her weight on her white-knuckled fists.

“I am not young, Steve Rogers,” she growls, eyes alight with something Steve can’t discern. “I know that you think that you’ve lived a long life. One hundred and fifteen years, right?” Steve nods numbly. “Well I’m twice that age. Two hundred and thirty four. I was born in 1799, when the country that you once defended was still a young nation, barely surviving. You think that I’m some guileless child? That my motives are as simple as revenge? You probably also think that I lived my life on some tropical paradise, spending my days eating fruit and swimming in the waves. But that was not my upbringing. I was raised a warrior, I spent the first one hundred years of my life training for ten hours every day, with every weapon that mankind created, learning every country, every leader, every law of this god forsaken planet. You think you know war because you fought in Man’s second world war?” America scoffs. “How long did you fight against the Nazis? A year? Almost two? I fought the Nazis while you were still just a scrawny teenager kicking around Brooklyn. I fought the Nazis after they kidnapped one of our own and stole our magic to create that damned serum. The blood that runs through your veins is the blood of my people. My peoples’ magic is what created you.”

“America, I know—“ Steve begins.

“I’m not done!” America hisses. She rolls her shoulders back, standing up straight and staring down Steve. “While you took a nap in the ice, I was on the battleground. I fought in every war that Man started. I have seen bloodshed, I have seen evil, I have seen the darkness that drives your kind. But do you know what makes this battle, the battle against North so important, so much different from every other battle that I have seen in my very long life?”

Steve can only shake his head, fully aware that America has flipped the tables on him.

“In every other conflict, every other time evil men have done evil things, there were others. There were other Men who stood against that evil, and the Arcadians stood with those Men. We fought and we died with them, because it was the right thing to do. Once, you were that man, Steve Rogers. Once, you were the one who stood and told the evil forces that threaten this planet no. But you gave up. It got too hard for you. Because you lost some people.” America shakes her head,
disgusted. “You willingly took my people’s magic, but you’ve stopped honoring that magic, honoring the code that makes it thrive. You lost some friends, I lost everyone. But I have accepted that. Warriors die. And that is their choice, that is the risk that they take on. And that is the risk that every single Arcadian warrior accepts, because we have been given a great power. My people died fighting, they died with honor. Your people died fighting, yet you grieve them as if they died without honor, as if they died without the knowledge and the choice that they made to stand up to evil. You have stolen that honor from your fallen friends.”

America looks around the room, as if noticing it for the first time, lip twisted in a sneer.

“And now…now you surround yourself with comforts and with safety. Safety for yourself. Safety against the pain of losing anymore.” America makes a noise in her throat like she’s choking. Her harsh gaze comes back down on Steve. “You have traded your own fucking comfort for the lives of millions who rely on you and Men like you to stand up to evil because they cannot. You have shut yourself in this palace to protect yourself; nobody else. You misuse the stolen magic, the power that you were given. You dishonor all of those people that you grieve with your cowardice. If I could rip my magic from you cell by cell, I would.”

Steve is frozen where he sits. America watches him, waits for his reply, but Steve can’t form any words in his mind. America scoffs, looking down her nose at Steve.

“If you will not protect this world, I will,” America states, voice low. “That is an honor that I take on with pride and enthusiasm. That is a mantle the Young Avengers will lift up without hesitation. You have lost your way, Steve Rogers, and you have misled your sheep down a path of lethargy and timidity. But you are welcome to continue down that path. If your own comfort matters that much to you, so fucking be it. But that is not the path that I walk.”

America doesn’t even wait for Steve to reply. She turns on her heel and strides out of the room without another word. The door slams, shaking in its frame with the force that America throws it, leaving Steve alone with nothing but his own shame.
The Black Widow is quiet as she leads Teddy and Billy through the compound. Teddy holds his breath the entire time, Billy a calming presence at his side. The barracks are across the compound, and as they ride the fast moving train, they catch quick glances of the massive size of the RWF base. Beyond Rogers’ villa is a series of smaller villas, then expansive training fields, some squat hangers and a large landing pad, followed by what looks like a small village packed with people, then finally a succession plain dark barracks buildings. The railcar comes to a smooth stop, and Billy’s fingers tighten on Teddy’s own sweating hand.

“This way,” Romanoff directs as the door slides open.

Romanoff walks quickly across the neatly trimmed grass that surround the barracks, towards the second of five buildings. Teddy struggles to keep up on numb knees, and their trio darts inside the building, the almost aggressive air conditioning a jolting contrast to the humid jungle-scape outside. Inside, the barracks seem occupied, but not full. Romanoff comments off-handedly about how the barracks used to house all the fighters, until their ranks grew too large and a new complex was built across the base, near the hangers. Now, the barracks house people “in transition”; refugee families applying to live in the village on base, mercenaries hired for short term missions, new fighters wanting to join the RWF ranks, the rare reporter allowed on the base, and anybody else visiting the base for a short period of time. As they walk briskly through the narrow halls, doors crack open and nervous eyes stare out, most of them concentrated on Romanoff.

They make it to the second floor, end of the hall, and Romanoff stops abruptly. She knocks twice on the door but doesn’t wait for a reply, turning the handle and pushing the door open as Teddy holds his breath.

There’s a small living area beyond the front door—kitchenette, a plastic couch and matching chair, a TV mounted on the wall, and stacked washer and dryer crowd the tiny space. From the armchair, Teddy’s mother jumps to her feet, a surprised and nervous look on her face. Teddy’s stomach sinks immediately, because he can tell that his mother has been crying.

“Theodor!” his mother gasps, rushing forward.

She closes the space between them in two steps, grabbing Teddy in a crushing hug that he returns eagerly. Teddy tucks his chin and breaths in his mother’s comforting scent, not caring that he’s begun to cry.

“I’ll wait downstairs,” Romanoff says, not waiting for a response before she retreats.

Teddy finally releases his mother, and she fusses over him, checking his face and body, straightening his sweatshirt, commenting on how skinny he is.

“Mom,” Teddy says quietly after a moment. “Is it true?”

The look his mother gives him is devastating. She looks sad and scared and guilty all at the same time, and Teddy knows that what the Super Skrull told him is the truth.

“I’m sorry, baby,” Teddy’s mother whispers. “I’m so sorry I never told you. I-…I’m not your real mother.”
There’s tears in her eyes that Teddy can’t stand to watch fall, so he grabs her firmly and waits for her to look up at him.

“You are my mother,” Teddy says earnestly. “You are.”

Teddy’s mother smiles and grabs him again for another bruising hug. When she pulls away this time, she begins to shift. Slowly, the visage of his mother that Teddy has known his entire life changes. A moment later, a Skrull woman stands before him, taller than he is, with green skin and a severe jaw. But her eyes are the same, the pale green eyes of his mother. Teddy forces himself to stare at her and without even realizing it, he begins to shift as well. It’s instinctive, and suddenly he feels different. Like every other skin he has worn in his life has been a lie. The shape he takes is almost like his mother’s, but slightly different. No square jaw, no leathery skin, a slightly bluer shade of green. And Teddy knows, deep down he knows, that this is his true form. Like a weight has been lifted from his shoulders, it takes Teddy no effort to hold this countenance, an effort that he hadn’t realized he had been exerting his entire life. His mother reaches up and strokes his hair, eyes still welling with tears.

“My boy,” she sniffs. “My beautiful boy.”

There’s the sound of tennis shoes brushing against the tiled floor, and Teddy remembers suddenly that Billy is there. With a bashful smile, Teddy steps back.

“Mom, this is Billy,” Teddy introduces, looking back at Billy, who stands awkwardly in the doorway. “He’s…my boyfriend.”

Teddy’s mother studies Billy for a long moment before gasping, and holding a hand against her chest. Slowly, she smiles, and extends her hand forward.


For a moment, Teddy is afraid that Billy is going to flinch away from the massive, clawed green hand in front of him. But he doesn’t. Of course he doesn’t. Because Billy is good and kind and nothing like the judgmental and severe boyfriends of Teddy’s past. Billy grins his crooked, amicable grin, his eyes alight with an easy friendliness as he takes Teddy’s mother’s hand in his.

“You’re…human,” Teddy’s mother observes, staring into Billy’s eyes pensively. “But, something else as well.”

Billy blushes shyly, rubbing his neck.

“It’s a long story, Mom,” Teddy replies for Billy.

Teddy’s mother purses her lips and looks Teddy over.

“A long story that I would like to hear,” she says seriously.

Teddy sighs. He knows he owes his mother an explanation after disappearing that way that he did. He’s not sure how she is going to take the news that Teddy has chosen to be a super hero, but she deserves to know. So, with a strained shrug, Teddy nods at his mother.

“Okay,” Teddy says, “I’ll tell you everything.”

***
Kate is alone in her assigned room, hair damp and dripping quickly cooling water down her back. She hadn’t been able to find Kaplan, apparently he had gone with Teddy to talk to Ellen Altman on the other end of the base, so Kate’s torso is still littered with nasty purple bruises and her cheek is tightening as the cut there scabs over. Rogers had grilled her for over an hour, which was about an hour shorter than he had spent on any of Kate’s teammates. She wonders what the others had told him, what they revealed that would help Rogers stop the Young Avengers. As for Kate, Steve Rogers may think that he brings the heat, but he’s hardly more than an angry kitten to Kate. Kate’s been lying to interrogators since she was nine years old, hauled in any time the cops couldn’t locate her mother. And the NYPD employs men far worse than Steve Rogers. Men not afraid to threaten a little girl, men not afraid to hurt a little girl. Compared to them, an interrogation by Steve Rogers was like a cafeteria conversation with her school mates—clipped, easy, and nothing but carefully constructed lies and misdirections.

Kate should be looking around the villa. She should be gathering up her team and asking them what they gave up. She should be enlisting Riri and Vision’s help in hacking the RWF computers. She should be finding a way off the base. But Kate is tired. Truly and bone achingly tired. Every move, every breath hurts and Kate’s got a killer headache. So, still wrapped in a towel after her shower, she searches for her hastily packed tactical bag.

When she finds it in the closet, she isn’t surprised to discover that it’s been rifled through. Her weapons are all still there, but all of the magazines and ammo have been taken. Rolling her eyes and deciding to give someone hell later, Kate digs to the bottom to find her worn leather clutch. From within, she pulls out her pack of cigarettes and lighter before striding to the sliding door at the far end of her room that leads to a very small balcony outside.

Kate slides down the wall, pulling her knees to her chest as she puts a cigarette between her lips and lights it. She forces herself not to wince in pain as she breathes in deeply, relishing the immediate tightening of her blood vessels. A comforting light headedness falls over Kate, relieving her headache, however slightly. She drops her pack and lighter onto the ground beside her and breathes out.

Her balcony is on the very edge of the base. It faces the high, electric fence that surrounds the base. Past that is a valley bathed in an unrelenting afternoon sun. Thick jungle, tangled trees and vines, noisy with animals and insects, stretching for as far as Kate can see. The base is certainly remote. Kate takes another drag on her cigarette, watching two guards in plain uniforms as they patrol the fence. They glance up at her as they pass, and one of them speaks into a radio, but Kate is too far away to hear what he says.

Kate smokes the rest of her cigarette as her hair quickly dries in the jungle heat. Her mind is pleasantly empty and her limbs are loose. She picks up her pack and pulls out another cigarette. But before she can light it, the door next to her slides open.

It’s the fucking Winter Soldier. Kate rolls her eyes and lights her cigarette.

“You shouldn’t smoke those,” Barnes says, looking down at Kate.

Kate sighs out smoke, refusing to look up at the man.

“Fuck off, dude,” Kate grumbles.

The Winter Soldier is quiet. Kate doesn’t look at him, just stares out across the jungle and takes another drag. Finally, Barnes moves. At first, Kate thinks he might be fucking attacking her again.
The movement is odd, strangely inhuman, yet still graceful. She jumps, ready to defend herself, but Barnes has just sat down on the ground across from Kate, legs crossed. It’s an odd sight and Kate furrows her brow at him.

“Can I have one?” Barnes asks, motioning at the pack beside Kate.

“What is this?” Kate scoffs. “‘Cool counselor’ heart to heart time? Not interested.”

“I just want a fucking cigarette,” Barnes replies coolly.

Kate huffs, but slides the pack towards Barnes, tossing the lighter after it. Barnes snatches the pack up greedily, pulling out a cigarette and taking a long first drawl that almost cinders half of the thing in one go.

“God, that’s good,” Barnes sighs, billowing smoke like some otherworldly beast. “Rogers hates it when I smoke.”

“I know what this is,” Kate retorts. “Rogers couldn’t get me to talk, so now you’re here to be all buddy buddy. Your good cop stupid cop routine won’t work on me.”

“Rogers couldn’t get you to talk?” Barnes asks, amused. “That figures.”

“He’s way too nice about it,” Kate replies. “It was like being interrogated by a second grade teacher.”

Barnes makes a strange, yelping sound. It takes Kate a second to realize that it’s laughter.

“Yeah,” Barnes muses. “He’s a good guy. Way too good for me.”

“Please,” Kate scoffs. “Good guys are a dime a dozen. And they’d get nowhere in life without people like you and me.”

Barnes looks over at Kate for a long time, taking a drag on his cigarette. Kate expects the gaze to feel violating, intense. But it doesn’t. Barnes is actually smiling, and Kate realizes with a jolt that the grooves on his face that Kate thought were scowl lines are actually laughter lines.

“You’re a smart kid, Kate,” Barnes says, turning to look out across the jungle.

“What happened to ‘little girl?’” Kate asks.

Barnes shrugs.

“Nah,” he smiles. “You’re not a little girl. Far from it.”

“Don’t stop being an asshole now,” Kate replies, giving Barnes a sidelong glance. “I was just starting to like you.”

Barnes chuckles to himself, flicking his cigarette butt off the balcony and climbing to his feet.

“Thanks for the bum,” Barnes says, stretching. “We’ll talk again soon.”

He turns and, with another unbearable wink, strides back through the still open door. Kate rolls her eyes, not bothering to call after him and ask what the hell all of that was about. She’s starting to realize that Barnes isn’t as much of a lackey as she thought. He’s got his own agenda that Kate knows he isn’t revealing to Rogers. She knows because she can relate, she can see the signs. What that agenda is, though, Kate has no fucking idea. Yet.
Kate snuffs out her own butt against the concrete floor of the balcony, considering a third cigarette. There’s a shuffling from inside her room and when she turns, she finds America in the middle of the room, looking around wildly. Kate furrows her brow when America’s wild eyes fall on her through the glass. America strides through the room, bursting out onto the balcony.

“What—” is all Kate can get out before America is on her.

America falls to her knees, immediately crawling over Kate and grabbing Kate’s lips with her own. When America pulls away, Kate notices how flushed and out of breath America is.

“What’s-uh…what’s up?” Kate asks dumbly.

“Shut up,” America growls, grabbing Kate hard and hauling her in for another kiss.

Kate groans in pain at America’s rough hands as America crowds her against the fence of the balcony. In a swift movement, Kate grabs hold of Kate’s hips and pulls them out from under her. Kate hits the ground with another hiss of pain. America grabs the terrycloth towel wrapped around Kate and pulls it apart.

“Wait!” Kate cries, trying to stop America.

America gasps when she gets a look at Kate’s bruised torso.

“Who did this?” America demands immediately, quickly shifting up onto her knees.

“It’s nothing. Just a sparring session,” Kate tries to explain. “Just ignore it, I was happy with where you were going.”

“Sparring with who?!” America cries, fingers feather light as they examine Kate’s broken ribs.

“Uhm…” Kate says. She wants to lie. Every molecule in her body is telling her to lie, to make up a story and stop America from worrying. But Kate swallows hard and averts her eyes, not wanting to see America’s face when Kate tells her the truth. “The Winter Soldier.”

America is on her feet immediately. Kate sits up, ignoring the sharp pain in her side.

“Where are you going?!” Kate shouts. America is already through the sliding door. Kate hurries to her feet, wrapping her towel around her again. “America!”

“I’m gonna kill him,” America growls, not looking back.

Kate chases after her, finally grabbing her arm as America throws her bedroom door open.

“No,” Kate snaps firmly. “No, you’re not.”

America turns, face full of harsh fury.

“Jesus fucking Christ, America,” Kate cries, yanking America back through the door and closing it before slotting herself between America and the doorknob, blocking her way through. “I’m fine. I wanted to fight him.”

America takes a few steadying breaths through her nose. Kate expects her to be angry, to demand Kate to move, but instead, her next question surprises Kate.

“Did you win?”
Kate laughs, sounding worn and exhausted.

“I got the jump on him a couple of times,” Kate replies, voice watery.

America’s face splits into a grin, albeit a cautious one.

“So…can we go back to what we were doing before…?” Kate asks carefully.

America scoffs.

“You’re hurt, Kate.”

Kate rolls her eyes, slinging her arm around America’s shoulders and hauling her in for a kiss. America is rigid, but when Kate pulls back, her expression is bemused.

“Come on,” Kate whines. “I’m horny.”

“Well, you look exhausted,” America retorts. “And injured.”

“No, no, I’m horny,” Kate replies, leaning in and kissing America’s pursed lips again.

She can tell she’s getting to America. America is struggling to keep her face serious, trying to suppress a smile.

“I liked how you came charging in all hot and heavy,” Kate whispers, brushing her lips along the shell of America’s ear. “It was real sexy.”

America’s hands settle on Kate’s hips. Encouraged, Kate rolls her hips, tipping in close against America. She kisses America’s ear and works her lips down along her jaw and her neck.

“What do I gotta do to rile you up, huh?” Kate asks, rolling her hips again. “What had you barging in here?”

America isn’t moving, but her body is starting to relax, inch by dubious inch. Kate runs her fingers along America’s sides, pushing off her jacket and dropping it on the floor. America’s arms reach around Kate’s back, tightening and Kate chuckles, low and playful. She pushes her hands up underneath America’s shirt, brushing the pads of her fingers along the long expanses of America’s warm, smooth skin. America finally smiles again, shifting her weight.

“You like that?” Kate breaths, kissing America’s neck. “How about this?”

Kate grabs the edge of America’s jean shorts, working open the button and zipper. She pushes her hand down the front of America’s shorts, running a firm fingers along the smooth silk of her underwear. America makes a strangled sound, head falling backwards.

“Oooh, sexy underwear,” Kate laughs. “Let me see.”

Kate drops to her knees, shimmying America’s shorts all the way off. Obediently, America steps out of them and kicks them across the room. Kate smiles at the sight of the black silk thong. She runs her fingers along America’s sides again, leaning forward to kiss the smooth skin of America’s inner thigh. America’s hand comes down in Kate’s hair, running through the dark strands encouragingly. Kate turns her face, running her tongue along the front of the shimmery silk. America’s breath hitches airily.

Kate puts her hands on America’s hips and shoves her back towards the nearby wall. America’s feet move numbly backwards until her upper back hits the stucco. Her eyes flutter open and watch Kate
darkly from under hooded lids. Kate grins wickedly, crawling on all fours as gracefully as she can manage to America’s feet. America makes a noise that sounds like the cross between a growl and a sigh.

“You are sinful, Kate,” America groans.

Kate licks her lips as she comes up onto her knees, grabbing the edge of America’s underwear and tugging them down so slowly that America twists her hips insistently. Kate puts a hand under America’s thigh and lifts it, pulling the underwear all the way down and off her ankle before hitching the leg up over her shoulder. Slapping a hand hard against America’s twisting hips, she shoves America’s middle back flush against the wall before moving between her legs.

America’s chest rises and falls in deep, slow breaths as Kate licks along her with a flat tongue. She tastes the way Kate remembers and Kate presses her face deeper, her other hand coming down between America’s legs to rub along her clit as Kate goes further down. The sounds America makes is like music to Kate’s ears, and America pounds her palms against the wall behind her, moans becoming higher and breathier. America’s leg tightens around Kate’s shoulder, pulling her in tighter. Kate switches her fingers and her mouth, pressing two fingers deep into America’s pussy. The sound it wrings from America’s lungs is a filthy snarl.

Kate pumps her fingers and purses her lips, tongue darting between them, and America twists desperately at Kate’s ministrations. Kate turns her palm towards her face, brushing her fingers along America’s G-spot, causing the other girl to spasm. America is on her tiptoes, head thunking back against the wall again and again, and Kate thinks that there’s going to be a dent there when she is done. She adds another finger and America moans, nodding frantically. Kate presses her thumb against America’s clit, dipping down to press her tongue along her pussy beside her fingers. Kate speeds up the pace of her fingers, thrusting into America faster, and it takes Kate a moment to realize that America is saying something.

“Kate, Kate, Kate, Kate, Goddesses!” America’s eyes fly open and she looks down at Kate. Kate meets her gaze, her mouth still working, and she winks at America. America’s jaw falls open and she moans, loud and long, her head falling back again. “Don’t stop,” America breaths, so airy that it’s barely a whisper. “Don’t fucking stop.”

Kate increases her pace again, moving her mouth back to America’s clit, and America begins to shake. Her fingers flex against the wall, knuckles turning white, and her muscles begin to go rigid. Kate can feel America’s pussy tightening around Kate’s fingers, and she knows that she’s going to come.

“I…I…I,” America is gasping, struggling for words.

Kate grins against America’s skin, pressing her tongue more firmly against her clit and adding a fourth finger, pulling her fingers apart wide. America shrieks, and Kate twists her wrist again, pressing all of her fingers against America’s G-spot and brushing down on it hard.

“FUCK!” America shouts, fist connecting with the wall and definitely leaving a dent.

And then she comes, making a strangled sound. Like before, she gushes deliciously around Kate’s fingers and down her face. Kate thrusts her fingers slowly, wringing everything she can out of America, and America is making a series of animalistic noises, fist deepening the hole in the drywall. America’s leg is so tight around Kate’s shoulder that it’s becoming painful, but Kate doesn’t stop. All at once, America shrieks, stumbling to her knees and grabbing Kate’s face, kissing her aggressively.
America licks Kate’s lips hungrily, probably tasting herself on Kate’s mouth. Kate moans against America’s lips, pulling the other girl to her desperately. Gently, America leans forward and guides Kate to the ground. She leans over Kate, kissing her as her hand moves between Kate’s legs. America pulls off the towel again, fingers brushing along Kate’s own dripping wet pussy.

America is much gentler with Kate this time. She’s careful of Kate’s injured side, moving her own body over Kate’s but holding her weight on her arm against the floor. Kate runs her hands hungrily up and down America’s body, relishing in the defined muscles strained against America’s dark skin. America kisses Kate’s neck as she pushes her fingers inside Kate. Kate sighs, running her fingers through America’s wild hair, pulling at the elastic holding it in a messy ponytail until America’s dark curls fall around her face. America thrusts into Kate, pressing the weight of her hips behind her wrist. It doesn’t take Kate long at all before she’s on the brink.

Kate shouts when she comes, but America isn’t done with her yet. Kissing down Kate’s body, America moves between her legs and licks along her pussy eagerly. America adds another finger and presses hard against Kate’s G-spot as her deft lips and tongue work Kate over.

Kate doesn’t know how long she lays there, and she loses count of how many times she comes. But America doesn’t stop. She doesn’t stop until Kate grabs at her desperately, panting and shivering and exhausted beyond measure. America grins at Kate wickedly, moving up Kate’s body and kissing her lips gently.

“You ready to admit that you’re tired yet?” America asks.

“Uncle!” Kate gasps. “You win, I’m tired, I’m tired.”

America chuckles, pushing herself to her feet and helping Kate up on her own numb and spasming legs. She guides Kate towards the bed, but Kate shrugs out of her grip, walking out onto the balcony, not caring if anyone sees her naked. She grabs her cigarettes and lighter before going back inside. America lays on the bed, watching her with wide eyes, looking incredibly vulnerable. Kate smiles at her, settling down beside her. Kate moves gingerly, her side truly aching now, but after some maneuvering, finally gets comfortable. Kate pulls a cigarette from the pack and lights it.

Kate expects America to say something, but America stays quiet. Kate sighs happily, body relaxing as she blows out a billowing cloud of smoke.

“What did you do with your pinky finger there?” Kate asks, taking another drag of her cigarette.

“Which time?” America replies.

“Hmm, the fourth time I think?”

America chuckles, light and girlish, and completely out of character.

“I’ll teach you some time,” she says before reaching down, taking the cigarette out of Kate’s fingers, and taking a long drawl herself. Kate laughs.

“I didn’t know they had cigarettes on Arcadia,” Kate snickers.

America shakes her head, breathing out.

“They didn’t. But when you hang around soldiers long enough, it’s a habit you pick up.” America hands the cigarette back to Kate.

“Hmm,” Kate mumbles.
She lays against America’s side, smoking quietly until she begins to feel heavy and tired, truly tired. Kate snuffs the cigarette out on the bedside table, not caring about leaving a burn mark, and snuggles in closer to America. She thinks that America has fallen asleep. Her breathing has slowed to something deep and steady. The cadence draws Kate closer and closer to sleep. But just as Kate is about to fall asleep, America’s chest rumbles with her voice.

“Kate,” America says quietly. Kate hums in response, not opening her eyes, so close to sleep. “I’m really glad that I met you.”

Kate smiles. But she’s already asleep.

***

Ms. Altman may not be Teddy’s biological mother, but Billy can definitely see where Teddy has picked up most of his mannerisms. They both laugh the same way, deep and low. They both clench and unclench their fists the same way when they’re uncomfortable. They both collapse their shoulders the same way when they’re upset. Their faces light up the same way—bright, cheerful green eyes going wide—when they’re happy. And they both display the wide range of their emotions openly in their overt body language.

As Teddy tells his story, they both show their feelings on their faces and in the way they twist their hands or straighten their backs or brush their hair behind their ear. Billy is quiet for most of the story, adding small details when pressed. But for the most part, he is wholly content to observe silently, happy to be learning more about his boyfriend from this single encounter than he has in the months that they’ve been together. Every so often, Teddy reaches for Billy unconsciously. Billy sees Ellen Altman watching those movements. She’ll smile to herself when it happens, a movement so quick that Billy doubts Teddy is noticing it.

Billy’s never had a boyfriend before, but he’s imagined meeting a future significant other’s parents. He’s always thought that it would not go over well. Homosexuality is a flagrant break of one of the Hard Line Policies, after all. But Ms. Altman just seems happy, maybe even relieved at times.

Billy has no idea how long he sits there. Ms. Altman has a lot of questions, and a large number of them are aimed at Billy. She presses him about his relation to the Scarlet Witch, asks about the extent of his powers, and eventually tells him that it was the old Sorcerer Supreme, Doctor Strange, who helped keep Teddy hidden from the Skrull and Kree for so long. Billy can tell that she wants to ask if that’s something Billy would be able to do, but she doesn’t. Probably because she can tell that Billy has no idea the extent or strength of his powers, and Billy doesn’t know if he would be capable of something like that.

“You need a teacher,” Ellen says at one point to Billy.

“Mom,” Teddy whines, “we told you that the current Supreme tried to take his powers. He isn’t interested in giving Billy more power.”

“There are other sorcerers,” Ellen replies. “There are entire planets of sorcerers in the far reaches of the Trion Galaxy. And Mordo isn’t as powerful as he thinks. There are still plenty of sorcerers on Earth.”
Teddy interjects again, pushing the conversation away from Billy. But she’s already gotten Billy thinking. The seed is planted. Billy’s not stupid, he knows he needs a teacher. He’s been wanting to find his mother, convince her to teach him more about his powers. But if there are other sorcerers out there, then there has to be someone else who could teach Billy. How would he find them? Maybe somebody on the base would know. Steve Rogers had mentioned that a sorcerer had warded the RWF base against magic, it’s why Billy hasn’t been able to use most of his powers, so maybe there’s a sorcerer here in Wakanda.

Teddy’s conversation with his mother and Billy’s drifting thoughts are interrupted suddenly when the door flies open. A streak of silver darts into the room and Tommy skids to a halt beside Billy.

“Billy! I found you!” Tommy cries.

Ms. Altman shouts at the sudden presence of Billy’s twin.

“What is it?” Billy asks.

Tommy is actually out of breath, and there’s a manic gleam in his eye.

“Come with me,” Tommy insists.

Billy purses his lips, looking back and forth between Tommy and Teddy.

“Excuse us,” Billy says, getting to his feet.

His twin follows him into the hall, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

“Is this an emergency?” Billy asks in a harsh whisper once they are down the hall and out of earshot.

“I just need you to come with me,” Tommy replies in a rushed voice. “Please?”

Billy chews his lip as he considers it. Tommy’s eyes are wide and excited as he watches Billy expectantly. Finally, Billy concedes, and tells Teddy that he’ll find him later before following Tommy further down the hall.

“Okay, close your mouth,” Tommy directs, putting a hand on the back of Billy’s neck.

“What?” Billy asks. But he doesn’t get a reply, because a moment later, his stomach lurches violently. The world around him turns into a sickening blur. It takes Billy a moment to realize that Tommy is holding onto him as he runs. Billy’s body is pinned rigid by the sheer force of it. And by the time he has thought to react in anyway, they are skidding to a stop.

Billy bends over, retching at the sudden changes to his equilibrium.

“Never do that again,” Billy chokes.

It’s not until he straightens that he realizes that they’re now standing in some sort of underground tunnel. The water at their feet is ankle deep and the sub-terrain space is lit by sparse bare bulbs screwed into the rocky ceiling. The tunnel disappears around a dark turn behind them and in front of them, one hundred yards away is the opening, alit with the sun shining through the thick jungle canopy.

“Where are we?” Billy demands.

“It’s a secret tunnel leading out of the base,” Tommy replies lightly, eyes on the opening. “I was at the pool by myself when this dog came up to me.”
“A dog?” Billy scoffs.

As if called, a small border collie appears at the entrance to the tunnel. It maneuvers over the rough terrain with ease and heads towards them, tail wagging.

“He had a note in his mouth,” Tommy continues, watching the dog approach. He holds out a folded piece of paper to Billy.

Billy snatches the paper from Tommy and opens it. Inside, scrawled in pencil, is a short note.

_Tom Tom_

*My friends want to meet you.*

_Princess Powerful_

“What the hell?” Billy mutters, looking up at Tommy. “Who is Princess Powerful?”

“That’s what I used to call Molly,” Tommy replies. When Billy gives Tommy a confused glare, Tommy huffs, rolling his eyes. “Molly is one of the kids who was imprisoned with me at the Red District. She was really powerful, telepathic and super strong. But those fucking animals at the Red District injected her with shit until she lost her super strength and they fucked with her brain until she couldn’t use her telepathy anymore.”

“And what does a dog have to do with Molly?”

“She couldn’t use her telepathy on _humans_ after what they did to her, but she could control animals. She’d do it all the time with rats and birds,” Tommy explains excitedly.

“And you think that, what, that Molly is here somewhere, controlling this dog?” Billy replies.

“It’s not a dog,” Tommy says.

“What?”

The dog finally reaches them, sitting down for a moment as it looks between Billy and Tommy.

“I followed it down here and then…” Tommy trails off, watching the dog expectantly.

The dog leans forward, eyes going blank and then suddenly the animal *melts* into a pile of fleshy goo. Billy jumps back, yelping, as the goo swirls and reforms. A few seconds later, a pair of colorful wings stick up out of the mess, lifting into the air as the rest of a puddle forms into a parrot. The bird flutters before them, coming to sit on a rocky jut of the tunnel. It squawks loudly at them and then turns its head, looking at Billy with one discerning eye.

“_Squawk! William Kaplan?_”

Billy jumps again when he hears the bird say his name. With wide eyes, he glances between Tommy and the bird. Tommy just looks smug, a crooked smile firmly in place on his face.

“What the hell?!” Billy shouts.

“_William Kaplan?_” the bird repeats.

“Yeah, Moll, this is my twin brother, Billy Kaplan,” Tommy says to the bird instead of responding to Billy.
“Squawk! Follow me!”

“Dude, this is fucked up,” Billy insists nervously. “We’re not following that thing. You don’t know that that’s Molly. It could be a trap. Kate told us that we need to stay on base. She said that the government has something coming after us.”

“Alright,” Tommy replies. He steps towards the bird. “Who was Molly’s favorite nun at the orphanage?”

The bird looks between the twins as if thinking about the question.

“Tommy,” Billy whines. “This is stupid, we should go b—“

“Sister Flora! Squawk!”

Tommy’s smile widens and he holds up his hands to Billy.

“See?”

“Just like that?” Billy scoffs. “You’re gonna follow a fucking shape shifting bird into the jungle?”

The bird collapses once again into a pile of goo. It shifts and twists, taking the form of a border collie again. The dog wags its tail and pants happily, waiting for Tommy and Billy.

“Come on,” Tommy insists, starting forward.


It occurs to Billy that if they’re no longer on base, his powers might work. So, cautiously, he approaches the dog, kneeling in front of it and putting a reluctant hand against its forehead. The dog sits down and allows Billy’s ministrations. Swallowing hard, Billy closes his eyes.

In his mind, Billy can see the dog. Its energy is…odd. A swirling rainbow of colors that results in a mostly grey puddle. But from that puddle is a long, bright pink line, disappearing into darkness. With his own astral hands, Billy grabs hold of that line. There’s a lurching sensation in Billy’s stomach and suddenly, he’s no longer in the tunnel. Instead, he is looking at the lip of a small cave. A majority of his vision, however, is taken up by a teenage girl. Billy feels as if there are more people just beyond his field of vision, their energies shimmering at his peripherals. But the girl is all that Billy can truly see. She has long, straight black hair that falls in curtains around her flat, pale face. Her lips are painted blood red, and she wears dark eyeshadow around her narrow eyes. She’s dressed wildly in a lace up red shirt with a high collar, a matching long red skirt, and elbow high, fingerless gloves. One of her arms seems…wrong though. From the elbow down, it emits an odd, red light. Billy can’t make out what is wrong with it from the gloves the girl wears. She has more piercings in her ears than Teddy, and even more piercings on her face. Her long, white fingers are wrapped around a golden staff that shimmers with an orangish energy. But most off-putting are her eyes. They are a bright and glowing yellow.

“You didn’t think it would be that easy, did you, William?” the girl asks. “Come find us, we need to talk.”

Immediately, Billy is thrown backwards. The vision ends abruptly and Billy is left sprawled on the wet floor of the tunnel. Tommy appears over him.

“What’d you see?”
Billy holds a hand against his aching head. The dog whines beside him, getting to its feet. Tommy extends a hand, helping Billy back to his feet.

“It was…another sorcerer,” Billy pants.

“Did you see Molly?” Tommy presses.

Billy shakes his head.

“There were more people. I could…sense them. But I couldn’t see them.” Billy shivers. “I only saw her, the-the sorcerer.”

The dog is walking towards the opening of the tunnel, glancing back at Billy and Tommy.

“We should get the rest of the team,” Billy says. “Tell Kate or America.”

The dog begins to whine. Tommy watches it, and he makes the same face the Billy knows he makes when he is considering something.

“I’m following the dog,” Tommy states. “You can come or not.”

Without listening to Billy’s protest, Tommy strides forward, following the collie as it begins towards the entrance to the tunnel again. Billy grinds his teeth. He can’t let Tommy go alone. He may be fast, but if this is a trap, then he’s going to need backup. Billy has no choice. He has to follow his idiotic twin.

Past the tunnel is nothing but thick, impenetrable jungle. Billy glances back and realizes that the tunnel comes out from a massive rock formation. Stony slate rises up behind them, presumably holding the RWF base on its peak. Water falls from cracks and crevices in the rocks, and the dog turns and wades through the now knee deep stream that runs along the base of the rock. Billy curses under his breath as the water grows deeper and deeper. Billy has no idea if the water is populated by some sort of blood sucking parasite or flesh eating fish, and his imagination runs wild despite the fact that the water is crystal clear. There’s no telling what might reside in the holes and crevices that their feet slide over unsteadily.

Eventually, the water grows so deep that they have to swim. The dog shifts, turning instead into a bright red cardinal, wholly out of place in the thick jungle. They breaststroke after it, and no matter how many times Billy insists that they should turn back, Tommy presses on pig-headedly.

Finally, finally the stream grows shallow again, and the ground tips upwards towards a series of caves visible on the face of another rocky hill. The cardinal changes back into a collie and leads them up out of the water. Billy watches the caves warily, so he is entirely caught off guard when a flash of blonde hair rushes out from the jungle to their other side.

“Tom Tom!” a little girl squeals, grabbing Tommy around the middle in an excited hug.

Tommy exclaims excitedly, falling to the ground and hugging the girl back.

Billy is watching the reunion cautiously when another body slips out of the nearest cave and approaches Billy with supernatural speed. He swears under his breath, falling back defensively. Because it’s the girl he had seen in the cave, even more intimidating and severe in real life. The staff she had held is gone, and her eyes no longer glow, though they do retain their odd yellow color.

“William Kaplan,” the girl says, drawing even with Billy. She doesn’t seem like she intends to attack, but Billy doesn’t exactly trust other sorcerers. “I’m Nico. And we’re…” she sweeps an arm
back, stepping aside to reveal a group of young people standing in the mouth of the cave, watching Billy with suspicious gazes. “…the Runaways.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys, hope you're enjoying the story so far! I don't follow the Runaways that closely, but I am a big fan of Nico, as she is part of the A-Force. When I started writing this, I knew that I wanted to include the teamup for Young Avengers and Runaways that's in the comics. But I misremembered the members of the Runaway, and I know that when I first introduced her, I said Molly was telepathic. I thought that she was the one who controlled Old Lace, but turns out that that's Gert. I re-read the comics last night and remembered the she's actually super strong, but I had the whole shape shifting animal idea in my head already, and was gonna have that be Old Lace, and I didn't want to change it. So there will be some further explanation in the next chapter, but the Runaways are gonna be a bit canon-divergent, hope nobody is too angry about my slip up!
The sun is setting by the time the Runaways have finished their stories. Billy is enraptured, to say the least. Their story is mind-blowing.

There are six of them altogether. Nico Minoru is their leader. Her parents were both sorcerers, *Dark Wizards*, Nico had called them. They had led a group called *The Pride* for *centuries*. The Pride brought together a large group of influencers from across the universe, and The Pride had backed Thanos quest for universal domination. They had created the portal that brought Thanos and his Kree armies to Earth in 2018. After his defeat at the hands of the Avengers, The Pride had continued to plot behind the scenes until 2027, when Mordo, after killing Stephen Strange, took on the mantle of Sorcerer Supreme and discovered the Minorus. He hunted them down and killed them, taking their power and using it to hunt down the rest of The Pride that resided on Earth. Many of the members of The Pride fled the planet. But almost a year before that happened, Nico and a small group of other children of Pride members had escaped The Pride base after witnessing their parents perform a ritualistic sacrifice of a young girl. Hence, the Runaways were born.

Chase Stein is the son of scientists who had worked for The Pride. He had absconded with Nico, stealing a vessel that they called “The Frog.” It’s a squat vertical takeoff jet that is capable of extra-orbital flight for short periods of time and that can travel at extraordinary speed and entirely cloaked from all forms of tracking.

Karolina Dean is a tall, gorgeous girl with blonde hair that nearly reaches her hips. Her parents were actors and she had been raised in Hollywood. Unbeknownst to Karolina, her parents were actually exiled aliens from the planet Majesdane. They had come to Earth to join The Pride, and had used a specialized bracelet to control Karolina’s powers. She can manipulate solar energy and gives Billy a demonstration that leaves him almost blinded. After Karolina had escaped with her friends from the Pride base, she was shocked to learn that her parents had arranged a marriage between her and a Super Skrull in-training, an attempt to bring the Skrull to Thanos’ side before his invasion. She was abducted in an all-too-familiar story and taken to the Skrull Throne world.

Her fiancé, Xavin, is a severe looking woman in human skin. Tall and dark and muscular, she watches the group from the corner with a steely glare. Karolina reveals that Xavin is technically a male, but as Karolina has no interest in men, Xavin had taken on a form of a human woman in order to convince Karolina to marry him. Xavin grumbles at Karolina’s bubbly retelling of their story, but never interrupts her. They had lived together on the Skrull Throne World for almost a year before they were to be married. As far as Billy can tell, Karolina is entirely smitten with Xavin. Turns out, she was able to convince Xavin that they were being used by the Skrull and the Majesdanians and eventually they escaped the Throne World together, returning to Earth to reunite with their friends.

Victor Mancha has an off-putting presence when Billy meets him. He’s rigid and awkward and speaks in clipped tones and short sentences. Turns out, he was built by none other than Ultron himself. After Ultron failed to upload himself into Vision, he had kidnapped a human woman and impregnated her with a synthetic fetus of his own creation, before burning the entire affair out of his memory. It was Ultron’s plan that the child be born and reunite with him when he was older so that Ultron could upload himself into the synthetic body. Instead, Victor had found the Runaways and Chase had erased his encoding that pushed him to seek out whatever was left of Ultron.

Then there is Molly and her frightening pet. Molly’s parents were also scientists who once worked for Hydra, recreating and enhancing the super soldier serum. They tested their serums on Molly as a child, giving her an array of abilities. But the state had taken Molly away and dumped her in an
orphanage. Her parents went on to join The Pride, forgetting about their mutated daughter. She had been taken from the orphanage after an incident in which she had picked up a truck with her bare hands, and had been stolen away to the Red District. When she was rescued by the Young Avengers, Nico had used her powers to locate her at the hospital. Molly had been more than willing to join the group, even though she was the youngest by far. Xavin and Karolina had stolen an alien animal from the Skrull Throne World when they left, a pet that had been kept in their quarters. Capable of taking the form of almost any animal, the beast had taken a liking to Molly immediately. Her powers were still severely limited after her time in the Red District, but she had formed a psychological link with the animal. And her favorite form for it to take is of a prehistoric fucking velociraptor. As Billy listens to her tale, the beast patrols the entrance of the cave like a massive, leathery guard dog.

Molly and Tommy play together inside the cave, Tommy darting about quickly, more excited than Billy has ever seen him. Billy tells the group as little as possible about the Young Avengers, despite their many questions.

“So what are you doing in Wakanda?” Chase asks suspiciously at one point.

“Steve Rogers wanted to meet us,” Billy offers. “What are you doing in Wakanda?”

“Trying to find you,” Nico answers, her yellow eye watching Billy carefully.

“And what do you want with me?”

Nico looks around at her friends, nodding at them. They take the cue, each getting to their feet and shuffling off deeper into the cave. Billy stiffens, unsure exactly what Nico plans to do. She moves closer to Billy, sitting on a rock structure across from him and watching him for a long, uncomfortable moment before speaking.

“I know Mordo kidnapped you,” she admits cautiously. “And I know who your mother is.”

Billy grinds his teeth, unsure where this is going.

“I was raised in sorcery. My parents taught me from the moment I was old enough to learn. And when my mother died, the Staff of One was transferred to me,” Nico continues.

“What the hell is a Staff of One?”

Nico breathes through her nose, observing Billy silently again.

“Magic is an ancient force, Billy,” she says after a moment. “But it isn’t unpredictable or uncontrollable. There’s many ways to obtain it and wield it. It expresses itself in many different ways. Most users don’t even realize that they have it. Some people are born with it to varying degrees. Entire races have incorporated it into their DNA, like the Arcadians. Others can acquire it through learning the Ancient Arts. There used to be schools here on Earth. You can ‘borrow’ magic from other realms, or you can funnel it from nature. Or you can amplify your magic with artifacts. The Staff of One is an artifact. I learned magic from my parents and my powers are enhanced tenfold by the Staff. Your magic comes from the Mind Stone. The Infinity Stones are a form of magic, the oldest magic, the most primal, the magic that formed the very universe. But I can teach you how to enhance your magic.”

“Why would you do that?” Billy asks suspiciously.

“Because us sorcerers have to stick together, Billy,” Nico replies immediately. “Because Mordo believes that magic should not be used on Earth unless he says so. He’s closed the sorcery schools,
he’s killed any sorcerer he can find, he steals magic, and he hoards artifacts. And the Earth is made weaker because of it. I know what you and your friends want to do. I know that you want to stop North, you want to turn the tides. But you can’t do that as long as Mordo backs North, as long as he protects him.”

“Then why don’t you stop Mordo?” Billy asks.

“Because I can’t. I’m not strong enough.”

“Look, Nico, if you’ve been watching me and protecting your friends with magic, then you’re way more powerful than me,” Billy replies, putting up his hands.

“No, I’m not Billy. I wasn’t born with magic, I learned it and I amplify it with ceremonies and artifacts. But your potential is far superior to mine. And if you can reach your full potential, then you can destroy Mordo.”

“And why would you want to help me?”

“Because,” Nico says slyly, “I believe in you and your friends’ cause. And because I’m selfish. I’ll never be able to reach my full potential as long as Mordo is around.”

“Well, at least you’re honest,” Billy grumbles. “But I—I can’t take a bunch of time to go to Hogwarts and learn magic. The Young Avengers—”

“I can give you the tools to enhance your powers in three days tops,” Nico interrupts.

“Seriously?” Billy scoffs. “It’s that easy?”

“Well, no,” Nico admits. “It isn’t easy. And if you want to truly reach your full potential, access the full range of your powers, then it’s going to take years of study of every form of magic. But I know the ceremonies to enhance your magic so that the next time you face Mordo, you’ll have a fighting chance against him. Mordo isn’t a natural born sorcerer, he gets his magic through study and borrowing and with the artifacts he has stolen. That means that he isn’t as powerful as you can be. Plus,” Nico looks around quickly, “some of the magic he has stolen belongs to you.”

“What does that mean?”

“Mordo was the one who cast the spell that killed millions of people all those years ago. He tracked the Scarlet Witch, cornered her, and framed her on North’s command. North needed a meta-human villain to turn the public against the Avengers. But in order for Mordo to cast a spell that strong, he had to have stolen power from Wanda, which means he stole power that belongs to you as her son. That also means that if you face him, truly face him, you’ll be able to steal that magic back easily. And that will weaken Mordo.”

“That’s…a lot to take in,” Billy says numbly.

“I know,” Nico replies. “But if you stay with us for a few days, I can enhance your powers and then I’ll help your team get out of the RWF base.”

“And what’s stopping me from taking them out the same tunnel that Tommy and I took out?”

“That tunnel is blocked and guarded. I used magic to get you through,” Nico says, raising an eyebrow.

Billy mutters a curse.
“Fine,” Billy states, crossing his arms. “I play Dungeons and Dragons with you for a little bit and you help me and my friends out of Wakanda so I can take on Mordo again.”

Nico nods, smiling a wolfish smile that makes her look absolutely diabolical.

“Deal.”

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The sun has just set when Billy appears in the doorway of Teddy’s room. Teddy is shirtless and exhausted, getting ready for bed after a long day. Billy seems oddly winded. His face is ruddy and his clothes are a mess, caked in a thin layer of clay that is dried in several places, flaking off of him every time Billy moves.

“Billy,” Teddy says, surprised.

Teddy wants to ask Billy where he went today, what Tommy wanted, why he’s so dirty, why he seems so out of breath, what the out of place wild look in his eyes means. But Teddy doesn’t get a chance, because Billy shuts the door behind him firmly and crosses the room, grabbing Teddy and pulling him into an absolutely bruising kiss. Teddy grips him back and finds that Billy’s clothes are damp and warm.

“Why are you all wet?” Teddy asks, pulling back a bit and opening his eyes.

Billy’s eyes remain screwed shut as he shakes his head dismissively.

“Doesn’t matter,” Billy mutters, yanking Teddy back down for another kiss.

Teddy doesn’t question it. Billy’s warm and yielding mouth is a welcome distraction from the day’s earlier events. He kisses Billy hard, holding him tight against his chest. Already, Teddy can feel Billy’s growing erection against his thigh. Teddy chuckles between kisses, pressing his thigh firmly between Billy’s legs, causing the other boy’s breath begin to stutter against Teddy’s lips.

“I want you to fuck me,” Billy breaths hungrily into Teddy’s mouth.

Teddy pulls back a bit, breaking the kiss.

“R-really?” Teddy stutters.

Billy’s eyes flutter open, wide and brown and blown and suddenly vulnerable.

“Yes,” Billy replies, nodding vigorously. “Please?”

There’s a low, needy pitch to Billy’s voice that goes straight to Teddy’s groin. Teddy swallows, throat suddenly very dry. Billy’s hand comes to Teddy’s chest, pressing something into his skin. Teddy looks down to find a small tube of lube in Billy’s fingers. Heat blossoms across Teddy’s cheeks, and he fumbles to take the vial from Billy’s hand. He almost asks where Billy got it, but his mouth is far too dry to form words at this point. With fat fingers, he tosses the lube onto the bed.

“Oh-kay,” Teddy manages to croak, looking back up at Billy’s eyes, full of wanton desire. Twin swirling and bottomless pools that hypnotize Teddy momentarily, and he can’t pull his own gaze away. He wants to fall into that stare, wants to drown in it. But Billy acts for him, yanking Teddy
back into another punishing kiss.

Billy’s lips part and his devilish tongue laps along Teddy’s teeth, his kiss-bruised lips, the inside of his mouth, and Teddy’s own erection is definitely growing now. Billy’s hands are grabbing for Teddy’s sleep pants and Teddy moves his own numb digits to the damp front of Billy’s shirt. He tugs it up and off of Billy, leaving Billy’s face streaked with wet clay that he doesn’t seem to notice. Eyes closed again, Billy leans back into Teddy, kissing him hard before moving his lips along Teddy’s jaw and down his neck. As Teddy works on the wet, heavy denim of Billy’s pants, Billy begins to suck a painful hickey into Teddy’s neck. Teddy leans into him, wanting it, wanting the mark, wanting people to see and to know.

Billy’s hands run up and down Teddy’s bare chest and back, small sparks of electricity shocking Teddy, warming him, making his skin tingle wherever Billy touches. Teddy shivers at the sensation, his numb fingers finally getting the button of Billy’s jeans undone. He shoves down the wet fabric and Billy grabs the edge of his jeans and pushes them all the way down, stepping out of them. Teddy reaches for Billy’s boxers next, peeling them off of Billy and leaving the brunette naked, pale expanses of skin making Teddy’s mouth water. He leans forward and grabs Billy’s thighs, lifting him from the ground. Billy’s legs immediately wrap around Teddy’s center. Billy’s erection presses into the skin just below Teddy’s navel, and Billy rolls his hips shamelessly, seeking friction.

Teddy pulls Billy against him, catching his lips in another kiss. Billy’s breath comes harsh through his nostrils and his legs tighten around Teddy’s back. Teddy turns and presses Billy against the wall. Billy arches against the stucco as his hand tangles into Teddy’s blonde locks, yanking Teddy’s head to the side so Billy can latch his lips onto Teddy’s neck again. Teddy moans at the contact, fingers running up Billy’s sides and along his face. His hand strays between Billy’s legs, grabbing his cock hungrily. Billy spasms at the sudden, rough contact, nodding desperately against Teddy’s throat.

Billy moves, unwrapping his legs and landing cat-like in the space between Teddy and the wall. He puts his hands against Teddy’s chest, shoving him hard. Teddy stumbles back towards the bed, his knees hitting the mattress. Billy presses forward, forcing Teddy back against the sheets. Without pause, Billy crawls along Teddy’s body, kissing him, touching him, straddling him. Teddy struggles on heavy limbs to pull himself up towards the pillows. Billy leans down, kissing Teddy again and using his own hands to haul Teddy’s hips up onto the bed. Once Teddy is fully on the mattress, Billy plasters himself against Teddy’s skin, rolling his hips. Billy’s cock presses hard against Teddy’s tented erection, and Teddy can’t move quick enough to shove his sleep pants down.

Once the barrier is gone, Teddy groans in relief, toes curling as Billy thrusts himself against Teddy. As Billy grinds lasciviously in Teddy’s lap, his hands search the folds of the sheets, finally finding the discarded lube. With an absolutely debauched grin, Billy sits upright and reaches for Teddy’s throbbing cock. With one hand, Billy strokes Teddy deliciously. Meanwhile, his other hand uncaps the lube and turns it over. Teddy shivers when the cold fluid hits his cock, a stark contrast to the heat of Billy’s hand, his skin, his body. But Billy continues to stroke him, slicking up Teddy’s cock with an easy expertise that Teddy didn’t know the other boy had. Billy continues to apply the lube, making Teddy wet and slick, as Billy reaches behind himself.

Teddy watches absolutely entranced as Billy begins to finger himself. Billy’s eyes flutter shut and his head falls back, hips still rolling against Teddy’s. Billy’s tongue flicks out and licks his lips and Teddy can only stare, slow and lavishing. Short, breathy moans escape from those lips and a boiling hot need pools in Teddy’s abdomen. Billy’s eyes fly open, searing Teddy with their amber gaze, and Billy dives forward, kissing Teddy deeply again as his hand grabs for Teddy’s cock.

Teddy can’t breathe. He can’t remember how to work his lungs. He can only watch in amazement.
and admiration and awe as Billy lifts himself up and lowers himself down slowly, inch by
devastating inch, onto Teddy’s cock. Billy’s jaw falls open, his eyes fluttering closed, as he sinks
down onto Teddy. So smooth, so warm, so tight. It’s all that Teddy can comprehend. Everything
and nothing at the same time. His chest constricts, struggling for air, and Teddy gasps like a dying
man. Finally, after what feels like hours, Billy brings himself flush against Teddy, body going
absolutely still. His sweaty palms land hard against Teddy’s chest, and he holds his weight there,
eyes still closed as he breathes through his nose.

Billy’s eyes fly open after what seems like an eternity, and they settle Teddy with a heated gaze that
Teddy can’t break, would never break. Slowly, ever so fucking slowly, Billy rolls his hips
experimentally. The sensation is akin to being gutted for Teddy, and he makes a strangled sound,
not daring to even blink, staring hard into Billy’s eyes. Billy bites his lip and rolls his hips again,
harder this time, and it’s enough to make Teddy feel like he’s coming absolutely undone. Billy’s
hands are still on Teddy’s chest, and they clench hard, digging Billy’s blunt nails into the skin there.
Teddy makes another incomprehensible sound, and he’s vaguely aware that he’s nodding as Billy
 gyrates again, this time lifting himself up a fraction of an inch and coming back down on Teddy’s
cock.

The air from Billy’s lungs is exhaled in a long, low moan and he leans forward, lifting himself up
again and thrusting back down. One of his hands slips in the sweat on Teddy’s chest, and Billy
bends forward further, one hand going to the bed and the other gripping Teddy’s throat as he pushes
himself upright again. He moves to take his hand away from Teddy’s neck, but Teddy grabs his
wrist, barely aware of what he’s doing. But Billy’s eyes swirl, truly fucking swirl, communicating
absolute and stripped down desire. Electricity again burns from Billy’s fingertips, making Teddy
feel numb as Billy lifts himself up again, higher this time, and rolling his hips downward.

Billy begins a circular, thrusting movement, undulating himself down on Teddy’s cock. Teddy still
can’t remember how to breathe, and his mind is starting to go fuzzy. Oxygen comes in short, aborted
bursts through Teddy’s lips as Billy quickens his pace. Teddy’s fingers wrap themselves into the
sheets and his toes curl so hard he’s afraid they might break. Billy’s pace quickens, bit by bit, and
eventually he sits upright again, head lolling back. He reaches for Teddy’s wrists, pulling his hands
up and putting them on Billy’s skin. Teddy runs his fingers along Billy’s sweat-slicked body, finally
coming to rest on Billy’s hips.

Billy bounces on Teddy’s cock, hips rolling in tight circles, and Teddy feels his own body going
entirely numb. All he can feel is Billy’s hips in his grip and his own cock smothered in glorious
heat. Billy’s cock is still hard, slapping against Teddy’s navel, and numbly, Teddy reaches for it
with one of his hands. He grabs Billy’s member, running his fingers along it, causing Billy to make
an absolutely wrecked sound, somewhere between a scream and a growl. Billy’s pace quickens and
Teddy’s heels begin to dig into the mattress as he thrusts up into the tight, magnificent warmth of
Billy’s body.

Teddy thinks he might lose himself. He’s fucked guys before. He’s had a short series of illicit
boyfriends. But it’s never felt like this. It’s never felt so right, so perfect. He’s never felt so
consumed before. Because Billy is consuming him. There’s no other word for it. Teddy is losing
himself to the sensation because Billy is eating him up. Teddy has fucked other guys before, but he’s
 never been fucked like this. Billy is in control. And Billy is everything. Teddy wants nothing else,
he needs nothing else. He is lost in Billy and he never wants to be found. Billy’s hands move along
Teddy’s skin, warm and sparkling, and electric white energy escapes Billy from his mouth and from
his fingers. When Billy’s eyes flutter open, they are a bright and unyielding blue. Pupils, iris and
sclera, all an electric and streaking blue. The color of the sky. The color of Heaven.

A prayer is ripped from Teddy’s lungs and it is only Billy’s name, over and over, because Teddy can
never say it enough. He shouts Billy’s name, whispers it, sobs it, screams it until his throat hurts. And Billy has becomes something else entirely, something otherworldly. A God, Teddy realizes, and he wants nothing more than to spend his entire life worshipping at Billy’s alter. Billy’s body glows with a white-hot and ethereal energy. When Billy speaks, it’s an enchantment, a spell. Words that mean nothing and everything. Muttered incantations and screamed invocations. And Teddy will kneel at this alter for as long as he draws breath.

Teddy is trapped in this moment, catapulted away from the crust of the miserable earth. He has no idea how long he floats here, in space, surrounded by galaxies and exploding stars, but it feels like an eternity. His own orgasm is a black hole, sucking him inward and Teddy releases himself to it. Somewhere far away, Teddy’s hand reaches for Billy’s cock, but the sensation is akin to an atomic bomb. Every touch, every whisper, every breath is creation. Every exhaled desperate plea is destruction. And Teddy teeters between the two. Lightening streaks, burning the bed, the walls, the carpet. The burning wood spells out infinity and Teddy can see it. A vision assaults his mind, and it is prophetic. Teddy knows it, and he watches himself and Billy standing before an intergalactic army that swears fealty to them. Teddy is here and he is there, but no matter where he is, no matter where he goes, no matter where this life takes him, he knows that he will have Billy at his side. That’s a certainty, as real as if it was carved in stone. Teddy is simply Moses, staring into the burning bush and divining the Word of God. Somewhere, back on earth, Teddy screams Billy’s name.

Teddy comes, and it is his end. He feels like he might be dying. Billy is a holy being before him, nothing but a white sun, burning against Teddy’s skin. Teddy is sure he must be dying, but he isn’t afraid. Because he knows that he is being remade. He dies and is reincarnated as something else, something better, something stronger. He orgasms into the being on top of him, and the strumming body folds over him, covering him. Teddy’s own essence bleeds into this God and the God accepts it. Far away, Teddy feels his head fall against the pillows.

Billy sputters briefly and goes silently, falling back hard against the sheets. Teddy rolls over, coming to rest beside Billy. His mind is still reeling, unsure of what just happened. But there is one thing he knows for sure, one thing that is absolute and that Teddy needs to express right now.

“I love you,” Teddy pants.

Billy turns to look at him, eyes back to their normal brown. He watches Teddy carefully for a long moment, and Teddy meets his burning gaze. Billy smiles his crooked, perfect smile, exhaling as he grins.

“I love you too.”

That proclamation is everything. And Teddy settles against the bed, knowing that he is riding a comet. He will stay here as long as Billy allows. Because Billy loves him too, and Teddy realizes that everything in his life has been leading to this moment. This is his purpose, and he will serve this God of love and destruction for as long as he is allowed.
“So, you’re dating a Skrull?” Billy asks, coming up beside Karolina inside the Frog, which is parked precariously beside a cavernous lake. It’s late, and most of the Runaways are asleep inside the Frog, so Billy keeps his voice low.

Karolina glances at Billy.

“Yeah, you got a problem with that?”

“No! No,” Billy sputters. “I… kinda am too.”

Karolina chuckles, and it sounds like bells ringing.

“Oh really?” she laughs. “Don’t tell Xavin, she knows like everyone in the Skrull Empire. She’ll probably freak out a bit.”

Billy grins to himself.

“Yeah, she probably would, but not for the reason you’re most likely imagining,” Billy replies.

“Why, your Skrull a big shot or something?”

“Or something,” Billy shrugs.

“Well,” Karolina says, “I can’t wait to meet him. I’ll keep it a surprise for Xavin though.”

Billy nods, and there’s the almost unperceivable rustling of fabric behind him, the only announcement of Nico’s ghostly arrival. Billy jumps when she appears at the corner of his field of vision. She looks even odder than before. Gone are the gothic clothes, the high heeled boots, the fingerless gloves. Instead, Nico wears a long, red ceremonial robe. Underneath is a floor length, loose fitting red dress over bare feet. It’s an unsettling outfit, like something out of a bad horror movie, especially because there is a gleaming, silver dagger hung on a leather belt around Nico’s hips that Billy only catches a short glimpse of before the folds of the robe settle around it, hiding it from sight. Also disconcerting is Nico’s uncovered arm, the one Billy had noticed before. It’s not a flesh arm, but it’s also not prosthetic or robotic. Instead, it seems to be made of energy, softly glowing red and as dexterous and natural as Nico’s other arm.

“Are you ready?” Nico asks, voice barely a whisper.

Billy swallows hard. Karolina has busied herself with something mechanical already, moving away from Billy. When Billy nods, Nico turns and strides through the belly of the ship. Billy struggles to keep up with her, her speed preternatural. Every step that Nico takes crosses the span of three of Billy’s steps, and he almost has to jog to stay behind her. They leave the Frog and Nico continues towards the mouth of the cave. Rain has started to fall, thick and hot, in the jungle. Nico doesn’t pause, plunging into the downpour. It’s late, well past midnight, and there’s something foreboding about the dark and tangled jungle that gives Billy pause.

Nico is already disappearing into the tree line, unbothered by the rain or the undergrowth, so Billy has to swallow down his trepidations and follow her, lest he lose her in the night. Once Billy darts into the canopy, he catches a glimpse of a bonfire lit deeper in the trees. He follows the light, beating back the waist high weeds and fist sized insects that assault him as he goes. When Billy finally reaches the fire, he’s out of breath and wishing he had worn longer pants.

Nico stands silently beside the roaring fire. The flames streak up into the air, fifteen feet high, unaffected by the rain. Nico is soaking wet, the long folds of her clothing clinging to her awkwardly. When Billy finally pulls even with her, she moves quickly, unfolding the fabric and
reaching for the dagger. Billy jumps when she pulls it, the metal making a small hiss as it leaves its scabbard. For a single, terrifying moment, Billy is certain that he’s fallen into an elaborate trap. But Nico turns the blade and runs the shimmering metal along the pad of one of her fingers.

Billy almost shouts, demands to know what kind of blood magic Nico is trying to involve him in, but he doesn’t get the chance. Because the moment a bead of blood appears on Nico’s finger, immediately washed away by the downpour, her body contorts, bending backwards and erupting with golden-red light. From the center of Nico’s chest, the head of a staff appears, and Billy can only watch awestruck as Nico grabs hold of it and pulls it free. Inch by golden inch, the staff is drawn from Nico’s body.

“What the hell is that?!” Billy cries.

Nico seems unfazed. She sheaths her dagger with one hand and spins the staff in the other, settling its end into the dirt.

“This is the Staff of One,” Nico replies with an easy shrug.

The staff glows, emitting a low, eerie golden light. Nico holds it with her unnatural hand, the red energy of it growing deeper as her eyes begin to become alight as well. She’s a terrifying visage like this, ghostly and otherworldly. But then Billy remembers what happened earlier to him, with Teddy. He bites his tongue, dying to ask Nico what she thinks of it, but ill at ease to speak of it.

“Can-can I ask you a question?” Billy asks uncertainly.

Nico inclines her head, radiant yellow eyes moving to Billy’s face.

“Early tonight…I-I was…well,” Billy sputters, looking at the ground. “Well something happened, and my entire body turned…white, like glowing white. And I felt…I felt…odd.”

“What happened?”

Billy blushes hard, wringing his hands.

“You were having sex,” Nico says. It’s not a question. Her eyes are discerning as she stares at him like it’s plainly written on his face. Billy grinds his teeth and nods, not daring to look up. Nico shrugs. “Magicae physica. One form of magic. You use the energy of your lovers to cast a spell, very ancient stuff. What kind of spell did you cast?”

“I-I don’t know,” Billy replies nervously.

Nico chuckles.

“You’re friends with an Arcadian, they use Magicae physica all the time. I’ve never used it, you should ask her.” Nico doesn’t pause to let Billy process that. Instead, she inclines the staff towards Billy. “Are you ready for this?”

“What…exactly?”

Nico opens up her arms, tilting her bead back. The hood of her robe falls from her and the rain soaks her face and hair. She smiles, her eyes closed as she turns towards Billy, breathing deeply.

“Do you feel it?” she asks, not looking at Billy.

“Feel what?”
“The Earth, the Rain, the Fire, the Air?” Nico shouts at the top of her lungs exaltingly.

Billy nods feebly because, yes, he can feel those things he supposes. But Nico’s head snaps downward, giving Billy a harsh look.

“No, feel it,” she demands.

Billy furrows his brow but tilts his head back. The rain falls in wet, heavy drops, dripping down Billy’s neck and back. He’s not particularly fond of the rain. In the States, toxic rainstorms are common, and when he was younger, Billy got so sick after a storm that he ended up in the hospital for two weeks.

“Billy, you’re going to have to let go of your inhibitions,” Nico directs, tilting her face back up. “There’s magic in nature, you can harness it if you just let go. Let it take you.”

Jaw tight, Billy looks back down at Nico. Her arms are still wide, staff in one hand, but she has begun to move. She rocks, moving her arms sinuously, rolling her shoulders and twisting her body. She reaches for her robe, undoing the front and letting it fall in a wet heap on the ground. The staff’s glow grows brighter and Nico undoes the belt holding her dagger next, letting it fall as well. Her movements aren’t exactly dancing, but it’s close. Writhing and shaking, Nico moves around the fire. Billy can only watch, uncertain and skeptical.

One moment, Nico is disappearing around the side of the bonfire. In the next breath, she is directly behind Billy. Billy jumps and spins. Nico’s face is twisted in a smile, her eyes as bright and as flickering as the fire. She taps the staff against Billy’s forehead.

"Open your third eye," she hisses.

The sensation that fills Billy is all consuming. He feels like he’s being thrown backwards, catapulting away from the earth, and falling into a pit all at once. There’s a warmth spreading across his body from the point where the staff touched, but unlike the comforting heat that his mother had spread into him, this is an almost unbearable burning. Billy can’t breathe, can’t move, can’t even see. He stumbles and he flies, he hits the ground and his feet brush the tree tops. When his eyes finally adjust to the blinding brightness that is burning through his core, the world around Billy is in vibrant, throbbing techno-color.

Billy is everywhere and nowhere. He can feel everything and nothing at all. The world ruptures into a dichotomy, twisting apart and breaking at a previously unseen seam. Fractals of pulsating color break around him, splitting and splitting again. He can see the earth below him, hovering in space. Then the solar system, the galaxy, the entire universe. At the same time, he is the size of an atom, watching the molecules break and reform.

The world around Billy twitches and writhes with energy and Billy can see it all, feel it all, and it is funneling through his chest. He feels like his entire body, his mind, his very soul is expanding to fit it all. He watches creation; massive creatures wielding unknowable power, fashioning the very universe before destroying it all and starting again. The he is one of these creators, molding a galaxy with his hands and then crushing it into dust. Billy watches himself and he is himself. He is in Wakanda beside the fire but he is also lightyears away. He’s also a child playing in the snow, an old woman walking along the street, a tired looking man standing on a bridge preparing to jump, a soldier putting on a brave face on the front lines, a teenage girl losing her virginity, an infant being born. A million different lives, a single soul. He is Billy Kaplan, but he’s also his mother, he’s also Teddy, he’s also Steve Rogers. He is everybody but nobody.

Billy hits the overgrown forest floor, panting. He feels like he should be afraid, but he isn’t. Nico
stands before him, lit by the fire, soaked by the rain. He looks around, feels his surroundings. The earth below him hums with energy. The air that he pulls into his lungs seems sharper, crisper. The light of the fire vibrates and swirls. He can feel and see each drop of rain that falls around him, taste the ozone in the water. It feels like too much, too much input, too many sensations. But it isn’t. Billy feels like he’s spent his entire life in the dark and he’s finally seeing the sun for the first time. And the only thing that he can feel is pure, unadulterated joy.

Billy begins to whoop and shout, a wide grin plastered on his face. Nico smiles too, reaching out a hand to help Billy to his feet. Billy springs upward, so full of energy that he can barely stand it. He’s laughing like a fool. He doesn’t want to ask what just happened, doesn’t need to ask. Throwing open his arms, Billy tilts his face towards the heavens, shouting nonsensical prayers and exhalations. He spins, moves, bounds around the fire. Nico yelps and follows suit and Billy can feel her energy, can see it shimmering around her. The fire spikes higher, logs exploding in the heat and sparks falling through the air as rain continues to beat down around Billy.

When Billy looks at his hands, they vibrate and spark with electricity. And Billy can see the source of it, in each droplet of rain, flowing from the trees, from the fire, from the ground, from the sky. Billy consumes it all, absorbs it into his body, and his skin begins to feel hot. He peels off his shirt, kicks off his shoes.

Billy has no idea how long he stays there, dancing around the fire with Nico. The hours pass like seconds and the ecstasy he feels never wanes, he never grows tired or bored. When the sun breaks the horizon, the fire snuffs out on its own and the rain ends abruptly. Nico takes off into the jungle at a run, and Billy goes after her. It feels good to run, and every tree, every plant, every insect, every molecule he passes bleeds energy into him. Nico climbs a steep hill at a sprint and Billy follows until they sit on the ledge of a mountain, miles and miles of jungle spread out below them, throbbing with vigor and life. They watch the sunrise, its rays filling Billy until he feels like he might burst.

“What was that?” Billy breathes finally, looking over at Nico whose face is bathed in sunlight, casting away the ghoulish look she takes on in the dark. She grins, glancing over at Billy.

“That was step one.”

***

The Cryo Room remains locked at all times. There are only four people in the Cube with the authority to enter the room. The Suspended Animation Chamber itself is a menacing looking thing. Four inches of bullet thick glass separate the world from the weapon within. It’s filled with a viscous green fluid that’s kept at -140 degrees Celsius. Wires and tubes lead in, connecting directly with the Asset, pumping the Asset’s body full of a freezing agent, an augmented DNA splicing agent, nano-organisms, and minor nutrients to prevent extensive damage. The Asset himself is a frightening sight. Outfitted in a tight, green skinsuit, he’s held upright in the chamber with clamps, looking like a deadly puppet on his strings. His white hair sticks out in frozen clumps from his head. A mask covers most of his face, there to feed him oxygen during the thawing process. Goggles protect his eyes from the damage the Warden has learned the flash freezing can cause. Monitors around the room gather dust, waiting to be called upon again the next time the Asset is needed. The only light is cast by the brain wave monitor which is always kept on. It infrequently reflects activity during suspension, and there is rarely anyone around to see it.

But as the Warden approaches the room, the Asset’s enhanced alien ears can pick up his gravelly
voice. Even through the walls, even through the thick glass, even when technically frozen. He is mostly Kree, though his grandmother was one of the water-dwellers on the planet Pac’i. Or he was mostly Kree. Captured during the Great Invasion, the Asset has been experimented on, undone and remade, enhanced with the DNA from at least twenty other organisms, and injected with nano-tech that fills his mind with a nonstop, high pitched whine and keeps him in eternally agony. He’s the Warden’s toy, his pet, and his experiment. Once, the Warden worked for Hydra, taking pleasure in tormenting the Winter Soldier in the name of science. Now, he has a much more prestigious job for the US Government.

“It’s been a long time since North has sent an agent to the Cube,” the Warden chuckles. “I was beginning to think the higher-ups were embarrassed by us.”

“The United States Government is immensely grateful for the work you do here, Warden,” a woman replies coolly.

“Of course!” the Warden barks. “Here we rehabilitate Policy breakers.”

“Important work in these troubling times.”

“I don’t think you understand the nuance of what I do here, agent,” the Warden continues. “To break behavior patterns, you must break souls.”

The woman doesn’t reply, but the Asset can hear their footsteps growing closer. Primal dread fills him, but there is absolutely nothing that he can do.

“You’ve been briefed on the situation?” the agent finally asks tersely.

“Yes, yes,” the Warden sneers. “A few children proving difficult to apprehend? You believe one of my special projects is the answer?”

“We have been given leeway to use your…unconventional assets to bring the illegals in.”

“What you need is a maggot,” the Warden growls, their footsteps coming to a stop just outside the door.

“Excuse me?” the woman replies.

“Society is a living breathing organism, agent. And superhumans are an infection that must be removed.”

There’s the beeping of a biometric pad.

“An infection,” the Warden presses on, “beneath the surface. Maggots, agent, thrive on carcasses, eating dead and diseased flesh. Placed in a living organism, a maggot will seek out infected tissue and consume is efficiently…ruthlessly.”

The door swings open. The Asset’s eyes are frozen shut, but the Warden’s voice alone is enough to make him begin to spasm, the tiny movements that his frozen body can manage, in disgust and in fear.

“What the hell is that?!” the female agent demands.

“This,” the Warden says, grinning in perverse delight, “is just the maggot you’re looking for.”
Kate stands in the shallow end of the lap pool, watching the sunrise begin to paint the sky in brilliant pinks and golds. She’s just finished over an hour and a half of laps. It had felt good, being in the water. She had been on the swim team at her high school, one of the few after school activities she had actually enjoyed, and swimming laps resulted in far less bruises and broken bones than Kate’s other chosen work out routines. Later this morning, Kate is going to have to meet with her teammates. They’re going to have to make a plan and they’re going to have to speak to Rogers again. After his meeting with America, Rogers had disappeared from the villa, and the Young Avengers had no idea if they were prisoners or guests on this base. But for now, Kate is going to make herself be satisfied with watching the sun rise.

That is, until the sliding door to the kitchen is thrown open to reveal Barnes in a pair of tight jammers. Kate bites her tongue and forces herself not to blush as he approaches the side of the pool casually.

“You’re an early riser!” he says brightly, tossing his towel on a sun chair.

“What the hell do you want?” Kate grumbles. “I’m getting sick of running into you.”

“This is my pool,” Barnes points out.

Kate huffs and hauls herself out of the water, rolling her eyes. Barnes chuckles.

“I didn’t say you had to leave,” Barnes shrugs before jumping into the chilly water.

Kate ignores the display, ignores Barnes' muscled body, ignores the exposed metal arm and the staggering amount of scars that beg to be stared at. She rolls her shoulders back and walks towards her towel, conscious of keeping her bruised side away from Barnes’ eyes until she can wrap the terrycloth around herself. Barnes stands in the shallow end, fiddling with a pair of goggles, watching Kate silently. Kate waits for him to say something, but he doesn’t. So Kate wrings out her hair and stuffs her cap and goggles into her bag.

Barnes is splashing the water onto his chest when he finally speaks up again, just as Kate is
“Hey, Kate,” Barnes calls. Kate stiffens, turning her head to look at Barnes. Barnes looks suddenly a bit suspicious, glancing around the empty sun-bathed courtyard as if he is afraid he’s being watched. He motions for Kate to come closer and, after a beat, she finally does. Barnes keeps waving her towards him, but Kate stops just out of his reach, not wanting to get too close. “Steve is gone, won’t be back on base for nearly a week,” Barnes whisper conspiratorially.

“So?” Kate retorts so loudly that Barnes shushes her nervously.

“He’s left Romanoff to babysit you kids, but he took a pretty large force to take care of the rest of the Sentinels. Romanoff is his only officer on base right now,” Barnes breathes, a glimmer in his eye.

“Then what are you?” Kate scoffs.

Bucky chuckles.

“Not a babysitter, and definitely not an officer.”

Kate shrugs.

“So what?” she asks.

Bucky gives her a serious stare.

“You’re smart, Kate,” he says. “Use your head.”

His eyes catch something over Kate’s shoulder and his muscles tighten, the metal plates of his arm whirring. When he speaks again, his voice is loud enough to be heard through the whole courtyard. “And tell your friends to stop having loud sex and burning things!” he practically shouts. “You’re all underage, none of us want to deal with giving a bunch of horny teenagers ‘the talk.’”

Kate grimaces even though she knows Barnes is misdirecting whomever he thinks is listening. Kate forces herself not to look over her shoulder. She wants to ask Barnes what he means. But she doesn’t get the chance, because Barnes nods at her, tugging his goggles down onto his face and disappearing underwater. Slowly, Kate straightens and turns casually. She catches a glimpse of the Black Widow near the pool house, watching her carefully. Kate smiles brightly at her, saluting lazily as she heads back towards the kitchen. The Widow’s face stays still and emotionless as she glances at the form of Barnes, cutting through the water like a shark.

Once inside, Kate begins making breakfast, keeping an eye on the pool through the glass door. She turns to open the fridge, and when she turns back around, Black Widow is crouching at the side of the pool, talking to Barnes. Kate finds a large pan and starts cooking enough eggs for the entire team as she watches Barnes and Romanoff interacting through the glass. Romanoff looks exactly like her Wikipedia page said she would—calm and cold and not a hair out of place. Barnes, on the other hand, looks nervous. He’s trying hard to be friendly, Kate can tell by the unnatural way he holds himself, open and exposed yet uncomfortable. Kate feels like she’s watching a nature documentary: what happens when a mountain cat meets a jaguar. The interaction is tense, Kate can tell by the way that the two look at each other, even though each is trying their hardest to seem nonchalant. Kate wishes desperately that she could hear what they are saying. Their conversation is short, with Romanoff straightening and stalking away after less than a minute. Barnes waits a long moment before returning to his swimming, as if making sure that the Widow’s really gone.

Kate’s not the best chef. Her breakfast of eggs and bacon is uninspired to say the least, but the smell is enough to rouse Cassie and Teddy from their rooms on the first floor. Cassie, an unapologetic
morning person, buzzes around Kate, adding spices and cheese to her scramble while brewing coffee and heating water for tea. Kate surrenders the breakfast efforts to Cassie and sits down beside Teddy, who looks...dazed.

“So, Teddy,” Kate asks slyly. “What’s your celebrity couple name?”

Teddy shakes his head, looking at Kate with bleary eyes.

“What?” he asks.

“You know, the couple name for you and Billy? If you guys are having the kind of sex that starts fires now, then you deserve a celebrity couple name,” Kate replies with a knowing smile.

The blush that covers Teddy is all consuming. He sputters, hands flailing and eyes on his socks, not daring to look up at Kate.

“What do you think, Cas?” Kate says a little louder, looking up at Cassie. “Bommy? Nah, that’s dumb. Telly?”

Cassie giggles, plating the updated scramble.

“Wisling?” Cassie suggests in a teasing tone.

“Oh, yeah, codenames,” Kate muses. “Hulcan?”

“I like that one,” Cassie chirps.

Kate grins, giving Teddy the Vulcan salute.

“I dub thee, Hulcan,” Kate says in a serious voice.

“Stop,” Teddy pleads, still blushing so hard that Kate can almost feel the heat coming off of him.

Kate pats Teddy on the back before reaching for a plate of eggs and bacon. She slides one in front of Teddy before grabbing another for herself.

“We’re just teasing, Ted,” Kate concedes. “Seriously though, how’d you start a fire?”

Teddy chews on his lip, still not making eye contact.

“I-I don’t know.”

“That good, huh?” Kate laughs.

The rest of the team is being beckoned by the scents and sounds of breakfast. Riri, Vision, America, and Eli show up pretty soon, and the breakfast room descends into a litany of voices. Kate shovels eggs into own mouth in a hurry, watching America carefully from across the room. She needs to talk to America, tell her what Barnes has said. But Kate doesn’t get the chance. Just when Kate is beginning to wonder where the twins are, they appear at the sliding door. They’re both dirty and wet. Tommy, besides from the derelict appearance of his clothes, seems mostly himself, jittery and snarky as always. But Billy...Billy seems...different somehow. He clutches some books to his chest as he walks in, setting them down on the table carefully before turning to look at the rest of the team. There’s a manic gleam in his eyes, and every so often, electric blue energy darts from his eyes or his fingertips. But there’s something else, something changed about his demeanor. The way he observes the group like he’s seeing them for the first time, the way he rolls his shoulders back like he’s standing up straighter than usual. It’s subtle, and Kate doubts many of her teammates notice it,
but to Kate, it’s blaring.

“Where have you guys been?” Kate asks.

Billy opens his mouth, but it’s Tommy who replies first.

“We went on a hike.”

Kate doesn’t break her gaze from Billy. The brunette twin shoves his hands into his pockets and looks sheepish. At least that hasn’t changed, Billy Kaplan is still a terrible liar.

“How’d you get out of the villa?” America demands, looking at Tommy.

Tommy moves to answer, but Billy gives him a sharp glance that shuts him up. With a tight jaw, Billy regards the group in the kitchen.

“We have something to tell you guys.”

***

Billy Kaplan is far more powerful than he realizes. Nico can see his power, brimming at the edges of his aura, threatening to spill over, yet tightly restrained. Billy probably doesn’t even realize the amount of effort he is putting into controlling his powers, into limiting them. If he ever let it go, he would be unstoppable. It isn’t surprising, both of his parents were borne of the mind stone and his soul was plucked from the Never Lands. Yet actually seeing that kind of power, observing its berth, is like staring into the sun, like nothing Nico has ever experienced before.

Nico catches a glimpse of it in the firelight, and then again as they watch the sun rise. Short visions of the future, ones that Billy doesn’t even realize that he’s projecting. But Nico sees it, two paths diverging in the wood. Two alternate realities that balance on a knives edge, all dependents on Billy’s next moves. One bleak and horrific, Billy’s love lying dead in the street, a world crumbling into chaos and fire, an alien invasion that leaves Earth nothing but a smoldering pile of ashes disintegrating in space. The other bright and triumphant, Billy as the Sorcerer Supreme, a king as a husband, and a universe in peace. The retributions are staggering, and Nico nearly chokes when she sees them, two timelines wrapped around each other and hurtling through the space time continuum with crystal clarity. Prophetic visions are never clear, yet what Nico sees when Billy allows his powers to flourish is two certainties, each as true as the other. The only difference is the decisions Billy makes.

The truth in what she sees leaves Nico drained, but she hides it well. Billy is far more powerful than her, but right now, he needs her to seem strong. Nico needs to seem like she knows what she is doing because Billy needs a teacher.

But right now, Nico needs to take a break. Unlike Billy, whose heart pumps unknowable magic through his veins with every beat, Nico’s powers are limited and using them leaves her drained. The Staff of One dissolves in her hands and Nico can feel the funneling spell that she cast on the ley line beneath them beginning to fail. Billy is still bouncing on his toes like an excited toddler though, and Nico can sense that right now, his power is stronger than it has ever been. If she’s going to cast an enlightenment spell on him, now would be the time to do it. But she can’t, she’s far too exhausted and she doesn’t have all the ingredients that she needs yet. So all Nico can do is give Billy a stack of ancient, leather-bound tomes and tell Billy to go back to the RWF base.
“Homework,” she tells him with a serious glare.

He looks disappointed but he doesn’t argue. Billy gathers his twin and they take off into the jungle.

Nico falls into bed for a quick nap, but before she knows it, she’s being jostled awake by Molly. It’s already past noon and they have things they need to do today. There’s a witch doctor in Sudan that will have the ingredients that Nico needs for the spell, and while they’re there, the rest of the team is going to visit the market because they’re running dangerously low on food. So Nico changes out of her damp dress and into something more put together.

Chase maneuvers the Frog out of the cave and they jet off, the trip taking less than a half hour. Finding a place to hide the Frog takes longer though, and its 2:00 pm before they’re finally headed towards the market. Nico double checks that Chase has the right currency before veering off from the group, headed towards the edge of the village while the rest of her friends move for the bustling market square.

The witch doctor’s house sits on the outskirts of the large village, squat and sunburnt and warded mercilessly. Nico doesn’t dare to take a step onto the man’s property. She’s dealt with him before, and he carries a certain reputation in the sorcerer community. He’s known only as Tukang, the Handyman. And his handiwork is on full display on his dried out front lawn. Animal bones, driftwood, torn bits of cloth, painted dolls, and carefully raked earth make up a sorcery minefield. Nico stands at the edge, waiting for Tukang to appear.

The man is plain, dressed in simple white garb, with a small, bald head perched on a thin neck. The man is ancient, hundreds of years old, part of the Zande people, but he moves like a young man. He throws open his door, watches Nico with narrowed eyes, and then strides purposefully through his yard, muttering under his breath as he goes.

The inside of his house seems plain, but to the trained eye, it’s an absolute smorgasbord. Nico was raised in Dark Magic, she knows the Black Arts and every Blood Ritual. The line between light and dark magic is thin, almost indistinguishable often, but there are some rites and spells that go so dark that they are unfathomably evil and fabulously enticing. At first glance, Nico spots all the ingredients needed for *Sacro Nocturno*: the tears of a widow, a black wicked candle, the rib of a predator, onyx, and, most importantly, the heart of a warrior. The only thing missing is the particular intangible ingredient in every spell. For the *Sacro Nocturno*, that ingredient is the broken trust of a child. Nico swallows hard and tries not to remember the last time she saw her parents.

Tukang doesn’t speak much, so Nico recites her list and he darts about the room collecting the items from his shelves. He holds up six fingers and Nico scoffs.

“Six?!” Nico chokes. “It was four last time.”

Tukang shakes his head.

“Six,” he replies in a gravelly voice.

Nico grumbles but hands over the price begrudgingly. Six vials from her purse, each with filled with her blood, the blood of a witch born of witches, an ingredient useful in some more advanced spells. It makes her nervous, handing over her blood, but she knows Tukang would never allow it to be misused.

Tukang gives her a flat smile and then waves her towards the door. Nico rolls her eyes, shoving the neatly wrapped brown paper package into her bag. But when she turns to leave, Tukang grabs her wrists firmly and whirls her back around to face him, his gaze suddenly serious and full of awe. He
stares at Nico hard, unblinking and unmoving, for a long moment. When he speaks, it’s in Sudanese, and Nico struggles to translate.

“You have come into contact with true power.”

Nico blinks. It’s an observation, not a question. She tries to watch Tukang’s aura, but he keeps it carefully hidden.


Nico wrenches herself out of Tukang’s grip but doesn’t dare break his gaze. Tukang’s hands fall to his side yet his stare remains serious. He looks Nico up and down before raising an eyebrow.

“You seek to control this power,” Tukang observes. “But you will not be able to.”

With that, Tukang turns sharply and waves Nico away once again. He disappears into another room, and Nico is left confused and alone. All she can do is leave awkwardly, unsure what Tukang’s motives are. She buttons up her bag and hurries through Tukang’s front yard. It’s a long walk in the blistering sun to the market square, and Nico is regretting her black outfit choice and heeled boots. But she eventually makes it to the market, a firm hand on her bag. Nico always gets paranoid when she’s carrying spellcraft material. In the States and in other countries where North’s influence is palpable, being caught with the ingredients for magic is something that can get you arrested or killed. Sudan, neighboring Wakanda, is heavily occupied by US forces. Nico doesn’t know how Tukang stays under the radar, but she knows that he protects himself, not only with magic, but with bribes and payouts.

Nico finds the rest of the Runaways spread through the market, perusing various stalls, arms full of wrapped packages. Victor is bent over a table spread with sweet smelling meats wrapped in toasted banana leaves. Xavin comes up behind him before Nico can reach the stall. Xavin curls her upper lip in a sneer, bending close to Victor.

“Why the interest in food, robot?” Xavin growls. “Do you want to act like an organic being that badly?”

Victor stiffens as Nico rushes forward. She’s getting pretty sick of Xavin’s constant harassment of Victor. The Skrull really distrust robots, for whatever reason, and takes it out of Victor constantly.

“My name is Victor, Xavin,” Victor retorts, turning to glare at the Skrull. “I’ve told you that a million times. And my mother used to make me tamales all the time, so back off.”

“Mother!?” Xavin cries. “A robot doesn’t have a mother. On my planet, you’d be dismantled for speaking such an outrage!”

Nico inserts herself between the two quickly, shoving Xavin back hard. They don’t need to be making a scene here.

“My mother was a saint!” Victor is shouting.

The woman inside the stall is watching the two nervously. Xavin gives Nico a contemptuous glare, her chin suddenly growing thick and green.

“Watch your chin, ET,” Victor grumbles, turning away. “It gets all Skrully when you go dreamy about your homeworld.”

“No making a scene,” Nico demands as Xavin grabs her face, covering up before anyone else can
notice. “And fucking be nice to Victor.”

Nico doesn’t wait for Xavin to reply. She turns to chase after Victor. He glances at her, turning to peruse another table filled with fruits, picking some up gingerly, his movements growing stiff and mechanical. Whenever he’s nervous, Nico knows that he falls back on his coding, growing less human and more robotic. Nico sighs and puts a hand on his shoulder.

“Your mom was great,” Nico says earnestly. She had met the woman once, and she really was a gentle soul. “And she wasn’t fucking evil like the rest of our parents.”

“Yeah, well,” Victor grumbles, voice becoming monotone. “Having Ultron as a-a…creator really cancels that out, doesn’t it?”

Nico stays with Victor, watching for prying eyes, while also keeping an eye on the rest of the team. They continue their shopping until everyone is laden down with canvas bags of food. After another half hour, they convene near the far edge of the market, making sure that they’ve gotten everything on their list. Just as they are turning to head back to the Frog, there’s a disturbance near the edge of the market. Sirens, crashing, shouting. Nico’s stomach sinks when she catches the source of the sounds: a military raid.

“Shit,” Nico gasps. “Everyone, get back to the Frog!”

Raids aren’t unheard of in the most populace areas of Sudan. RWF agents regularly come to Sudan to collect refugees and many Sudanese families shelter those refugees while they wait for the RWF to come for them. The joint forces military conduct random raids to deter the citizens from helping out those fleeing North’s extensive reach. Nico had thought that by staying out of the city, they would avoid any unwanted attention. They need to get out of here right fucking now, or things are going to get messy. The Runaways aren’t soldiers, they’re not fighters, and they’re definitely not Avengers. But that doesn’t matter to the JF. They’re unregistered meta humans, and that’s all that these soldiers care about.

The group turns and starts to hurry towards the edge of town, keeping their heads down and trying not to draw attention. But just before they’re clear of the buildings, three high impact military vehicles comes screeching around the corner, blocking their exit. Panic flares in Nico’s chest. There’s no hiding. She’s carrying spell casting material. And the JF soldiers are always equipped with blood testers that will reveal Katrina and Xavin as aliens. The Runaways don’t exactly blend in with their surroundings, they’ll definitely be detained and searched. Molly begins to cry, her still all-consuming PTSD sending her into hysterics. Nico grabs her, trying to calm her.

Nico looks around her small group. She’s their leader and they’re all look at her for direction.

“Chase, take Molly and get to the Frog! Now!”

Chase looks like he might protest, but he doesn’t. He grabs Molly’s hand and darts towards the space between a row of houses. The rest of the team watches Nico expectantly. Xavin is already growing, skin turning green. She’s ready to fight. The soldiers are out of their vehicles, shouting at the group in French and English.


Katrina doesn’t pause, she immediately rushes forward towards the soldiers, sobbing uncontrollably. The soldiers continue to yell, telling her to stop, but she doesn’t. Instead, she throws herself into the arms of the two closest soldiers.
“Help me! Please help me!” she sobs.

It works, the soldiers pause, swayed by the sobbing, sixteen year old blonde girl. Xavin has changed fully into a Skrull by now. Some of the other soldiers notice, and raise their weapons. Katrina glances at her fiancé and a moment later, they’re all blinded by a brilliant flash of light. The force throws most of the soldiers to the ground, and Katrina rises into the air, her entire body lit up brilliant pinks and yellows. Xavin is pounding forward, undeterred by the spray of bullets from the nearest vehicle as he crashes into two of the soldiers and grabs a third by the neck, throwing her to the ground savagely. Victor and Nico back away, Xavin and Katrina holding their own as they fight off the group of soldiers. Nico watches the other end of the village, and the quickly approaching larger force. It’s in that moment that one of the JF soldiers comes tumbling from the passenger seat of one of the vehicles, a power dampener in his hands.

“Katrina!” is all Nico can scream before the weapon is activated. Immediately, Katrina and Xavin hit the ground, powerless.

“What are their exoskeletons made of?” Victor asks breathlessly, stepping past Nico.

“I don’t know,” Nico cries.

Victor strides forward calmly. Nico ducks as the soldiers fire on Victor. Others are restraining Katrina while Xavin continues to fight wildly, even though he’s seriously underpowered now. The bullets don’t bother Victor, he uses a magnetic force field to block them easily.

“Get on the ground!” one of the soldiers screams at Victor. “Get on the ground now!”

“I can tell that your exoskeleton is a complex aluminum-titanium alloy,” Victor observes nonchalantly.

Nico watches as Victor flushes the soldier with his elector-magnetic control. The soldier stiffens and then falls under the weight of his armor. With a smile, Victor turns and waves a hand. The rest of the soldiers go to their knees, struggling against the now heavy, unpowered material they wear. Victor turns back to Nico, shrugging casually before approaching the soldier with the power dampener.

Nico is distracted, and that’s her fault. She doesn’t see the flanking squad until it’s too late. They grab her around the middle and drag her down the alleyway. She struggles against them, but they’re too strong. She’s being manhandled, forced to her knees. Nico twists, the knife still in her hand. One of the soldiers chuckles and speaks through the voice projector of his mask.

“What do you think you’re gonna do with that, sweetheart? You gonna stab us?”

The soldier kicks hard. Luckily, Nico holds the knife in her pyschoenergetic hand. The force would have broken the fingers on her flesh hand, but it’s still enough to send the knife clattering to the ground. Nico’s right arm is strong, but not strong enough to fight against the soldiers, and two men wrestle it behind her back. She can’t move, no matter how much she twists and struggles. One of the soldiers grabs her bag and she shouts.

“Robotic arm,” the soldier in front of her observes coolly. “What’s in the bag, sweetheart?”

Nico spits at him. She needs to rile him up. But he wipes it away calmly, bending towards Nico.

“Don’t want me to see what’s in the bag?” he chuckles. “Get her on her stomach.”

The soldiers holding her shove Nico hard. But the movement dislodges their grip on her right arm.
and she wrenches it free, reaching desperately for the knife. The soldier in front of her grabs it first, though, twirling it in his gloved hands. He grabs Nico hard with his other hand, behind the neck, and yanks her close, pressing the blade to her cheek.

“What if I carved up this pretty face, hmm?” he snarls. “Teach you a nice little lesson before you go to the Cube?”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Nico hisses.

Nico can’t see anything but the man’s eyes from behind his mask, but she can tell that he’s smiling.

“Wouldn’t I?”

Nico smiles too, because he’s fallen for it. The man presses the blade into the skin of Nico’s cheek. She feels her skin break, feels the blood run down her cheek. Immediately, her body bends backwards with such a force that she is freed from her captors. The soldiers shout, confused, struggling to their feet. The Staff of One erupts from Nico’s chest and she grabs it, climbing to her feet.

“When blood is shed, the Staff of One appears,” Nico grins. “Now, Get Lost.”

The Staff of One is powerful, but it’s a temperamental thing with a mind of its own. She had hoped that the spell would send the soldiers to Mars, but instead they all begin to stumble about blindly.

“I can’t see!” the soldier to Nico’s left shouts frantically.

“It’s a fucking witch!” the man who had been taunting Nico cries, waving his hand in front of his mask.

It’s not what Nico wanted, but it’s good enough. She turns and runs, colliding hard with Victor when she comes back out onto the street. Xavin is beating down the rest of the squad at the end of the road, fully powered once again.

“Let’s get out of here,” Nico pants, turning to see the other squad of soldiers are now only a block away.

Victor nods, Katrina not far behind him. Katrina calls for Xavin, and the four of them take off at a dead sprint, past the military vehicles and heading towards the cluster of trees that they’ve hidden the Frog in. Just as they crest the small hill and can see the Frog, Molly waiting nervously for them in the cargo door, a RedJet adorned with a Joint Task Force logo appears overhead. They keep running, but the jet’s red targeting light floods over them, dust whipping up in spirals from the jet’s rotors.

The weapons bay opens and a small heat tracking missile is released.

“Victor!” Nico screams.

“I’ve got it,” Victor replies easily, turning and lifting a hand.

The missile barrel rolls dangerously before turning unnaturally and hitting the ground just below the jet. The explosion sends more dust flying into the air, cloaking the Runaways’ movements as they continue to sprint towards the Frog.

“What’s going on?” Chase shouts as Nico reaches the lowered bay door.
“Why aren’t we cloaked?” Nico cries. She turns to Katrina and Xavin. “Get on!”

Katrina drags Xavin on board, but he is snarling furiously.

“It is shameful to run!” Xavin states.

“Nico is in charge and she says get on board so get on board!” Katrina cries.

Nico follows the two into the belly of the Frog, Chase on her heel. Chase brushes past Nico, going to the ship’s controls. The Frog hums as it lifts off. Molly stands in the doorway, eyes on Victor.

“C’mon, Victor!” Molly yells.

Nico rushes towards Molly, shoving her out of the doorway. Victor hums with electricity, magnetically connecting himself with the outside of the Frog. Nico bends to offer him a hand as the Frog reaches the tops of the trees, but he shakes his head.

“Don’t worry about me!” Victor calls. “I’ll keep them off out tail until we’re cloaked.”

Nico nods and stumbles back into the Frog. Her teammates are buckling into their seats, expecting a bumpy ride. Nico falls into one of the seats, grabbing the straps of the seatbelt. Chase maneuvers the Frog expertly, and Nico can hear Victor crawling onto the top of the ship. Nico glances out the window and sees two more missiles spiraling away from them.

“Get us cloaked, Chase!” Nico screams.

“I’m trying! But I gotta lose their tracking lock first!” Chase snaps, twisting the controls and sending the Frog banking dangerously to the right.

Nico’s right hand tightens on the Staff of One.

“Up Top,” she mutters.

The Staff tugs Nico up out of her seat, phasing her through the top of the Frog and bringing her to rest beside Victor. The magic of the Staff keeps her steady and the Frog maneuvers. Victor glances at her, waving another missile away. Nico eyes the jet on their tail.

“Go Away!” she commands, but the Staff does nothing. Shit, she’s used that one before. The Staff never casts the same spell twice with a single user. She’s panicking, her mind reeling, searching for a spell she hasn’t used before. She’s used “disable” before, she knows she has.

“Victor!” Nico cries. “What’s another way to say disable?”

Victor glances over at Nico, brow furrowed. It’s in that moment that an oncoming missile releases a payload of whining teflon balls. In an instant, the balls come whizzing forward, breaking through Victor electromagnetic force field. Victor doesn’t even have the chance to turn before the balls are ripping through his body. Nico watches, as if in slow motion, while Victor is literally torn to shreds. He falls, his grip on the ship releasing as his body rolls, broken and ragged, off the edge of the Frog. Nico leaps, grabbing Victor’s limp wrist just in time. She struggles to stay on top of the Frog, one hand on Victor, the other on the Staff.

The RedJet presses closer, the weapons bay doors opening once more.


The RedJet’s rotors stall and immediately the jet drops. Straining, Nico hauls Victor up, gripping his
destroyed body to her chest as she crawls unsteadily towards the top hatch of the Frog. From far below, she can hear the sound of the RedJet crashing hard. She phases the Staff of One back into her body so she can grip the metal bars better. Katrina appears, throwing open the hatch. Her eyes go wide when she sees Victor’s unmoving form and she reaches for him. Nico snarls as she twists her body and gets Victor into Katrina’s arms. Beneath her, the Frog’s cloaking panels begin to activate and the ship seems to disappear. Nico feels like she is floating and she eyes the ground far below her nervously, smoke billowing from the crashed jet. Katrina reaches out her hand and Nico grabs it and is dragged into the ship.

Nico crashes hard to the floor. Her teammates are frenzied. Molly is crying again, on her knees beside Victor. Nico finds Chase’s eyes.

“Get us the fuck out of here.”

***

The Asset huddles on the ground, shivering violently, his wrists and ankles bound in substantial, magnetic restraints. His head hangs heavy between his knees. There is nothing but torment, non-stop pain, the constant scream of micro-machines in his frontal lobe sending waves of searing agony through his nervous system. The only thing that makes it stop is when he does as he is told, and as of yet, he hasn’t been told to do anything. So the Asset grits his teeth and processes the only emotion that his mind can manage—terror.

They’re on a jet, the Asset and the Warden. The Asset has been out of cryo for nearly half a day now, and the Warden has only beaten him once. So the Asset is expecting more abuse soon. For the time being, the Asset has put as much space as possible between him and the Warden, and the Warden is acting like the Asset doesn’t exist.

“I can’t say we’re completely comfortable with you escorting your…specimen to the site personally, Warden,” a woman’s voice says through the video feed.

The Warden chuckles, low and dangerous, hands clasped behind his back.

“From what you tell me, Agent, these children made quite the embarrassment out of your team in Sudan this afternoon.”

The agent doesn’t reply and the Asset doesn’t really care what she has to say.

“Besides, I doubt any of your people could handle my asset the right way,” the Warden continues in a self-satisfied tone. “You see, he was stranded here after the Great Invasion, part of a squadron of Kree linked by a super-computer living hive-mind.”

The Warden chuckles again, and the sound turns the Asset’s stomach. The Warden is turning, moving towards the Asset. The Asset goes stiff, nostrils flaring as his breathing becomes panicked.

“When his compatriots were slaughtered, that computer was the only friend my poor boy had left,” the Warden continues in a tone of fake pity, mocking the Asset as he squats down. “We killed the bloated thing off course, far too dangerous. But my poor boy seemed so…lost without it that I took it upon myself to mimic its programming.”

The Warden’s clammy hand grabs the Asset roughly by the chin, jerking his face up. The Asset
keeps his eyes shut, but the Warden clenches both of his cheeks in his hands, digging his nails painfully into the Asset’s cheeks until his eyelids finally fly open. The Warden cocks his head, a sickening grin on his face.

“Oh, the fun I had stomping around in his mind,” the Warden says, mostly to the Asset. “As a result, he takes orders only from me. He can only be controlled by me.” The Warden straightens, sneering down at the Asset. “Watch,” the Warden growls.

He pulls back a fist and brings it down hard across the Assets cheek. When the Asset stiffens and moves to defend himself, the Warden knocks his hands away.

“Don’t fucking move,” the Warden commands.

The Asset’s arms fall to his lap. He remains perfectly, inhumanely still as the Warden pulls back his fist again and again and again. Even when he’s done, the Asset doesn’t move, doesn’t dare wipe away the blood on his lips. Because for a brief, wonderful moment, despite the external pain on his face, the internal agony goes quiet while the Asset tries his hardest to follow the Warden’s command.

“Please, spare me the details,” the agent speaks up. The Warden turns to look at the woman on the screen, sweat on his brow and an insane gleam in his eyes. “Just assure me that ‘your boy’ is capable of dealing with our problem.”

The Warden grins, revealing crooked, rotten teeth.

“Yes, of course,” the Warden replies, moving across the bay to a set of metal boxes. “I heard that there is a Skrull amongst your children.”

The Warden throws open one of the boxes, pulling out a small vile. He turns and immediately charges back towards the Asset. The Asset is still sitting perfectly still, not daring to move a muscle. The Warden undoes his restraints before opening the vile and shoving it painfully hard up one of the Asset’s nostrils. The Asset breathes in the best he can, taking in the scent.

“There, now he has the scent,” the Warden growls with a perverse joy. “He’ll have the Skrull in a matter of hours.”

The Warden bends and grabs the Asset by his hair. He drags him across the bay, towards a release hatch. The Asset doesn’t fight it. The Warden throws open the hatch, bending at the waist again and pulling the Asset’s face dangerously close to his own.

“Did you hear that, boy?” the Warden snarls. “Fetch.”

The Warden throws the Asset head first through the hatch, kicking him hard in the lower back. The Asset falls through the short chute and out into the night sky.
Chapter Twenty Two

Chapter Summary

Oh my goodness this chapter took me FOREVER. Sorry about that, I'm in the process of moving so everything has been busy and hectic. I WILL finish this story though, I promise. And I plan to write a sequel, so keep an eye out for that! Anyway, who's excited for the Runaways on hulu?

Victor never wakes up. He never moves, never breathes or twitches. Instead, he remains as still as a grave. He doesn’t bleed blood, but a thick, oily lubricating and conductive substance that pools around his unmoving form. In the places where his skin has been torn away, his robotic interior is revealed. He’s limp, body twisted at unnatural angles as they haul him through the Frog into the miniscule medical bay. Chase is in a panic. His specialty is hardly cyborgs, and Nico can see the desperation and the fear twisting his features. The rest of the team crowds near the door. The room is cramped and Nico is only getting in Chase’s way. So she turns and pushes past her friends.

“What’s wrong, Katrina?” Xavin asks quietly as Nico passes.

“Look what they did to Victor,” Katrina whimpers, eyes wet. “Why would they do that?”

Nico hurries through the belly of the Frog, looking around wildly until she finds her Book of Shadow. She snatches it up and rushes back towards Victor, throwing open the book as she goes.

“…may be true, but we are lucky that it was just a robot that was injured, and not a real person, Xavin is saying casually when Nico returns.

Katrina’s eyes go wide and she shoves Xavin away from her hard.

“Xavin, this is not the time for your—your… robophobia bullshit,” Chase snarls, not looking up from where he’s bent over Victor’s body.

Old Lace paces uncomfortably near the other end of the corridor. She changes from a velociraptor into a hamster and then into a cat, a symptom of Molly’s anxiety. Xavin presses closer to Katrina again, but Katrina begins to shout at her.

“Get away from me!” Katrina screeches, turning away and hurrying down the hall.

“I-I simply meant that…repair is possible,” Xavin attempts, but her blatant mistrust and dislike of robots is showing pretty clearly.

Nico searches her book. She knows there’s a spell in here that will help Victor. She had tried to use the Staff, but after six different spells and no results, she had given up. For the Staff to work, Nico needs to be able to visualize a result, and Nico has absolutely no idea what the repair of a cyborg would include.

“Y-you can fix him, can’t you, Chase?” Molly asks in a quiet, wavering voice.

Chase drops the tool in his hand and it clatters to the ground loudly. Swearing under his breath, he turns to face Molly.
“I don’t know!” Chase snarls. “Give me three seconds, *fuck!*”

Molly’s expression goes absolutely blank. Her eyes grow wide, however, full of fear and hurt, and she turns away before anyone can see the tears forming. With a stuttered sob, Molly runs towards the bay door. Nico wants to go after her, she wants to tell off Chase for taking out his anger on Molly, she wants to find the spell in her book. But instead, Chase begins to shout for Nico’s help. Xavin and Katrina scream at each other at the end of the hall. Old Lace, a velociraptor once more, growls at Chase once before leaning forward and chasing after Molly.

With a frustrated, helpless growl, Nico snaps her book shut and squeezes into the room beside Chase. Chase has maneuvered Victor onto his front. The back of Victor’s skull has been removed. Within the cavity is a human brain augmented by a series of shimmering, mechanical pieces made of a synthetic material. Chase’s hands are busy examining the robotic parts, but he pulls his left away and motions to Nico.

“Just-just hold this here, I need my micro-set,” Chase pants in a thin voice.

Nico does as she is asked, taking hold of the piece that buzzes softly in her fingers. With sweat pouring down his pinched brow, Chase hurries past Nico and takes off at a run down the corridor.

“It’s going to be okay,” Nico says, mostly to herself. “It’ll all be okay.”

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America’s accusatory glare is an exhausting thing. Billy had sat in it for the last hour with his twin, forced to stand in the middle of the group and admit sheepishly to what they’ve been up to for the last twenty four hours. The responses from Billy’s other teammates he can predict: it could have been a trap, they’re so reckless, they could have been killed, they should have told somebody where they were going. But America’s nearly unblinking stare, the embodiment of “I’m not mad, I’m disappointed,” makes Billy shrink in on himself. Breakfast has long gotten cold when Billy finally escapes those eyes. America had remained silent the entire time.

Kate’s decided that she’ll be accompanying Billy this evening when he heads back out to meet the Runaways. But right now, apparently the Young Avengers have been sentenced to imprisonment of an indeterminate length of time in Rogers’ villa. Billy and Tommy’s indiscretion seems to be quickly forgiven in favor of Kate’s escape plan. The rest of the team, just waking up from a night’s sleep, are quick to follow Kate’s barked orders. But Billy’s time in the spotlight has left him drained. So he scoops up the books Nico had given him and heads to his room.

But sleep doesn’t come. Billy sits cross legged on his bed, incredibly tired, yet his every cell still seems to be buzzing. So he settles on reading the books from Nico. They’re leather-bound, ancient looking tomes, the kind of thing you’d see in an old movie. Billy can’t remember the last time he owned a bound book. He has vague memories of a children’s book his mother used to read him with a lion on the cover. The books Billy holds now are much more severe. Heavy, water-stained, worn. Billy opens the first one.

The words of the book are hand-written in red ink and faded with time, in a language Billy doesn’t know. The English translation has been added to the margins, cramped and slanted, above a dozen other translations, scribbled in every available space. It takes Billy a moment to even find a word in a language he knows, finally spotting the English text after a thorough examination of the page.
To separate the psychoenergetic form from the physical form, a wizard must be able to center the chakra and access the Astral Plane. Condensing the psychoenergetic form can only be achieved through meditation or through a Separating Spell. The psychoenergetic form is most commonly stored within the hindbrain and along the spinal column. The symbol of Unka will create a doorway to the Astral Plane, through which the wizard may project his centered psychoenergetic form.

Billy closes the book again, searching the cover. It’s made of blank, cracked leather and doesn’t contain a name. Billy inspects the spine, the first few pages, finally finding the name on what could only barely be called a title page. A single word, written in the same language as the rest of the book. Billy pulls out his phone, quickly translating on Google.

*Ghostly Travels*

Shrugging, Billy turns to the second page.

The book is set up in a way that Billy has never seen before. It’s absolutely nonsensical. On each page, in a stream of thought order, is a different dump of information. Reading the damn thing takes turning back and forth between a dozen different pages. It takes Billy at least an hour to get his bearings in the blasted thing, another hour before he begins to make sense of it.

The separating spell, when Billy finally finds it, actually seems quite self-explanatory. Billy climbs off his bed and onto the floor, sitting exactly the same way a crude sketch depicts. Taking a deep breath and closing his eyes, Billy uses his mind’s eye to map out his surroundings. Per the books instructions, he searches until he finds a “crease.” Unnoticeable if you don’t know what you’re looking for, the crease is exactly like it had been described in the book. Throbbing energy fields overlapping, creating a nearly imperceptible crack in this reality, the spot where dimensions collide as they near a body of power. Concentrating on the crease, reaching his own psyche towards it, Billy recites the words.

Nothing happens. Billy cracks open an eye, but he is still seated on the floor of his room. Sighing, Billy begins the words again. When he speaks, though, there’s a…delay. Every word echoes about the room before landing on Billy’s ear. Billy opens his eyes again, falling silent. Nothing is amiss. The room is the same. Billy feels the same. But when Billy opens his mouth again, this time shouting senselessly, the sound still seems to reverberate along a long hall before Billy hears it.

Curious, Billy climbs to his feet. He approaches his door, reaching for the handle. But his fingers never find it. Instead, Billy glances down to find his arm sticking *through* the door. Shocked, Billy withdraws his hand, turning away from the door. As he spins, he catches glimpse of something on the ground. It’s with wide eyes and a breath caught in his chest that Billy realizes that he’s looking at himself, calmly sitting cross-legged on the ground, eyes closed and unmoving except for the slow rise and fall of his chest. For a long, dazed moment, all Billy can do is stare at himself. An unnamable sensation swirls in Billy’s stomach. When he is finally able to move, he rushes forward, reaching for his own face. But once again, his hand simply passes through without resistance.

Billy feels panic rising in his chest, but he swallows it down. *Ghostly Travels*. Billy’s been reading this book for over two hours, he knows that it’s about Astral Projection. This isn’t a failure, this is success. That realization inflates like a balloon inside Billy until he literally whoops out loud with excitement.

After a few grounding breaths, Billy turns back towards his door. He walks towards it, through it, past it. He’s in the hallway now, looking back on his closed bedroom door. With a wide grin, Billy looks around the empty hallway. He can hear the sounds of somebody around the corner, the sounds of people upstairs above him, the sounds of somebody inside a nearby room. Each sound is
amplified, yet still sounds as if it is coming through water. Billy glances up. He can see the energies of his friends, shining like Northern stars, each a familiar color and consistency by now, walking along the hall upstairs. Luckily, Billy isn’t unaccustomed to flying, and he takes to it in the astral plane like a duck to water, floating upwards and through the ceiling above him.

He finds Kate walking along the narrow hall, Vision hovering behind her. Billy calls Kate’s name, but she doesn’t even blink. Vision, on the other hand, pauses.

“What is it?” Kate asks when she notices that Vision has stopped.

Vision searches the hall with a confused look. He shakes his head vaguely.

“Nothing,” he mutters, turning back around.

Vision hadn’t seen him, Billy is sure of that, but he had still known somehow. Billy isn’t sure that he should be following Kate. If she ever found out, she would be furious. But Billy can’t help himself. He’s following the pair before he even realizes what he’s doing, floating along behind Vision, curious.

Kate takes Vision down the hall and into an empty room. Vision holds out a hand, connecting himself to a computer access panel on the wall. Billy almost sighs in relief. This is nothing new. For what must be at least the thirtieth time since they’ve arrived at the RWF base, Kate’s insisted that Vision plug himself into a terminal and try to find a way into the RWF system. And, for what must be at least the thirty-first time, Vision reports that he has been locked out.

“I’m sorry, Kate,” Vision says sheepishly, face still slightly out of focus. “This AI system… it’s… very advanced.”

Billy can tell that the idea of not being the better AI gets to Vision, because the android doesn’t stop, turning back to the access panel before him.

“I can access several recently uploaded reports from an overwatch station on the base,” Vision reports.

Kate shrugs, turning away.

“Oh,” Vision says, sounding faraway. The timbre of his voice goes rigid and mechanical. “I’ve found a… hijacked… video feed… from… from…”

Vision’s eyes are alight and suddenly his entire body goes rigid. Every screen in the room lights up—the television, the access panel, Kate’s phone—showing blurry video feed. Billy watches the short video, only a few seconds, repeated over and over again in a loop. It seems to show a poorly defined silhouette, seemingly standing on the outer shell of an airship, being ripped through with shrapnel. The body stands against the sunlight one moment, the next his body is torn apart in an instant and he falls. Before he hits the metal shell, the video restarts, playing again.

Vision’s body arches upwards at an unnatural angle, nearly folding in half backwards. Sparks fly from his eyes, his mouth, his fingertips. He’s screaming, but the sound is unbearable—a high-pitched, multi-tonal screech that never ends. Billy tries to cover his ears, but it does nothing in his astral form.

Kate dives forward, reaching for the sparking connection between Vision and the access panel. Billy shouts for her to stop, forgetting that she can’t hear him. But she grabs Vision’s wrist and wrestles him back, somehow without getting electrocuted. Vision goes limp in her lap, eyes rolling backwards. Kate jostles him worriedly. Billy is rushing forward, once again forgetting that there’s
nothing he can do. A spell leaves his lips, but only white, translucent wisps rush forward, dissipating quickly.

Vision’s eyes come into a bleary focus on Kate, rolling and blinking a few times before settling firmly on her face.

“What-…w-w-what happened?” Vision asks, voice still robotic, sounding like a broken feedback.

Billy sighs in relief, even if Vision still seems shaken. He’s struggling to recover, having a difficult time getting his limbs to work. His movements are unnatural, almost frightening. He gets to his feet first somehow, wrenching himself upwards from the middle, arms and legs twitching back and forth as he struggles to right himself. Kate’s asking him what he saw, what the video meant.

Billy wants to know the answer to those questions, but he doesn’t get to hear them. Because a moment later, there is a painful tugging at Billy’s navel. As if hooked by a fisherman, Billy loses his footing and begins zipping backwards. He moves in and out of objects, the floor, the walls, all the while being yanked by an invisible line. Billy barely has time to realize what’s happening before he’s being forced back into his physical body.

The vision is perfectly clear and excruciatingly painful. Splayed out before Billy is Victor’s body, absolutely decimated. A shimmering substance leaks from him like blood, pooling around his still form. His robotic interior is visible in the places where his skin has been shredded. There are voices shouting from all around Billy, but he can’t look away. Victor doesn’t respond to any of the people crying his name. He doesn’t shift, doesn’t blink, doesn’t breathe. Billy stares down at Victor, heart seizing. Because mostly, Victor just looks dead, entirely dead.

“Help us,” Nico pleads, but the voice comes from Billy’s own throat.

He’s released from the vision, flung backwards until his head hits the ground painfully. There’s an immediate migraine digging in behind Billy’s eyes, and he rubs his temples trying to relieve it.

The vision propels Billy to his feet. He begins stumbling on numb feet out his door and towards the stairs. Billy shakes his head. The vision had filled him with emotion, Nico’s emotions: fear, panic, helplessness, worry. The emotions cling to Billy, a sticky substance in his mind, becoming his own. Billy bursts into the room where Vision is still propped against a wall looking disoriented.

“They’ve been attacked,” Billy wheezes, barely able to breathe. “We have to help them.”

“What?” Kate asks, from where she is staring seriously at the computer across the room. “Who was attacked?”

“The Runaways!” Billy replies. “That video you saw! It was Victor.”

Kate finally glances up from the computer.

“How’d you…” Kate’s voice drifts off, confused.

Billy shakes his head, averting his eyes.

“I-I was trying out a spell from Nico’s books. Astral Projection.” Billy pauses, daring a glance at Kate. “I heard… the commotion up here and I can go through walls and stuff in the astral form so I came up here and I saw that video that just messed up Vision.”

Kate cocks her head but seems at a loss for words. It’s Vision that replies to Billy.
“That was from an intercepted video feed from a Joint Meta-Human Task Force Redjet in Sudan.”

“Were they captured?” Billy asks, stomach dropping so quickly he feels he might get sick.

Vision shakes his head slowly.

“I-I don’t think so.”

“Vision, you can help him,” Billy realizes. “He was created by Ultron!”

Vision actually appears to become paler.

“I can try,” he says sheepishly.

They both turn to look at Kate. She huffs in frustration.

“How will we get off the base?” she asks.

“I can show you how,” Billy replies breathlessly.

Billy leads the way towards the drainage tunnel at the east edge of the villa’s perimeter fence. But when they get there, there is a massive metal, barred door, locked with an intimidating set of padlocks and chains blocking the tunnel.

“No!” Billy cries.

“How’d you get through before?” Kate asks.

“This wasn’t here before,” Billy says, voice panicked.

But then, realization hits him.

“Nico,” Billy breathes. “The sorcerer, she said she used magic to open the tunnel.”

Billy almost regrets saying that, because immediately, every face turns towards him.

“I don’t know how to do it!” Billy defends, holding up his hands.

“Try,” Kate insists.

Billy swallows hard. Ever since the night before, he’s been seeing everything in a different light, literally. Everywhere he looks, he can see pulsing energy, able to manipulated or absorbed or controlled. Coming onto the RWF base this morning, through this very tunnel, sans gate, had been like walking into a black-lit room. Rogers had mentioned the warding against magic, but now Billy can see it. Symbols that Billy doesn’t recognize, painted invisibly on nearly every surface. Two such symbols sit on either side of the grate in front of them, dark and swirling, sucking in the energy from everything around them. How Nico broke this warding, Billy has no fucking idea.

Billy steps forward and puts his hand on one of the symbols, and immediately regrets it. The thing drains Billy, so quickly and so thoroughly that Billy’s knees give out. Kate has to catch Billy so he doesn’t hit the ground. His teammates want to know what just happened, and Billy knows that it must have looked strange to them. As far as they could see, he put his hand on a blank brick wall. But Billy is realizing the trap that he’s fallen into. Everywhere he looks, there are magical symbols. Some absorb the magic from the air around them, others project a sort of force field. What each one does specifically, Billy has no clue. But he does know that he’s inside the magical perimeter created by these symbols, which means he is absolutely powerless. Which is precisely the reason Nico has
set up her base camp a mile away.

“I can’t,” Billy admits. “I can’t break it.”

They don’t have Riri’s suit, which could blast through this door in a matter of seconds. They don’t have any of their confiscated weapons or tools with which to weaken the locks or chains. They can’t get through the gate. They’re going to have to find another way out.

Billy tries to establish a link with Nico, but he can’t even manage that, not from in here. He isn’t certain on how the rules work exactly, but he’s figured out that only Nico, safely away from the warding, can link them. Billy is beginning to panic, but Kate grabs him firmly, forcing him to face her.

“Calm the fuck down,” Kate demands. “We’re gonna figure this out.”

Billy grinds his teeth and forces himself to nod. Kate’s words aren’t particularly calming, and she’s about as therapeutic as a cactus, but Billy knows that he can’t become frantic. Kate squeezes Billy’s shoulder, trying to be reassuring, before turning towards Vision.

“Go get America,” she directs, and Vision disappears.

“How are we going to get off the base?” Billy asks, trying to keep his voice steady.

Kate swallows hard, glancing around.

“Rogers is gone with most of his force. The Black Widow is the only officer on the base right now,” Kate explains in jolted tones.

“So?”

Kate doesn’t get the chance to answer, because America is charging down the hill towards them, Eli and Tommy close on her heels. Kate walks forward, meeting America halfway and out of earshot.

The more time the two girls spend together, the more Billy thinks that they’ve learned to communicate telepathically. They exchange maybe a total of ten words, interacting mostly in self-serious glances. If it’s an argument, Billy would guess that Kate wins, because she America purses her lips and nods curtly, looking away.

“A distraction,” Billy hears America say slowly.

Billy doesn’t know what that means, so he watches Kate expectantly. Kate’s demeanor has changed though, like someone flipped her switch from demo to play, because a shadow of seriousness descends over her, a real physical thing that Billy can see in her aura. The pleasant violets at the edge of her energy become a hard and unforgiving deep purple.

“A distraction,” Kate repeats, settling Billy with a serious stare. “We need a distraction.”

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Plans and schemes. Bucky tightens the strap of his holsters around his chest. Plans and schemes and hard liquor. These are the things that Bucky Barnes are made of. He reaches for the oddly shaped flask, something Asgardian, aged for thousands of years. It tastes a bit like battery acid, but long
Bucky’s been alive a long time. He’s seen World Wars, he’s seen the Age of Heroes, he’s seen mass murder, he’s seen fear. He isn’t sure if the world truly goes through cycles, or if it’s simply chaos that occasionally aligns into something almost recognizable. The part of him still stuck in a Hydra freezer takes comfort at the idea of chaos. But the other part of him, the part that wants to be good enough for Steve Rogers hopes that he can predict the future. What his long life has actually amounted to, Bucky can’t fucking say, but he wants it all to be for something.

Plans and schemes. Bucky is chock-fucking-full of them. Bucky can play people like a fucking violin. He can quietly convince Steve to leave the RWF en force. Bucky can angle the Young Avengers in the right direction and convince them to chase after the impossible. Bucky can even take the JMTF wrongly reporting that the Young Avengers were sighted in Sudan in stride and use it to his advantage. Plans and schemes. But at the end of the day, the only person that Bucky trusts, the only person he might have ever trusted, is himself.

Bucky might play at being the good guy. He might put on a brightly colored costume and stand amongst the ranks of heroes. But deep down, Bucky has always known that that isn’t his true place.

Maybe Bucky isn’t a good guy. And as he watches Kate Bishop’s plan piecing together in the steeled glint of her dark eyes, Bucky thinks maybe she isn’t a good guy either. She isn’t asking Bucky’s permission, she isn’t *asking* Bucky for anything. She’s *telling* him what his part in her plan is in a tone that tells Bucky that she isn’t used to hearing the word “no.” Bucky keeps his face blank, years of practice have perfected his stony silence. He can’t tell if Kate knows what he is going to do. He has no idea how Kate would know, Bucky hasn’t told a soul. She wants him to leave the base, a request that would be ludicrous if he wasn’t already planning it. Because shit is about to hit the fan, and the first thing that Steve is going to do is to quarantine Bucky to the base like a disease.

“You’re insane, Kate Bishop,” Bucky laughs when she finally stops talking.

Kate purses her lips, not amused.

“What do we have a deal or not?” she growls.

Bucky runs his metal hand through his hair and pretends to think about it. Kate doesn’t just play the game, she plays to win, by any means necessary.

“How do I know that you’re going to deliver?” Bucky asks.

“I’ll get what you want, stop stalling.”

Ten minutes later, Bucky walks through the base, itching for the shadows but knowing that he must be seen for his plan to work. A majority of Steve’s forces left with him this morning. But the base is still fairly full. Refugees, rear forces, other employees, the eyes of hundreds of people find Bucky. Whispered voices begin, hushed tones repeating the same words, “Winter Soldier,” over and over again in every language. Bucky keeps his eyes forward. He knows that as soon as he arrives at the hangar, Black Widow will be called out. So he keeps walking, weapons in their holsters dripping off of him like Christmas ornaments.
“Barnes,” the flight deck officer says carefully when Bucky approaches.

Bucky is one of the few people on base with unquestioned access to equipment, including the jets. But he can see from the look on the officer’s face that somebody has withdrawn that privilege. Whether that was Steve or Romanoff, Bucky doesn’t know and he doesn’t care to ask. Instead, he nods at the officer and strides past him. The guy is smart, he doesn’t confront Bucky. Instead, he grabs for a walkie-talkie and Bucky can hear him calling for Romanoff. Bucky grins and selects a Black Cat fighter jet.

It takes Natasha not five minutes to get to the hanger. Bucky smiles brightly at her as she approaches. She doesn’t return it. Instead, she crosses her arms across her chest. She’s dressed in her uniform and she looks ready for a physical altercation. And she most likely has backup.

“Barnes,” Natasha greets coolly.

“Nat!” Bucky replies, leaping down from the cockpit.

“The base is on lock down,” Natasha recites. “All take-offs need prior approval from the Major.”

“Yeah, that’s not gonna work for me,” Bucky says with a shrug.

Nat sighs angrily, rubbing her brow.

“Barnes, don’t make me do this,” she glowers.

Her hand moves, and Bucky knows it’s a signal. He catches something soaring towards him from his peripherals and ducks to the left just in time. The arrow slices across the skin of Bucky’s upper arm before lodging into the side of the jet. Bucky turns to look up into the rafters where a dark figure in crouched.

“Barton,” Bucky calls loudly. “They ever gonna let you retire, man?”

Clint shrugs before slotting another arrow and taking aim.

“Nat called in a favor,” Clint replies, letting the arrow fly. It lands near the cockpit and with a hiss, the Black Cat disables.

Bucky looks at Nat, who has rounded on him with clenched fists.

“You really want to do this, Romanoff?” Bucky asks.

“You’re not leaving,” Nat says in a hard voice.

Bucky cracks his neck, falling into a defensive position.

There are things that Kate knows. Her father may be a vain man, a man obsessed with the illusion of untouchability, a man hell-bent on creating a theater of security around him. Once upon a time, when he was young and uncorrupted, long before the rise of North and men like him, Kate imagines her father must have been at least somewhat decent. The relationship between her parents had never made very much sense to her. She could never imagine her mother marrying the man her father is now, so, at one point, he must have been a good man. But whoever that man was, that exterior has withered away, leaving only the basest of humanity left in him. He wants only in his life to be seen by others as strong, successful, and smart. Kate’s father is in no way concerned with actually being strong or successful or smart. He is purely selfish, and that is his weakness.

When, entirely by accident, Kate had stumbled onto the unsecured link to her father’s private server at thirteen years old, she had found an absolute trove of information that, even at a young age, Kate knew was of paramount importance. What she had planned to do with that information, Kate can’t recall. At the time, she only resented her father for his callousness towards her mother. Not a month before, Kate had stood alone at her mother’s funeral, her father and her sister choosing to ignore entirely the death of Eleanor Bishop. So only basic revenge had driven Kate at the time.

Kate had moved as many files as possible onto her own computer. It took only two days before there was no more storage space. Several hard drives later, Kate had needed someone to teach her more in depth computer tech and hacking techniques. Enter Riri Williams, known to Kate only as Miss_Stark. Through her father’s network, Kate soon had access to millions of classified top secret documents and reports. Getting these documents were one thing, actually reading them was something else entirely.

The Cold War had been entirely orchestrated by Hydra as a cover for their many illegal experiments. Operation Paperclip, MKULTRA, uranium and radiation human experiments, Project GABRIEL, the Holmesburg Program, Project Bluebird, OKHILLTOP, Subproject 68, covert aerospace projects, eugenic experiments, Operation Sea-Spray, the Red Room, and, of course, the Winter Soldier Program. If anyone stepped out of line, they were visited by the Fist of Hydra and their deaths were blamed on the enemy. So long as the public was distracted and fueled by a fear of nuclear Armageddon, questions weren’t asked. Kate read the reports. She watched the videos and listened to the recordings. She looked at every photograph so many times that their images are burned permanently into her brain.

Hydra may be gone in name, but definitely not in spirit. It simply adapted, morphed into something stronger and even more sinister. No longer did these wicked men and women need to hide in the shadows. Now they stand in the light with outstretched arms before a cheering crowd. They don’t need the shadows any longer because there’s no need to construct a paper enemy. Secret dealings and back alley ransoms are necessary to convince humans that their fellow man is the enemy. A shroud of secrecy and constructed other-ness is how you tell a human being that another human is different than them, means to harm them, hates them and everything that they stand for. Secrecy isn’t needed by men like North. Because a real enemy has shown itself, an unhuman enemy. Meta-
humans, aliens, sorcerers. It’s human nature to fear what they don’t know, and it’s the nature of men like North to use that, to assure the public that their fears are real, that the monsters are coming for them, and that only he can protect them.

Things may have changed on the surface, but underneath it’s all the same. The same rot, the same festering decay, blackened, poisoned. The same men who delighted in the shadows in the 80’s are still gleefully inflicting pain today. Those are the true monsters. Beasts, leashed by those like North, his ravenous guard dogs.

There is a man whose name he tried to erase. His name may be hard to know, but his filthy fingerprints are all across history. A demon who has no desire for the sun, or the crowds, or the adoration of millions. He wants only pain and it’s continuation on his behalf. Those many horrific projects, programs, and operations that Kate had read about never really ended. Like Hydra, they simply have new names now. For years, Kate has known this. For months, she’s been planning. And for weeks, ever since she met her new friends, Kate’s been maneuvering with a hopeful eye on her prize.

The fates may be aligning. As much as Kate wants to be honest, the frantic, paranoid, obsessed voice in her head is screaming. When Vision had malfunctioned at seeing the video of Victor being shot, his system override had broken through a firewall in the system. Not the RWF system, but the JMHTF. And for a split second, Kate had access to a flurry of reports. One report in particular had caught Kate’s eye.

Kate’s father had warned her that something was coming for the Young Avengers. But she couldn’t have imagined what he meant.

Is she prepared? That’s the question that Kate asks herself over and over as they access the Armory, as they use Riri’s suit to blow open the drain gate, as she tightens the holsters across her chest, and as they make their way through the tunnel and out into the jungle.

Billy, Teddy, and Vision are they only ones Kate takes with her. The others need to cover for them, she had convinced America. In all honesty, Kate would prefer to be going alone. But Billy is frantic, Teddy wouldn’t leave his side, and Vision might be able to help this apparent injured cyborg.

Kate’s not sure what she’s expecting, but a pre-teen girl in a pink rabbit-ear hat is not that. Kate stops short, but before she can even say a word, the girl bolts, a terrified look on her face.

“Who was that?” Kate cries, turning to look back at Billy, who is straggling up the steep incline.

“Who?” Billy pants, finally glancing up at Kate.

Kate looks around, but the kid is gone. She opens her mouth to speak, but a moment later, a nearby boulder shifts and dislodges itself from the ground. Faintly glowing pink and looking miniscule lifting the boulder up over her shoulders, is the girl. Kate barely has time to duck before the boulder is hurling past her. Her teammates shout and dive out of the way, except for Vision, who simply phases through the rock. From the ground, Kate looks back at the girl. She looks like she means to grab another boulder, but instead, her knees buckle and she hits the ground, fainted.

“Molly!” Billy cries, scrambling to his feet and rushing towards the girl.

Kate hauls herself upright and follows. She’s confused, unsure what exactly happened, but at least the kid is breathing. Then it hits her.
“Molly?!” Kate gasps. “The kid we saved from the compound?”

“Yeah,” Billy replies, gently lifting the girl in his arms. “They said this happens to her when she uses her powers…thanks to what they did to her at that place.”

Billy strides forward into the yawning opening of a cave. Apprehensive, Kate follows him with the rest of their group. Just inside the cave, parked haphazardly, is a massive aerospace ship. The bay door is down, and Billy walks up it quickly. Teddy follows but Vision circles the ship and fades through the metal shell. Kate slows her step, searching the exterior of the ship. It’s splattered with bullet holes, but it doesn’t Kate long to find what she’s looking for. A tracker, still active. Rookie mistake. Kate pockets the thing without turning it off.

Kate’s attention is drawn by a volley of shouting inside the vessel. She quickly boards to find a massive and infuriated Skrull.

“What did you do to her!” he screams.

Billy sputters an explanation, but Teddy just looks dumbstruck. The Skrull advances.

“I knew I couldn’t trust you,” the Skrull snarls, reaching for Billy. “Sorcerers are duplicitous by nature.”

Kate charges forward, inserting herself between Billy and the Skrull.

“Step the fuck back, Jolly Green,” Kate hisses, reaching for her pistol. “We’re here to help. The kid passed out.”

A tall, painfully gorgeous girl comes rushing towards them. Her blonde hair shimmers and slides across her shoulders like water and even when twisted with concern, her features are flawless.

“You’re Karolina Dean,” Kate says breathlessly as the blonde grabs the Skrull’s arm purposefully. “I’ve seen your movies.”

“Yeah,” Karolina huffs, annoyed. “And who the hell are you?”

“These are my teammates,” Billy says breathlessly. “We came to help Victor.”

Karolina gives him an apprehensive glance, but before she can say anything, there’s a loud, screech from down the corridor. A pair of voices begin to shout as the room lights up brilliantly. They all turn to hurry down the hall. A girl dressed like a Hot Topic catalog stumbles from the room as Kate pulls even with the door frame. It takes Kate a moment to understand what she’s seeing.

On a medical table is a badly injured boy with sandy hair. Arching over him, still halfway in the wall, is Vision. Both boys are frozen, mouths wide and emitting high pitched screams. Electricity sparks between them as Vision’s body seems to be melting into some sort of liquid.

“SKKKAAAAAKKK—DEFENSIVE SY-SYSTEM ACTIVE—GRR-RRR—OFFENSIVE MEASURES AUTHORIZED—“

Kate can’t tell which one is saying it, the sound doesn’t seem to be coming from their mouths.

“What are you doing to Vision?!” Teddy cries, shoving past Karolina only to be stopped with a heavy hand on his shoulder from the Skrull.

“You attempt to use a robot to ambush us?” the Skrull roars.
“Let him through!” Billy shouts.

“You presume to give me orders, little one?” the Skrull laughs, body growing in size.

“Xavin, wait—“ Karolina tries, but it’s too late.

Teddy’s body explodes in size as he shoves the Skrull hard.

“You’ve made your final mistake,” the Skrull snarls.

The Skrull pulls back and fist and lands a heavy punch across Teddy’s chin, sending him flying. Billy shouts, unable to do much with Molly still in his arms. Kate dives towards the fray as Teddy returns the punch. Hot Topic is shouting now too, a shimmering staff in her hand.

“Everyone chill out!”

Immediately, the temperature in the room drops. In only a matter of seconds, every surface is covered in a layer of ice. Kate’s feet slip from beneath her and she hits the ground and Teddy slides past her, unable to get his balance. It’s not long before Kate’s teeth are chattering, her breath coming in white puffs. She struggles to her feet and pushes into the medical bay towards Vision. Without hesitation, she puts her hands on Vision’s shoulders and shoves. But her hands slip right through his melting skin. In an instant, she’s filled with an unnamable sensation. Not quite pain, not quite fear, but somehow both of those things. The seconds tick by in agony as Kate struggles to even move, to see, to breathe.

When Kate’s eyes finally work again, she finds herself on her side on the frozen ground, Vision’s amorphous body beside her. Shivering violently and struggling to get her limbs to work, Kate forces herself onto her knees and prods Vision nervously.

“Viz, come on!” Kate pants.

His body begins to retake form, slowly. His uneven eyes blink open, dazed.

“Th-thank you,” he sputters.

“What happened?”

“I…don’t know but I—“

He’s stopped midsentence by a gurgling behind them. Kate looks up to find the other boy on his feet, but just barely. His eyes are alight with white light and from his mouth leaks an oily substance as he struggles to speak. He moves like the living dead, feet fumbling and knees knocking. Vision grips his head and groans, rolling away from the boy.

More people press into the room. They talk and shout over each other. Kate can’t stay here, not for very much longer. She wants to know what’s happening, she wants to make sure Vision is alright. But she needs to keep her teammates and these other people safe. There’s no time. So Kate struggles to her feet and ducks out of the room and past the crowd. Crossing her arms across her, Kate gingerly makes her way across the melting ice and out of the ship. The temperature difference is astounding as she fumbles out into the jungle heat.

But unfortunately, Kate isn’t the only one with the idea. Moments later, the rest of the teen wonders are escaping the frigid inside of the ship. Kate nearly screams when she turns and finds herself face to face with a fucking dinosaur.
“That’s just Old Lace,” the Japanese girl shrugs, approaching Kate. “Sorry about that in there. We’re all a little…tense after what happened today. I’m Niko.”

Niko looks strained, exhausted, emotionally worn out, and she carries that all plainly. Kate takes her offered hand.

“Kate,” she mutters.

“What happened in there?” Niko asks.

“I don’t know. I’ve never seen Vision like that.”

Kate is impatient. She tries not to let it show. She suppresses a groan when Billy helps the sandy haired zombie out into the cave, though, admittedly, the guy is looking significantly better. Vision appears, phasing out of the ship and coming to Kate’s side.

“Well, if it isn’t the not so friendly ghost,” Niko says, crossing her arms.

“I apologize for my behavior,” Vision replies, looking down sheepishly. “Your cybernetic friend and I appear to share many of the same programming codes and electromagnetic signatures.” Vision looks at Kate seriously. “That is why I felt his pain when I saw him damaged. His synaptic responses were transmitted through the signal and I was susceptible to them. It was a…distress call of sorts.”

“You’re the Vision,” Niko guesses as Kate bounces from foot to foot. “Victor’s father was Ultron.”

“Yes. Our code is so similar that we create a…confusing feedback.” Vision glances over at Victor who sways dangerously where he stands. “I may be able to help your friend with the proper equipment. Perhaps back at the Rebels Without Flags base?”

Niko snorts.

“There’s no way we’re going there,” Niko says, putting her hands on her hips.

Kate can’t wait anymore. Pulling her phone from her pocket, she brushes past Niko.

“Gotta check on something,” she mutters as a half-assed excuse.

Kate doesn’t look back, rushing out of the cave, heart racing. Kate had only had access to the JMHTF system for little over a minute, but years of practice had kicked in and she had transferred a hijack uplink onto her mobile. Kate checks that now. The transport is in Sudan, Kate only has a few minutes. Hands steady, Kate cocks her pistols.

“What are you doing?”

Kate jumps at the sound of Billy’s voice. She turns to find Billy and Teddy with curious looks on their face. Kate grinds her teeth and tries to think of a lie.

“You need to get everyone inside,” Kate says quickly.

Billy’s brow furrows.

“Why?”

Of course, that’s the moment that the Skrull decides to make another appearance, now in human skin.
“I must apologize for my behavior,” the Skrull says in a tone that tells Kate he’s being forced to apologize. “We Skrulls are not known for our patience.”

Billy chuckles.

“You don’t have to tell me,” he laughs, jerking his thumb towards Teddy. “This one is half Skrull himself, but all of him’s impatient.”

The Skrull’s face lights up.

“Are you truly half Skrull?”

“And half Kree,” Billy adds brightly.

“Billy,” Teddy grumbles.

“What? It’s pretty cool. His mom was like an empress or something.”

The Skrull freezes, mouth hung open.

“Y-you are Dorrek Vii?” he gasps, eyes actually filling with tears. Teddy’s face is turning a bright shade of red. “The Great Unifier who will bring union to the Skrull Empire?!”

The Skrull drops to his knees, prostrating deeply. Billy’s eyes become the size of saucers as Teddy sputters awkwardly, unsure what to do with his hands.

“I am at your service, My Savior,” the Skrull says into the ground.

“Well…I actually…passed on the job,” Teddy replies, ducking his head.

With an almost broken look, the Skrull glances up.

“B-but the Skrull Empire is fractured…in disarray. The destruction of my homeworld could have been prevented had our Empire been unified,” he cries. “Your destiny is too important to simply…”pass on.”

Kate huffs angrily, grabbing Billy hard.

“Billy, get everyone onto the ship, now,” she commands.

Billy looks like he wants to question it, but the Skrull is getting to his feet, the familiar fury back in place on his skin.

“Unacceptable!” the Skrull roars. “You have been chosen for a great duty for our Empire! You will embrace it or live a life of shame and—”

He never finishes his diatribe. One moment, the Skrull stands with his arms outstretched and body firm in anger, the next he is simply gone. A flash of green, the sound of snapping bones, a slight breeze, and then nothing. Kate’s stomach drops.

The three of them turn. Twenty feet away, one foot on a boulder, the Skrull limp in his arms, is…a man. But not a man at all. Not human, that’s for sure. If Kate had to guess, she’d say he was Kree. But that’s not quite right. Because this…this is a beast. Nearly seven feet tall, white hair, red eyes, nothing but bundled muscle, and dressed in some sort of armor. He drops the Skrull carelessly to the ground. Somebody inside the cave screams. With an upturned lip, this creature surveys his surroundings until his burning crimson eyes land on Kate. And for the first time in a very long time,
Kate feels fear, real fear.

Kate knows who this is and she knows who sent him. At least, she’s read about him on paper. Reality is worse, much much worse. She’s made a mistake. She’s been a fool. And her friends are about to die for her mistakes. There’s no time to run or to hide. There’s no time to get her friends somewhere safe. There’s barely enough time for her to pull her pistol. This monster cracks his neck and steps over the Skrull’s body.

“Who’s next?”

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“How was the landing?” the Warden’s voice sneers in the Asset’s ear. “Little rough?”

That’s funny to the Warden, the Asset’s pain. The Asset’s arm is definitely broken, and probably a few ribs, but that kind of pain is barely worth his attention. He rolls onto his front and climbs to his feet, his body already working to heal itself. A crowd surrounds him, muttering and dumbstruck. The Asset doesn’t care what they’re saying.

“My baby!” a woman screams. “My baby is in the car.”

She rushes forward, grabbing the front of the Asset’s shirt and then immediately withering under his stare. The Asset turns and see a half collapsed car. Inside is a child crying loudly. The sound is grating.

“It’s time to remove your leash,” the Warden is saying. “I know you’ll be a good boy.”

“Please,” the pudgy woman sobs, stumbling backwards towards the car. “My baby, please!”

“Yes…” the Warden sighs, annoyed. “We mustn’t forget the little people.”

The Asset steps forward, shoving past the woman and taking hold of the door. With a swift movement, he tears the door from the frame and throws it behind him. The child continues to cry, loud and terrified. The Asset bends forward and grabs the child’s ankle, ripping the safety belt away from the child seat, and yanks the kid free. Holding it by the leg, the Asset turns towards the pudgy woman who stares up at him fearfully.

“Put the child down,” the Warden says in a bored voice.

The Asset pulls the child close to his face, sniffing. It’s not what he’s looking for.

“You don’t want to make me angry now, do you?” the Warden warns.

With a growl, the Asset tosses the toddler at the woman.

“That’s a good boy,” the Warden rumbles, sending an uncomfortable shiver down the Asset’s spine.

Before any of the other humans can try to interact with him, the Asset takes off. He lets his programming take over. It’s easier that way. Don’t think. Thinking leads to pain. Simply…obey.

The Skrull is close, the Asset can smell it. He barrels through the small city and charges into the jungle. The landscape flies by. The Asset thinks that once, a long time ago, he enjoyed running.
The Asset forces that memory out of his head. It will only lead to punishment. Who or what he was before doesn’t matter. That entity is long dead. To even acknowledge its ghost lands the Asset in the Rewash Station. The Asset runs faster.

The Asset enters the Whitespace and it’s a blessing. Freedom from this world, from this life. The Whitespace is as close to heaven that the Asset will ever be. All unnecessary stimuli is eliminated from conscious awareness. Body intelligence takes control. There is no good and no bad. There is no pain. There is only the objective.

The Skrull doesn’t see the Asset coming. He’s distracted and far too easy to take down. The Skrull’s neck snaps like a twig in the Asset’s hands. Faces. The unimportant ones fade to white. The cries of a girl. The sweaty voice of the Warden. Pain. It all fades away.

The Asset has killed the Skrull. The Warden wants him to kill more. He calls him “my little killer.” But in the Whitespace, there is no killer. Killing is accomplished. That is all.

This one’s voice is all pain and love. Strike before the pain turns to rage.

This one, using words like a weapon. Neutralize the voice, neutralize the threat.

This one, changing into something stronger, a bigger challenge. Strike now while he retains a human form and human vulnerabilities.


The Whitespace grows hazy with color and the Asset’s head begins to ache. The Warden’s voice forces itself through the Asset’s brain.

“You know I don’t like when you white out on me, my boy. It makes it so hard for me to keep up with you.” The Warden pauses and the pause makes the Asset’s stomach twist. “You will be punished quite severely for it when you return.”

A cyborg is moving towards the Asset for a counterattack.

“Now, you may kill the half-Skrull. I have no need for him,” the Warden says dismissively.

“You should tell whoever’s talking to you that their signal is strong and sloppy,” the cyborg states, hands glowing. “And…that you will not be able to hurt anyone else.”

The cyborg’s arm moves into the Asset’s chest. Pain, searing and all consuming, but nothing the Asset isn’t used to. He struggles, craving the Whitespace, needing to get free.

“I am solidifying my hand inside your chest cavity,” the cyborg reports calmly. “Please stop fighting, I do not wish to cause you pain.”

The Asset’s head snaps forward and he stares the cyborg in the eyes.

“Pain is my home,” the Asset snarls, finally getting her feet against the cyborg’s chest.

“Do no move!” the cyborg shouts when the Asset begins to shove himself away with his feet. “You could die!”

“Good.”

With a roar, the Asset finally gets free. The cyborg’s arm rips apart and the Asset falls to the ground, half an arm stuck out from his chest. The Asset pulls his electromagnetic weapon and fires. The
cyborg stutters and falls, sparking. The Asset turns away.

A memory, foggy and cold, breaks through to the front of the Asset’s mind. When he looks down, he sees a soldier…a friend, sprawled on the ground, bleeding as an alarm blares overhead. Abandon ship.

“Noh-Varr…” the friend sputter as blood pours from his mouth. In his hands he holds his organs as they spill from his split middle. “P-please kill me,” the friend begs.

The Asset has no name. He has no friends. He had no emotions. Except for those that press against his chest. Loss, sadness, helplessness, dread. The Asset lifts his boot. He will slaughter this spirit.

Something small and fast collides hard with the Asset’s back, sending him flying. His head smashes against a tree trunk. He struggles to get to his feet, to regain his bearings. The Warden’s voice is in his ear again, but it’s not addressing him.

“…may be unexpected but that’s no reason to retreat.” The Warden pauses, presumably listening to somebody else speak before continuing. “Three of the first four targets are reading as extra-terrestrials. No legal standing in the US….I’d get to keep those.”

The way the Warden says the word “keep” makes the Asset’s skin crawl.

“You’re making me upset, boy,” the Warden growls, once again addressing the Asset. “I need you to keep the enemy engaged and prepare for extraction. Don’t make me activate your psycho-arthritis pain incentives.”

The Asset forces himself upright and charges forward, back towards the targets and away from the threats of pain. The Whitespace is enticing but the Asset forces himself to remain aware.

The Asset gets his hands around the throat of a target, throwing them hard against the ground. A girl aims a pistol at him, a tranquilizer. The Asset ducks out the way and the dart embeds itself into the neck of a large reptile. He charges towards the girl. She's a good fighter, but she is merely mortal. Her dark eyes flash with anger and she holds her own for ten seconds, longer than most. But the Asset is stronger and faster and her well aimed hits mean nothing to him. In a moment, he catches exposed and kicks her hard in the head. She hits the ground, unmoving.

Across the clearing of the thick jungle, a small girl stands, terrified. The Asset can smell that she's enhanced, he knows that she’s the one who kicked him before. Without a thought, the Asset charges. A different female steps in his way, brandishing a staff. Sorcerer. She begins to recite a spell, but the Asset closes his fist around her neck, cutting her off before she can finish. She chokes and sputters. The Asset looks into her eyes. He will watch her die, it’s what the Warden wants.

“Deactivate,” the Warden’s bored voice says.

Immediately, the Asset goes limp. The girl in his hand falls to the ground coughing and choking. A faint whistling announces the arrival of the stealth jet. A claw spirals down from the opened bay door. The sorcerer watches with wide eyes as the claw wraps around the Asset’s middle. There is a violent tug and the Asset’s feet leave the ground. He’s zooming upwards.

The Asset crashes into the bay of the jet, released by the claw. He sees the Warden, his back turned, bent over four prone bodies. And then the Asset sees nothing at all.

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Consciousness comes in hazy bursts to Teddy. He can’t remember where he is or how he got here. He can only barely remember the past hour. All he really knows for sure is terror. Because when he opens his eyes, he finds a constrictive metal mask that covers his entire face is secured tightly around his head. He can’t see, he almost can’t breathe. He tries to move, but he finds himself heavy. Not only have his hands and feet been bound in something massive and metal, but he’s been drugged. He can’t see, but he can tell he’s in a moving vessel. He can’t see, but he can hear the conversation of strangers around him.

Terror. Pure, all consuming terror. For Teddy’s entire life, the threat of the Cube has hung over his head, something nebulous but terrifying. Don’t step out of line, you’ll be sent to the Cube. Don’t do or say the wrong things, don’t love the wrong people, don’t worship the wrong god, or you’ll be sent to the Cube. It had been a frightening and effective threat. Everyone knows about the Cube yet nobody really knows about the Cube. Because those who go in, never come out again. The threats always been there, but somehow, Teddy thought of the Cube the way he thought of Hell. A frightening place that may or may not exist, with the sole purpose of scaring people into line.

But those threats have finally come to fruition. Teddy flew too close to the sun. He thought he could break the rules and get away with it. He thought that if his intentions were right, he would be okay. He thought and he thought and he thought, but he was wrong. He flew too close to the sun and now he is plummeting back down to Earth, down to the furthest depths of the deepest hole. Because Teddy may not be able to see or remember where he is or how he got here, but he knows for certain only one thing: he’s going to the Cube. He’s been captured and he’s been damned to Hell itself.

Teddy wants to cry, he wants to scream, he wants to fight. But he can’t do any of those things. He can’t even move. This isn’t happening. It can’t be happening.

Teddy thinks of his life, of his mother, of his friends. He thinks of Billy. Oh god, Billy. Teddy wants to weep from sorrow, he wants to mourn the lost life, the unfulfilled future that he thought he would have with Billy. A life Teddy will never know flashes before his eyes. He doesn’t know what happened to Billy. For all Teddy knows, Billy is dead. Or worse...captured. Teddy swallows hard, the thought so terrible he can’t bear it. The idea of Billy being doomed to the same horrid fate makes Teddy think he might get sick. His heart is racing, but he still can’t move, he still can’t call out for Billy. He’s utterly and entirely helpless, and that’s the worst part of it all.

“I don’t feel good about making the extraction while there’s still active hostiles,” a voice says from nearby. “The order was to bring the Young Avengers in alive.”

The voice that answers is slimy, nasally, sadistic.

“What did I tell you? Our contacts were unreachable at the time,” the voice hisses, Beelzebub himself. “My cockroach will keep them occupied. He’s so efficient it’s almost boring.”

Footsteps approach Teddy. His breath comes in short bursts. Somebody grabs his hair hard and wrenches his face upwards.

“Or maybe it’s just been too long since I’ve gotten anything new to play with.” The man pulls Teddy close and sniffs him. “Gentlemen, to the Cube.”

Teddy’s stomach drops, and tears finally spring free from his eyes. The Cube. That’s what the man said. It’s actually happening.
“And the Asset, sir?”

The man sighs and moves away from Teddy.

“He’s within range?”

“Affirmative.”

“Well, I suppose we should retrieve him.”

More footsteps and shouting.

“You heard the Warden. Spear ‘im and clear ‘im, boys.”

The voices move away. The vessel tips as it’s maneuvered. Again and again Teddy tries to scream. Billy’s name sits in his throat, unable to move past his tongue. Teddy sobs harder.

“Reel him in and set a course for the Cube,” the Warden says. “We’ve been away from home for far too long.”

“Sir, we have a priority call from Agent Ruther demanding to speak to you,” someone reports from the cockpit.

“Tell her that we ran into more resistance than expected. We were barely able to retrieve our asset, much less capture any renegades,” the Warden replies sourly. “If she has any questions, remind her that as far as she’s concerned, neither I nor my agents technically exist.”

If possible, Teddy falls even further into despair. He’s not just being sent to the Cube, he’s being disappeared. This never happened. There would be no trial, no report. As far as the government was concerned, Teddy Altman never existed. A life sentence for a life that was never there in the first place. Teddy’s an alien. His mother, his poor mother, had said not two days ago that the reason she had worked so hard for so long to keep him protected was not only to hide him from the Skrull and the Kree, but because, according the US government, he has no rights and no standing. Anything could happen to him. Anything is going to happen to him.

The Warden had said it himself, Teddy is his new toy.
“Wake up!”

The words drift into Kate’s ear, faint, sounding like someone shouting from miles away. The words are sobbed in a broken voice, but they’re still a spell, and in a moment, Kate is sitting bolt upright, reaching for the weapon on her hip that is no longer there.

“Did we win?” a child’s voice asks.

Kate blinks a few times, getting her bearings. Her head aches and her vision is slightly blurred. Definitely a concussion. Kate struggles to her feet more slowly than usual.

“He was about to finish us off,” Niko practically sobs, voice gravelly. “But he got…pulled away.”

“We were…rescued?” Kate asks. Steve Rogers, Kate thinks, and that terrifies her for some reason.


Kate feels like the earth is shifting beneath her feet. It could be the concussion, but it’s probably guilt. This is her fault, all her fucking fault. She needs to get out of here, she needs to get to the extraction point.

“Our assailant was named Noh-Varr,” Vision says from where he’s leaned against a tree, halfway on the ground. His right arm is missing from the elbow down. “An interdimensional Kree refugee working with a Black Ops Team. He helped them take Billy and Teddy.”

Vision struggles to his feet, stumbling over roots and underbrush. His face is twisted with an entirely human emotion, the same emotion Kate is feeling now: guilt.

“My psycho-kinetic form disperses my processing power throughout my body,” Vision continues, head hung low. “When part of me was lost, I was…incapacitated while my CPU adjusted. I was unable to stop them.”

“Vision, you did everything that you could,” Kate says, voice slightly slurred. “Are you alright?”

“It’s nothing that requires…special attention,” Vision replies.

Kate steps close to Vision.

“We have to go after them,” she says in a low voice.

“Yeah?” Niko barks, surprisingly close and suddenly furious. “And how do you propose we do that? Go tattle to Captain America?”

Kate scoffs.

“Vision and I will handle this.”

“No fucking way you’re going alone,” Niko growls. “They have our friends too.”

“Sorry, Sabrina, but the Young Avengers have it covered,” Kate retorts. “We have actual combat experience.”
“I will inform the rest of the team,” Vision says.

“No!” Kate cries. Two pairs of eyes search her. She grinds her teeth for a moment. “We don’t have time. I put a tracker on that…freak and I’ve got trans less than a click away.”

“What?” Vision and Niko ask at the same time.

“I’m going now,” Kate snaps, turning a little too quickly. Her feet get tangled and she stumbles forward.

“Kate, you have a very serious head injury,” Vision informs her.

“Yeah, well, I also have a plan. Which is more than anyone else can say. Let’s go get your arm back, Viz.”

Niko steps in front of Kate, eyes glowing yellow. It’s disconcerting and makes Kate pause.

“I’m going with you.”

“No,” Kate repeats, getting to the end of her leash.

“Without Billy, it would be wise to bring a sorcerer with us,” Vision interjects.

“If you’re going after them, then I’m coming with you,” Victor calls from where he approaches.

Kate growls under her breath.

“Great, fucking field trip to the fucking Cube,” Kate shouts. “Wanna bring the kid too?”

“I really think we should inform the rest of the team,” Vision says nervously.

“No!” Kate snaps. “I have a plan and I’m leaving now.”

Kate begins to walk away. She’s got places to be right now. Her skin is crawling, feeling more like an ill-fitting wool sweater than her own body. Kate wants to rip it off of her bones, grow into something new, something better. She had failed, she always fails because she’s weak and she’s wrong in the head. She had thought she could take on anything that North would throw at her, and she had been wrong, so fucking wrong. The enhanced Kree had taken her down like swatting away a fly. Because that’s all Kate is, a miserable insect crawling on the crust of this condemned planet. Kate needs to move, she always needs to move. Because deep down, she’s absolutely terrified of what might happen if she stood still.

Part one of Kate’s plan had been a disaster. But she can still salvage this. Her heart is racing, her head is pounding, she feels a little ill, but she isn’t going to stop now. She had made a deal, and she was going to deliver. She’s going to save her friends, she’s not going to let that sadistic fuck known now as only the Warden get his filthy, chubby fingers on them. Kate got the tracker on the Warden’s pet, she knows where they’re going, and she’s going to be close on their heels.

The trek through the jungle is difficult. Every stump, every fallen tree, every branch and root seems to be purposefully trying to stop her, but she isn’t going to stop them. Vision, Niko, and Victor are close behind her, no matter how much distance she tries to put between herself and her tagalongs. They ask her questions. Vision especially seems suspicious. Kate ignores them.

The Redjet is expertly squeezed into the tiniest of clearings. The Winter Soldier is long gone. Sitting in the cockpit is a bow and a bundle of specialized arrows. Hawkeye’s bow and arrows. That
wasn’t part of the deal, but Kate can’t help but smile and fondle the expertly crafted bow like a long
lost lover.

“Come to Mama,” Kate breathes, slinging the thing across her back. She doesn’t have the time to
question how or why the bow is here.

Vision connects himself into the cockpit’s controls, an apprehensive look on his face that Kate
ignores. She shoots a cool looks at Niko and Victor as they strap themselves into seats in the back.

The Redjet lifts off, and the change in atmosphere makes Kate’s head feel like it’s splitting in half.
She holds her temples, ears ringing so loudly she can barely hear Vision asking for a heading. Kate
struggles to upload the tracker into the jet’s computer.

The rest of the rescue party sits in stony silence. Kate tightens her jaw, despite the pain in her head,
and stares hard at the storm clouds gathering on the horizon. Thunder claps overhead. The filtered
air in the cabin smells like ozone, sour and acidic. There’s a metallic taste in Kate’s mouth that she
thinks might be blood. But Kate doesn’t care. She can’t care. She’s far too occupied. Her mind
refuses to be still. In fact, it feels too full, a sensation that Kate is all too familiar with. In fact, that
sensation is the only thing that Kate thinks she can count on with certainty. Kate swallows down the
blood and stares ahead.

The silence in the cabin is real, heavy thing that sits awkwardly around them. The rest of their small
group has questions for Kate that they aren’t asking. Kate can practically see the words on their lips.
But they never escape, instead replaced with suspicious glares and angry glances. Kate doesn’t care
what the others think. She wishes she was alone, even though she knows that it isn’t exactly smart to
go running into the Cube as a lone mortal human. She needs the others, and that might be what hurts
her the most. Needing other people, the very thought turns Kate’s stomach.

Kate keeps her eyes on the horizon. With a hardened resolve, Kate looks ahead to the very gates of
Hell.

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Barnes is gone. Some of the kids are missing and their friends aren’t talking, even from the inside of
their holding cells. Wakandan air control spotted a covert Black Ops JMHTF jet heading west.
Expeditionary forces sent to the scene found signs of a meta-human fight and two unknown juveniles
and a dog fleeing in an extra-orbital aerospace ship. That’s what Natasha’s clipped report had read.

Steve stands in downtown Los Angeles. A few hundred meters away, Peter Parker holds the head
of a Sentinel up triumphantly, joking about mounting it on his wall. A crowd of protestors surround
them. They cheer and they shout and they block the para-military police force from getting to
Steve’s team. Steve keeps his hood up and his face covered. He can’t risk being recognized, so he
hurries into the shadow of his QuinJet.

Once one pillar breaks, the entire structures collapses. This is something that Steve knows all too
well. Things haven’t exactly been good lately, far from it, but Steve has been doing good work. He
knows that. America Chavez’s words still burn in the back of his mind, but he can’t let them distract
him from reality. And reality is that Steve has been saving lives. Things were at least…stable
before.
Then these kids showed up.

Steve knows he can’t blame the kids. It’s not really their fault. They simply shouted the words that millions of people across the globe have whispered to each other for a decade. Words that Steve himself has said to Bucky again and again. Steve has no right to tell them what they can say and what they can do. But he does have the right to stop them from getting everyone that Steve has struggled to save for the past thirty years killed. Because North has always known. He’s known about the Rebels Without Flags. He’s known about Steve. And he’s been planning. But so has Steve. It’s been a silent, secret chess match, one calculated move after another. North isn’t an idiot. Murdering the thousands of people that Steve protects on the base without reason would be suicide. His constituents and his opponents would rise up and demand change, and North would be dethroned.

But this unrest, children publically standing up to North, fueling protestors across the globe, forcing Steve to intervene…that’s something North can spin in his favor. And Steve knows all too well that the second North can give the public a reason, he won’t hesitate to bring down his might on Steve and on the RWF.

Kids not listening to Steve is something he’d expect. Kids making mistakes, being too headstrong, not understanding the intricacies of global and intergalactic relations and polices, those things Steve can forgive. But Bucky? Bucky betraying him, Bucky going behind his back, Bucky scheming and planning and directly disobeying him…that’s harder for Steve to swallow.

It’s not like Steve thinks that Bucky is the perfectly obedient soldier. Steve would never ask that of Bucky. It’s not who Buck was when he was young, but it is who he was forced to be for nearly a century. Steve isn’t Hydra, and if he ever acted like it, Bucky would never forgive him. Is that why he left? Has Steve become someone, something different? Has he been changed so much by the last thirty years that he’s driven Bucky away? There’s a sudden lump in Steve’s throat that he struggles to swallow.

Steve is nothing without Bucky. During the years that he lived without Bucky, when he thought that Bucky was dead, Steve was a shell. A brightly painted, red, white and blue shell, but a shell all the same. Everything that Steve is, everything that he has become, is because of Bucky. When he got Bucky back it was like breathing again for the first time, like coming out of an eighty year coma. Steve doesn’t exist outside of Bucky, not really. They’re like two trees that were planted too close together and now their roots are tangled so closely that it’s hard to tell which ones belong to which. At some point, it stopped even mattering which roots were his because they were so intertwined that they held each other up.

But now, Bucky is leaving him again. He’s pulling away from Steve, little by little. Steve doesn’t know when it started, but he feels like it might have been happening for a while. Steve’s just been blind, purposefully looking the other way and pretending that everything was okay because he couldn’t stomach the alternative. What will Steve be when Bucky is gone for good? He doesn’t know, he doesn’t want to know. Because even imagining it is like looking into a black hole. There is no future for Steve without Bucky.

Steve should be able to go through the motions. He should be able to pretend. If he was the person that he pretended to be, then Steve would take this all in stride. He’d come up with a plan. He’d rally his troops. He’d defeat his enemies. He’d save lives. He’d find a way to get Bucky back. But that man, that’s Captain America, that’s Major Nomad. For decades, Steve has known that he isn’t really that man. It was easier to pretend when he had Bucky by his side. Because Bucky knows who Steve really is, and he had loved him anyway. Or at least, Steve had thought he had.
Steve’s already thinking of Bucky in the past tense.

“Major, we gotta split,” Hope says hurriedly. “We’ve got incoming air support.”

Steve nods. Wrap it up, he shouts. He gets into his jet. He struggles to keep his face blank and his body language firm. His team is in high spirits. As far as they know, they’ve succeeded in their mission. They did succeed in their mission. Steve has to remind himself of that. Because, otherwise, Steve feels like a failure. Everything is unraveling. He wonders if anyone else senses it.

***

Eli paces his cell. He and the rest of the Young Avengers were taken into RWF custody barely an hour ago. As the freshman member of the team, he’s been told very little. He’s thinking about his grandmother. She probably thinks that he is dead. Guilt makes Eli feel a bit sick. How could he do that to the woman who raised him? He had left early in the morning before his grandmother had awoken. She doesn’t know about what Eli has been up to lately. He hasn’t had the courage to tell her. Because to tell her that he was getting into vigilantism would break her heart. That’s how his father had started out. He had wanted to use his powers for good, but whatever good intentions he may have had at the beginning had quickly been consumed and misdirected. It wasn’t long before his father had been arrested for gang activity. Some of Eli’s first memories are of visiting his father in prison. Of course, that was before the Lane Act had passed, before his father and all others convicted of organized crime activity had been disappeared. For the good of the public, they had said.

Eli isn’t a saint. That fact twists in his chest painfully. A year ago, he had been using mutant growth hormones to supplement his powers. Two generations had meant that Eli only had not even half the strength of his grandfather. At the time, Eli had told himself that he had had good intentions. If he could just make himself stronger, then he could help more people. At least, that was the reasoning he gave until he had been shot in the chest while trying to steal MGH from a street dealer. The irony, of course, was that a blood transfusion from his grandfather had ended up increasing his physical strength. He had promised his grandparents that he was done.

That was a lie. Eli hadn’t gone back to MGH, he was done with that, but he hadn’t quit. He was already in too deep by then. He had joined the Southern Resistance. Most of the other members were minor Hard Line violators: gays, lesbians, Jews, Muslims, women, minorities. At the time, Eli had been one of three meta-humans. It wasn’t long before Eli was elected as a leader. And he had kept it all from his grandparents.

The Young Avengers had changed the game. Here were young people standing up to North publically, showing their faces, unafraid. In a way, they had put the Southern Resistance to shame. After years of staging small level protests—small for fear of being arrested or killed—here were the people that they were pretending to be, wishing they could be. Eli had realized in that moment just how much fear was driving him. Fear had kept him wearing a mask, fear had kept him from telling his grandparents, fear had kept him from pushing their group further into bigger things, fear had kept him complacent. He had realized that he was just playing into North’s hands. North didn’t care about small protests, he didn’t care about a bunch of teenagers and college students waving signs and shouting in the streets. That’s not a real threat to North. Everything that Eli had been through had really been for nothing. He had worked so hard only to end up being played by North in the end.

Eli had been at the protest when the Sentinels showed up. He had stood at the front of the group in
his costume. He had waved a sign that read “Meta and Proud.” It’s astounding how much can change in a few days. Looking back, he can’t believe that he thought that he was making a difference. The only language that men like North understand is violence. North hadn’t hesitated to murder hundreds the moment he had a reason he could justify to the public. The only threat that North can comprehend is a threat to his rule. All the work Eli had done for the past year and a half hadn’t even registered to North. The Southern Resistance has been working for ten years and North had never even acknowledged them. The Young Avengers though, they had defeated a Supremacy gang, they had stood up and publically threatened to take down North. In less than a month, the Young Avengers had gotten to North. They had implemented and promised violence, and North had responded. It makes everything Eli had thought he was doing almost laughable.

Eli had been driven by fear, just like all the people in the Southern Resistance. They were prepared to resist, but only to a certain point, only to the point where they could get away with it and go home and pretend like nothing had happened. Being asked to join the Young Avengers, as terrifying as it had been in the moment, was freeing. Here was the opportunity to stop being Eli Bradley and to truly become Patriot. It was a fantasy that Eli had had, a fantasy that he thought he was too afraid to enact. He had been using the name Patriot for years. First in online forums, then in the streets, but it had all been an act back then. Back then, he had thought that he was brave for putting on a mask and saving the fleeing civilian from a Supremacy gang or for organizing protestors. But the mask had been a crutch, a disguise. You can’t truly be a hero, truly be brave when hiding your true self. You’ll always be leading a double life so long as you hide your face.

Eli doesn’t wear a mask now and he won’t ever wear a mask again. He doesn’t know what happened to Kate, Vision, Billy, and Teddy. Black Widow had interviewed him first. It had been a short interrogation. Eli doesn’t know anything, but he does suspect. There are whispers across the base that Eli has caught, even from the confines of his cell. They’ve been arrested and taken to the Cube. That should terrify Eli, but it doesn’t. It makes him angry. All he can see is red as he paces his cell. He may not know Kate, Vision, Billy, and Teddy personally yet, but he does know about them. He’s been following the Young Avengers religiously since the church. They had been brave, they had been fearless, they had stood up when all the rest sat and averted their eyes. When Eli had sat and averted his eyes.

In a short amount of time, the Young Avengers had become Eli’s heroes, his idols. And there is nothing Eli wouldn’t do to support them, to save them. He’s done hiding, he’s done wearing masks. Eli is angry. Angrier than he’s ever been. He thought he knew anger before, but he hadn’t known the true depth of fury. He paces his cell, he rattles the barred door, he shoots angry glances at the camera in the corner.

Eli is done sitting on the sideline.

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“I remember when I was young, I was obsessed with finding the perfect hiding place where no one could see me. Where I could play my private little games however I wanted to. There are no rules when you’re completely hidden…”

“And now look at me, Warden of a facility that doesn’t exist. Given charge of extraterrestrial criminals with no legal standing in the United States. There may be laws to protect criminals…human criminals. Not aliens. Not mutants. We’re all invisible here in the Cube. Free to play our own little games.
“So…let’s get started shall we?”

Death is a real entity here. It walks the grimy halls, it howls like a banshee in the pained screams that echo throughout, it hovers over the prisoners, watching with unseen eyes. It circles Billy now, licking its lips, hungry for his soul. What feels like an eternity ago, but was really only half a year, Billy had thought he wanted to die. Bullies, Supremacy gangs, Hard Line Policies, those are the things that made Billy crave an end. But that’s all he had really wanted, an end. He hadn’t truly wanted death. He hadn’t even known what wanting to die actually felt like. But now he knows…he knows what it means to crave death, to plead for it to take him.

Because Billy is condemned to a fate worse than death. Hades itself can’t possibly be as bad as this place, as the life the Warden gleefully promises Billy. There is no escape but death. But Billy isn’t the one who is dying right now. No, instead he is watching Teddy die.

“It really shouldn’t be this hard,” the Warden sighs after an hour, tossing a bloody and filthy scalpel aside.

“Iwanthimtostop, Iwanthimtostop, Iwanthimtostop,” Billy repeats over and over. The spell hadn’t worked an hour ago, and it isn’t working now.

“But we do usually install power dampeners with our surgeo-machines under heavy anesthetic,” the Warden continues, turning his grey eyes onto Billy. “Call me old fashioned, but I prefer to do it by hand.”

“Iwanthimtostop.”

Teddy lies on a surgical table, strapped down with heavy restraints, and unmoving except for the almost imperceptible rise and fall of his chest. He’s still alive, but only barely.

“Which makes it difficult when the…patient’s organs keep moving out of the way.” The Warden chuckles, a cold, merciless sound. “Even when unconscious, it’s a very impressive adaptation. But I’m having so much fun with it, so I don’t mind.”

The Warden reveals his small teeth in what could only barely be called a smile.

“Iwanthimtostop, Iwanthimtostop.”

“I don’t know what you’re complaining about,” the Warden sighs, approaching Billy. The man smells like blood and sweat. “Your procedure went quite smoothly I think.”

With a pointed, yellow nail, the Warden taps on the metal device implanted in Billy’s left ear. Billy tries to wrench out of his reach, but can’t. Like Karolina, he’s been chained to the wall by his wrists and ankles. His muscles gave out a while ago, and now he only hangs painfully forward. Karolina, however, is still unconscious. She hasn’t woken yet to see the cold body of her fiancé, neck broken at a sharp angle, sprawled at her feet.

“Your spells don’t work if you can’t hear yourself casting them. Quite a clever device on my half, isn’t it?” the Warden sneers. “I want you to be able to hear every little thing except your own voice. But do keep trying, I find it oddly soothing.”

The room Billy is in is filthy and damp. Blood stains, some old and rust colored, others fresh and shining cover the floor and walls. Everything smells like decay.

“Iwanthimtostop,” Billy sobs.
“Warden?” someone calls from the doorway. “You’re needed outside. We have a situation with the Asset.”

The Warden sighs angrily, pulling off his rubber gloves.

“That cockroach is more trouble than he’s worth.”

The Warden heads towards the door.

“Sir, should I have the Skrull’s body incinerated?” the guard at the door asks.

“No,” the Warden replies, stopping to glance at Karolina. “I think he’s fine there for the moment.”

With a wicked grin, the Warden steps forward and pulls something from his pocket. He holds it up beneath Karolina’s nose. With a stuttering gasp, Karolina’s eyes fly open. The Warden chuckles and strolls out of the room with his hands behind his back.

Karolina takes in her surroundings. Billy can’t turn his head, but he can hear Karolina clearly, the implants in his ears that block out his own voice amplifying everything else. Karolina’s breathing grows rapid as she realizes that she is bound, that she is inside a bloodstained room. Billy can tell that she is slowly realizing where she is, what fate she’s been condemned to. Her breathing soon turns to sobs and high pitched cries. She sees Teddy, his abdomen split open and bleeding on the table. She spots Billy, chained to the wall a few feet away from her. She tries to use her powers, but the metallic band around her head prevents her from being able to do anything. And then…her eyes fall on the body beneath her feet.

Karolina’s anguished screams fill the room. Over and over she shouts Xavin’s name, but the Skrull is unmoving. The metal restraints rattle but hold firm. The pain and the devastation in Karolina’s voice shatter Billy. It’s exactly how Billy had felt just a few hours ago when he had come to in this nightmare. Karolina screams and she struggles, but soon, she will grow exhausted. Soon, she will accept her doom. Soon, the image of her dead fiancé will be burned into her retinas, and the Warden will use that against her. Billy knows how she must be feeling. This is the worst thing imaginable to her, but she’ll quickly learn that the Warden’s imagination is far vaster and far darker than her own.

When the Warden returns, he looks annoyed. With an angry huff, he sends the blast door sliding downwards. The room seals with a sickening hiss of finality. A tomb, Billy’s tomb, Teddy’s tomb.

“I would like this operating room taken off the grid for the next few hours,” the Warden says into the coms device inset in the wall. “I am preparing to do some top secret work. Authorization code delta alpha kappa four nine.”

Billy’s mind is already broken. Not even a full day in this place and he can already feel insanity pressing in along his frontal lobe. Again, he begins to silently pray for death. His lips are moving once more.

“Iwanthimtostop, Iwanthimtostop, Iwanthimtostop.”

The Warden smiles when he turns, full of malice and violent delight.

“There, some privacy at last,” the Warden announces, glancing at Billy. A curious look crosses the Warden’s face and he approaches Billy once again. “Do you really just want me to stop? Are you sure you don’t want to…punish me? Hurt me?”

Billy refuses to blink. He stares into the Warden’s eyes, the color of dirty water.
“I want him to stop.”

The Warden chuckles and turns away. He strides casually towards Teddy, picking up a large knife as he goes.

“The idealism of youth I suppose,” the Warden sighs, looking down his nose at Teddy but addressing Billy. “You think you’re above murderous thoughts. So childish…Let’s see if we can…change your mind.”

“Gotosleep, Gotosleep,” Billy starts to chant. It doesn’t work. His spells haven’t worked for the last hour and a half. Karolina has stopped struggling. She slumps forward, silent tears sliding down her face and dropping onto Xavin’s body. “Gotosleep,” Billy half sobs.

The Warden laughs again, enjoying this, relishing it. He leans over Teddy and Billy can hear the buzz of an electrical saw. The Warden has placed Teddy in Billy’s view, but Billy can’t watch, not anymore. He squeezes his eyes shut and continues to chant.

But shutting his eyes doesn’t block out the sounds. The wet rip of tearing flesh. The squishing of organs. The drip of blood on the concrete floor. The clatter of metallic surgical tools on the tray. The dangerously slow beep of a heart rate monitor. The hum and buzz of saws. The screams from other prisoners that permeate even through the heavy blast door. Karolina’s quiet sobs and desperate pleas. The Warden’s absolutely evil laugh every time she begs. Everything but Billy’s own voice.

On and on it goes. There’s no way to know for how long. It feels like an eternity, but it’s probably only a few hours. There are no windows, and Billy can tell from the pressure change that they must be underground. He realizes that he has no idea where he actually is. Nobody knows where the Cube is, and that’s part of what makes it so terrifying. It is Nowhere. No chance of rescue.

No chance of rescue.
Chapter Twenty Five

The Cube sits in the middle of the Atlantic, inaccessible except by authorized air landing through the usually locked and wholly underwater top, and only, gate. When granted, airships can land through the extended top hanger which lengthens upward on command, breaking through the choppy waves. Otherwise, you wouldn’t even know that the Cube is there, beneath the water’s surface, lurking like some horrible sea monster.

Kate wasn’t expecting this. The tracker on the transport had been disabled about thirty miles out by an electromagnetic shield. Kate had expected to find an island. She had been wrong. They had needed to flee to the closest airstrip to refuel. After, they had attempted covert reconnaissance, but had been picked up on radar and hailed by the Cube’s air control. At least the incoming signal helped Vision pinpoint the location of the Cube. Next, Kate had asked Nico to teleport them inside.

“Teleport?” Nico had scoffed. “I don’t have a sling ring.”

“What the fuck is a sling ring?” Kate had asked.

“You need a sling ring to teleport,” Nico said like it was obvious.

“Billy doesn’t have a sling ring.” Kate retorted.

“That’s not…possible.” Nico had trailed off in thought at that point, but made it clear she couldn’t get them inside.

In the end, it took intercepting one of her father’s shipment vessels and stealing high pressure gear and underwater laser cutters. They still had to find a way in. The Cube’s security is a menacing thing. Underwater robotic patrol vessels circle the metal box day and night like sharks. And the Cube itself has both internal and external laser shields as well as power dampeners running at all times around the exterior. It was a good thing that Kate hadn’t brought along anyone who was affected by dampeners, but that didn’t make getting in any easier. A high tech firewall kept Vision from accessing any important information about the Cube, like guard shifts and patrol routes, weapons systems, security cameras, override codes, or where exactly in the massive structure their friends were. Over a day Kate had wasted. A day during which her friends were in the hands of a madman who wasn’t afraid to kill on a whim.

“It doesn’t look that bad,” Victor says, keeping his distance from Vision as the group peers at the low quality video feed on the computer screen.

“Don’t be fooled,” Vision replies gravely. “The Cube is classified as an infinite security facility. Extracting our friends is virtually impossible.”

The cramped bay descends into frantic argument. They’re only wasting time, everyone knows that. Every second they spend here is a second longer the Warden has their friends. Kate is beginning to truly panic now. Why did she think she could do this? Why did she think that after forty years of operation and most likely countless failed attempts to break in or out that she, Kate Bishop, could do the impossible and infiltrate the Cube? She runs a hand through her already greasy hair, wanting to grab it in her fist and rip it out. Vision remains silent though, eyes unmoving from the screen.

“Why so quiet, Viz?” Kate prods.

“In truth, the Cube may not be completely impenetrable,” Vision says quietly.
“If you have a plan, we need to hear it,” Nico forcefully interjects.

“My predecessor once took control of the US Government’s systems, all of them,” Vision begins. “I’m sure that the Cube’s system is based on the same architecture. If I could get into the mainframe, I could control it. I could disable the robotic guards and many of the other security systems.”

“So do that!” Nico cries.

Vision shakes his head.

“I have spent months, ever since I was awoken, preparing failsafes to prevent me from doing just that,” Vision explains. “It is possible, yes…but I fear I’ll be losing a piece of myself.”

Nico’s face sets into something hard as she turns away. She puts her finger to her mouth, biting hard on her nail. Kate furrows her brow.

“Take it easy on your nail there,” Kate says. “You don’t have to be scared, we’ll figure it out.”

“I’m not scared,” Nico replies vehemently. “I’m going to get your droid to the mainframe.”

Nico bites down hard on her finger, hissing slightly in pain. When she pulls her hand away, her nailbed is bleeding. A half a second later, Nico is bent backwards. From her chest, a staff explodes forward. Kate yelps in surprise, stepping back as Nico grabs the staff and yanks it free.

“You got a thesaurus in that computer brain of yours, Vision?” Nico asks with a steely glare.

“O-of course, why?”

“I’ve been having trouble coming up with words for my spells. I need to expand my vocabulary a little bit.” Nico’s jaw tightens as she glances at Kate. “Take us back to the Cube, I’ll get us in.”

***

The massive machinery required to hold the Asset at bay is impressive. A hydraulic press holds him tight against the backboard, his arms and legs are almost entirely encased in metal restraints. Not that he could get away right now. The arm that sticks out from his chest long ago began expanding, tiny filaments and psycho-kinetic wires digging into the skin, tapping into his veins and arteries. It isn’t pain that the Asset feels now, it’s weakness. And weakness is unbearable.

But there’s something else…different. Because this isn’t pain. In fact, the constant excruciating pain that defines the Asset’s existence is somehow lessening. The hum at the back of his brain, the bane of his existence, the buzzing that keeps him from having a single coherent thought is somehow quieting. And as his mind begins to clear, other things are filling in the emptiness.

The Asset is only barely conscious when the Warden approaches. He feels ill, actually ill. A fever burns through him and his head is far too heavy to continue to hold upright. Even his eyelids droop downwards. He thinks he must be dying, but that’s alright. The Asset is ready to die.

“What is it?” the Warden asks annoyed.

“Sir, we assumed the Asset had suffered from a puncture wound,” the doctor begins. “But this appendage seems to be phase shifted into his chest.”
The Warden gets close. The Asset doesn’t open his eyes, but he can feel the man, smell him. He smells like fresh blood, and for once, it isn’t the Asset’s blood.

“He looks fine to me,” the Warden replies, voice full of bored contempt.

“What’s worse is that the nanites in his blood are reacting negatively to this technology,” the doctor continues. “We need authorization to use the phase cutter.”

The Warden ignores the doctor. Instead, he lunges forward and grabs a handful of the Asset’s hair, yanking his head upright and pulling hard until the Asset opens his eyes. The Warden’s face is disgusting. All spittle and jowls and warts. The Asset hates him.

“What did you say when you first came to me?” the Warden snarls. “That in five months the Earth would be the new capital planet of the Kree Empire?”

The Warden laughs a merciless laugh.

“Look at you now, a broken play thing, barely able to stand.”

The Warden releases the Asset. Fury is building in the Asset’s core. If he had the energy, he would kill the Warden, crush his skull and watch him bleed out on the floor just so that he could burn his body with enerue acid and watch his fat face melt away into nothing.

Vengeance, it’s a feeling Noh-Varr has not felt in a long time. That is the Asset’s name, isn’t it? Noh-Varr?

“Leave it, let’s see what happens,” the Warden says. He doesn’t see the change in the Asset, he doesn’t sense it. The Asset remains silent. He lets his lead lull forward and his eyes close. “I have better toys to play with now.”

The Warden leaves. The doctors leave. Only a lab tech remains, sloppily plugging the nanite receiver into the port at the base of the Asset’s skull. If it had been a doctor, he might have known that the nanites were being fried the moment they entered the Asset’s bloodstream. He would have noticed that the arm that juts forth from the Asset’s chest is poisoning the Asset’s blood. The Warden thinks that the Asset is dying, but he doesn’t care. He thinks that this poison will kill Noh-Varr. If the Warden had cared to have done his research, he would know that Kree are immune to blood borne pathogens. He would have realized that the poison isn’t killing Noh-Varr, it’s killing the Asset.

Hours tick by in silence. More techs arrive to prepare the Asset for cryo-freeze. Noh-Varr remains silent. The fever burns through him, it weakens him, but soon it will overcome the poison in his blood. Inch by miniscule inch, Noh-Varr is awakening. Memories are starting to flood his brain, memories that for years have been suppressed by the nanites humming painfully in the back of his head. He had been a warrior once, one of the greatest in the entire Empire. But even back then he had been driven by somebody else. He’s always simply been a tool, a weapon. Drafted as a child, as many Kree warriors are, Noh-Varr had been uploaded to the hive mentality. It was considered a great honor then. He had been deployed to Earth to fight with Thanos, he had been given special instruction to create an outpost on this underdeveloped planet. But the Skrull had arrived to defend this miserable planet, and the Avengers had rallied, destroying the Kree. Noh-Varr’s team had been slaughtered, one by one, first by this planet’s military, then by the Warden, until only Noh-Varr remained. He had watched his friends die and then he had watched himself die, little by little, until only his basest functions remained.

Noh-Varr had already begun to question his place when he had been sent to Earth. He had already
begun making secret plans, difficult to keep away from the hive mind, to escape. In his mind’s eye, he sees a female. He had loved her once. A fellow warrior, one of his own team. And he had watched her die. It had been the Warden’s final play, the thing that finally broke Noh-Varr.

He can’t let them send him to cryo-freeze. If he doesn’t act now, he may never have the chance again. But Noh-Varr knows the process by heart, he’s been through it hundreds of times. So for now, he bides his time, he waits for the Warden to return.

But the Warden doesn’t return. Instead, the massive structure of the Cube shifts violently. Alarms begin to blare, red lights blinking. The main power turns off and the generators begin to hum.

“Th-the mainframe is breached! I repeat, the mainframe is breached!” a frantic voice begins over the radio. “Activate mobile defense unit 564!”

The techs exchange nervous glances. The hydraulic press that keeps Noh-Varr still quietly powers down.

“What’s mobile defense unit 564?” one of the techs asks the other.

Noh-Varr lunges forward. The metal that holds him creaks and breaks. He rips the forearm cuffs off of himself and grabs hold of the chest holster. The metal crumples in his hand.

“I am.”

***

“This changeling’s body is truly amazing,” the Warden says at some point. “Shifting biomass to protect itself. I wonder if it’s a function of its Skrull physiology. Very useful. He’ll make an excellent pet.”

Billy opens his eyes and immediately wishes he hadn’t. Teddy looks like a corpse on a mortician’s table, but somehow far worse. The skin of his torso has been split open and peeled away, revealing his internal organs working weakly. He’s pale, so pale from blood loss. A menacing looking machine connected to his heart keeps it pumping, and IV bags of blood hang from rusted hooks nearby. The Warden is keeping him alive, but just barely.

“But that’s neither here nor there,” the Warden sighs. “It just means that I can cut and cut for days on end and he won’t die.”

The Warden shoots a sly glance at Billy. He’s doing this to torture Billy, that much is clear.

“Gotosleep,” Billy sobs, tears falling freely down his cheeks.

The Warden approaches again, leaning in so close that Billy can smell his breath. It smells like death and rot.

“And you get to watch,” the Warden hisses. “Isn’t that grand?”

“Go to sleep!” Billy screams, voice breaking.

“Oh, come now. Surely you have something else to say to me.”
Billy’s jaw goes so tight that he fears his teeth might break. Because it’s true. Billy has been silently pleading for death for hours now. But if he can’t bring death to himself, then he wants to deliver it onto this *fucking monster*.

“I WANT YOU TO DIE!” Billy screams, lunging forward only to be stopped short by his restraints, pain lancing through his shoulders and arms.

The Warden chuckles, leaning away, hands clutched at his lower back casually. He opens his mouth to speak, but before he gets the chance, his attention seems to be pulled away by something. Whatever it was, the Warden doesn’t seem to care, because his watery eyes fall on Billy again.

“And our youth become killers,” the Warden says gleefully. “Perhaps we do have a war on our hands.”

The Warden is watching Billy’s face for a reaction. But Billy can see what is happening behind him, and he can barely believe his eyes. Xavin’s body shifts and then turns over. Slowly, the Skrull rises to his feet, head still cocked at an unnatural angle.

“You wish to know war, old man?” Xavin asks.

The Warden’s eyes go wide. He turns in disbelief. An emotion that isn’t gleeful violence passes the Warden’s face. It looks like fear, something the Warden isn’t used to feeling. It twists his fat face into something even uglier. With one hand, Xavin reaches up and grabs his head and with a loud snap, his neck cracks back into place. The Warden is backing away now, feet stumbling as he tries to put distance between himself and the Skrull. But he’s trapped, Xavin stands between him and the door, and there is nowhere else for the Warden to go.

But Xavin doesn’t attack. Instead he turns and grabs the restraints that hold Karolina, ripping them away easily.

“X-Xavin?” Karolina sobs in disbelief. She collapses forward and her fiancé catches her.

“Free the others,” Xavin directs, helping Karolina regain her balance.

Once Karolina is on her feet, Xavin turns and glares at the Warden.

“You think you know war?” Xavin begins, slowly closing on the Warden. “I saw the blood flow as two worlds snuffed each other out. I saw the black hatred of generations extinguishing themselves. My father killed a family of screaming Majesdanians in front of me when I was five. I cried, so I was left with the corpses for three days. I have no innocence. I have no ideals. You wish to see war, old man?”

Xavin grows and grows into something massive and threatening. His Skrull skin supplemented by stony scales. His eyes are alight with fury as he corners the Warden.

“I will *show you the face of war!*”

Xavin grabs the Warden by the throat. Karolina uses a white hot glowing hand to break Billy free. Billy collapses to the ground as Xavin pins the Warden against the wall.

“Wait!” Billy wheezes, struggling to his feet. Xavin pulls back a fist, ready to crush the Warden’s face. Billy stumbles forward, grabbing his arm hard. “Don’t kill him!”

Xavin shoots Billy a contemptuous glance.
“Just moments ago you wanted this cockroach dead!” Xavin roars. “To shy away from a simple act of vengeance is not the Skrull way. He must pay for what he has done.”

“He deserves to die,” Billy agrees breathlessly. “But not like this. He has to answer for what he’s done.”

“Death is that answer,” Xavin growls.

“Xavin, please!” Karolina cries. She shoves herself in front of Xavin. The Warden sputters, choking and thrashing still held against the wall. “Please don’t do it. You said you would change, this is just the same. Please…spare him for me.”

Xavin releases the Warden. His fat body goes crashing to the ground where he coughs and wheezes. Karolina throws her arms around Xavin, but Billy has only one thing on his mind. He turns, desperate and terrified as he rushes towards Teddy. Karolina has broken his restraints, but he is still unmoving. With shaking fingers, Billy pushes his peeled away skin back together.

“Heal, heal, heal,” Billy repeats, forgetting the implants in his ears. He screams in frustration.

Behind him, Karolina goes supernova. A blinding light fills the room, and Billy covers his eyes. The blast door explodes, metal bending and warping. Xavin soon appears at Billy’s side.

“Give him a moment,” Xavin says. “He will heal.”

There are tears on Billy’s cheeks. He looks up at Xavin, desperation twisting in his chest. Billy is afraid. They may have escaped their binds, but he knows they don’t stand a chance of escaping the Cube. It’s in that moment that the Cube shutters. An explosion rips through the walls nearby. The force throws Billy to the ground. Xavin pulls him back to his feet and when Billy glances down at Teddy, he sees that the cut down his abdomen has begun to heal.

“We have to leave now!” Karolina screams from the door.

“I will carry him,” Xavin says. “It would be my honor.”

Billy nods numbly. He has no idea what is happening but Xavin is scooping up Teddy as if he weighed nothing and turning to follow Karolina through the hole in the blast door. Billy’s muscles still ache and protest but he forces himself to run, pawing at the implants in his ear and quickly finding that they are drilled into his skull. He’s running on instinct as he follows Xavin and Karolina, the only coherent thought in his head being, please, please let Teddy be okay.

***

The monster Nico has summoned swats away guards with ease, digging effortlessly through the thick metal walls of the Cube. The passageways fill with water as more guards are washed away. Nearby, Kate, at ease in her scuba suit, hacks away at a wall with her laser cutters. Nico doesn’t really like the water, she’s never been a good swimmer, but she keeps her panic at bay, directing her monster towards the mainframe.

Prodigium Effodio. Excavating Monster.

“You must have spent a lot of time in the library,” Nico had joked when Vision had given her that
“I am the library,” he had responded.

Vision and Victor, no need for scuba gear, follow the massive red energy monster as it makes its way through the Cube. Nico, on the other hand, follows Kate, shimming through the hole in the wall and sealing it behind them with magic before the room can fill with water. Kate doesn’t pause, she’s off running within seconds, talking to Vision over the radio, asking him where Billy and Teddy are.

Nico has always thought of herself as a fighter. But compared to Kate Bishop, she’s nothing. Kate moves like a dance, every movement, every well placed shot is fluid and almost mesmerizing to watch. She punches and she kicks, she takes aim with a beautiful golden bow and lands arrows perfectly, she pulls the pistols from their holsters and doesn’t hesitate to fire rounds straight into the heads of her enemies. She is brutal yet she seems to barely acknowledge her brutality. Men die one by one at Kate’s hands, and she’s scarcely bothered by it at all.

Vision takes control of the mainframe, and the power shuts off. The emergency power hums to life, but blast doors previously sealed go whizzing upwards. As they run, they pass tiny cells, each with a prisoner staring out at them with sunken eyes through heavy polymer doors. Every inmate looks emaciated and traumatized. Their filthy uniforms hang off of them like rags. Some are in strait jackets, others have large metallic devices locked around their heads. But every single one of them looks like a ghost, like the imprint of a human being but not truly there. Many of them scream. Nico can’t tell if it’s from fear or from excitement. They all sound the same and their shouts mix together to create a din of desperate cries, a sickening melody. It’s too much for Nico.

“Vision’s found the room they’re in, let’s go!” Kate cries, pulling Nico from her thoughts.

Kate leads the way through the maze, Vision’s voice in her ear. She turns a corner and run bodily into Xavin. Karolina cries out in surprise, dropping her fists as relief floods her features. Everyone tries to talk over the others. Kate’s face twists with an unidentifiable emotion as she frets over Billy. For his part, Billy looks entirely traumatized. There’s a faraway quality to his gaze and his voice is quiet when he speaks. Every other second, his dark eyes flit to the body slung over Xavin’s shoulder, Teddy’s body. Teddy is unmoving, barely breathing, covered in blood, and looks almost dead.

“Who did this?” Kate demands, jaw tight.

“The Warden,” Billy replies, eyes on the ground in a way that suggests he’s holding back tears.

Kate takes a dangerous step forward, grabbing Billy by the arm.

“Where is he?”

Billy tells her the man was last seen down the hall. Without pause, Kate begins to shoulder past the group.

“Viz, I found them,” she says over the radio in a low voice. “Sub-level Alpha 9.”

“Where are you going?” Nico demands as Kate begins to pull away, off down the hall the others have just come from.

Kate turns and looks at Billy.

“Get to the mainframe,” she directs. A moment later, she’s off at a run.
Nico doesn’t have time to question where Kate is going, because Vision’s voice is suddenly over the speakers.

“Follow my voice,” Vision calls from a speaker down the hall. “Follow my voice,” again but further away this time.

Xavin is wanting to follow Kate, but he can’t, not while carrying Teddy, and nobody else is strong enough to carry a guy that big.

They run, Billy pawing at an intimidating piece of metal that seems to be set into his ear. Karolina makes quick work of the guards, incapacitating those they come across easily. Alarms are blaring loudly as they run. They stumble through the dark, lit only by flashing red lights. They follow Vision’s voice. The prisoners are howling.

Billy comes to a stop, fingers on the implants once again.

“Nico, can you get these out?” Billy cries, yanking painfully on the implant in his right ear.

Nico turns, reaching for the bit of metal. She tugs carefully.

“That’s deeply implanted,” Nico says. “It might hurt to remove them.”

“Just do it!” Billy shouts.

Nico grinds her teeth for a moment but acquiesces. She catches Billy’s eye.

“Are you ready?”

Before Billy can respond, Nico casts her spell. Billy’s face twists in pain as the metal breaks into pieces. Without pause, Nico yanks the implants free as Billy screams, as blood spurts from his ears. Immediately, Billy grabs his head, hands quickly growing slick with blood. But he forces himself to straighten.

“I can get us out of here,” he says resolutely. “We just need to find the others.”

Vision quickly leads them to the mainframe, where a terrific fray is happening. Vision and Victor are holding their own but are quickly becoming overpowered. Nico tightens her grip on her staff, trying to think of a spell, but Billy beats her to it.

“Go to sleep.”

At once, every guard in the room collapses to the ground. Nico’s eyes go wide. She can’t believe that worked. The absolute depths of Billy’s powers never fail to astound her. It had taken zero effort for him to cast a spell on over thirty fully grown adults at the same time. He doesn’t even realize just how fucking powerful he is either. He simply returns to fretting over Teddy as Vision continues hacking into the mainframe.

“Where’s the other one?” Victor asks, looking around for Kate.

“I don’t fucking know where she went,” Nico replies, annoyed.

Vision does though, and he calls to Billy. Reluctantly, Billy leaves Teddy and rushes to where Vision stands at the main computer uplink. Nico can’t see what they’re doing, but a moment later, both boys are back.

“How are we gonna get out of here?” Nico asks frantically. She’s realizing that they have no exit
“And where is Kate?”
“Kate is fine,” Vision says. “Billy got her out of here. Now we have to go.”

Nico wants to question, but there isn’t any time. Billy steps forward, eyes alight bright silver. He lifts a hand. But before he can do anything, there is a streak of color and then nothing in the space where Billy had just stood. Nico looks around, bewildered.

The silver-haired monstrosity from the cave stands across the room, Billy unconscious at his feet. From his chest juts Vision’s missing arm. But something else is different about him. His veins bulge from his skin, a dark, dangerous looking color. When he approaches, he moves more slowly than before. Vision steps in his way and lifts his remaining hand. A repulsor beam hits the man in the chest and sends him flying and Vision is on him in a moment, yanking his other arm free.

An explosion rips through the blast door across the room. Bullets and lasers start flying, ricocheting about the room. Nico hits the ground. Panic is flooding her body. She’s finding it hard to move, hard to even breathe. She feels numb. Maybe she’s realizing that they’re trapped, that they’re about to be captured. She crawls for cover, looking around for her friends and seeing only the chaotic fray. From across the room, she sees Billy, awake once more but looking like he’s in pain. A guard grabs him by the hair and begins to drag him away. But his eyes are alight again as he lifts a hand.

A blue energy shield envelops Nico. Before she can understand what’s happening, she realizes that she’s moving. Not just moving, but being moved, teleported. The world around her spins in a sickening fashion. The frantic disaster of the mainframe room disappears, immediately replaced by a scene much quieter, much more pleasant. As the energy field fades away, she finds herself strewn on a sandy beach. Waves crash nearby, and a warm breeze makes the palm trees sway.

One by one, her friends appear on the beach with her. First Vision, then Victor, then Karolina, and finally Teddy and Xavin. No Kate. No Billy.

Nico doesn’t have time to question. She barely has time to shove herself upright. A combat boot steps into her field of vision. She follows it upwards and squints against the sun, trying to make out whoever is standing over her.

“You kids are in a lot of trouble.”

Steve Rogers, Major Nomad, stares furiously down at Nico.
“You can’t keep me prisoner for long, my dear,” the Warden hisses. His breath smells like rot, Kate winces at the overwhelming stench of it. “You think I don’t have contingencies in place? You’re even dumber than you look. You may as well kill me now, or else you’ll be dead before long.”

Kate sighs and straightens. She looks down at the paunch man, tied tightly into the chair, face red and eyes bulging. She pulls back a fist and punches him in the nose. Kate can feel the bone break beneath her fingers. The Warden cries out and tries to jerk away.

“You’ll die soon enough,” Kate promises.

The Warden has the audacity to laugh.

“What happens before then, I wonder,” the man struggles to speak as blood runs into his mouth. “Will you torture me? Try to get secrets out of me?” The Warden laughs again, long and low, reveling his small, yellow teeth. “If you think a teenage girl can break me, then you clearly have no idea who I am.”

Kate crosses her arms across her chest and sighs, looking down at the man.

“I know exactly who you are, Marcus Carol.” Kate pauses, watches the shock and realization spread across the Warden’s ugly face. “You thought you could stay hidden behind fake names and titles. What a boring name, Marcus. I’m sure your mother would have called you Marky, had she loved you.” Kate bends down, putting her face mere inches from the Warden’s. “But she didn’t love you, isn’t that right? After years of neglect, you finally ran away and ended up in a state home. I don’t blame her, your mother. Who could love an insect like you?”

The Warden shakes his head, sneering defiantly up at Kate.

“You think I care that you know my given name? Marcus Carol died decades ago. I don’t care about the name of a dead man.”

Kate straightens and turns her back, walking a slow circle around the room.

“I’m sure you’re wondering why I took you from the Cube, why I brought you here. I’m sure that you think that I plan to torture you for information about North. I’m sure you have all kinds of expectations for what’s about to happen.” Kate stops walking and looks sharply at the Warden. “Your expectations are wrong.”

The Warden tries to shift, but is too tightly bound, so he spits blood on the ground beside him.

“You’ve been the warden of the Cube since 2019, but you had quite a different job before then didn’t you? Lead Psychologist on the Winter Soldier Program. A fancy way of saying that you were in charge of all the mental abuse and brainwashing. You know all the tricks in the book, that’s why I’m not going to even attempt to torture you,” Kate pauses, cocking her head. “I don’t know you well enough, I don’t know what makes you…tick. But I have a friend that does.”

Before the Warden can process what Kate has said, she turns sharply and goes to the heavy metal door, unlocking it with a loud *thunk*. The hinges screech as the door swings open, allowing the brilliant sunlight to flood into the dark bomb shelter. A figure stands in the doorway, darkened by the light at his back.
“You actually fucking did it,” Barnes says, voice full of awe as he looks at the Warden the way a wolf looks at a trapped rabbit. “I can’t believe you delivered.”

“I told you I was good for it,” Kate replies.

The Warden is making a choked sound behind her, sputtering, struggling to speak. When he finally does, it’s a single word tumbling weakly from his lips.

“Barnes.”

Barnes’ eyes narrow and he strides quickly past Kate and into the shelter.

“That’s right, you miserable piece of shit,” Barnes growls, quickly approaching the Warden. “Your own personal demon, here to drag you to Hell.”

Kate turns to watch the Warden squirm. He struggles against the rope that holds him, wheezes desperately as Barnes gets closer. Kate can’t help but smile.

“What is it that you told me the first time you met me?” Barnes asks, crouching down in front of the Warden. “Ah, yes…”The sooner you accept your fate, the sooner the pain will be over.”

Wide smile in place, Kate walks through the door, closing it behind her. The thick metal seals with a hiss, but it isn’t nearly thick enough to block out the screams. The Warden’s shouts echo through the small passageway as Kate climbs the rotting wooden stairs.

***

When Teddy comes to, he’s afraid to open his eyes. The Cube awaits him, just past his eyelids, and whatever horrors the Warden has planned for him. He’s been in an out on conscious. Teddy has no idea how long it’s been. All he can remember is a nightmare. The Warden, grinning as he works, cutting and stabbing and sawing and injecting into Teddy’s abdomen. Pain, so much pain. Fleeting moments of lucidity only to fall back into a place near death. No escape.

Teddy’s surprised when he can feel soft sheets beneath him. He tries to move his arm and finds it no longer restrained. Inch by cautious inch, Teddy tries to move and slowly realizes that he’s in a bed and he’s free, not tied down of cuffed. His eyes fly open and he’s nearly blinded by midday light shining brilliantly through fluttering white curtains.

Once his eyes have adjusted, Teddy looks around and finds himself in a small hospital room. Everything looks clean and pristine, a far cry from the filth of the Cube. Quiet, pleasant music plays on a speaker nearby, a fan spins lazily overhead, flowers in a vase sit on a table, making the whole room smell of lilies. Is this a dream? Is Teddy dead?

Teddy tries to sit up. Excruciating pain shoots through his body so sharply that Teddy cries out and falls back against the pillows. Teddy looks down at his torso to find it wrapped in clean, white gauze. In the middle, a pinpoint of blood appears and begins to spread, bright and crimson. Teddy’s heart rate rises as a machine nearby comes to life and begins to beep insistently.

A few seconds later, the door to the room swings open to reveal a large man with a pair of small glasses. He smiles, relieved, when he sees Teddy is awake. Fearful, Teddy once again tries to sit up, only to cry out in pain and fall back again as the man draws even to the bed.

“Oh, you’ve ripped your stitches,” the man sighs, looking at the crimson stain.
“Who are you?” Teddy croaks. “Where am I?”

“My apologies,” the man replies with a smile. “My name is Dr. McCoy. You’re at the RWF hospital in Wakanda and you’ve been very seriously injured. Though, your Skrull physiology certainly saved your life.”

“I was…I was in the Cube,” Teddy mutters, horrendous memories assaulting his mind, making his eyes begin to well. “What happened?”

Dr. McCoy moves across the room to a sink, washing his hands.

“Your friends rescued you,” he responds brightly. “I’ve done in depth studies on Skrull, Kree, and other alien biology, so Major Nomad brought me in for you.” Dr. McCoy finishes washing his hands and walks back to the bed, bending over Teddy. “You have had two surgeries and you’ve been in an induced coma for the last eight days.”

“Eight days!” Teddy cries, wincing at the pain it causes.

Dr. McCoy uses a pair of scissors to cut away the bandages, ignoring Teddy. Teddy looks down to find a large, ugly, stitched up gash that runs from his groin to his throat. It looks mostly healed, scarred even, though in some spots, the wound seems deeper.

“The wonderful thing about being part Skrull is that you heal quite quickly. I’d guess that even the scar will be gone within three months,” Dr. McCoy states happily. “Though I did have to stuff the wound in several places to ensure proper healing. You had a very bad infection when you first arrived.”

“Where’s Billy?”

“I’m only your doctor, son,” Dr. McCoy replies, straightening up and moving across the room. “I do as Major Nomad asks, that’s all.” The man pauses at a set of locked drawers. He seems to be thinking. “I will tell you this,” he sighs, turning to looks at Teddy over his shoulder. His voice becomes serious, no longer light-hearted and jolly. “You’re very lucky to have escaped the Cube.”

Dr. McCoy busies himself with unlocking the drawers and digging through them for clean gauze. Teddy can hear how high his heart rate is rising on the machine nearby. He needs to see Billy, he needs to know that he’s alright.

“The nurse will come in to redress your wounds,” Dr. McCoy says, pulling Teddy’s attention. The man walks back to Teddy’s bed, putting handfuls of bandages and ointments near his feet. Teddy looks up at him, and he knows his expression must be pained because the doctor gives him and sympathetic look. “I’ll let your friends know you’re awake. They’re very worried about you.”

Teddy swallows and nods. He attempts a thank you, but it’s weak and watery. The doctor squeezes Teddy’s shoulder gently and gives him a reassuring look.

“It’s okay, you’re safe now.”

Two nurses come in to redress Teddy’s wound. The process is excruciating. First, they pull the packed gauze out through the open parts of the wound, an uncomfortable tugging, searing feeling. Then, they repack with clean gauze, a painful, almost unbearable process. They clean the wound with warm salt water, then rub ointment on with gloved fingers. Then, one nurse holds Teddy upright as the other wraps his entire body in clean bandages. Once they’re done, Teddy is in so much pain that tears fall down his cheeks. They take mercy on him, using a needle to put morphine in his IV drip.
The pain killer hits Teddy quickly. Almost immediately, his mind feels like it’s filling with air, while the rest of his body becomes far too heavy to move at all. It’s a blissful sensation if Teddy is being honest. His worries, the panic tightening in his chest, the tension held in his shoulders and neck, they all dissipate. Teddy sinks deep into his pillows as sleep begins to press in on him. He’s so exhausted.

The nurses leave and Teddy slips in and out of sleep in his morphine high. He still thinks of Billy, though his mind gets distracted every few seconds and takes off in another direction. Teddy doesn’t want to fall asleep, he wants to be awake when Billy arrives.

The door of his room opens again, and Teddy glances over hopefully. It’s America though, not Billy, and she looks solemn, stony, even more so than usual.

“Teddy,” America says in a soft voice. “You look much better. We were all…really worried for you.”

Teddy nods vaguely as America approaches, her body stiff. She looks like she is dreading something.


America’s jaw goes tight. She looks at her hands, not at Teddy, nostrils flaring.

“America,” Teddy says seriously, though slightly slurred, brow furrowing. “Where is Billy?”

“I’m sorry,” America chokes. “I’m so sorry, Teddy.”

Teddy’s throat feels thick. The pleasant morphine high is quickly devolving into something frantic and heavy. The heart rate monitor begins its warning again.

“Where’s Billy?” Teddy repeats, voice higher this time.

America finally looks Teddy in the eye.

“He didn’t make it out of the Cube.”

***

When Kate arrived back on the RWF base, she was immediately taken into custody. No amount of shouting or angry retorts frees her from the small cell. Without a distraction for her overactive mind, Kate can only pace the small space, pent up energy threatening to overwhelm her. She has no idea what is going on with the rest of her team. She’s spent the last six days with the Winter Soldier, interrogating the Warden, breaking him down inch by disgusting, twisted inch. After the fourth day, the Warden had begun to talk. In a haze from lack of food, water, or sleep, the Warden had finally broken. There’s still dried blood under Kate’s fingernails, the Warden’s blood.

Kate expects she’ll be once again interrogated by Steve Rogers. Or, more likely, he doesn’t have the stomach for such a thing, in which case, he’ll put Kate into Black Widow’s hands. Kate grinds her teeth, preparing her lies in the back of her head. Where has she been for the last week? Billy had sent her off somewhere unknown and she’s been struggling to get back to the base. What happened to the Warden? The Warden’s pet alien had kidnapped him in retribution for the years of torture he
had experienced. Where is Bucky Barnes? Kate has no idea.

After what feels like hours, the door at the end of the hall finally opens. Kate looks up, expecting Rogers or Romanoff. She’s surprised when she finds America instead.

“America!” Kate gasps, rushing towards the door of her cell.

America’s face is cold and unmoving. However, when her eyes land on Kate, Kate finds them alit with contempt and fury. Slowly, America moves down the hall, comes to a stop in front of Kate, glares at her for a long moment. There’s an accusation in America’s eyes, and Kate’s stomach sinks.

“I can’t believe that I trusted you,” America whispers, voice breaking a bit.

“America,” Kate replies. “I’m glad you’re here. Is Rogers listening? I have something that I need to tell you.”

“I actually believed you when you said you were going to try harder,” America continues, voice low, shaking her head slightly. “And then you just turn around and do something even worse.”

“What are you talking about, America?” Kate says cautiously.

America looks sharply up at Kate, her eyes full of absolute contempt.

“I know everything, Kate,” America states, jaw tightening. “Rogers found the others. Tracked the jet. They told him what happened, and he told me.”

Kate’s face grows warm.

“Whatever Rogers told you, I guarantee he doesn’t have the whole story,” Kate replies nervously, mouth suddenly dry.

“Using your friends as bait for the Warden?” America hisses, taking a threatening step forward.

“That’s low, even for you Kate.”

“That’s not…what happened,” Kate defends uncertainly.

“I don’t want to hear it,” America snaps. She pauses, shaking her head sadly. For a moment, Kate thinks she might actually cry. But America swallows hard and fixes Kate with an accusatory glare.

“I was wrong about you. You’re not a hero. You’re not even a good person.”

Kate wants to reply, but she can’t. She’s frozen, silent, unable to defend herself against what she knows is the truth. Kate can’t look America in the eye. She drops her gaze to her own hands, America’s words sinking in. She’s right, Kate isn’t a hero. The blood under Kate’s nails, the evidence of her own wickedness, is a stain on her skin. Kate picks at the blood desperately, but proof is dried and set, difficult to get rid of. Words spin nonsensically in Kate’s head, never stringing together a coherent response. She can’t think of anything to say, even though America is waiting for her response. Kate has none. America takes a shuddering breath and continues.

“You weren’t one of the people in my vision. You’re just a liar. And a killer.” Kate winces at the word. America shakes her head again, brow furrowing. “Nothing else. And I don’t know how I didn’t see it before.”

A single tear falls down America’s cheek, splashes against the cold concrete floor and forgotten. America waits for Kate to meet her eyes. “
I’m done, Kate. I want you gone. Out of the team. And out of my life.”

The words stab and Kate wants to double over at the pain. She flails desperately, but still her lips won’t move. She swallows hard, tries to think of something to say, but she can’t. America sighs sadly, turning to walk away.

“America!” Kate croaks, reaching through the bars.

“No!” America hisses, stepping furiously out of Kate’s reach. “A transport will take you back to New York. This is over.”

“I can’t go to New York,” Kate cries.

“You can and you will.”

“That’s a death sentence, and you know it,” Kate replies angrily, her usual rage returning.

“You go back to New York, or you remain in this cell until a marshal trial,” America retorts. “Don’t put your friends through that.”

“Wait!” Kate screams, but America is already walking away. “America! Stop!” Kate cries desperately as America reaches the door at the end of the hall. “I have information! I can help you! I’m your only chance at liberating the Cube.”

America pauses, shaking her head. When she responds, she doesn’t even glance back at Kate.

“That’s what you do, Kate,” America sighs. “You try to integrate yourself, make yourself useful. But at what cost?”

The door swings shut with a hiss of finality, and Kate is left entirely, utterly alone.

***

When Billy awakes, he finds himself in a tiny cell. Barely enough space for a metal table set into the wall to serve as an uncomfortable cot and a small, exposed toilet. He lays on his side on the cot, and he quickly discovers that he is bodily restrained in a strait jacket. There’s a hazy set to reality, and Billy knows immediately that he’s been drugged. His body feels heavy when he struggles to put himself upright. Billy groans at the pain that lances through his head at the movement, but he can’t hear his own voice. The implants in his ears have been replaced.

The terror Billy had felt when he had first arrived at the Cube is gone. Billy had saved his friends, he had saved Teddy. They’re safe now, the Warden has nothing to hold above Billy’s head. Billy isn’t afraid. He struggles to his feet, stumbling on numb, heavy limbs. The door of his cell is made of thick, bulletproof plastic. The surface of the interior is scratched, damaged, dented from occupants past. Billy gets close to the door, head heavy and thick as he struggles to focus his eyes on what he can see outside his cell. All he finds is a hall of similar cells, each occupied by emaciated and dead-eyed prisoners. People in suits rush by through the hall, but none of them even spare a glance at the suffering detainees they pass. Billy’s become part of the background of this place.

Billy feels sleepy, heavy. He stumbles back to his cot, collapsing against the cold metal. There’s no pillow, no blanket, no semblance of human comfort. Simply cold surfaces and hard lines. Billy
swallows a lump in his throat. He needs to get used to this. This is his reality now. Billy had made the decision to save his friends instead of himself, the knowledge that they’re safe is the only comfort Billy will be afforded for the rest of his life, however short a time that may be.

There’s a sudden pain in Billy’s thigh. He hisses, glancing down at the offending implant. A large, metal piece of equipment is set into Billy’s skin through his blue jumpsuit. At first, Billy has no idea what the thing’s purpose is. But that quickly becomes clear as drugs rush through Billy’s system, the small implant sinking into Billy’s veins and injecting him with whatever is immediately making Billy’s vision blur and swirl. It’s not even thirty seconds before Billy’s head feels so heavy that he has no choice but to collapse uncomfortably against the cot. Billy feels like a tidal wave is pressing down on him, crushing him against the cot, suffocating him. He tries to fight it, but he can’t.

Billy’s vision swims and then he’s gone, slipping away into darkness.

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